

The Past's Current

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Sometimes, the worst kind of dreams are the ones you wished you had never woken up from.

"Kieran! Look how high I can go!"

Bianca runs towards the swing set as fast as her little legs can take her. I'm seated on the bench near the playground's edge. Today is just like every other day. I pick her up from school, she plays, I watch. Just like every other day.

"Kieran! C'mon, look at me!" She swings, pushing off the ground, but her strength doesn't get her far.

I look away from her, not even bothering to acknowledge her little stunt. Bianca's nonchalance makes me feel sick. Especially today.

"I said watch! Me!" Bianca pouts, "How about you come push me if you're so interested? Huh?"

I scoff, this was bound to happen, but I can't take it. Not today. I look toward the other end of the park, searching for some other distraction from Bianca's constant whining.

"Keiran? Are you even LISTENING?"

My eyes stop on a boy playing with a stick. I watch him, but I feel my patience thinning.

"I'm going to tell Ma..."

That's it.

I cut her off, pushing her hard on the swing. It sends her flying in the air, screaming and flapping her arms.

"OWW! Kieran!" she cries. "You're a big meanie!" But I'm not paying attention to her tantrum, my eyes back on the kid. His dad leading him home for the afternoon.

"Bianca, we're going home," I order, still not looking at her.

“What? But why?”

I grab hold of her arm, but she tries to squirm out of my grasp. Anger reddens her face and it seems like she’s about to burst into tears.

I tighten my grip. “Do I need a reason? You can come back another day. Besides, you’ve played enough already.”

“What, so that means you can boss me around whenever you like? Who are you, my dad?” She slaps my hand away, clearly over it.

“Bianca! Enough!”

“It’s not like he’s even here for us anyway.”

What... did she just say?

I can’t hear anything anymore. Not her crying. Not my hand pulling at her favourite pink blouse. Not the sound of my shoes hitting the pavement as I run home, Bianca in tow.

How could she...

“Ma! Kieran pushed me off the swing in the park!” Bianca shouts towards Mum’s home office.

“Ah, sorry sir, I need to deal with something. I’ll be back in a moment... yes,” Mum says to her headset. She’s working after hours. Even today.

“Oh, Bianca sweetheart, it’s alright, Mama’s here, why don’t you go to your room?” she coos. Bianca nods, knowing I’m in trouble. Under her tears and whining, I bet she’s celebrating her victory.

“Kieran. You know better than to be rough with Bianca,” Mum says. Her voice is stern, and her brow is furrowed.

“But...”

“No ‘buts’ young man. You’re grounded!”

“But she said stuff about Dad!”

Mum lets out a small gasp, and she’s silent for a moment. At first, I think she finally understands, but what she says only makes me feel worse.

“I know you’re still sad about today, but your sister’s only seven. She needs you more now than ever. Understand that looking to the future is more important now, okay?”

I slam the door to my room, Mum's words still stinging in my ears like acid. The pity dripping from them driving me mad. That same fake pity that friends and family wore when they heard the news that he was gone. That he was...

I shake my head. If they're not going to care, then fine.

Looking for something else to think about, my eyes land on the desk in the corner of the room. Strewn about is all kinds of junk. Worksheets, comics, pencils and...

My eyes stop on a photograph. Its wooden frame and faded colours whisper of a peaceful past, but it makes my heart skip a beat.

A family of four, not three, on a camping trip in the woods. Their smiles shining even brighter than the sun behind them.

How does it feel to lose someone...

...and for it to be all your fault?

Splash!

A wall of water hits my back, and I find myself quickly submerged in the torrent. *Since when was there a river here?*

The current continues over my head, streaks of white light and the black of my hair swirl in the chaos. I desperately struggle toward surface, but it's just too strong. I can't hold my breath much longer. I hate water. Soon enough it makes its way into my lungs and my vision dims. Bubbles ripple toward the surface. It's so high up.

"Kie!"

But that voice...

"Kieran, buddy! Don't run off too far!"

No. There's no way...

"Kieran!"

I force my legs to push me forward through the water. I can't just give up. I can't. I wince as debris scrapes my skin, but I must push on. The voice was getting louder now. Perhaps if I can just break the surface of the water...

"Kieran, sweetheart? Don't go running off again. I need help with Bianca." I whip around at another familiar voice. But it wasn't his voice this time.

I feel heat in my cheeks when I catch the sight around me; a pristine field of greens and browns surrounded by trees. The only sign of the storm I know is to come in the chill breeze and the clouds overhead. The sound of a river bubbling in the distance makes the hairs on my neck stand on end.

The owner of the voice finally emerges from the tent pitched in the ground a little way from me.

Mum.

A giggling Bianca in her arms; Mum looks happy, just like she did five years ago. She walks over to my side but doesn't see me. I don't belong here. I don't deserve this.

"Kieran! There you are! You shouldn't leave the tent without supervision!" she exclaims. A little figure appears from the bushes, carrying a stick in his, no, my left hand.

"Dad! Dad! Look at what I found!"

It's not fair.

"I found this cool sword, Dad! See?"

Why did he have to ruin everything?

"Okay, kiddo, I'm coming, I'm coming!" He trudges casually through the undergrowth, and tears prick the corners of my eyes. With a smile on his face, he takes the stick from younger Kieran's hand and waves it in the air, slashing some imaginary target. He's wearing the same plaid shirt and jeans that I remember when he fought against the current on that day.

"Grey, you were with Kieran? Oh, thank goodness. I don't know what would happen if he ran off by himself."

"Don't worry too much about it," Dad says, scratching the back of his head and turning to hug my little sister. "Hey there Bianca..." He stops suddenly, stiff and unmoving, and his smiling face morphs into a sombre one.

"Ivory, I have to deal with something real quick, okay?"

He looks towards me. Not the younger me. *Me.*

Mum and Bianca have already retreated inside the tent, and the younger Kieran was nowhere to be found. It was just me and him.

At first it's hard, but I take a step forward. Two steps. Three. I'm soon in a full run, and I can barely see his open arms blurred by tears. The scent of his shirt and the feel of his arms around mine, the feeling I've been missing for so long.

It should've been me! I should have died! Why couldn't the river take me instead? Why?

Someone was screaming. It was me. The tears were overwhelming now, and I could barely feel his hand caressing my back.

"I'm sorry," a small, pitiful voice croaks into his shoulder. It can barely be heard, but it feels so loud compared to all the anger.

"I'm sorry too, Kieran," he replies. "I'd wish a thousand times to keep being with you, with your sister..."

The first drops of rain begin to fall.

"But I need you to do just one thing for me, alright Kie?" Dad's voice wavers. Is he crying too? "I need you to be strong. Be strong for your Mum and for your sister. Please."

The wind is howling in my ears. It bites into my tear-stained face.

"Be strong for me, Kieran."

The light from the window shines into my eyes. I forgot to close the blinds again. The sheets have been tossed to the floor, and there are wet spots on my pillow. There's something hard underneath it too. I search around until its rough, gnarled surface meets my hand, but it just makes my eyes prick with tears again. The sword.

Sometimes, the worst kind of dreams are the ones you wished you had never woken up from.

But sometimes, they're just the thing you need to bring you back to reality.

Before it's too late.