

As they advanced the church steps, Vienna felt a strange sense of...something. Behind her eyes. Like somebody had tugged on the strings behind her eyeballs, dragging them backward into her head and sending a strange pang through her forehead. It was a curious sensation.

"Is something wrong?" asked Camille, upon seeing Vienna suddenly halt, hand to her forehead.

"Not at all," responded Vienna, and trooped ahead again, high heels clacking against the stone steps. Inside, she stalked assuredly down the aisle to the very front pew, mink coat billowing and bright green scarf streaming out behind her, where sat Harlan Schaffer's two closest friends (whose names Vienna had still never bothered to learn), his brother and his young widow. Vienna smiled briefly at Ludovica Schaffer as she sat down on the end of the pew. Camille sat beside her, which irked Vienna, though she chose not to comment. Camille had the irritating habit of fancying herself one of Harlan's wives, as though she, Ludovica and Vienna were a trio, equally wronged, even though she and Harlan were never actually married. Just briefly engaged before he married Vienna instead. If the quantity of artworks that he made of each woman was at all representative of the strength of their love...well. There was a whole series of paintings for Vienna, and for Ludovica. For Camille, there was only one (rather dull and derivative, to be frank) painting, which did not even sell. He might have painted more, except that he was too busy conducting an affair with Vienna to have spent much time painting his then-fiancee.

Still, the three women sat together, staring at Harlan's corpse and listening to the organ. Not one of them cried, and in actual fact Ludovica, whose current husband it was that lay within the box, seemed the most bored and unbothered of all. Ludovica was a widow, at only...what was she? Twenty-eight? Twenty-nine? In another universe, one where Vienna and Harlan had not divorced, Vienna would have been a widow too. She sort of was now, in a way. Was there a word for a dead man's divorcee? An ex-widow-to-be? Vienna stole a glance at the real widow, who she sometimes thought of as her successor - or as her understudy, on days when she was feeling less charitable. Ludovica's hard, young face was as pristinely porcelain as it ever was, hard little lipsticked-mouth pouted sullenly and heavy-lidded eyes boring into the side of his casket. Vienna followed her gaze.

Harlan's casket was a dark, polished mahogany, which he would have liked. 'Dignified', he would have called it. Harlan was obsessed with dignity. That was one of the many reasons that Vienna could not make an adequate wife for him; her apparent lack of dignity. She felt a strange, bothersome feeling begin to overtake her, like someone trickling water down the back of her dress. It was that familiar feeling of *shame* that had plagued her during her marriage to Harlan; the feeling that she was embarrassing him, that she was not being dignified enough for him. That she was laughing too loud, that she had drunk too much, that too much of her décolletage was showing. It came over her so forcefully that for a moment she was surprised to look beside her and not find his steely, pursed-lip sneer staring back at her. The embarrassed, shameful feeling visited her whenever she thought of Harlan. Usually, she would shake the feeling off irritably like a suffocating winter coat in the summertime, tearing it off her sweaty skin. Now that he was dead though, it had taken on a nostalgic, endearing quality that Vienna did not mind so much. *I am so sorry darling*, she wanted to whisper into his skin, kissing his cheek. *I'll try harder*.

She took a moment to assess Harlan's funeral, determining if it would have earned his approval. It was a beautiful chapel, stained glass windows, gothic-esque spire, and an ornate, ceramic crucifix lording over his coffin. Jesus' tear-stained eyes seemed to be falling right upon Harlan's body, as though even He were in mourning. The congregation was also quite impressive, with almost every pew filled except for a few at the very back. Every face looked suitably sombre, some were even sniffing delicately into handkerchiefs. The organ music had been grating, and struck the ear with an unpleasant howl, which he would have found grand and momentous. The only thing that could have marred it was his manner of death, which was decidedly *undignified*. Camille had read about the death in the paper, and had told Vienna of it with some degree of pleasure.

Harlan had been walking through town late at night on his way back from a friend's art showcase, when he was confronted by a gang of hoodlums.

"Understandable," Vienna had said as Camille recounted the story to her over their morning tea. "Wearing tails and a gold pocket-watch alone at night."

He had apparently caused quite the commotion, refusing to give up his wallet or watch to them in an admirable display of courage and principle.

"And they shot him?" Vienna gasped.

Camille shook her head. "I wish."

In actuality, Harlan was not shot, but rather, in trying to make an escape from the thugs, he had run full speed onto the road and was hit by an oncoming taxicab. His ribcage was shattered and all the cash he was carrying went flying anyway. The muggers had scooped up the loose banknotes and then disappeared into the night, leaving the distraught taxidriver to hold Harlan's head in his lap and watch the life leave his eyes. For whatever reason, Vienna had found this story side-splittingly funny. Later, Ludovica had telephoned to confirm what Camille had already told her.

"It sounds worse than it was, Vienna May," (she always used Vienna's full given name) "He wouldn't have felt much pain. The coroner said they found a French bordello's worth of morphine in his system, so he probably didn't even realise it when he'd punctured his lung." Then she'd hung up the phone with a clatter, just in time for Vienna to explode once again into peels of laughter.

Staring now, at that shiny mahogany casket, his death seemed a little less funny. In fact, it did not seem funny at all. It seemed horrible, uncomfortably horrible, and Vienna wished that she were repressing laughs again like she was when she was first told.

After the priest finished his reading ("Harlan Schaffer was many things; a loving father, a devoted husband, and above all, a *truly brilliant* artist..."), Vienna realised that the family was rising from their pew to approach the casket, and that Camille was getting up right alongside them. She did not intend to follow suit, after all she was not even really part of his family anymore, but if Camille was going, then she certainly would too.

Up close, Harlan looked the same as she remembered him, with only his hair a little grayer. His cold, expressionless face looked ever so similar as to how it did when he was alive; unrelenting and dispassionate, serious-browed and ever so slightly beautiful. His lips were pressed together and there was a dignified, restrained tightness in his jaw. It was a marvel that he looked as well as he did now, as he was not destined to age well. A sickly sort who smoked like a chimney and was frequently overcome with attacks of neurasthenia. His face was as sharp and exacting as his wit, hook-nosed and heavy-browed like a villainous banker from a cartoon. She suspected that the remaining joviality in his appearance was more a credit to the mortician than to himself. Vienna became vaguely aware that somebody in the congregation had begun to sob, in a stilted, hoarse drone. The noise was strangely mechanical, as though someone had pressed their 'mourning-loved-one'-button, and they had switched on their ear-splitting wail. Harlan's hands were clasped together, his suit stuffed full of cotton wool, an artificial re-inflation of what the taxicab had smashed out of his skeleton. Camille and Ludovica stood over him, their long, slender frames pressed together like a pair of wan songbirds yin-and-yang-ed together amongst riverbank reeds. Their sympathetic eyes however weren't on Harlan, they were on Vienna. Vienna then realized with mild horror that the person emitting those awful banshee wails was herself, though she could not seem to find it in herself to stop. The tears were hot and blubbery and awful, spilling out of her tear ducts with reckless abandon and dragging with them her mascara and her dignity. In any case, Harlan did not seem to care at all. He was reacting the same way he always did; no change in expression, no sitting up from his coffin to put his arm around her. He did not ask if she was okay, or to say sorry. He didn't seem to notice her crying at all, and if he did, he did not seem to care. It was rather like she was crying in front of a brick wall. Or a dead man.