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Grade: 10

Fremont High School

Emma was proud of a lot of things in her life. She adored her garden that sat behind the rickety glass windows of her small house. She valued her job at the local store and beamed whenever she walked past her country's flag high in the sky above her. She was also very proud of her son – the sole reminder of her late husband – who she considered the brightest spot in her life. He had a crooked smile that melted hearts and brown eyes that reminded Emma of her garden's soil. He was a wish come true. She even could recount the exact moment when her son had first opened his eyes to the world.

“Welcome home, Bruno,” she had said, using a name for a man long gone.

The first time Emma had scolded Bruno was when he had launched a stone through one of the windows. The sun had dipped towards the horizon – the perfect amount of light for her to begin dinner with – as she finished washing the vegetables. A small knife cut away at the parts that her current rodent infestation had ruined. The silence was punctured often by Bruno's shouts from outside and Emma's grumblings about the cost to have the rats removed.

It was a flash across her vision. A black shadow across a beam of sunlight. Emma had dropped the knife in the sink at the sight of the rat, only to have to duck out of the way when the stone shattered glass and shards splattered everywhere. Even as she tried to scold him, Bruno was much more worried about the small nicks on his mother's skin than the words spilling from her mouth.

“Going ‘hunting’ in the garden, you said. It's only a fun game, you said. I won't destroy anything, you said.” She towered over the young boy, using her apron to dab at the cuts. The wake of her words filled with frantic gulps of air and clear crystalline tears running streaks down his face. Emma dropped down to Bruno's height, hand ruffling through his hair as he sobbed. “And look at you. All dirty and muddy. It isn't even dinner yet.”

“I didn't mean to,” he wailed. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry.”

She only placed her hands in his, showing him the shallow marks. “I'm okay. See? They'll be gone in a week.” Bruno looked. “And then I'll have someone fix the window.” Bruno's gaze caught his mother's. Emma hid her knowing smile well. Neither mentioned how Bruno had come in possession of a slingshot. “Everything will be alright, Bruno. So chin up and do me a favor.”

“Anything, Mother.”

“Smile for me.”

He did.

For a boy who was never harshly punished, Bruno did not grow up spoiled or shy. He liked to laugh when confronted, so certain of his own place in life that he was not easily lured from his path. Once, Bruno had come home with a wilted cornflower. He salvaged it from the side of the road with the sole intention of planting it in the garden. Emma watched Bruno struggle – much to her amusement and his growing frustration.

Emma, in the end, had shown him how. And, in the next few years, the cornflower had grown just like Bruno had.

One night, he had asked what his mother had kept looking at. Emma had only hastily looked back at her needlework.

“The garden,” she said, “What else is outside the window?”

“A lover?” he teased, beaming like always. Emma scoffed, wondering if she should poke fun at all the books he had been reading. “There are many things in the garden,” Bruno continued, “a lover could be one of them.”

“The cornflowers,” she grumbled, eyes glued to her work as she refused to glance up again. “It’s the only lovely thing in this house.”

Bruno’s smile remained. It was a lie, of course. She knew that Bruno would come to her defense as, even with her age starting to show, she still held firmly to her youth. And Emma, dear Emma, could not deny that Bruno was looking more and more like his father every day.

“It’s the loveliest thing *outside* this house,” Bruno said, retreating towards his rooms. “Maybe I will bring some in so it could learn from the loveliest thing *in* this house.”

“Maybe,” Emma said, smiling at her needlework.

That night, when Emma went to set the table for dinner, a vase of cornflowers was already waiting for her. Bruno did not hide his smile well when he finally came down from dinner. His lips twitched as he watched her run a hand across the delicate petals. When she muttered her thanks, his smile only got wider.

It was memories like this, Emma believed, that was what had her so heartbroken when Bruno volunteered to fight in the war. Even if he was beaming in his field grey, fresh out of training.

“Don’t cry,” he begged. “I’ll be home by Christmas.”

“Christmas!” she said. “Who am I supposed to talk to until Christmas? Myself? The neighbors will think I’ve gone insane.”

“If you wail any louder, they will.”

Emma only continued to sob. Only a little while ago had he begun the ritual of bringing her cornflowers from outside. Bruno wrapped his arms around his mother, smiling against her hair.

“I will be home by Christmas,” he insisted. “Let me have my one great adventure. After that I will do whatever you wish.” His smile refused to falter. “I promise.”

“You and your promises,” Emma muttered.

“Have I ever lied to you?”

“Do you promise to write?” she countered.

“For you,” Bruno said, “anything.”

When she looked back at this moment, she wished she had something besides “I love you” to her son. *If you wished to protect me*, she now wanted to say, *then you should never have gone*. Yet she had still made the conscious choice to let the boy go.

A year or so after the war had begun, Bruno had broken his second promise. The first was inevitable. Her son was not home by Christmas. The second was less obvious. But the delay in the little messages Bruno had sent home became longer and longer. Then the hollow boys began to come home and Emma started to have her doubts. Telegrams followed. Innocent pieces of white paper that, with the information they contained, should have been written in blood.

Emma pulled her wagon into the poorly lit shop, the morning sun fading in the store with shut windows and stale air. Mrs. Schmidt looked up from the dented counter that ran along the wall, perpendicular to the door.

“Good morning,” she croaked.

“Good morning, Mrs. Schmidt,” Emma replied, opting to act somber. The woman’s eyes had puffed up as she did not even try to hide the tears. Mrs. Schmidt’s hands shook, the paper between them crumpling where her fingers pressed into it.

“Every single time, Emma. Every *single* time.”

Emma lifted up the bags of produce onto the counter. “What happened?” she asked, knowing full well what Mrs. Schmidt was holding. Emma had witnessed the breakdown after Mrs. Schmidt had received the one for her husband. A neighbor had told Emma about their second born son. Now all Mrs. Schmidt had left was one last son and an old shop.

“Is something the matter?” Mrs. Schmidt echoed bitterly. Her lower lip wobbled. “They say it every time, you know.” Her tired eyes dropped down to the paper her voice a monotonous drone. “Death was instantaneous and without suffering.”

Emma bit her lip. “I’m so sorry.”

The telegram only tore in Mrs. Schmidt’s hands, wrinkled fingers shredding the paper. Mrs. Schmidt had screamed the last time Emma had walked in. She, like the many others who

saw the crippled returning, did not believe what the telegrams said. She wanted the truth. Emma had not been careful. That time she had said that ignorance was bliss. A horrible mistake.

“Have you gotten anything from Bruno?” Mrs. Schmidt asked, now counting out the bills to pay Emma.

“No. No, I haven’t.”

Mrs. Schmidt dropped the bills in front of her. “Well, Emma dear, no news is good news.” Emma walked out of the store that day with the sole intention of never checking for mail again. A promise that always went up in smoke the moment she had gotten back home.

But that was a year ago. And this was now. Emma heard the stairs creak as a form slowly made his way down the steps. The form wobbled past on its crutches, casting a shadow against the door to the kitchen. Emma stole a glance up, well wishes on her lips, but he only hobbled past. She went back to making breakfast.

Dinner was usually the time she tried to speak to him. Emma would approach with another plate ladled with food that he was only going to leave untouched. She would walk over to the chair facing the garden and set it down on the small table beside him. Emma would remove the breakfast from that morning and wait in the silence.

She had cried when Bruno had come home. Big globular tears that streaked down her face and stained the ground. Emma had forgotten everything she had wanted to say. She couldn’t even manage to smile, and he couldn’t either. Bruno only limped past.

“Mrs. Schmidt sold me the store today. She is going to go live with her parents up north.” Bruno only gazed out through the grime-stained grass towards the garden beyond. Emma followed his gaze, lips pressed into a thin line. “It’s in your name, you know? It’s for your future.”

“Mother,” he said, head turning away from her. “I don’t need your pity.”

She rose quietly, knowing he did not look to her as she left. It was always the garden and the cornflowers that claimed his attention. Emma plucked her sheers from the clay pot that sat near the door, pulling on her leather gloves.

As she stepped out, she thought of what Mrs. Schmidt had said earlier that day. Emma had walked in, ready to lay claim to the store only to be met with a withering glare.

“You’re so very lucky,” Mrs. Schmidt had said bitterly “So very, very lucky.”

Emma wondered if that’s what Bruno liked to consider it. Luck.

She did not see Bruno through the window as she walked past, stopping in front of the cornflowers. Emma bent down gently, letting the velvet blue petals run across her fingers. She could still recall the day Bruno had planted the flowers fondly. All of them were children when they had left. But when they had returned, Emma was in shock at how much older she had felt

her son become. How the inexperience buried her, and she could only hang her head in shame. What did a woman who spent the past three years fretting know?

There is the thud of Bruno's wooden crutches against the wooden gate. He leaned against the fence, casting a shadow that matched those underneath his eyes. "Don't cut it, mother," he said. "Please leave it alone."

She paused in front of the cornflowers, setting the sheers down. Her head turned, wispy hairs drifting into her face from a soft spring breeze. Emma could still see Mrs. Schmidt this morning, sobbing once again. Out of the four men she had lost, Emma had seen Mrs. Schmidt's reaction to three of them. Anger, disbelief, and finally a strange empty acceptance. Emma was glad Mrs. Schmidt had already sold her the property before she had broken down in tears. Bawling about how fortunate Emma was. How fortunate she was to still have a son. No matter how bitter the little boy she had raised had become.

Emma stood up, brushing the dirt from her pants. She held out her hands, as if she expected that same little boy to rush in her arms. "For you," she said, "anything."

A distant look had grown in Bruno's eyes. She barely noticed his mouth move. "Mother, could you do me a favor?"

"Anything, Bruno." They stood a dozen steps apart. Steps that had formed in the past three years. A difference in appearance and in mind. She would never understand what had happened to her son, but she would continue the role she had always played. Emma – no matter how her obligation to her son dominated her youth – could never hate what she had become. In turn, she could never hate what Bruno had become either.

His mouth opened again, a hand reaching out before it dropped back to his side. He didn't look at her, head bent down towards his missing limb. She stood still, feeling the breeze float and dance and twirl across the wild grass. The garden had always been her shelter from reality. What was Bruno's?

"Mother, I –" His hand brushed against his face, hair hiding his eyes as his shoulders began to shake. It was a broken sob, nothing like what had wracked her when he had returned. For her it was relief. The tears trickled fast down his face, a steady stream that drip-dripped onto the wild grass where he stood. Emma spanned the distance between them in exactly seven crisp steps.

Her gloves drifted to the floor as she pulled her son towards her, arms enveloping him into a hug as she held him close.

"What do you want, Bruno?" she asked into his hair. His hands curled into her shirt as he crushed her closer, wet cheeks staining her shoulder.

"Smile for me."