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## LETTING GO

Christine Hagen

**THERE WE WERE; SITTING IN A ROOM** in the basement of a church, staring at a picture of him. We all know why we are here. It's as if our existing in this moment made up for all the moments he's already missed. But I know that's not it. A circular formation of souls, crowded around, staring at a clergymen I'm sure the deceased barely knew, if at all. The faces of those souls in observance are blank, pained, hurt, or guilty, as if someone could've stopped his selfishness or hurt getting the best of him. I'm not sure that's the case. But I think I could have.

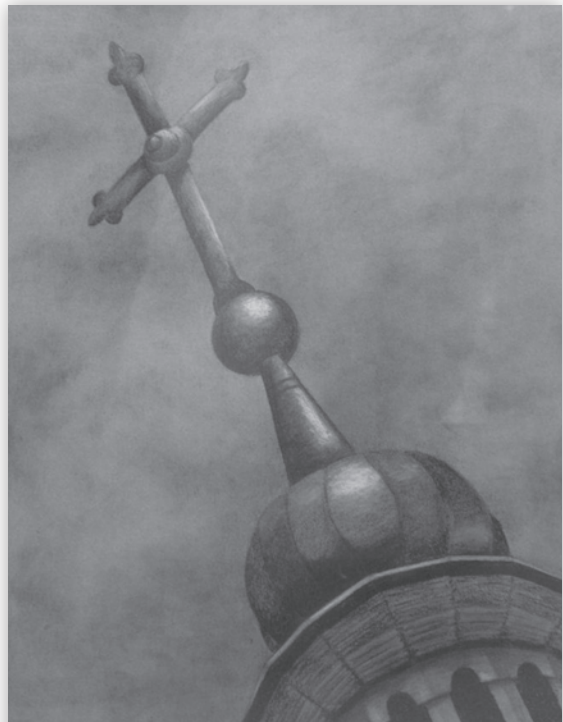
This man is saying words, but I am not hearing them. My family is not hearing them; his family is not hearing them. They do not exist because he is not dead. He is not dead to me, anyway. His picture is his only representation in this cold, damp shell of a room. Maybe it's not his only representation, for there sits his piano, guitar, and autograph book. I hated that guitar but I would die tonight if I would get a chance to seem him play.

The hushed tones of tear-strained voices muttered to themselves the words of Lennon & McCartney, his favorite. "Let It Be" was the simple motto for which he lived. If only he had done so. His parents are there. They don't look sad, per se, but bewildered. As if this is for a show, as if he will come around and say "Mom, Dad, you've been Punk'd!" But that would never be. He didn't like that show anyway because he said it was unfair.

**UNTITLED** Macy Freeman

And as we light these candles that looked like they were used at the first Passover, I look at his picture. Everything, with the soft candlelight and the music and the tears, falls on me so hard, knocking every emotion out of my being. I can't help it. We're instructed to go outside to release one hundred silver balloons. Silver was his favorite color. I loved him for loving a color so much he named his dog after it.

We are walking into the dark, black night, into a garden where church ladies have their tea and chat about azaleas and their husbands' dentures. I remember when I saw him here, playing his guitar after church one day. That's when I fell in love with him.





After a prayer, asking that God would let these balloons into Heaven, where I think they would stand out as tacky, we are informed to release them whenever we feel the time is right. I cannot feel this time being right. It's not right. He is gone and he should be here with me releasing this balloon for us, not for his death. We were, we are alive, but we can only be alive together, right?

My dad has his hand on the small of my back, and I realize how hot it is outside. My dress is sticking to me. It could be sweat, but it could just be my tears drowning me slowly. He is informing with this small gesture to let go, but I don't think I can. It's so final. As if this balloon is him, and everything he ever did and would represent in my future. I can see in my dad's face that there will be other boys, that they will love me as much as he did. But I can't believe him. Not with this balloon in my hand.

But I think about it. He always wanted me happy and said I was beautiful when I smiled, even in a corny school picture. He wanted me to smile no matter what, that God wanted me to smile, too, because He made my teeth perfectly and they deserved to be shown off. I always laughed. God, how he could make me laugh.

Laughing is the farthest thing from my mind as I face the reality of being one of two people left with balloons. His mother is still holding on. I know, Deborah, I know. We cannot let go because we loved him most. She looks at me with tears in her eyes, makeup falling off of her sunken face. Her frame is startled and violated, as is mine.

I look at her and I smile the best smile I could because I know he would have loved it. I nod at her, saying it's okay because he knew we loved him. I nod because I know I could've stopped him, but I nod also because I didn't know how bad he was hurting. I nod because he was everything to me and everything is now nothing and I don't know what to say or do anymore. I nod because I want to let this balloon melt into my hand as I coddle it throughout the night.



With one decision, I look at Deborah, and she is looking at me, and we decide to let go together. She is letting go of twenty-two years of memories, good and bad, and letting them float through the star-filled sky. I know he would like that. We often went to the astronomy lab to look at the stars.

My hand is loosening the party string and I feel his going away. She looks at me as she releases her grip and I nod again, and she smiles. We both point our heads to the sky, with our families and loved ones behind us, as we send a gift to the most beautiful man in our lives. I send it to him in hopes he will remember me. I've heard in Heaven, it won't matter if you're married or not because you have a different purpose. But just for tonight, I need him to remember me. Just for tonight.