

Frozen Thoughts

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A snowflake lands in my hands covered by black leather gloves. It is the first time I have seen snow falling so thick. It amazes me. I look at the sky, and all I can see is grey, a sea of grey covering us all, pouring white snowflakes down on us. The trees on the other side of the river have no leaves, giving the final touch to the winter scene. The cold wind that makes the snow travel diagonally hits my cheeks, the only skin I have exposed, and I feel them turning pink, pinker and red. Under my jeans and my huge winter jacket, I feel my cold skin, but it is inside my body that the cold really lies. I've never felt so cold. I close my eyes, and a picture of me lying on the sand, under the sun appears in my mind, bringing a rush of nostalgia. I shake my head. I am not allowed to think of it. It's not only the endless fight between summer and winter. It is more than that. It hurts to think of my hometown in Brazil, it hurts to think of my family's summer house, it hurts to think about all the people I left behind. It hurts even more to think about the one person that won't be there to welcome me home when I go back.

My mind rewinds to five days earlier. It was a Wednesday, three days before my flight, three days before I left for college over five thousand miles away from home. My grandfather, Orlando, was walking towards me, as I loaded the car to go to my apartment downtown and start packing. He had just taken a shower after coming back from the gym, but he was already sweating again even without a shirt on. The heat was nearly unbearable, and I remember naïvely wishing for the cold. If only I knew then how much I'd miss it. "Hey, Biboca!" He called me by the nickname only he used. "Are you leaving already? Do we have to say goodbye?" He had his arms opened, but I had mine wrapped in three huge bags that I was trying not to drop while taking them to the trunk of my mother's car.

"I'm not leaving until Saturday, Grandpa. We can say goodbye later," I assured him. He dropped his arms, and on he went to the front yard where my stepfather waited for him, but not before messing with my hair as he always did.

I had just finished loading the car to go to my apartment downtown and started to pack when I heard it. At first, the voice sounded too distant, too unfamiliar for me to give it attention. "Girls! Come here!" The voice pleaded. "Girls!" I heard it again. It was only when my stepfather screamed my sister's name that I recognized it. I didn't need to move to know that something was not right. The reason why I hadn't recognized the voice before was because I had never heard it. The desperate tone that my stepfather's voice had in that moment was completely unfamiliar to me until then.

I stood up and ran. But as I ran through the garage, the only distance between me and him, I knew that I didn't want to get there. Whatever it was, I didn't want to see. I slowed down when I got closer to the front yard, but I needed to move. I needed to help him. My mother managed to pass by me and got there first. The way she came to a halt when she saw what was happening made my heart sink inside my chest. Three steps, it

took me three more steps to see my grandfather lying on the lawn, and in that moment I could swear I felt my heart breaking.

“He’s gonna be fine,” my mom told me. “Call an ambulance. He’s gonna be fine.” The way she was talking, though, revealed how she really felt. She knew it, I knew it, but neither of us wanted to believe it. It was my fault. It was my fault, I would tell myself in that moment. The first time he had a heart attack was because he had been too nervous. He was nervous now because I was going away for four years. I did that. It was my fault.

“It’s not your fault, sweetie.” My neighbor hugged me. Where did she come from? How did she end up here? Did I say it aloud? I couldn’t think. I hugged her back, and let all the tears roll out of my eyes. My grandfather was not passing away. That couldn’t be happening. No, that couldn’t be happening.

Carol, my older sister, was upstairs and came to the front yard later. When she got there, my mom and grandmother were giving him CPR, and they never stopped until the ambulance got there. I remember seeing the panic in my sister’s eyes and imagining that they were basically a reflection of my own pain. But I should’ve known better. Carol didn’t cry at first. Her first reaction was to scream, and then she collapsed on the front porch and broke into tears. I watched her sob as she never had before, and somehow I found strength within me and cut off my own tears. I did it for her. I sat beside her and hugged her, and in that moment I was sure the void was a much more comfortable place than inside of me. I felt nothing. I didn’t allow myself to feel. I didn’t allow myself sorrow, because I was not sure I’d be able to stop if I ever started to cry again.

The cold wind travels through the Missouri River, washing the memories away, and I force myself back to the present. My sister is here with me now. We buried our grandfather on a Thursday, packed on a Friday, and flew on a Saturday. I would have never been able to do it without her. My father and Carol came with me to help me move in. They are staying only for a week, but their presence, even for a short time, makes me have the strength to stay. On that Wednesday morning, five days ago, I thought of a million ways to not come to St. Charles, to cancel this whole trip and be there with my family. But I couldn’t. I had to do it for him, more than anything now. I had to do it for him. I had to come and study to become the writer he always wanted me to be.

For a split second, I imagine all my thoughts vanishing and my mind as empty as can be. I don’t think. I just feel the breeze on my skin. But I know the memories will never really leave. They are frozen thoughts. And I am not sure I want them to. In fact, I’m afraid they will. I want to be sure that every time I sit to write, my grandfather will show up in my head. Smiling from ear to ear, he’ll say:

“And your novel, Biboca? Have you finished it yet?”

“I’m working on it, Grandpa. I’m working on it,” I will answer. I long ago learned that pain is inevitable, but we can choose whether to suffer or not. At this moment, I just want the suffering to go away.

“Are you ready?” my sister asks, looking at me and then my father. There is so much more to this question than just “Are you ready to go?” Am I ready? Am I really ready? No. I’m not ready for this 180-degree change in my life. I’m not ready for them

to leave me at my dorm. I'm not ready to say goodbye, even though this is the one thing I wish I could've said to my grandpa. I feel the monsters inside of my head beginning a revolution. These dark thoughts won't leave me, and I am scared to death. I'm not ready to face them alone. I am not ready.

"Yes, let's go," I say, instead.