

Mourning, as Expressed in Dancing

Maren Schettler

“The dance of life finds its beginnings in grief... Here a completely new way of living is revealed. It is the way in which pain can be embraced, not out of a desire to suffer, but in the knowledge that something new will be born in the pain.”

– Henri Nouwen

The twinkling bell rang one more time, and Clara repeated, *thank you, yes have a good night, yep you too, thank you*, to the final customers leaving the store. A breeze, colder than any she'd felt since last winter, flew into the shop as Clara shooed the customers out. Finally, a gentle click, lock the door, flip over the closing sign—*Thanks for stopping by, come back soon!*—written in her mother's cursive script, a delicate hand Clara has always envied. She sighed, a polite smile lingering on her mouth. She hoped the customers, still talking outside the shop's door, wouldn't see her lean her head against the wall. Her hair fell forward over her eyes, and she instinctively tucked it back behind her ear as she turned away from the door.

Every night after closing, Clara strolled through the shelves of the bookstore. This night, for no reason she was aware of, she felt she must tread lightly, quietly, without anyone to disturb but the ghosts of dust

and light. She reveled in the silence, the old cherry hardwood creaking in the places she expected. Clara had spent many evenings watching her parents dance together up and down the aisles of bookshelves after hours.

She knelt to rearrange books that had been pulled, glanced at, and discarded by customers' kids. Clara remembered glimpses from her childhood, back when she could hardly reach the third bookshelf high. She picked up a classic edition of one of her favorite children's books. On the cover, a little bear walked beside his even littler friend, his free arm cradling a pot of honey. She could hear him laugh and see his eyes shine as he looked back over his shoulder at her. Clara's father had been the one to read her to sleep each night, and at one point, Clara had plans to read this book to her own child. She slid it back into its place on the shelf.

Clara stood behind the counter, counting bills to balance the till, and pausing between small stacks to write down numbers and guess what minute of the hour she expected her husband to walk in. Usually, he came around a quarter past nine, but sometimes his shifts at the children's hospital kept him away longer than expected. Lately, it seemed he worked himself harder, pulling longer hours. Maybe to distract himself. But even after shifts, he would help Clara close things up, sometimes joining her for her evening walks through the winding bookshelves. Though often short and filled with sighs of long days, evenings were their time to talk. There had been more sighing than talking these days.

As Clara finished counting the till, soft snowfall accumulated on the shop's windowsills. She absentmindedly glanced outside, gasped, and closed the cash register. All thoughts of her closing responsibilities—and of her husband—left her mind as she began preparing to go out. She hadn't realized how much she had been aching for the sight of snow. It called to her with an irresistible gentleness, welcoming her home with open arms.

With steady urgency, Clara stepped out from behind the counter and pulled her peacoat and wool hat from the standing coat rack. She hardly heard the back door of the shop open or the call of her husband's hello! A draft of cool air accompanied his footsteps, and winter's first freeze clung to his jacket. Clara pulled on her mittens, adjusting the fabric around her thumbs as she walked to the front door.

"Hey hey hey—where's my hello, darling?" Silas breathed, wrap-

ping his arms around her from behind, pulling her away from the door. The familiar warmth of his cologne threatened to distract her from her purposes.

"It's snowing, Silas," Clara replied, trying to shrug him off. Hoping these words would be all she'd have to say, she felt him tense around her. Clara didn't want to have this conversation again, but goodness Silas, don't you understand by now?

His arms loosened, and Clara thought that might be the end of it. But then Silas slid his hands down to her hips and pulled her around to face him. There was no missing the sadness and frustration in his eyes; Clara could only hold her stubborn stare for a moment before looking away, toward the door.

"I have to go," Clara said, attempting once more to pull away.

"It's been two years, Clara. Please, if you don't go out just once, maybe you'll . . . I don't know—"

"I have this one thing to remember them by, and I can't have it?" Clara ripped herself from him, putting an arm's length of distance between them.

"One thing, Clara? Are you serious? You've taken on their bookstore, and every day you follow the paths they've walked countless times across these floors—I know you try to be them, and I can tell that you practically see them around every corner. Maybe it's too much," Silas said. He took a step forward, reaching for her hands. "Darling, we were doing so much better this summer."

Clara crossed her arms. She hated that he was sincere because she couldn't compromise on this. She met his eyes again, which were begging her to understand him. But her heart recoiled and snarled, and out of her mouth came, "Too much? Having them here would be enough. And if I can't have that, then dammit I will keep of them what I can," she spat. Clara hugged her arms around her stomach, feeling vulnerable. She regretted that the books had to hear this. "And what about *her*, Silas? Are you going to forget her too? Move past it like she never happened and try again?"

The empathy Silas desperately tried to maintain for Clara hung on by a thread. As moments passed, Clara saw silence fray the soft fabric of his eyes. He eased his hands in his jacket pockets, unsure of what to do with them.

"Is that really how you think I feel?" Silas sighed, broken.

Clara's throat tightened, and she knew it wasn't fair—not to her, and not to him. . But she meticulously guarded that deep ache in her heart and womb, a special kind of ache that only a mother knows. She wanted him to know exactly that: she had lost so much more than he had.

"I'll be back in a half hour or so," Clara said. She was going to see them tonight.

Silas stood, and Clara left him, wind-worn and tattered.

Stepping into the cold, Clara walked deliberately down the sidewalk as though nothing was wrong. She held herself upright for as long as Silas may have been able to see her from the store's windows. Then she staggered, a dry sob heaving from the depths of her, her legs going weak. Freezing air stuck in her throat like burrs and drove tiny hooks into her lungs as she gasped. *Just ride it out, Clara. It'll pass.* Bent over, hands on her knees, she focused. As soon as her chest stopped forcing out air, she stood up and walked on as steadily as she could.

Only three blocks from the store lay an empty intersection outside of one of the town's few neighborhoods. A few streetlights lit the corner, but no stop signs or traffic lights stood guard. A walking path lined the street, and along the path was a bench. This night was the year's first snowfall, but Clara had spent many evenings over the last two years sitting there, watching the snow fall and rest and fall and rest.

Clara walked briskly to keep warm, squinting against the breeze and snowfall. She thought back to the night she received the phone call from the police. Clara agreed to watch the store for her parents so they could have a night out together. They drove back late, in the snow, in the dark. Even in clear weather, cars with their headlights off are hard to see. Her Parents probably had only a moment to call out to God before they were hit—at least Clara preferred to believe so. There were no witnesses.

Clara reached the bench, grateful to finally sit. She slowed her breath, hearing only the shuffling of her coat and quiet creak of the bench as she eased back, waiting. The few flakes she had seen from inside her bookstore were now multiplying quickly. Clara had learned that the snow gave shape to things otherwise unseen. Tonight, she knew she'd see her parents dance.

Silence pushed against Clara's ears. Snowflakes floated in and out of the light of the streetlamps, invisible and then glittering like stars.

They fell to the ground intact, in cotton-ball clusters on the street. Soon enough, the snow accumulated into a light dusting, just enough that one could leave traces of footprints. Clara sat death still, her cheeks reddened and numbed in the cold. She stared hard, searching for any movement among the falling snow—the first sign of her parents.

Clara saw a sign after a few minutes. Under the streetlamp closest to her, the snow flurries appeared to be swept up from the ground, like dust flying lightly from the brush of a broom, or from the twirl of a long dress dancing by. Clara melted into her bench seat, a shaky whimper of relief releasing from her mouth. Breathing again, Clara sighed.

“Hi Mom, hi Dad.”

She followed the flurry of snowflakes, catching sight of shoeprints for just a moment before they were swept away by her mother’s dress as her father moved soundlessly with her. They had always had a beautiful rhythm together. Clara grew up watching them move together—in dance, in decisions, in their business, and in their marriage. Even during tough business days, when customers complained without reason or sneveled about the price of hardcovers, her father would catch a moment with her mother and give her a twirl behind one of the bookshelves. Occasionally, Clara’s mother would flip over the closed sign to end the day, and, exhausted, the two would hold each other, swaying gently, gathering strength for tomorrow. They’d dance through the days together.

Since the accident, Clara visited the corner each time it snowed to remember and to hold their memory close. Tonight, the snow was perfect. After long enough, she began to see more than just footprints. If she looked closely, she could trace where the snow fell on the invisible frames of her parents. Clara could nearly see her mother’s woolen skirt dusted with snow like lint. Her father’s broad shoulders, capped with snow, hid where her mother’s face pressed into his jacket. She couldn’t see most of her mother, huddled against her father’s chest. The glint of snow reminded Clara of their eyes, which always shined and never dulled, even now.

Clara’s eyes filled and overflowed. It was too soon—it was too soon. She should have had more time with them. She thought about her argument with Silas; he didn’t see what she saw. She was the one who lost them, so only she can see them now. He only thought the snow reminded Clara of the night of their accident, but she couldn’t explain how much more it was than that. It was too soon, so she held them close

now—perhaps closer than she did when they were *here* here, when she could feel the fabric of her father's coat wrapping her up in a hug, when she could hear the clicks and taps of her mother's heels as her father swung her around the bookstore and join in their giddiness. Now, she must hold what she has, clinging to the traces left of them in silent snow.

Clara could have stayed for hours, watching their ghostly steps being written and erased in the snow, especially because she was not particularly inclined to face Silas, whom she knew she had hurt. She didn't know if she cared that she had hurt him, which scared her. But he had to understand that this is what she needs.

Silas was leaning against the front counter when Clara returned. He didn't look up when she walked in, stamped her feet at the doormat, and pulled her hat and mittens off. She kept her eyes down too. *He's hurting*, her mind recalled. *But not as much as I am*, her heart replied, growing callous again. She took a deep breath and stepped up across the counter from him.

"I'm sorry, Silas," Clara said.

Silas didn't speak, but he searched her eyes for traces of ghosts, for dead apologies. Clara hoped she had said it convincingly.

"I just . . . I need this, okay?" Clara continued. "I know it's hard for you because this is a part of me that you can't have or understand, but please trust me. The snow keeps them here."

"The thing is, hon, I don't think it does," Silas said softly.

Silas watched Clara's face go blank. Feeling her slip, he amended, "Listen, I know you see something out there in the snow, and I don't get it, and I probably never will. Grief can mess with our minds a bit—"

"This isn't grief, Silas. I still have them. They're here," Clara said, her face and voice hardening. She watched pity fill Silas's deep brown eyes—oh those eyes you could just slip into and sink until you're gone, gone—and she turned away. She already knew what he would say.

"Clara, they're not—they're not here, and they're not out in the snow, and they're not in this store. They might be, I guess, I don't know, in your heart, maybe, but please look at me—and I know it's hard—but I need to hear you say that you know they're not here," Silas said. The pleading in his voice cut to her heart, but what could she say? They were here. "I want to help you, and I think the first step is showing you that... that, they're gone."

Clara kept still. She watched the snow melt from her boots, pooling at her feet.

"Clara, darling?"

They're here, he just doesn't understand. I'm alone but they're here.

"Darling, I think we should move away."

Clara flinched. Whipping around, she said, "What? *That's* your solution to fix me?"

"I'm not trying to fix you, I'm trying to *help* you, and I'm running out of ideas," Silas said. Exasperated, he set one hand on his hip and rubbed his forehead with the other. "I thought this last summer would give you enough space and time, but tonight I saw you put your coat and hat and mittens on like you always do on these nights, and I didn't want to believe you were going back out. And..." He paused. Clara watched as he let both his hands fall to his side. He shrugged, helpless. "And my heart shattered for you," Silas said, feeling the weight of Clara's stare upon him. He tried to make his words every bit as heavy. "I admit I've never lost my parents like you have so I'm not trying to minimize that or compare, but I did lose . . . I mean, we lost . . ."

Too heavy for his tongue, his voice broke, and his words pulled him down.

The store's clock ticked in the background, and neither mourner could carry the silence of the moment. It filled the pages of the books around them. They all told the same story.

Silas moved out from behind the counter and slowly pulled Clara to himself. He slid his fingers through her hair, her head against his chest. She held him, and he held her, and they sniffled from the cold and from a grief so unimaginable that they hoped it wasn't real.

Still pressed together, Silas eventually spoke first.

"Let's think about it, okay? Consider it," he said. "It could be difficult, but it's possible it could be a really good thing. For both of us."

"Sure," Clara said, tired of this friction between them. She looked out the store windows at the snow piling high. They'd work it out, she thought, and they'd stay right here.

Days passed without snowfall and thus without conflict for Clara and Silas.

Clara ran the day-to-day of the bookstore while Silas worked at

the hospital. He was often up and gone before Clara rose to awaken the store. She prepared coffee for both her and her customers. It wasn't anything fancy, but her parents always kept hot drip coffee prepared for those wanting to browse awhile. The earthy aroma filled the crevices of the shop where dust didn't.

Around midday, Clara, holding her second cup of the day, wandered around the store, asking customers if they needed help with anything. This was one of her favorite parts of her job. She used to watch her parents come alive as they recommended books to members of the community. Her mother was far more familiar with nonfiction genres—everything from travel books to memoirs to self-help guides. She could read people even better than she could read books. Clara knew her mom was excited when her voice rose over the bookshelves, and soon enough, she pulled the customer and the book toward the register, offering a discount. Clara was always amazed at the number of people who would return to the store a few weeks later, declaring that her mom's recommendation changed their lives. *It was exactly what I needed*, they would say, and then ask for a suggestion for their next book, or for their sister or father or teenage son who just didn't like to read.

Her father was a bit softer with people. He would ask questions until the customer suddenly knew exactly what they wanted. He listened intently and asked gently, guiding them in their thoughts until the customer would have a *eureka!* moment and march right up to the book they knew they wanted the whole time. These customers touched a tender spot in his heart; often, they were afraid to approach a genre that others had told them was silly or worthless, like fantasy or romance. He inspired them to the point of hearty conviction for their beloved genre in the face of opposition. He'd shake his head and chuckle as they'd leave the store, faces hard with determination.

Now Clara walked the line between the two of them in her own bookselling. She began with easy questions and helped the customer decipher from there, mixing in suggestions or favorites of her own. She felt she could only speak about her own experience.

Clara walked up to a young woman she hadn't seen in the store before, standing near the self-help shelf. The woman looked sheepish at having been found browsing here, but Clara set her mind at ease with a smile.

"Is there anything I can help you with?" Clara said, eyes glancing

down at the book already in the woman's hand.

"Well, um. I've just found out that I'm pregnant, and I'm a bit lost trying to figure out how to prepare or what to prepare for. My mom passed away when I was a teenager, so I never learned those things from her," the young woman said.

Clara, caught off-guard, said, "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." She was unsure of how to continue. If she spoke from her own experience, she would have to tell the woman to hold off on buying any books until she knew her baby would survive the pregnancy. That wouldn't do.

"Well thank you, I appreciate you saying that," the woman replied, moving her hands to her stomach and looking back at the books on the shelf. "So, I think my best bet is to get some expert advice. Do you have any recommendations?" She glanced at Clara's wedding band. "Or, do you have any kids?"

The ache in Clara's stomach returned, deep and hollow. She remembered the ultrasound, the confident doctors, and Silas's sparkling eyes gazing at her with more love than they ever had.

"I don't. I'm sorry, I wish I could help," Clara responded. She gestured toward the top shelf and said, "This author has a few great options, depending on what particular stage of development you're looking to learn about."

Clara tried to focus on the woman, the customer, but she couldn't stop thinking about the fact that this woman lost her mother when she was so young. She said it in the same manner as someone offhandedly mentioning that they grew up without television.

"Oh, perfect," the woman said. She pulled a book from the shelf and skimmed the summary on the back cover, nodding to herself and to Clara.

Clara couldn't pull her feet up or resume the polite conversation she had tried to maintain. Her hands wrapped tightly around her mug of coffee, which had become lukewarm, the scent stale and acidic. The woman looked up and saw Clara staring at the book.

"Is everything okay?" the woman asked, confused. Clara tried to shake off whatever it was she was feeling.

"Uh, yes, I'm sorry . . . I, well. Would you mind if I asked you a question?" Clara said.

The woman responded, "Sure, yeah?"

"I was just wondering, and you don't have to answer if it's too per-

sonal, but how did you handle that?" Clara said. She knew she wasn't thinking straight, fighting to stay grounded.

"Handle what?" the woman said with a look of growing apprehension.

"Your mother's passing," Clara said, horrified at her own bluntness, unable to keep herself from asking.

"Oh," the woman said. The familiar look of pity crossed the woman's face. Clara could tell the woman was putting the pieces together and she hated the implications of asking the question.

"Well, it wasn't easy. Teenagers don't deal with things like that well, and there's no *one* way that people grieve. My dad was going through it too. But we had each other, and time helped heal us quite a bit," the woman said, reflecting as she spoke.

Clara deflated. She'd heard this before. Why had she thought this woman would have anything more to offer?

The woman continued. "People have always told me that death is a natural part of life, that it's just what happens. I don't know about that. I think it feels completely unnatural and...and wrong. And I think it's okay to feel that way. But, eventually, you learn that your feet keep taking steps, one after the other, and your breath keeps moving in and out of your lungs all day and night. You realize you're alive, and they're dead. And there should be a difference between what those two things look like."

The woman looked at Clara, wondering if she had shared too much or not enough. Clara nodded and smiled, thanking her for sharing. She thought of her parents dancing and wondered if *they* were actually the ones living. The woman thanked Clara for the book suggestion and asked if she could check it out at the register. *Yes, she could, she's glad she could help.*

The word *dead* continued to echo in Clara's ears like the thuds of heavy boots on hardwood floors. Dead? Oh, but she still had them here; they lived in the cave of her womb and in the dust floating off the bookshelves and in the warped, knotted wood and in the snow. Close, so close.

A few evenings later, it began to snow again, looking like it would be quite the snowfall. Clara had already made up her mind—no matter what Silas said, she would go out again.

She pulled on her boots, thinking this time she would make it out of the store before he returned from work. She was almost right. She was about ten steps out the door when his car pulled up the curb outside the store.

“Clara!” Silas called, stepping out of his car. There were already a couple inches of snow wetting his shoes and the bottom of his slacks.

Clara kept walking, refusing to give in.

“Clara, if you must, then I’ll come with you. Please let me come with you,” Silas said, catching up with her. Clara shook her head, angry that he was determined to ruin this for her. He didn’t understand, and it felt insensitive for him to encroach on this time she had with her parents when he knew as much. But she didn’t say anything as he followed half a step behind her.

As they approached the corner, Clara could see that her parents had already begun dancing. She glanced at Silas, who saw nothing but snow. She sat down on the bench, and after a moment, Silas gently sat down next to her.

“It’s beautiful to watch, yeah?” Silas said. Clara stayed silent. He was talking about the snow falling. Sure, it was beautiful, but her parents—oh, they were mesmerizing.

The longer it snowed, the more definition the snow brought to her parents’ frames. The same wool skirt floated and swept up flurries around the two of them. They danced, and Clara tried to block out Silas’s presence. She observed how they moved, catching occasional shoeprints in the snow before they were brushed away. She saw what she had the previous time, during the first snow of the winter: Her mother appeared huddled closely to her father. With heavier precipitation this evening, Clara could more clearly define their snowy outlines. They were holding each other close, looking down at what appeared to be a little bundle in their arms.

Clara’s mittened hand flew to grasp Silas’s arm as she stared into the snow. Silas, shocked, looked to Clara and back out to the snow-clothed street. He squinted, waiting to see something or for Clara to say something.

Wide-eyed, Clara watched them dance, the bundle held closely and cozied between them as they twirled and twinkled. Clara thought she had emptied herself of tears, but more welled in her eyes until she couldn’t see anything but starry white. She took a halted breath, unable

to keep herself from weeping. Releasing Silas, she buried her face in her shaking hands. They were all there, so close and together, while she was alone. Painfully alone.

Silas reached around her and pulled her in close. She let him gather her up, pressing her head against his chest.

“Our little girl, Silas,” Clara said between sobs. “Our little girl.”

“I know, darling, I know. I see her too. I see her everywhere,” Silas said, warm tears slipping from his eyes.

They sat so close, quietly weeping as their pain-filled tears mingled on their coats. Clara looked up to find her parents’ silhouettes of dancing snow gone—gone with their granddaughter. Flakes of snow continued to rain down, oblivious to the fact that the waltzing pair had disappeared. They were gone, and Clara held Silas close, so very close.

Maren Schettler is a senior studying English, music, and political science. She loves the outdoors and enjoys camping and hiking with friends and family. While in school, there is no end to her frustration with the lack of leisure reading time. Her boxer dog Pacha is her favorite reading buddy.