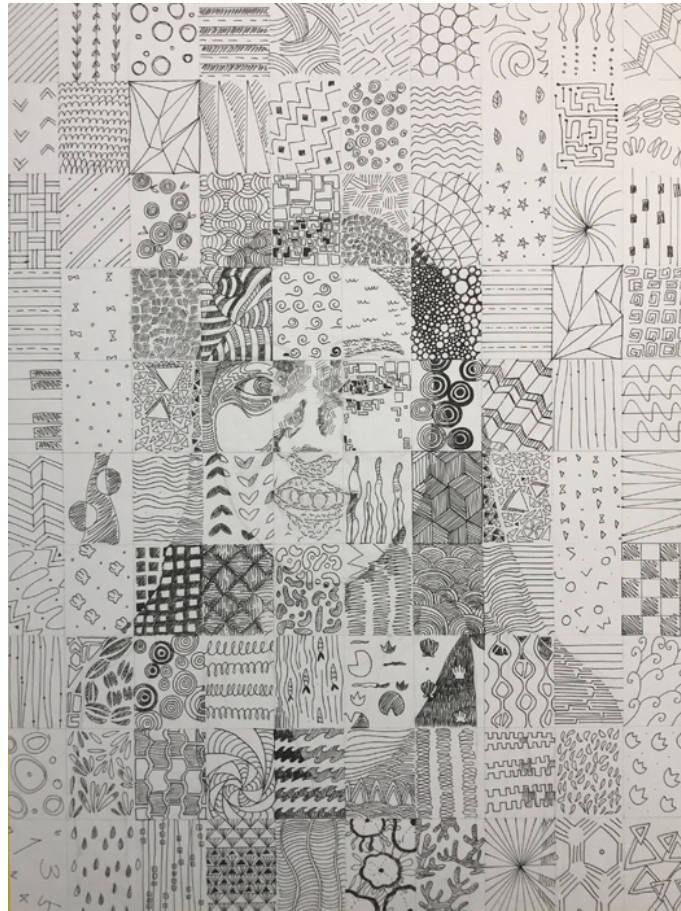


SHORT STORY

The Theatre

by Julia Hausstätter



"In pieces" by Sarah Yun

You could still hear the prolonged beep ringing in your ears. Long after the doctor told the nurse to turn off the monitor, long after your daughter's sobs went quiet.

“We had a good life, we did good. Goodbye, honey.”

You were glad that the last words you ever heard were from him. That was what you had always wished for: to be surrounded by the people you loved and to hear his words, feel his hand.

Slowly, the ringing started to tone down and you became painfully aware of the absence of his warm, protective hold on you. Instinctively you reached your ring finger, turning the time-worn ring as you had done for the past 63 years.

An oddly familiar smell danced around your nose. Popcorn? You looked up and realized that you had forgotten something. Something rather important.

You had just died.

So, where were you? And why was there popcorn?

Your feet were firmly planted on a battered, red floor that stretched out towards yellow walls, hung with what seemed to be the original movie posters of your favourite movies. You were standing in front of a small ticket booth with glowing lettering on top, spelling TICKETS AND POPCORN. You concluded that the afterlife must apparently be an old, worn-out movie theatre.

At that moment, a bored-looking teenager appeared in the booth window, chewing gum and scratching a nasty-looking pimple on his chin. Now, that was not how you had imagined it.

“Is this heaven?” you managed to squeeze out, your mouth barely keeping up with your brain.

The boy let out an exasperated sigh and looked up.

“I don't know, do you want it to be?”

Taken aback, you stared at him. What was going on? You decided on another question, masking your growing fear with a sharp tone.

“Where am I and what am I supposed to do here?”

Not letting go of his battered chin, the youngster gestured towards the sign above his booth, visibly annoyed.

“You're in a cinema, people tend to watch some kind of movie in a cinema. Boy, oh boy. What do they teach you down there? You all act like you've never heard of this before,” he

mumbled around his bubble gum, back to being busy irritating his poor chin even further. Defeated, you took a step towards his booth. Somewhere in your mind you registered that your knees weren't hurting anymore. At least the 'no more pain after death' part of the preaching was true.

"Okay, what movie are you showing?"

The boy glanced towards his desk, pushing a greasy string of dark hair out of his pale face. "Looks like you just missed 'Martin', but you could still make it to 'Jane'."

Your heart skipped a beat. Jane? That was your name. Was that a coincidence? Was there coincidence in heaven? Was this even heaven? Panic started rising in your chest, your heart beating faster than it had the day you had opened the door to the police officer with the sad face. But just like that day you pushed that panic right back down your throat. You squeezed your fingers around the familiar metal on your right hand and took a deep breath. And just like on that day you only nodded, knowing there was no point in asking any further.

Some things were just meant to be dealt with.

"Okay," you took a long shaky breath. "Then one ticket for 'Jane', please." The boy nodded, looking at you with a smirk on his face.

"That'll only cost you one life."

"I- I'm, I'm pretty sure I just died. I don't know what else I could give..." you mumbled, getting more and more quiet with each word. You hadn't considered payment yet. The ancient Greek tradition of putting two coins on the dead person's eyes to pay for transportation to the afterlife would have been incredibly useful right then, you thought.

A deep sigh escaped the greasy-haired boy's lips.

"I know," he reached under his table and pulled out a small box. "That was the joke."

"Oh."

Your heart was still pounding. You drew in a few deep breaths, trying to calm yourself down enough to at least sound like you were content with what was happening. You watched the boy turn to a small popcorn machine that you had not noticed before, standing in the left corner of his little booth. He started piling up the corn, thankfully with a little shovel and not his fingers.

"Funny," you said, forcing a small smile onto your face. The skinny shoulders lifted and slumped curtly, followed by a grump "hmpf", your strained respect for his bad joke going unappreciated. Once the box started to overflow, he turned back around and opened a small

door on the right side of the booth. He exited his small crate of power and started walking in the direction where the different cinema halls must be. After a second of hesitation, just one moment in which you considered simply collapsing onto the floor, or stamping your foot or just bursting into tears, demanding a proper explanation for what in God's name was going on, giving yourself just one brief moment of despair — you pulled yourself together, grit your teeth and willed your body to follow this lanky kid to whatever cinema hall that held the movie mysteriously named after you.

You followed him in silence, listening to the muffled sounds your feet made on the red carpet. It reminded you, in some way, of the walk down the hospital corridor, when you followed the young doctor towards the small white door. He had the same dark hair as the boy before you now, but much less greasy and cut in a more modern way. You had always remembered the young man's hair, so harsh in contrast to the bright white door he had walked towards. Sometimes you had dreamt about that white - that all-consuming whiteness, blinding you while you were shouting for her, trying to reach her, to pull her to safety. You had never quite reached her in time.

A quiet cough pulled you out of your thoughts. The young boy was staring at you, his face looked almost worried.

“Sorry, what?” the words came out shakily, your mind still partly trapped in the white nightmare.

“I said, we're here.”

You looked past him, realizing the both of you were standing in front of a large black door. There was no number on top, no indication of what was behind it. The boy pushed the box of popcorn impatiently into your hands and took a step to the side, reaching for the door handle.

“If you wanna make it in time you should get inside. Just grab a free seat.” The annoyed look was back, drawn on his face like an old Fetti painting. With that he opened the door to a small dark entrance room that seemed to open up into a bigger hall. The dark-haired boy gestured at you to hurry, so you took a big breath, grabbed the well-worn ring and took a step past him into the oncoming darkness.

“Enjoy.” It was just a whisper in the dark, but it sounded almost kind. Before you could turn around to give this strange boy with the irritated skin a smile or maybe even thank him, he shut the door and left you surrounded by darkness.

You had never been afraid of the dark, life had shown you that there were things a lot more terrifying than darkness. Yet, you were still thankful that it only took your eyes a few seconds to adjust and you cautiously started walking forwards. Your heart was drumming in

your ears and you could feel your fingers turn cold in a mixture of fear and maybe even slight excitement.

After only a few steps in the dark, the entrance gave way to a grand hall with a huge screen at the front, glowing in a dark grey light, illuminating the hundreds of red cushioned seats, all neatly threaded armrest to armrest throughout countless rows. You turned and tried to make out the back end of the room, but it vanished into darkness. Suddenly, you realized those seats were not empty. Many of the chairs were occupied by all kinds of different forms of shadows. Your heart felt like it would burst out of your chest at any second, in an attempt to run and hide.

“Hi!”

The sudden noise startled you. You shrieked, spinning around, panicking, trying to locate the voice, your popcorn flying everywhere.

“Oh dear, I am so sorry, I did not mean to scare you! I thought you had seen me!”

Your eyes darted across the darkness, trying to make out the shape of the person speaking. After a few seconds, you were finally able to discern a fine outline of what looked like a tall person standing just a few steps in front of you. The voice had sounded rather young, female and energetic, and also very apologetic. You tried to regain your posture and swallowed hard.

“Uhm, hi, but uhm no. I — I didn’t see you.” You desperately willed your voice to sound even.

“Oh dear. My apologies! After a while you get so used to this lighting, you forget how it feels to come in here for the first time,” the woman laughed. The voice seemed very friendly and the laugh made you almost chuckle with her. Were it not for what she had said.

“Are you – are we... are we trapped in here?” you whispered, feeling the panic rise back up your throat.

“What? Oh, no! This is just the movies, didn’t Chris tell you? This is getting ridiculous; ever since he had his whole ordeal with those cross fanatics and the big boss put him on hold, he turned into a literal teenager. All moody and blaming everyone but himself,” a hand, hopefully hers, carefully touched your arm and pushed you towards a row of red seats.

“Here, come take a seat your movie will start soon. Don’t wanna miss that, right? Anyway, where was I? Oh yeah, Chris. Well, I told him — I really did — I said to him ‘Chris, this whole miracle thing will not work’, but did he listen? Of course not. Sometimes I — but don’t tell him this okay — sometimes I kind of understand why they did what they did, I

mean he just would not stop talking. Can you imagine that?”

You didn't think she had drawn a breath in between her sentences. It was fascinating and scary at the same time. While she kept on talking, she gently pushed you into an empty seat and slumped down into another chair, right next to you.

“But enough about that drama, I don't think I've introduced myself. I'm Eve, been here a while so if you got any questions that Chris didn't answer — shoot me!”

“Shoot you?”

“Is that not what you say? Oh man, I always get this stuff wrong. Languages are so hard!” she chuckled again, exaggerating a sigh. “So?”

You wanted to start talking, but all the thoughts and questions raced to your mouth at once, crawling on your tongue and hammering on your lips. You willed them to be quiet, begged for one rational thought, just one. But your mind was in shambles and you could not form any proper sentences. You were drowning in your own thoughts, when suddenly your husband's voice came through the waves of panic, like a lifebelt. *We gon' be alright, honey.* You had heard that hundreds of times and it was always there, right when you needed it. Sometimes it was just a bad month and an unpaid bill, sometimes a white room and a broken heart, but it was always there. Keeping you from drowning.

You drew in a shaky breath.

“What is this place? What am I supposed to do here? Where am I?”

At that moment, the big screen started to light up slowly and you could hear cheering from the rows behind you. The tall woman, Eve, turned towards you and finally you could start making her face out. She was a beautiful woman, young looking and with a genuine smile that danced around her perfectly formed lips.

“Okay, Jane. This is the place you came to after you died, I hope that's not a surprise for you — that you died I mean,” she shot you a quick look of concern, but kept talking after you shook your head. For some reason that was not the thing that worried you at this point. “And this is your cinema, your hall. You'll be able to watch your life from an outsider's perspective so to speak. You know how they say that your life flashes before your eyes when you die? This is like that, but comfier and with popcorn.”

“Okay, okay, yeah. I — okay. But who are all those people? And what happens after I've seen the movie?”

“Those people? They are you! Or you know, past versions of you. Some male, some female, some something in between — but all of them you,” she gestured around, making a big

movement with her arms, “and about afterwards, well, you can choose. Some want to stay and keep watching their other selves’ lives. Some, on the other hand, they have someone waiting for them and they choose to leave after the credits. But,” she put her hand up in a defensive manner, “don’t ask me what happens after you leave. Can’t spoil all of the surprises!” She shrugged her shoulders and chuckled again.

Someone waiting for them. That’s what she had said. *Someone waiting for them.* Your heart threw itself against your ribcage. Could it be that she was waiting for you? After all this time? No. No, this was nonsense. Or was it?

“Oh look! It’s about to start, how exciting!”

The screen was now shining in a bright white light; it felt warm and inviting. Excitement lay in the air, you could almost taste it.

Then your name appeared on screen in bold black letters, followed by your birthdate and the day you had died. Then the movie opened on an old hospital room where a beautiful woman in her twenties lay on a white bed, screaming in pain. You recognized the woman, your mother. It didn’t take long until the screaming of a baby could be heard echoing through the room. A chubby nurse placed the infant on your mother’s chest, and she cuddled it, glowing with pride and joy through her dishevelled hair and sweaty forehead.

“Jane,” she whispered. “My Jane. Welcome to this world. You’re gonna be amazing.”

The movie continued, and it showed everything. How you grew up, first in the yellow house at the end of the road with a loving mom and a kind dad, and then, after the war, in the small apartment on the fourth floor with a mom who always seemed to have had one too many. Too many drinks, too many jobs, too many devils to battle.

It showed your school life, the friends you had made, the friends you had lost, the people who had only been there to teach you a lesson in life.

It showed the day you had found your mom, passed out in the cramped living room, surrounded by empty bottles and lost dreams. It showed her funeral, the few people who had attended. It showed your face, full of pain and disappointment. It showed your first foster parents, and your second and your third. It showed your teenage self, acting out, trying so hard to be loved by someone — anyone.

It showed the first bottle you had opened. It showed the next. It showed them all until the day you didn’t recognize yourself in the mirror and you had started screaming at yourself. Cursing your mom, your dad, the system until there was no one left to blame but yourself.

Then the movie showed you in the small, cosy room sitting across from the nice old lady with the big glasses, letting yourself talk for the first time. It showed all of your tears, but eventually it showed your progress.

It showed your new life, the hard work you had put into your career. It showed the boyfriends and lovers that had come and gone until the warm, sunny afternoon in April, when your friend had introduced you to a handsome young man with the kindest eyes you had ever seen. The movie showed your first date, your second and hundred-and-fifth date. Your first kiss, your first fight, your first flat. It showed your wedding, your first anniversary and your second.

It showed the day you took the test, it showed the two lines, it showed the two of you dancing through your flat, shouting in excitement. It showed your belly grow bigger, and then a familiar old hospital room filled with the same love and joy as it had at the beginning of the movie. It showed her. Your little baby girl.

It showed how she grew and grew, crawling, walking, talking, being so excited about the world, nothing could contain her. It showed your little family grow once more, when she was eleven. The new two lines were a happy little accident, you had been excited. The movie showed how you had welcomed your second baby girl into the world, it showed your family, it showed how scared you had been because this was all you'd longed for. All you had ever wanted. And could this be true? It showed how you had always managed to keep those thoughts away, chasing them with hugs and kisses and the feeling of being safe.

But then it showed the day. The day your oldest wasn't home on time. The day, there had been a knock on the door, and you had opened it to the policeman with the sad face. It showed you following him to the hospital. It showed the young doctor. It showed the white door.

You wanted to close your eyes, you wanted to forget and not be reminded of the pain. You didn't want to see what was behind this door. But you couldn't take your eyes off the screen. It was too much to even wipe away the tears running down your cheeks. You let them drop on your popcorn.

The movie didn't stop by the white door as your nightmares would usually. No, it showed you walking into the cold room, filled with despair and a slow beeping noise. It showed the white hospital bed, the white linen and your daughter. Your baby girl, so small and defenceless tucked into the harsh light of the room. Her arms connected to big monitors by countless wires. So small and skinny, filled with veins trying desperately to pump blood through her, keeping her alive.

It showed the doctor talking to you, you didn't remember that he had talked to you in that moment. He had said many things, but you had only heard fragments. "Car accident", "brain dead" and something about "no hope for recovery."

It showed the funeral, the months following. It showed a house, once filled with life, dark and dead. It showed a little girl not daring to speak, because it could make her mother cry. It showed long therapy sessions. It showed the many heartbreaks caused by old toys found in the back of the garage, by pictures, by shirts losing their smell.

It showed a slow healing process. It showed your husband holding you. It showed you holding him. It showed you hugging your little daughter, crying. Apologizing.

"We gon' be alright."

The movie showed the good things that followed, your daughter's childhood, holidays, board game nights and road trips. It showed her graduation, it showed you beaming with pride, clapping louder than any other parent in the room. It showed you looking out of the window every night, smiling at the stars, telling your eldest goodnight.

It showed you grow old with him. It showed all the anniversaries, it showed you watching him dance with your daughter at her wedding. Your heart filled with so much love and so much pain, your feelings fell out of your eyes and into your lap.

The movie showed you growing weaker with age, it showed a hospital room. It had been painted in a calming yellow, with little flowers over it. It showed you slowly falling asleep, your daughter burying her head into your shoulder, hugging you softly, staining your nightgown with hot tears. Your husband was stroking your face, kissing you.

"We had a good life, we did good. Goodbye, honey."

And with this, the movie ended, and the screen faded back to its dark grey light, with the exception of a small white door that seemed to appear right at the bottom of the screen.

"I think someone's waiting for you," Eve's voice danced softly around your ears. "Do you want to —"

"Yes. Yes, I do," you almost shouted, jumping up from your cushioned seat, not caring about the popcorn. You squeezed past Eve, leapt down the remaining steps towards the screen until you stood right in front of the white door. But this time you were not afraid of it. You heard the cheering of the crowd, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered right now. Only this white door.

As you reached for the door handle, it swung open. The light almost blinded you for a second, but then you could make out a silhouette. Your heart drummed against your chest,

your mouth so dry you could barely even swallow. Could it be? You willed everything you had, every inch in your body and your mind, for this to be her. *Please*, you thought, *please, please, please*.

“Mom?”