

“Light Fades”
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Grade 8
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The monotonous buzz of the fluorescent lights hovering overhead has become familiar after days of the droning purr ringing in my ears. My heavy eyes struggle to open, squinting against the piercing glare, chest heaving with each shuddering breath. When I'm able to drag them open, I glance over the room. Not much has changed; a glass of water rests on the table by my pillow, small pieces of dust settled at the bottom. The cramped space is void of much decoration, unpleasantly sterile, covered in white. An IV drip is attached securely to my forearm, an oxygen mask slipped over my face. I pull the mask off in disgust, delicately peeling the tape off my arm and sliding the needle out. Machines scattered about the room blare in protest, and a nurse rushes into the room, concern painted across her delicate features. A few wisps of deep brown hair stray from her tight updo, shiny hair piled atop her head. She hurries to the IV, fumbling with the long tube. Her voice is frayed with worry. "Sir, you can't take this off! It's very important to your health that you allow the machines to do their work."

I lift a quaking hand to my mouth to cover a fit rattling coughs. It takes a moment for me to quiet down, and I try to push words through the knot in my throat. The sounds come out muddled and trembling, but intelligible. "Thank you, dear, but no."

Conflict flashes across her face. The IV tube dangles from her hand, the needle tipped with crimson. Her brilliant blue eyes roam over my face, wiry features covered in skin pockmarked with age. The corners of my cracked lips hitch up in a wry smile. "Allow an old man his final few requests. Help me sit up, if you would?"

With a shaky sigh, she hooks the tube over the metal stand, flicks the machines to “off,” and steps up to my bedside. She reaches for a remote affixed with Velcro to the side of the bed. She holds a button, and humming electronics elevate the bed, leaving me sitting upright. I afford her a nod and my thanks before she flits out of the room.

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Shaky and grief-stricken, I roam the linoleum-tiled halls of the only hospital in a small, forgotten town on the outskirts of Oregon. A special kind of unremarkable that allows it to be easily dismissed. The kind of town people only visit to be forgotten, or to die.

My grandfather had done the latter.

He was an inconsequential man, one who had lived an unexceptional life. One with little family; me, and his daughter-in-law, my mother. She'd been on a business trip when we'd heard news that his state was declining, leaving me to look after one of my last living relatives. Only one person, one memory, to mark the passing of a life. It felt wrong somehow, a kind of cruelty that only nature itself could manage. To leave this world in a parade of sickly yellow light and the ghastly growl of machines attached to patients that may never awake. I watch the numbers painted on small plaques as I pass, wondering how many here would face the same fate, and how many would go on to leave this place.

When I reach room 137, the digits are obscured by two figures muttering in front of the door. One is clad in blue scrubs, the other draped in a pristine white coat. Even from across the hall, I make out some of their conversation. “He’s removed his IV and mask, and asked they not be used. No family. He’s been in and out for the last few days.” The man accompanying the chattering female shakes his head.

“Nothing we can do. You know he’s dying.” The nurse falls silent, looking helpless and morose, while my mind turns the new information over in my head.

No family? No one here to see him?

The doctor speaks again after a moment. “See to his final moments, if you will. He deserves that much.” He departs with a flutter of white, leaving the nurse looking lost in a flurry of grief for a man she doesn’t know. I approach her slowly, taking care not to startle her out of her thoughts.

“Ma’am?” Despite my efforts, she flinches, whipping her head in my direction.

“Yes?”

“Did you say he has no family? No one?”

“That would be correct. No living relatives.” Her voice is quiet when she replies.

I pause for a moment, considering my words. "May I see him?"

Her blue eyes flare with a spark of hope. "Yes, of course." She nudges the heavy door open and ushers me through. I'm greeted by a man with a shock of white hair, hard-set features, and thin, blotchy skin. Deep brown eyes regard me, then the nurse. I can barely contain a wince at the strain in his words.

"And who might this be?"

The nurse clears her throat quietly. "This young man is here to see you. His name is..." She trails off, casting her gaze to me imploringly.

"Casper. Casper White."

"Well, Casper. What are you doing here?"

I give my best attempt at a casual shrug. "I heard you didn't have any family around." He chuckles, but quickly erupts in a coughing fit.

"That's for sure. Not a one."

The nurse quickly retreats from the room, all but overjoyed to leave me to deal with an old man in his presumed final hour. The door closes with a soft click.

After a gut-wrenchingly long moment of silence, the man speaks. "I'm Warren. If you would, will you get that book there?" He points a trembling finger at a worn, leather-bound book sitting on a chair by the window. I quickly retrieve it, laying it delicately on his lap. I pull the chair over to his bedside as an afterthought. He runs his fingers fondly over the cover, then opens the tome to a bent, yellowed page covered in scrawled words. *A notebook.*

"What's that?" The words escape me before I can think, and I instantly regret them. He only smiles, though, and explains.

"I've had it for years. Since I was a boy, like yourself. My father gave it to me - took him a week's pay. Best present I've ever gotten."

His honesty and warmth calms me somewhat, though I still wring my hands uncomfortably as I look away - a habit I get from my mother. "I've never written anything before. Not anything I like. I can never say what I want to."

His laugh is sincere, though a bit broken. "It comes with time and practice, Casper. Rome wasn't built in a day."

I fall into hesitant conversation, and somehow, in a hospital in the middle of nowhere, I've made a new friend. One short-lived, and outspoken, and wayworn, but one rich with knowledge and patient and kind.

Three years later, and my writing is improving - or so my mother says. I like it more now. I'm getting better at saying what I'm thinking. The words are easier to find. I never would've been able to before, or even after, if I hadn't had that notebook. Old, ragged, full of thought and emotion, just like its previous owner.

Words given to me, all because of someone else's.

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Words. So simple in being, but so complex in nature. Letter, syllables, sounds, scattered everywhere like so much treasure. In our heads, our hearts, our souls - stuck to pale skin, left hanging on an eager tongue, trapped behind rosy lips. Our existence is etched in our souls with the m, tangled in the stars above and the earth below and the life flowing through everything. We are made of words, and sounds, and thoughts, twisted beautifully into tenacity and vigor. We wield them as our weapons, our defense, and for some, our saving grace. They sustain us, support us, connect us in feeling and light and ethereal spirit. Resources may dwindle, the sun may explode in the sky, and still they are always there. We take new vitality from those spoken, derive wisdom from those written, and revel in those never spoken.

