

## Nina's Dance

"I'm going to be a wreck tomorrow no matter what happens." My papa slurred his words over our glasses of whiskey. The bottle glimmered against the moonlight, empty. September air was warm, but the breeze chilled to our bones, and we could hear the heifers mooing in the distance. The weathered floorboards of the porch creaked with every shift of weight. I was enwrapped with his jacket that smelt like fresh cut hay; I sat in her seat beside him. I wanted tomorrow to be worry free for Papa, he did nothing but worry nowadays.

The next morning, I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and winced at the throbbing headache that reminded me of the whiskey from the night before. I knew today would be long, so I ordered my bridesmaids to cure the hangover with more alcohol. At eight am sharp a team of beauticians herded in, tools at the ready. Then, I was primped and pampered like a prized show pony all morning. There was an overwhelming aroma of chemicals from all of the different beauty products, stray lip hairs were tweezed, and tape in places I didn't want to think about. The final touch was her beaded necklace around my neck, something old.

No, today was perfect, I thought. White clouds taunted us with the chance of rain. Even if it did, the wedding would still be outside. I had been planning this day since I was thirteen years old, and I watched *Father of the Bride* for the first time. None of my plans were for this wedding to be inside. Besides, if it rains on your wedding day it's just good luck. How special I felt, being the oldest, I was the first to get married. No one had felt these types of emotions before, and we were all treading on new territory.

I sat beside the woodfire stove, I knew too well, while my makeup was being slathered on my face. I thought about this house that had been one of the only constants in my life, the beams stood yellow and splintered from a hundred years of different seasons. What else had it seen? It stood on the street corner enwrapped in lush green pastures, watching a family of immigrants help build the foundation of a town. It had seen the foundation of a business built by the hands of two love birds. Nina and Papa would eventually build a family in the same rooms as our great relatives. I would even be brought home swaddled in a pink blanket and placed in the room to the left upstairs, twenty one years ago. They were together through sickness and health for the past forty-three years. "Would this be my fate," I thought. Would my future husband agree to care for my needs even if I would follow in her footsteps? I could only dream that our marriage would be as beautiful as theirs.

The anticipation kept rising like an ocean tide, after the beauticians had left as quickly as they came. The sun laid in the middle of the sky, the cows retreated to the shaded area of the barn, and a parade of cars barreled down our driveway as if they were escorting the president. My mother wouldn't let me look out the window as my fiancé, Damien, made his way under the cherry tree that sat by the front door. He stood facing the lush green pastures. I walked through the white door of that old yellow house and tapped him on the shoulder.

After I finally laid eyes on my soon to be husband, the day started racing by. The photographer got in what felt like a million photos and then we were whisked away to our final destination as a young couple. A small white barn a few minutes away from my childhood home, tucked in between the hills underneath Mt. Rainier, and lined with a small rusty barbed wire fence. Our whole family sat in chairs awaiting our arrival and the processional playing on speakers. A few moments later, a man in a brown leather fringe jacket, announced us as husband

and wife and were ushered away to sign the rest of our lives away to each other. The whole day I felt Nina's eyes watching me, my papa towed her along and I worried if each moment was the last. She was a ticking time bomb, and I worried she would be set off before I could go to her.

When I finally was released from the clutches of bridely duties, the priority on my list was to meet with them. We came back outside and dodged the reaching hands of excited family members. My papa ushered my Nina out the back door of the reception hall littered with watching eyes. I wanted this moment to be private, but I forgot that we were the center of attention that day and privacy was not what we were going to get. The back patio was shaded and the cold concrete slab was uninviting to my feet that were aching in pain from standing all day. Despite all the distraction and chaos, she exclaimed, "I know you." A wave of warmth rushed over me, and tears overflowed from my tear ducts, blinding me. I clutched onto her and held on. I was holding onto her and not the shell of a person that consumed her. I felt like if I held on tight enough, she wouldn't drift away again.

Nina hummed a mindless tune and walked toward the next person she could remember. Just as quickly as she was there, she was gone. My Papa trailed after her and left me paralyzed. Not a clear thought was going through my head, and it reminded me of what she must feel like all the time. Aimlessly wandering through her own mind with no coherent thoughts, leaving her loved ones with a skeleton that had no brain. Ten years ago, we thought the diagnosis was a joke, Nina was healthy as a horse and as strong as an ox. We used to ride our cattle horses in the fields of buttercups, surveying the cattle around us and talking about whatever a twelve-year-old contemplates about. She taught me the importance of caring for animals. I remember her saying "an animal will sacrifice all of them, if you give them all of you." For ten years, I watched my riding partner forget how to throw her leg up over the saddle, and eventually forget that I was her

riding partner. And now here I stood, terrified that this was all I was going to get of her for the rest of the day.

And just like that, the whirlwind of my wedding day swooped me off my feet again. There were even more pictures and delighted exchanges with those I haven't interlocked a gaze with in a very long time. The DJ announced us as husband and wife for the first time and I felt the room fill with applause and love. Our family was proud of how far we have come and the team we had made. I felt the approving gaze of my Papa. I remember shaking, waiting to hear his approval of my husband and blessing us with the permission of this day, almost a year ago.

A bride and groom's first dance, so traditional yet so daunting. Damien, my husband, and I were not very good dancers. In fact, we both were uncomfortable even kissing in front of our parents. I buried myself into the blue worsted wool suit, hiding myself from the anxiety. Yet, there we swayed with 200 pairs of eyes locked onto our motions, our song felt like hours. I anticipated the next moment so much I barely could keep focus on my husband.

My Nina and Papa used to enjoy themselves and danced like no one was watching. I remember being in the very same house that I had prepared myself in that morning, Jimmy Buffett playing on the Bose speaker so many years ago. Nina's auburn curls would fall into her eyes while she cleaned the kitchen in her white tank top and weathered blue jeans. My mouth anxiously awaited the peanut butter cookies that tasted as if love were in a pastry, salty and sweet. Papa would come inside for lunch, smelling of rich manure. He would hold her waist from behind and sway to the beat, I would look away when they would exchange a kiss. I wish I had watched it.

Our first dance slowly faded away and then you could hear Randy Travis start singing from the overheard speaker, “You may think that I’m talking foolish... You may have heard how I’m wild and free...” The DJ beckoned our parents and grandparents to come to the dance floor for their featured dance. My Dad’s parents performed an upbeat two step and swung each other around. Damien’s parents sang loudly and off key. My mother and stepfather swayed back and forth to the chorus, “I’m gonna love you forever and ever amen...” Damien and I bumped into all the generations that had created us and we held onto each other tightly.

I stopped dancing abruptly knowing this moment wasn’t for any of us that were dancing, I had planned this specifically for my Nina and Papa. Damien and I were no longer dancing but scanning the crowd for our favorite duo. Papa was doing the best he could to usher her to the dance floor, but he couldn’t help it when she was remembering all the faces around her, he didn’t want to break her out of that trance. I wasn’t going to let him miss this opportunity if I had anything to do with it.

Grabbing Damien’s hand, we made our way through the sea of dancing family members. I remember hearing the last bridge and feeling the anticipation, I was missing our moment. I pushed my way through Grandma and Grandpa Kunz dismissing something they said to us.

I reached for her hands, they were cracked and calloused from the past. They used to have dirt lodged between the nail and skin, sometimes a gash encrusted with blood. She would never shy away from doing a dangerous or strenuous job. Sometimes, I remember, her voice would bellow over two hundred heads of cattle louder than Papa’s. She didn’t shy away from her illness either, she didn’t sit waiting for silence to consume her. With her head held high she

would bring the horses to pasture every morning and feed the calves every night, until she couldn't.

I traced my fingers to the arch of her back, holding her side and my Papa's. Damien followed in my footsteps and suddenly all four of us were dancing together. We all rocked back and forth as Randy hit us a little close to home. "They say time can play tricks on the memory...making people forget things they knew..." Papa's eyes glimmered like that bottle of whiskey from the night before, holding back his emotions as best he could. We probably looked a little silly, all swaying together like that, but this moment wasn't for us to look like a perfect family. It was for us enjoy every good moment we had together, for the bad moments outweighed the good.

Nina is not dead, and this was not the last time I would see her. But it was the last time I had seen a small sliver of the woman she used to be, dancing with Papa like all those years ago. She resides in the memory care facility struggling to tell us she loves us and struggling to remember even who we were. Her misty blue eyes stare at you trying to grasp the memories you shared together. She wanders around with Papa by her side and watches her every move. She hums that mindless tune, under the moon that glimmers like an empty whiskey bottle.