

## God Gave Me Feet

Autumn.

Fall.

Harvest.

I love this time of year; I soak it up with each deep breath of the season. I take in the ripe fall air, with each breath hoping the next one will leave me satiated, happily finding peace in the knowledge I never truly could be. Fully satiated, I mean. Fall isn't the time to be content – it's a time when the only thing I'm filled with is curiosity. It's a time when the world makes a silent agreement with change, with growth. Fall is when the entire world silently whispers *I have your back*, gently pushing you towards your highest self, urging you to re-emerge with the leaves in spring. Like the sweet potato slips need daily watering during their first week in the ground, I can feel the universe infusing my soul with its knowledge, whispering to me that it's almost time. Harvest is soon when I can open and be soft yet again.

The day is only slightly warm and will silently slip into a chill as we're distracted by the vibrant reds and yellows of the harvest trees. The clouds will eventually take over, leaving today's blue sky nothing but a faded memory. But not just yet – we're still here.

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I hopped out of my faded red pickup ( Just as you expected, huh? ) and breathed in the slight chill of the November air. I took a second. Breathing. Seeing. Feeling. November is my favorite month. I can be an observer then; I can be me. My prolonged silences aren't questioned

for once — the rows of wine-colored leaves are enough to stop anyone in their tracks. Enough to make them understand me, even for a moment, enough to make them plant their feet on the ground and feel the earth underneath them, to go somewhere else for a bit, to speak with the trees, the dirt, and the worms in the same way they talk to each other. Those leaves are enough for anyone to understand they're a part of something bigger. Everyone in our small town knows November is for me, and they let me have it.

I turned towards the school and finally exhaled. Moving towards the backseat of my Tacoma, I caught a glimpse of myself in the window; both my overall straps were twisted as the last of an October tree's leaves twist around its trunk in a final embrace. Beautiful on a maple, but alas, I'm just a girl. I laughed at myself as I flipped the metal hook once, twice, thrice (Jesus Christ), quatrice, until my straps were straight. Finally, I hooked them onto the golden Liberty buttons that rested right above my breasts. I used to work with a woman who couldn't stand my twisted straps. She could spot those straps from across the room before I could even realize that she'd entered the office for the day. She would approach the back of my desk chair with a graceful silence; she never said hello, but I always knew she'd arrived by her soft touch on my shoulder. Somehow, she never startled me as she placed her nimble fingers on my shoulder, always painted a baby yellow, and smoothly slipped my strap off my arm, always starting with my right side. I could feel her warmth as her arm reached down to the front of my overalls, resting her left wrist on the nape of my neck as she held the golden button in place, finally latching the strap with her right. I stopped my work then, waiting to feel her hands return. I thought about loving her as I rested my green fingertips on the golden buttons.

"Getting dressed in the parking lot again?" Alan shouted with a smirk, walking towards my truck from across the parking lot. He palmed my head before I could fully turn to him with what would have been some unfunny quip in response. I swatted his hand away with a playful grumble, "Dude, respect the curls man!" Alan bellowed, "I promise your one-inch curls are fine Kris. Matter fact, you should be thanking me for the blessing of my touch; it's been known to promote keratin." I rolled my eyes hard, but they couldn't combat the loving smile I could never seem to get rid of when Alan was around. He was my brother, technically my half-brother, but we like to think our parents meant to leave us enough room to grow a friendship. I slid my fingers through what little hair I did have on my head, working to puff up the little blond curls from the root. It's been only a month and a half since my yearly vanity buzz, and each time, the hair seems to grow back faster and faster, especially in November. "The only thing your hands promote is grease," I smirked with the pride of a younger sibling. Alan and I had a sister, but I guess the only thing her half could grow was distance. We try not to talk about it, or I do; I think her distance hurts Alan more than me; they grew up together. I try to be a sister enough for both of us; that's what the family does, right? "Kris?" I looked up at him. "Huh?" I wasn't sure when I began looking down. "Let's go, okay?" I didn't miss how much softer his voice became.

They say working with family members is a recipe for disaster, and it is, but Alan and I thrive in chaos. Let's give our father a big round of applause, raising two high school teachers. Isn't that every middle-class father's dream? Obviously not, but apologizing to our father for our life's work never seemed like a glaring task on life's to-do list. Alan made a move to palm my head again as we walked onto campus, but without the element of surprise, Alan was no match for my heightened senses. I took a step back from his right half as he went for my head, making

sure to jab a finger in his side before appearing again on his left. Alan yelped before we heard the high-pitched accent of one of Alan's history students, "Yea, get him Miss Kris!" I laughed as I turned to give the kid a wink. "I still need your personal essay by class today Caleb!" Unsurprisingly, the child had strategically disappeared behind one of the rows of lockers before I could finish my sentence. "Instant karma," Alan bellowed. "Instant karma," he repeated with a smirk, but I didn't hear him.

I loved our campus. Alan and I were blessed to teach at the same private school we attended as adolescents. It was one of those campuses with an ever-flowing stream of donations from grateful parents and constantly nostalgic alumni. The walls were far from the classic white bricks of the public schools I taught at early in my career; they were actually just wired gates completely covered with years of vine growth, now a mix of zesty lime, gold spice, and sunset sunflower. Thanks to climate change, our outdoor classrooms were still in use, and the indoor classrooms above our theater were prepared and lying in wait for the first inklings of a North Carolina white Christmas. I watched the ivy vines blow in the slight autumn wind, showing off their beautiful little deaths. For a moment, the gleeful chatter of the students faded, and the beings around me disappeared until it was just me and the leaves. I could hear them whispering to each other through the breaks in the wind, telling stories of love and death and the peace that lies in between. I reached my hand out towards a lone red wine leaf, craving its knowledge, dying to communicate through the same neural pathways. "Miss Kris!" I pulled my hand away. "Can I talk to you before class?" I turned to the young boy somehow suddenly behind me; his eyes were pleading. It worried me. "Of course, come in five minutes before class."

Neal was the kind of kid that wasn't a kid at all. He dressed and talked like a 60-year-old man on sabbatical. I saw a lot of myself in him, and my nerves for our conversation only grew as I rearranged my classroom for the discussion-based lesson we would have for the day. I placed the class' healing crystals on a small handkerchief in the center of the circle of chairs. I was delighted when the school allowed me to begin an annual trip to the local crystal shop at the beginning of the year. Allowing the students to choose their own destiny for the year has always created a comfortable environment for them to bond. This year's class felt most connected to fluorite, red jasper, rose quartz, selenite, and onyx. Clarity, confidence, peace, love, and protection were the pillars of this year's class, and the students' eagerness and openness allowed these energies to thrive, sometimes even making me reevaluate my own path. As I placed our talking stick next to the class crystals — a rainbow sensory slug brought in by one of the more passionate students — I could hear the heavy metal door of our bungalow shut behind Neal. I checked my watch. "Your punctuality is excellent, Neal." It scared me. "What's going on?" I asked as the freshman placed his bag next to a seat within the circle, moving to grab the red jasper from the center before answering me. "What is your schedule like after the school day ends, Miss Kris?" I let out a small chuckle at the boy's prose, not missing the evasive nature of his response. "While I'm glad the mysteries of an English teacher's personal life intrigues you, I'd like to know where this curiosity stems from." I try my best to refrain from blurring the lines between the professional and personal. It's hard with students like Neal, who actually view their teachers as more than educational servants. I watched Neal roll the jasper around in his palm. "I can't help my mother anymore." He clenched the jasper in his hand like he was afraid it was going to disappear. "What do you need right now, Neal?" I parked myself in the seat next to him. His chest rose underneath his sweater vest. It didn't fall again until after he spoke. "Can you give

me a ride home?" I looked into his eyes and tried to find all the words he wouldn't say, but he wouldn't let me in, not on this. I crossed the line.

Neal sat in the passenger seat of my truck, facing the window the way I did as a child, trying to find my place in what was outside of it. The wind was picking up in the evening air, the whispers between the trees growing louder. Neal only got quieter. As I pulled into the boy's driveway, I could see his hand gripping the door handle as if my truck was on fire, and he could feel the licks of its flames underneath his feet. I put the car into park, and by the time I removed my seatbelt, the passenger side door had already been slammed shut. I trudged through the pile of leaves that covered the boy's lawn and driveway, watching as he struggled with his house keys. I walked up the porch steps and watched Neal drop his keys, once, then twice, hands shaking as he finally slid the key into the lock. He turned to me, "Thank you for the ride Miss Kris but you really mustn't stay, I haven't had the time to tidy." I gave the boy a warm smile as he struggled to turn the lock. I gently removed his hand from the key, replacing it with my own, turning the key counterclockwise as the door opened with a slight pop. I looked down at the boy, "I'm happy to help Neal, but I'd like to check in on your mother if she would have me." Neal only nodded silently.

Neal was right; it looked like no one had the time to tidy the small house for quite some time. I placed my leather bag next to the couch, dressed in at least four different colored blankets. Takeout boxes littered the coffee table sitting in front of the sofa. I turned to the boy as he emerged from the dark hallway to the right of the living area. "My mother is happy to know you're here, she's in the bedroom at the end of the hall." I nodded. "Would you like to bring a

glass of water with you?" I shook my head. "No thank you, how about you work on today's homework while you wait, and I'll help you with any questions you may have on my way out." He nodded with a slight smile, the first I'd seen on him today. I walked down the dark hallway, squinting to make out the baby pictures of Neal and his father lining the walls. His mother's door was slightly ajar when I softly tapped it three times to announce my entrance. "Come in, darling!" called out a voice I thought I would never hear again. I must have been dreaming. I pushed open the eggshell door to a world I'd thought I'd left behind. I couldn't cross the threshold as the scene before me showed me just how much that world had changed. My eyes settled on the woman before me; she lay upright in a bed of light green sheets, the baby yellow comforter covering her bottom half. A TV tray overflowing with vanilla Ensure and orange pill bottles sat to the left of the bed, a bright white nightstand covered in used tissues to the left. "Oh, please do come in, darling, I'm terribly sorry I couldn't make it to the living room today; some are easier than others," said the woman cheerfully. I took a step inside the room. The woman hadn't looked at me yet, too focused on the bright blue blanket she was knitting. "Excuse the mess, my love. I'm rather ill, as you can surmise, but I'm not contagious, so don't fear it!" Her excited tone didn't match the appearance of the woman it came from. "Hello, Dawn," I whispered from in front of the doorway. Her tired eyes met mine, and the years of unsaid words strung us together instantly. She didn't look away as I sat on the edge of her bed, nor did I. And for a moment, we were just leaves, whispering tales of love and hate to each other through the gentle breeze of her Dyson sitting in the corner of the room. I couldn't tell you how long we stayed that way, looking into each other. "Come here darling." I kept my eyes locked into hers as long as possible before moving to sit before her. Her nimble fingers, now shaky, found their place on my shoulder, slipping the strap of my overalls from my right shoulder. Unlatching my overall strap, her baby

pink nails twisted once, twice, then thrice, smoothing the straightened strap over my shoulder once more. I could smell the cocoa butter on her hands as she rested her left hand on the nape of my neck, her hand sending a shiver down my spine as she pieced me back together. "You know I can do this by myself now." I whispered, somehow worried that speaking at a normal volume would shatter the illusion. "Obviously not," she chuckled as she moved to fix my left strap. While she simultaneously undid me and made me whole for a second time, I couldn't help but revisit the past. Dawn was my first real boss at my first real job. I started as an intern for her clothing company straight out of college. She was only five years older than me but became the mother I never had. Alan had his mom, and I had Dawn. She took me out to lunch on my first day, and it was the first time I'd said anything all day other than, "Hello, my name is Kris." She had only said about three words that entire lunch, and somehow, by the end, I'd told her my whole life story. That was the kind of woman Dawn was — so tender that she made you soft by association. Dawn was the only woman I'd ever loved. "Where's your husband?" I whispered as she latched my left strap into place. "He's gone." was all she said in response. I found out later that same day that Dawn had stage four breast cancer.

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For the next year, I would become Dawn's primary caretaker and Neal's secondary guardian. Alan loved it; he'd always wanted a brother, and history was Neal's favorite subject, so on the nights I would spend with Dawn, Neal stayed with Alan in his guest room, quickly transformed into a teenage boy's dream bedroom. Winter was hard. Dawn started chemotherapy a few weeks after that first visit, and by the end of December, she had me help write her will. Neal was very quiet during that time. Dawn went into remission in the spring; it was the best two months of our lives as the family we had accidentally created began to feel everlasting. Dawn



tired of knitting in May, and we spent the summer taking jazz dance classes together at the Y. Dawn was good at everything she did, except for jazz dance; she sucked. I suggested family hip-hop classes for us all, but Neal and Alan just laughed at the thought, and Dawn wasn't one to give up until she perfected a craft. We danced through September. Her cancer came back in October.

On Halloween, I spent the night at Dawn's; her doctor had ruled her bedridden two weeks prior. We'd had an argument earlier in the day; she kept trying to dance from YouTube tutorials when I'd leave for work. I couldn't handle coming home to her lying on the living room floor anymore. Today, she'd promised to stay in bed, and while she sat under the covers when I came home from dropping Neal off at a friend's for the holiday, I knew she'd been dancing still. I sat on the edge of her bed as I massaged her swollen feet, trying to lighten the mood by tickling her baby yellow toes. Sometimes, she laughed, and everything was okay. Sometimes she wouldn't. "I talked to Dr. Azinge today —" Dawn cut me off. "I already told you I'm not doing chemo again, I won't be able to dance." For a moment, I saw red, so much of it that I knew I couldn't speak without starting an argument again. I was tired of arguing. I pressed my thumbs firmly and slowly into her sole until she took a deep breath. "You can't dance *now*, Dawn," I whispered. She stuck out her left foot, urging me to move on from her right. I followed. I looked into her light green eyes; her once long red curls were short like mine now; she puffed up her tiny ringlets. "God gave me feet for dancing, and that's exactly what I'll do."

I watched Dawn die, slowly and painfully. I'd never felt pain this beautiful before her, but I had seen it. I had seen how the last of a tree's leaves wrapped around its trunk in a final

embrace before winter, hoping they could meet their brothers and sisters again in the spring. Like a phoenix, they died at their brightest, without fear, with hope. But I knew I wouldn't find Dawn again in the spring, and that felt more painful than it did beautiful.

On November 20th, I spoke to Dawn for the last time. "I love this time of year," she whispered to me like she was telling me a secret only I could understand. I didn't know if I could anymore, understand, I mean. "Why?" *You'll die with the leaves.* She let my question hang for a moment, I looked at her wondering if she'd somehow heard my silent statement. "When the world around you changes, it's unfair to expect it to grow around you." I saw her. "I'm happy to die as I am, there's nothing more I'd like to change. At first I was jealous when September came, when the leaves started to change and I could already feel that I wouldn't be able to change with them anymore, I became angry ... b-" she coughed. I handed her a glass of water, placing my hand under her chin to catch the drops that spilled from the sides of her mouth. "Bitter." She handed me the glass. I set it back on the bedside coaster. "When October came, I stopped wanting to try anything new. I've picked up 40 new hobbies every fall i've ever lived, in preparation for a winter by the fireplace. So when November came, and all I wanted to do was dance I thought I'd do just that...I thought I'd do it until I couldn't anymore."