This is (Not) How We Mourn

We're the only car on the road, coming back home from our weekly family dinner at Apple Bee's. Mom and Dad are ranting in the front about some book. As things start to get heated, I can't help but giggle at my mom's red face and Dad's amused grin.

"It's all about the principle, Sam! You cannot simply leave sloppy, loose ends and excuse it as 'making room for interpretation!' Honestly, I don't know why you like that book so much."

Dad looks over at mom, eyes shining with fondness and a humor that's always been there, before turning back to the road. "Alright, alright, Kimberly. I obviously didn't recommend the right book for your taste. My bad."

Before my mom could respond, before I could interrupt the conversation with my thoughts on the matter, a pair of lights come swerving towards us from the left. I barely have enough time to register that it's another vehicle before it's there, smashing into the side of the car that my dad and I are sitting on. There's the sound of metal being turned in on itself, of glass shattering like thunder...

Then nothing.

I must have blacked out, but I couldn't have been out long. When I came to, I could see the darkening sky and all the stars from where the window was supposed to be. The only sound filling the still air was my mom's voice, shrill and panicked, screaming out the same word over and over again.

"Sam! Sam! Sam..."
"Sam, honey," my mom started, her voice loud and strained from impatience and the physical distance. "Please start getting dressed. We have to go to church."

As hard as it was to pretend I didn't hear her, I did anyways. Just like she ignored me every time I told her that it felt like I was suffocating under the blanket of sympathy glances and calls of "sorry for your loss" that rung out in church. Just as she ignored me, I let her words go through one ear and out the other. I allowed myself to relax back into my covers, closing my eyes afterwards. I heard her footsteps approaching from the hallway, but I didn't move. After a few moments, I released a sigh that combined perfectly with the sound of Mom forcing my bedroom door open.

My mom had always been small in stature. Her head barely came up to my shoulder, at about five foot in height and just-not-heavy-enough in weight. Her form seemed even tinier while standing within my large doorframe, though. Her clothes swallowed her up similar to the way that sadness and irritation consumed our house in my dad's absence. Her face was ridden with misplaced wrinkles, signs of aging that weren't meant to be there yet. Had I not known how misleading the sight was, I would have felt bad for giving my mom such a hard time when she looked so fragile.

But I was hurting too, so I stayed quiet.

We watched each other as the silence stretched on endlessly. When her patience ran out, my mom took several steps into my room. She stepped over mountains of unattended clothes and shooed away my laptop with the tip of her boot. Her form shifted through stale, cold air in what my mind perceived as slow motion. Once she was standing in front of me, I looked over to my window to avoid eye contact and noticed it was raining, pouring even, outside. I let my eyes
sharpen to follow a wet trail as it slid down the glass. I concentrated all my attention on that rain drop. The cloudy sky and gloomy grayness of outside was a better alternative to focus on than the gloom my mom and I brought to the room. Honestly, I couldn’t even bring myself to look at her.

The lack of eye contact did nothing to stop her from addressing me, though. "Sam, did you hear me? You need to get up."

"No," I said, bleakly.

"Sam, I'm being serious. Get ready so we can go."

Again, "No."

"Sam..." She started again, but I was quick to turn away, the distant memory of my mom's screams suddenly overcoming me. Since he passed away, being my dad's namesake has been nothing short of agonizing. My very existence was a constant reminder of him. Every interaction and call of "Sam" brought him to the forefront of my mind, and it's as if my mom's been purposely calling out my name more often. It's as if I'm her only channel to his memory, the only way she can bare to acknowledge he was ever alive to begin with.

And that was the problem. It's been three months since the accident. Thirteen weeks since we last acknowledged my dad's existence. Ninety-one days since my mom began acting like having a moment to take a deep breath at the very least would kill her, too. One hundred thirty-one thousand, four hundred minutes have been wasted as I've tried to think through and understand how I, myself, have been feeling. Without dad being there, time has lost all meaning. Grief, replacing everything we used to be, has left my mom and I more like hostile strangers than family.
"You act like me asking you to do one thing is so much work! I can't run this house by
myself, you know."

"But it's not just one thing, mom! First you want me to go to church with you, then you
want me to clean up your mess, and go wherever you want to go. If you would just let me rest, we
wouldn't even be having this conversation!"

"Really? You say it as if resting isn't all you do. You wouldn't even leave your room if I
didn't make you!"

"And why do you feel like that's needed? If I want to spend time in my room, then I should
be able to. I'm tired, mom! I'm always tired. And just because you can't seem to sit still doesn't
mean I should suffer along with you!"

The door slamming's the only response I get in return.

She doesn't understand me, nor I her. While I just want a chance to catch up with myself,
to find the time to come to term with what has happened before moving forward, my mom never
seemed ready to give pause. She's kept moving, and at every point she's been trying to drag me
along with her. It's always "You're in your room too much, come to the store with me," or "You
should be out doing something," and it's all left me feeling rushed and accused. Just as quick as
my mom made her comment, I was biting back about her being selfish and trying to make me
forget just because she wanted to. She'd lose her temper, and so would I, so the back and forth
never stopped. Seemingly, this was how we mourned, with bitter tasting conversations escalating
into war-like battles, and by not healing at all.

I was prepared for this, another attempt to force an unwanted trip to church, to be no
different.
But the feeling of a soft touch against my shoulder cleared my mind and loosened the tension in my muscles. It was only once I had relaxed completely that Mom's voice flowed out in a feathery whisper.

"It would mean a lot me if you came to church with me today. Or maybe... If you prefer, we can both stay in today? It is a bit gloomy out, what with the rain and all."

The wave of surprise that slammed into me caused her words to hang heavily in the air for some time. I wasn't sure what to make of the offer and, instead of trying to find an answer, I allowed myself to slowly turn back around. There was a small, hesitant smile adorning my mom's expression once I was finally facing her. The sight brought tears to my eyes that, for the last three months, thirteen weeks, ninety-one days, I continuously tried to stop.

"Oh, Sam," my mom whispered when she noticed, and she opened her arms to me. "Honey, I'm sorry. Please don't cry."

"Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry..." I can hear the tremble in my own voice as I stare into the dark of my room, trying to keep myself from sobbing. The walls are too thin, and if I'm too loud, Mom will hear. She has church in the morning, so she'd be more upset that I woke her up than me crying anyways. She doesn't care enough to ever ask, so I won't let her know.

So, I say my mantra with more resolve, determined to prove some point that I haven't quite figured out yet. "Don't cry, don't cry, please don't cry..."

As it had become routine, I didn't listen, I couldn't even if I wanted to. Tears flowed steadily across my cheeks, stopping at my chin as I moved into my mom's embrace. Her arms wound around me, and I cling just as tightly. With the ease of a turned switch, all my pent-up anger and frustrated dissolved. In the warmth of our sudden unity, my mom and I cried together.
We cried for ourselves and the fact that we both became so lost and separate from one another. We cried for my dad, who wasn't fortunate enough to make it out of a car accident my mom and I walked away from. We cried because of fear and uncertainty, because death is promised while another day isn't. We cried because, no matter how unfair that thought felt, we both knew it was something we would have to come to accept.

With that very thought in mind, I pulled away from my mom, suddenly having no more tears to cry. It seemed her eyes had run dry too. For a while, the silence continued to sit between us, and, in its presence, I tried to figure out where to go from here. Without much warning, even to myself, words were erupting from my mouth like an explosion.

"I'm sorry for how I've been acting lately. I know this is hard for you, too. It's just been-"

"No, Sam," my mom interrupted. "I should be the one apologizing. I've been pushing you in my own attempt to come to terms with things and... I'm very sorry for that. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me... I know your father wouldn't want us to be this way with each other."

I knew what she said was true. Before the accident, my mom and I were never like this. We used to have baking Thursday's and celebratory movie nights every time my dad came home from a business trip. The reality of death had set us off course, though. In the face of my dad's absence, while he had never really been the glue that held my mom and I together, the extent of our separation made it seem that way. And maybe that hadn't been his place before, but that didn't mean it couldn't be now.

So, I rushed forward again and pulled my mom into another hug. A soft "I love you" was muttered into her shoulder and her arms wrapped around me in return. Mom’s smooth and steady
return of the sentiment lightened the atmosphere in the room. As if the guilt and pain from the last three months had been lifted, I felt like I was finally able to breathe. I stayed close to my mom, basking in the moment, however temporary it was, and allowed myself to breathe.

For myself, and for him.