

The Checkered Umbrella

He picked up the book with sadness in his eyes and hurled it into the lake before him. It plunged sideways into the water, sending soft ripples across the pond; each ripple vibrating like his heart against his chest. He felt stronger with every second, yet overall he was falling apart. The ripples in the water didn't seem to make him feel victorious anymore. He half wished he hadn't thrown it. But at least this way he could be free, truly free.

He looked at Andrew's hands. They were covered in ink.

"I'm sorry I dropped the bottle of ink." Andrew said to his father, yet neither of them bothered to turn their head and look at each other.

"It doesn't matter. The book had little meaning anymore." Still, they avoided any eye contact.

The man appreciated that his son wasn't talking much. It gave him time to think. He remembered the day he'd first seen his wife. She wore a light pink dress and carried a dark red tote bag. The sky was bleak as the marshmallow-like clouds cried their eyes out. The woman had no umbrella, or maybe she just hadn't been using it. He wondered if maybe she liked the rain. But when she passed him, he didn't hesitate before he asked her if she'd like to share his black and white checkered umbrella.

"That would be lovely, thank you." And then she looked at him and smiled, "But if we are going to share, wouldn't it be best if we were going to the same place?"

"Indeed it would." The man replied with a shy smile and he covered her with his umbrella and took her out to get lunch.

As he stood with his son by the pond, the memories became more vivid. He remembered how she'd written a page about each day she'd spent with him. He remembered how he'd seen her sitting at her desk writing rapidly, as if she only had that one minute to spill her heart out. She'd told him, "This way when I am older, I won't ever forget how I felt. I won't have to lie down and imagine it. All I'll have to do is open up this book, and I can reread it and relive it all over again."

It wasn't until years later that she admitted why she'd really written it. Her family had a history of a deadly illness. The illness seemed to spread along throughout every generation. She knew it would pass through her as well, but she could only hope to outlive it as long as she could.

The day she was diagnosed with the disease, she gave him the notebook and said, "It's called The Checkered Umbrella. I wrote it for you so that you never forget. I always wanted to

be a writer. Now anytime you ever feel lonely, all you have to do is open up this book. Then you can relive it over and over again and each time you do, even if only for the time you are reading, it will feel for a moment that I am still there next to you holding your umbrella. You can read this, and with each page you read, we will come to life again. Now we can live forever, whether or not I am sick or well.”

He was speechless. So she said, “Promise me you’ll read it someday, at least once?”

“Yes dear.”

Now he stood by the pond at the age of 75 with his middle aged son. The son had dropped a bottle of ink, her ink, the ink she had used to write their story. It was one of the few things the man hadn’t been strong enough to throw away. Andrew had tried to catch it, but clumsiness and slippery fingers are 2 other common genes. The ink spilled all over the book that had lied untouched for about 45 years. The ink seeped through the pages. Most were now unreadable. But he wouldn’t have dared touch it anyway. If he did, he was certain that he’d never put it down. If he tried, the book would stay stuck to his hands, as if connected by glue. He wanted anything but to relive the pain anyway, so he took the book and he threw it into the pond, letting the water soak up every last bit of their life together, drowning the pain he now felt for her. He’d ridded the house of all his wife’s possessions long ago, hoping not to be reminded. But even with no physical reminder, the man still ached for her. Now he got rid of the only thing worth keeping, physically throwing the pain away into the polluted waters. The old man took one last look at the book dissolving in the current. She had promised him that with this book, he would never be lonely. But it’s the book that reminded him all these years that he was. For the first time in 45 years, he was truly free despite the familiar ach in his chest. He was certain that he longed for his wife every second, so he could barely feel it anymore. He was numb to it. Although the pain was stronger now than it had ever been, it was only temporary. After all, he hadn’t thrown their life away; he’d only thrown away some leather and string and glue. All he had left to remind him of the past was his son and his ink stained hands, but he couldn’t get rid of his son. The weary man sighed and said, “Just do me a favor and go wash your hands.”