

Cardinal

The red cardinal sat outside Elara's window, its harmonious tune painting a stark contrast to the stillness of the world that morning. It came to her window every day at approximately 6:12 AM. It served as Elara's reminder to get out of bed. The bird's feathers were impossibly bright, flashing against the pale grey sky, a burst of color in a dull world.

Elara watched it through the window pane, foggy from her breath. The bird tilted his head and sang, then flew off, leaving a flash of red in the dreary sky.

Elara turned towards the mirror. The sun was beginning to creep in, casting a long shadow across the carpet. A yellow Post-it note clung crookedly to the edge of the mirror. The ink was beginning to fade. *Everything you lose is a step you take.*

Kaia had written it. She found the lyric on some ancient CD, tucked in a plastic sleeve, left behind in an attic full of dust and mildew. They used to listen to it together, the two of them pressed close to the floor with their ears by the speaker, the volume low so no one else could hear. Elara felt as if she could still hear the crackle of the CD, their muffled laughter, which was too loud for the world they lived in.

But Kaia was gone, and Elara just turned sixteen.

In another lifetime, 16 meant getting a driver's license, a part-time job, and a birthday cake. Now, it meant something entirely different. Elara stared at the envelope on her desk from the Bureau of Emotional Regulation. It came the day off her birthday; it made sense. In a world obsessed with efficiency, timing was everything.

The Procedure

No one called it the colloquial name anymore; *Memory Erasure and Realignment Control Procedure* sounded so clinical, so negative. Elara knew the official truth; she'd been fed it since

birth. The procedure erased the negatives; it made people stable. Still, Elara's chest felt tight at the thought.

Elara's racing thoughts were interrupted by a knock. Her mom stood in the doorway, wrapped in a grey sweater, and the smell of laundry detergent. Her smile held still and steady, like a photograph taped onto her face.

"Hey, honey," she said with her usual smile, "Ready?"

Elara's throat was dry, but she nodded.

The car ride was washed with pale gold sunlight. The trees blurred past with bone-thin branches and leaves that were dusted bronze. Her mother played soft instrumental music in predictable loops, calm, controlled, and utterly without feeling. Its soundwaves filled the space the same way her smile did — present, but empty.

"Do we always have to play this godforsaken music?"

"You'll be okay," her mom said with a simper on her face. "It's what's best."

Elara looked at the straight path ahead. She desperately wished her mom would veer off course, take the next exit, turn around, go anywhere but forward. But the car kept moving, steady and unyielding.

The clinic was a box, with white walls, glass doors, and no windows on the upper levels. Inside, everything smelled like bleach and lemon. The front desk lady wore a pristine white blouse, almost camouflaging herself with her surroundings, she had a nude pink lipstick on and held the same tight smile as Elara's mother.

"Hello there," she said, her voice light and emotionless. "You must be Elara. I see you're scheduled for the procedure today. Based on your profile and extenuating circumstances, we will need five sessions instead of three. We just have to be cautious with grief."

Elara glanced at her mother. She was already smiling and nodding.

The last thing Elara saw before the anesthesia blurred her vision was the pale ceiling above her. Kaia's soft voice singing played on repeat in her mind.

Elara woke to silence.

Not the silence she knew — soft, natural, filled with the occasional sound of the wind. This silence was exact, deliberate. It felt manufactured, like the procedure had muted her world. Even her breath, slow and shallow, felt too loud in the room.

The quietude of the room was interrupted by a gentle push of the door. A nurse stepped inside, her shoes squeaking against the thoroughly bleached floor. She held a tablet in her hand and a practiced smile on her face.

“You’re awake,” she said gently. “That’s good. Everything went as expected.”

Elara said nothing; her tongue felt heavy in her mouth.

“You may feel a little disconnected at first,” the nurse added, checking something off a clipboard, “That’s normal.”

Disconnected. Elara thought that word felt too small.

By noon, Elara was back in the car. Her mother helped her into the passenger seat, fastening the buckle like she had when Elara was a child. The same smile sat on her face, unmoving, identical to the one she had worn that morning, and maybe every morning prior.

The engine hummed to life. The car pulled away from the clinic in silence, broken only by the music. It continued on with the monotonous music, except this time it felt right. Elara's mom noticed her lack of dissent.

“See, you're feeling better already!” she exclaimed.

Elara wasn't so sure.

Elara's grandma's house used to hold a strange sense of comfort for her. In a bland world, the vintage furniture, the rusting kitchen appliances, and the musty smell provided a reassuring contrast from the sterile world beyond its walls. It had been a week since the procedure, and Elara felt disassociated from herself. Her grandma's house no longer felt like a haven, but instead a hollow museum of a past version of herself. Session 2 was in the morning.

She laid in bed when the familiar pit in her stomach resumed. She spent many sleepless nights praying for her thoughts to be silenced in moments like this; however, as she reclined onto her grandma's rustic bedspread, she felt herself praying for her emotions to never falter. For the first time in a week, she felt like herself.

Elara felt a sudden urge to explore her grandma's dusty attic. Growing up, it gave her solace from the uniformity of the world beyond. She sat up and hurried her feet towards the attic door and boosted herself up to it. The attic air was thick with the scent of mildew. Sunlight crept in through a single, grime-streaked window.

Elara stepped carefully across the attic floor, each board creaking slightly beneath her feet. Her fingers trailed a row of boxes labeled chaotically in her grandma's messy handwriting — *Christmas, Baby Clothes, Work documents* — her eyes shifted to the unlabeled box hidden behind the others. It was smaller than the rest, covered with a thick layer of dust and sealed with a single piece of tape.

She reached over and pulled it out, and then slowly peeled off the tape. Inside, she saw scattered scraps: a cracked locket, several birthday cards, glitter gel pens and various other trinkets. At the bottom, there was a thin, spiral-bound notebook. The cover was what seemed to

have been a bright pink, but had now faded and dulled. The edges of the notebook curled inwards. Across the front in big bolded letters it read — *Jennifer's diary, Age 16*

Elara froze.

She stared at her mother's name.

With trembling fingers, Elara lifted the notebook from the box and sat cross legged on the attic floor. The air felt heavier now, like the room held its breath in anticipation too. She opened the first page.

May 7th

Joe is acting weird. I dont know if its the pregnancy or something else. My brain always jumps to conclusions, theres only so many reasons a 16 year old boy acts so different. I still havent told mom, but i cant keep the baby. Im not ready. I dont know who i am.

May 12th

Joe is still being strange. I dont know whats wrong, he mentioned something about the government but i have a feeling thats a lie. When he exclaims "theyre out to get me" i dont know how to respond because what. I know the government is crazy but still.. Why would the government want him??? I think the whole pregnancy thing is getting to him. I scheduled my termination for may 22nd.

May 13th

I broke down in front of joe. I needed him to get things together because i am already spiraling out of control. He snuck in through my window close to midnight, his eyes were bloodshot and he kept looking around as if he was being watched. He showed me a official-looking paper he had about something called 'Memory Erasure and Realignment Control Procedure' i have no idea what that is but he explaiuned they erase everything they

deem negative in your head to control you. I didnt believe him at first and thats when he got really mad. Not like yelling mad, but scared mad. Id never seen him like that before. He told me they did it to his mom, he started crying. He told me it wasnt her anymore. He started sobbing. I told him he was scaring me, and he just begged me to be careful. He told me he loved me, then he handed me this fricking flash drive. I dont know what to do.

May 16th

I dont know what im doing. God damn it I really really dont. It's 1:17 am and i'm terrified. Theres a black suburban parked outside that has been there for a day. No ones left or gone in. I texted joe 5 hours back and hes not gotten back to me but im terrified.

May 17th

Joe is gone. And I can't breathe; ive felt like I'm being crushed by a 1000 bricks every second of today. My mom woke me up in tears and told me, she said there had been an "accident" i asked her where and she told me they never found a body. Holy shit holy shit this is not real. I dont know how to exist anymore. I want to cry but it feels like my eyes have given up. I never got to tell him I loved him back.

May 18th

I opened his flash drive. Oh my god. Idk if i can say much

May 19th

They came to my door today. My parents were at work. I opened the door i dont know why i did. There were two of them and they simply asked if i knew joe. I tried to say something but my voice was stuck. They told me pregnancy is a delicate time and that they need to take me to a clinic soon just to make sure everything is ok. I dont know how they know. The only person

other than me who knew was Joe. They told me to expect a summon notice and said they'd take me there themselves, then they left.

May 21st

The summon came yesterday, i was going to ignore it but then they showed up at my door in the morning. They took me to the clinic, and someone who I think was a nurse but im not sure called this session "emotional premapping" she asked questions like "Do you feel anger frequently?" and "Would you say your grief is interfering with your ability to function?" and "How often do you dwell on past events?" i lied, i smiled and she just nodded.

She told me i was scheduled for the procedure tomorrow. I told her i couldnt do it tomorrow, i had an appointment. She inquired what? So I told her about the abortion. She sighed and told me that unfortunately because of the extenuating circumstances faced decisions such as that were no longer my choice. She said that I was too emotional to make such grave decisions. I told her i made my choice before, and she just kept saying i cant. Her voice which started out sweet was yelling now. I said I would not come, that's when she called the men in the suits back in and that's when I agreed. When i got home mom held a letter in her hands from the "clinic" im terrified. Joe told me i would never remember this, i wouldn't remember him. I can't let go of him. This isn't ok. Joe told me the cure, i dont know if i will ever be the same again. But i have to try. I think i need to write down what i know, i hope i get to see this again.

THE PROCEDURE -

Name : Memory Erasure and Realignment Control Procedure

Used to suppress stuff like trauma grief rebellion and emotions labeled as excessive

Major plan is to introduce to the entire population in the next three years

Doesn't delete your emotions it buries them (you forget you forgot)

Fragments of emotions remain

CURE TO PROCEDURE

Because emotions aren't fully deleted, there are loopholes around the procedure

It is possible to have a "wake word", something you associate with deep emotion. Joe said mine would be cardinal. They were always my favorite. I don't know if he's right but I hope he is. I'm hoping I see my diary when I get home. See the word and I am converted back to normal.

Elara sat frozen in the attic, the diary still open in her lap. Her breath was shallow. Her fingers were trembling. Tears ascended down her cheek uncontrollably.

Joe.

Elara had spent her childhood asking about her dad. The answers from her mom were always limited to 'He wasn't around' or 'He had to go' or 'He was better not remembered'

So she stopped asking, she trained herself to stop wondering, she told herself it did not matter. But it did.

Her father wasn't a ghost, He wasn't a myth. He was a boy who tried to warn the girl he loved. A boy who vanished without a body, without a goodbye. A boy who handed over a flash drive because it was the only lifeline he had left.

Her father was Joe.

Elara pressed her hand to her mouth trying to stop the sob that arose in her throat. It came anyway, in a way that was raw, broken and aching.

All her life, she hadn't blamed the procedure. She believed it kept people safe, like they told her. She believed forgetting made things easier.

Now she knew the truth.

It didn't erase pain, it erased people, it erased love, it erased her chance to know who she really was. It erased both her mom and dad.

She stared down at her mother's words, feeling like she was reading a version of herself from another universe. Maybe some part of her, the part that still whispered Kaia's name in the dark, the part that still looked for a cardinal every morning, was a version of her mom.

Joe had called it a failsafe. *Cardinal*. A word she'd loved before she even knew what it meant.

Elara looked up at the attic window. It was smeared with dust and grime, but beyond it the sky was starting to lighten. She saw a faint shape in the window, too fast to determine what it was, but Elara swore she saw red.

For the first time in weeks, she felt all of it. Every memory, every ache, every ounce of grief and love and rage that had been muted before. For the first time in weeks, she was awake.

Elara knew she had to get her mom back.

She bolted out of the attic. Her grandma was still asleep. She knew she had little time. She ran out of the house.

By the time Elara reached her house. The brisk morning air had chilled her to the bone. The sky was a cold, colorless gray. She fumbled the spare key hidden under a flowerpot. Her breath came in short sharp bursts. The house was as still as always.

Her mom sat at the kitchen table, perfectly composed. A soft hum filled the room. She looked up when she heard Elara.

"Sweetheart," she said, calm as ever, "You're home."

Elara's voice trembled.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Her mom tilted her head slightly, still smiling. “Tell you what?”

“I know who Joe is, I know what happened.”

Her mom didn’t flinch. Her smile remained unchanged.

“What?” She said, “I’m not sure what you’re talking about, sweetheart.”

Elara’s chest cracked open. Rage, grief, and longing poured out. A longing to be understood. Her tremors broke down into sobs, and her mom remained unfazed.

“This isn’t you!” Elara cried. “You were real, you were scared”

Her mother kept humming and smiling.

Elara’s voice fell to a whisper, barely holding itself up.

“...Cardinal,” She said.

Her mom remained unperturbed.

“I said the word.” Elara cried out uncontrollably.

Elara realized the word alone wasn’t enough. She felt like she needed some fresh air. She staggered towards the door to her deck, flung it open, and stepped outside. The morning wind bit her cheeks. The sky above was pale and indifferent, and the world above felt impossibly quiet.

Then fluttering down from somewhere beyond the trees, Elara spotted the cardinal. It landed on the wooden railing, its bright red feathers catching the light like fire in the frost. It tilted its head. It sang.

Elara’s breath hitched.

“Cardinal,” she said again, but this time, she didn’t say it to her mother. She said it to the bird, to Joe, to the universe.

Behind her, the humming stopped. Elara turned.

Her mother stood in the doorway, the smile on her face slowly faltering. She stared at the cardinal, frozen.

“Mom?” Elara said quietly.

Her mom took a single step forward.

The wind moved through the trees. The bird chirped again. And then, it happened.

The smile vanished. Her lips parted just slightly. Her shoulders dropped like she had been carrying something heavy for years and had finally been able to set it down. She blinked rapidly, her expression raw. A single tear slipped onto her cheek.

Elara stepped closer, as more tears took over her eyes. For the first time ever, her mother was truly seeing her.