

Long Division

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Polaris is given a picture, a time, and an order to find and pick her up from the train station. He stares at the woman in the picture, who stares back at him wearing the pained, melancholic expression he always wears. His fingers fidget at its corners, bending them and creasing the edges.

We share many of the same features, he thinks bitterly. Yesterday's memory burns, corroding his will; the cold, impassive atmosphere of the previous night failed to quench his frustrations, but he could only blame himself. Cowardice runs deep and he wonders if this woman shares that characteristic too. He wishes that she does. He doesn't want to suffer alone. All those nights he spent bent over his desk, drowning the horrible screeching downstairs with pages of scrawling letters and numbers, hoping that somewhere in those pages he would find an answer had been spent in vain. He wishes that he had enough gall back then to press his ear against the wall and listen for the cause of the maelstrom.

Now, he knows, and he must meet her in five minutes.

He's dressed in a button-down and khakis, the default outfit for every vaguely important occasion. The belt cinching his waist aggravates his suffocation. He feels his lungs snatching every molecule of oxygen they can, but he is granted some relief when an announcement comes on stating that the 4:15 train has been delayed by ten minutes. Still, once again he is reminded why he's here, and the suffocation returns at double the force, as if he has sunk another mile under the waves. He bides his time by staring at the remarkably shining marble floors of the station.

The PA system crackles to life. "The 4:15 PM train has arrived at Platform 4. Everyone, please allow room for the departing passengers."

He gazes at the accumulating throng of people. Men and women carry bags of brown luggage in their hands, while struggling to don their coats and scarves to prepare for the onslaught of cold outside. He doesn't bother to refer the picture again; they are both their father's children.

He hopes she never comes, for his sake, but his mother is eagerly awaiting her arrival. Her enthusiasm is not only unwarranted, but also unknown. Her mother is offering this visitor as an olive branch, despite her being the daughter of the woman who ruined her marriage. Though, considering the circumstances of her arrival, he supposes it can't be helped.

Polaris rests his chin on the palm of his hand. He doesn't raise it when he spots a face with eyes the color of winter soil; they are trained on him. She clutches her bag like a sword, swinging it around to dissuade anyone from approaching too close. He imagines crescents imprinted on the leather handle by her nails.

This is the first time he's ever seen her, and he only heard of her existence several weeks ago. He resents the fact that they are the same age, but he knows nothing else about her besides her last name – *Cavendish*. It leaves a bitter taste in his mouth, bitter enough to overpower the acrid feeling he has when he says his own last name. If her mother didn't intervene in his family's affairs, he would've had a quieter childhood and there would've been nothing to write choirs about.

When the crowd clears and he can see her entirely, he stands up and stuffs his hands in his pockets. She stands a few feet away from him, her face holding an unfathomable emotion. Neither of them speaks for a few seconds as they gauge each other for the first time. Polaris's mood sours even more as he realizes that they are even the same height. Overseers might mistake them for being full siblings.

She breaks the silence first by extending her hand. The corners of her mouth quirk up in a semblance of a smile. “My name’s Cassiopeia, but just call me Cassia.”

When he tentatively reaches to accept her hand, he resists the urge to say *I know who you are*. He feels calluses besides her fingernails and along the lines of her palms. “It’s nice to meet you, Cassia.”

“You as well.” He licks his lips, dreading the incoming small talk. Polaris lightens his voice, to disguise the strain of this situation. “How was the journey here?”

“It was fine.” She shrugs. The scarf around her neck loosens slightly, revealing the silver chain of a necklace. “There’s nothing really to talk about.”

Besides what brought you here, he thinks.

“Well, we don’t really know each other,” he says, vaguely. He gestures at her bags. “Are you ready to go?”

Cassia nods, but her arms tighten around themselves. “Before we go, we should take a picture together. I think your mom wanted one.”

His smile is painful, consisting of jagged knives forced through his lips. His fingers twitch in his pocket and they threaten to close around his own throat so that it can vomit the rotten words it wants to say – but he swallows it all down like sickly-sweet cough syrup. He widens his smile until it strains his cheeks.

“Of course.”

The affair is nothing special. An awkward distance stands between them. Cassia moves closer to him to be fully in frame, and he suppresses a disgusted shiver when her arm brushes against his. In seconds, it’s all over but they now have a permanent record of each other’s existence.

Polaris sends it to his mother before he drives them to his childhood home. He helps her unpack her bags in tense silence before he returns to his room while she stays downstairs.

He hasn't had an extended stay here for a couple of years, but his mother always welcomed him home with open arms. She's not going to be here today, unfortunately, but her presence saturates the area. Dust doesn't exist under her meticulous eye.

He sits in the chair near his desk and finds that his fingers still gravitate towards his pencil. Long nights were spent on this desk; he remembers the dark half-moons thumbbed underneath his eyes and the piles of eraser shavings around his homework. In the end, he supposes it's all worth it. He's an aerospace engineer and he comes home smelling like petroleum and nitrile—but this career of his never sat right in his stomach. Dread accompanies him when he leaves for work, suppressing a flinch every time someone calls for him. It's a visceral reaction; he wants to tear his name apart and slip his face into the folds of his sleeve. His father still haunts him. He walks in the same halls as he does and even when Polaris is alone, he can never escape from that infernal surname, "Wiles."

It's unnerving how much of their father he sees in Cassia. Beneath her strained politeness lies simmering acrimony. He could tell that she hates him.

And he hates her too.

He goes downstairs and finds the living room empty. The television softly plays the nighttime news. The coffee table has the familiar assortment of outdated magazines and a half-filled glass of wine sitting idly on worn coasters. Cassia's voice lilts overhead. She's in the kitchen, leaning on the counter, and her figure bends like the fraught branches of a weeping willow.

Polaris can't hear what she's saying, but he knows that she's calling the hospital based on her starchy expression. She holds her phone close to her ear and, after a few minutes, he hears an audible sigh and approaching footsteps.

When she sits in the chair across from him, she shakes her head.

“Is your mother okay?” he said, coolly.

“Yeah, she’s fine.” Cassia’s voice is tight, a taut string between two poles over a chasm. “Thanks for asking.” She stares at him with pursed lips as a precaution against saying anything more.

He could imagine what she wanted to say. They are two parallel trains crossing in opposite directions, their thoughts a blur to each other through the light-streaked windows. *Where are they going? What are they carrying?* He only has a vague idea of what she’s thinking, and so, they’ll never be on the same level.

Polaris meets her with equal intensity, challenging her to say whatever lays in her mind. He could handle her words, or maybe she thought he couldn’t.

Maybe that’s why she wordlessly trudges outside, bringing a glass of wine with her and leaving him flustered.

He considers leaving for his own sanity, but reconsiders for the sake of his mother. She wants him to, at the very least, *talk* to Cassia and he can’t lie about that. She would know, but he can’t think of anything else to say to Cassia. He’s driven her to the place she wanted to see and answered her questions and treated her accordingly. His knuckles are white and a desperate sweat coats his skin, but he’s not quite sure what he’s desperate for.

Polaris pretends to read one of the magazines to ease his boredom, but his mind isn’t processing anything. He wants to find something that would draw her back into the house: an interesting article, a fire on the stove, anything that isn’t their families. His eyes flicker to the television and now, he finds its flashing colors and jarring noises too much to him.

Then, Cassia screams.

He’s called to the porch and he sees her kneeling, her hands covering her face, and her body shuddering with sobs.

She's surrounded by islands of shattered glass amidst a sea of deep red wine. She lifts her head upon hearing his footsteps and she delivers to him a withering glare, its intensity unwavering as she rises to her feet.

"I don't understand how a person as smart as you can be so unrepentantly *dumb*. You're blind and deaf to the needs of everyone around you. Don't you understand that I don't need your charity, I don't need your pity, but you're so *selfish* that you can't even see past the crest of your ego!"

Now, he flies. He's spitting caustic ammunition and circling around her in a furious dance. He doesn't understand why she is so angry with him. Did he not express his condolences about her comatose mother? Did he not arrive in a timely manner here at her request? He finds her accusations baseless and ridiculous and *what exactly did he do wrong?*

Cassia says nothing but glances down at her fingernails.

He wonders if he should apologize for his outburst, but he doesn't know how or where to begin, or whether she deserves one since she had instigated the argument. Still, he forces one out, the apology falling clumsily on his tongue as it was derelict to saying such words pertaining to remorse. If only she was a stranger who he accidentally bumped into, so he wouldn't have to see her again. He could just mutter an "I'm sorry" and move on with his life.

She might as well be a stranger, but the blood that ties them together forced them to be in Perdition, neither friends nor enemies.

At last, she spoke in a tone that resembled normalcy, "I'm going to the hospital. Do you want to come?"

"I'm fine." He paused, and then, like he was offering her a consolation prize, "I hope your mother wakes up soon."

He already apologized. Wasn't that enough?