

Hannah Lawson

It Was Black

“Please just let me go... When can I leave?”

In my head, I am asking a question, but I know better than to ask it out loud to Mama. She is beside me, but her lips are closed so tightly shut that I am afraid she will not talk to me at all. The question bounces noisily in my brain, distracting me; I almost bump into the tall, white-haired man beside me. There are hundreds of people flocking through the tall, carved wooden doors. Everywhere there is black. I think to myself that I want to make all the strangers leave this place, the crowd that my mother and I are now a part of. Or maybe, if I cannot make them go, I will leave: pushing my way through them, even though I am small, to run out into the fresh air. Either way, I do not like it here.

I came through the door with my mother just minutes ago, but I already feel stifled by the heavily carpeted rooms and low ceilings. I notice that the building is big and tall and nice; nicer, even, than our church, with its velvet pews and stained glass windows. But the air is thick; at our church the air is clear, and sweet, and it smells like lemonade. In this building, I'm choking on the scent of too many flowers. I try to take deep breaths, but the scent becomes worse, and now it's in my mouth.

The crowd never stops talking, but I can't decide if they are having fun or not. The chatter surrounding me reminds me of the buzzing of bees in my ears when I play in the field by my house, and the sound makes me uncomfortable, just like bees do, though I don't know why. My mother leaves me on a chair near the back of the room—“Don't move, Maria”—she says, and I don't move, but I turn my head as far as I can each way to see the whole room and all the people in it.

The men are dressed in suits and ties. The women have chosen skirts or dark-colored dresses. It looks like Easter at church, but without the purples and yellows. The color black is everywhere. I see babies being carried, and I twist my neck till it hurts, trying to find girls like me: there are a few. They are wearing nice dresses like mine. I smile a little at one; she drops her head

and stares at her shoes: nice shoes, church shoes. I fidget a little and touch the ribbon in my hair; do I look nice? I decide that my red ribbon is very pretty. But everyone looks beautiful and handsome here; my Mama is especially beautiful. I can see her talking to strangers, but I don't know what she's talking about.

All around me, there are families and friends, I think. I hear conversations, people meeting each other. "Hello, Aunt Mary," "It's been good to talk with you, Uncle Carl," they say, but the strangers don't say anything to me. There are more questions in my head; I wonder why my mother has brought me here. She had not said much before we got in the car to come to this place.

"Maria, put on your black church dress and your black tights. We need to go somewhere this afternoon."

"Why, Mama? It's not Sunday."

"Because, Maria. I have to go somewhere, and you can't stay at home because the sitter can't come."

I looked hard at Mama's face, deciding whether I should pout or listen. I chose to hurry into my nice clothes, and she quickly braided my hair, her hands moving like she was not thinking about it at all.

Now that we are here, though, the number of people is too overwhelming for me; I have never seen so many people in one place. I see a girl glance toward the door, and I think she feels like I do. Maybe she is uncomfortable in her church clothes, as I am. I stare at my tights, where they bunch into a million wrinkles around my knees. I wonder what song the birds are singing, and if the wind is dancing in the trees.

I have a feeling of sadness. I can see a lot of smiles, and I hear laughter. But the laughter is hollow, and the carpet—the soft, deep carpet covered by the ugliest flowers I have ever seen—seems to swallow it in, and gulp it up. One lady, a little older than my Mama, wears a jacket and skirt the color of dark green moss. She looks like she is enjoying herself. I sit alone on my hard chair and curl myself up as small as possible, tucking my legs underneath me. No one is looking in my direction, and I feel that I can stare without anyone stopping me. I watch the lady in green, and hear her start to talk.

"Mrs. Spencer!" The green lady says, in a voice that screeches a little.

She is talking to a woman who is older than me, but younger than my Mama.

“The last time I saw you, you were a miss,” the green lady continues, her voice not as screechy now.

The young lady talks so quietly that I can’t hear her, and I give up trying to listen. But the green lady is soon talking to everyone who comes through the doorway. “He was handsome, wasn’t he? And our darling Carolyn says he was such a wonderful husband,” she says. The green lady looks for a very long time at a photograph of a man who reminds me of my father.

The green lady seems very different than the woman who has been standing at the front of the room since we got here; I have been watching them both, wondering if they know each other. The woman at the front is dressed in black, like almost everyone else, and she wears a very sad smile; it is the same smile Mama gets when I’ve done something wrong. Everyone seems to know this woman, and they push towards her, shaking her hand, and wiping their eyes with tissues. I think they call her Carolyn. Carolyn just keeps smiling her sad smile. Behind her is a box that is almost lost in a pile of flowers: but when I stand out of my chair, on my toes, I see that it is very, very shiny. I think if I were closer, I could catch myself staring in the polished wood. I mean to ask Mama what the box is, but I don’t even know where my Mama is anymore. She is lost in a sea of people that are pushing to get closer to the front of the room. They seem very rude, and impatient, even though they speak to each other, and I hear them talking, always talking. I catch some of the things they say. “Wasn’t he wonderful? In his last moments...” “It’s true, I didn’t know him very well, but my late husband was close to him...” The conversation fades in and out, sometimes loud, sometimes soft.

In the middle of the bustling and chatter, a man wearing a perfect suit that is not wrinkled at all, not even one bit, gets up in front of us and starts to speak. I want to touch the suit to feel how smooth it is, but I don’t know what he is saying, because Mama is grabbing my hand and taking me downstairs before I can listen. I cast a glance back at him, and I have a feeling that he is sad. Downstairs there is a kind lady who has blue eyes, just like my teacher has, and she talks to me for a while when Mama leaves, asking me questions like how many pets I have and if I have brothers and sisters.

After what seems like a day, Mama comes back downstairs, and she

seems more serious than when we arrived. She pulls me away, up the stairs, back to the front of the building. Is it time to go? A man dressed in a suit opens the door for us; he looks at Mama, all in black, wearing a string of pearls. "I'm sorry for your loss," he says to her as we finally leave. I have heard people saying that again and again and again today, but I don't really know what it means, and it slips out of my mind as we walk outside. When we walk outside it is raining; the air is cool and dark and damp. My Mama makes a comment that the rain is nice today. I wonder why she says that; she hates rain.

As soon as we get home I kick off my shoes and wriggle out of my tights, replacing them by a coat and red rubber boots. I am different than Mama; I love rain. The rest of my day is spent in puddles, until I am shivering, soaked to the bone, and Mama forces me to come inside. She has hot chocolate waiting for me.

The next day, I go to school, just like normal.

"Did you do anything fun this week?"

My teacher asks in class, as we were marched into our classroom.

"I went to a birthday party!" My best friend Sophia exclaims, smiling.

"I went somewhere too," I say.

My teacher looks directly at me, and her blue eyes are kind. "Where did you go, Maria?"

"I went somewhere with my Mama," I said, remembering the experience.

"Oh, that's nice." said my teacher.

"It wasn't nice." I said. "It was sad. It was black."