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## Grieve Not

Joy Notoma

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Joy Notoma  
*Grieve Not*

The TV crew called the shop for two weeks about the t-shirt that Ola made and even though Ola always picked up, they only wanted Uncle Reg who was never there. Reg was the owner but he didn't know anything about the shirt. He didn't know how Ola had put her heart into every detail, how many nights she spent sketching until the dead boy's face worked its way into her dreams and shook her awake until morning, how she never cared about another client before Deanna. She was used to spray painting dead people onto tees, but ever since Deanna dropped off the pic of Kris to use as a model, she knew there was something different about the boy. The geeky looking kid could have been her little brother or a runt of a cousin that she loved to tease. He shouldn't have been dead. At first, she didn't know how he died; it was against policy to ask the cause of death so they never knew unless the client volunteered the info and Deanna hadn't volunteered a thing.

Ola had seen the TV show before. It was about weird clothing trends and they were doing an episode on spray painted tees: an inside look at the people who make the shirts with the dead homie's face or who roll out custom-mades of, say, Bob Marley, to make a buck outside a concert or festival. When Reg finally took the call, Ola busied herself organizing the shop portfolio. The tightness in her chest eased up when he put the call on speaker and she didn't have to struggle so much to listen through the office door. The producer went on like Reg needed convincing that spray painting tees was an art when Reg had been spraying for decades before he rented the storefront and went official. Then Reg's raspy, old G voice said: yeah, for sure they could come through, and her chest pulled into a fist again.

The shop was in a plaza like a hundred others between Jersey and the Bronx, but the crew showed up at the beginning of Ola's shift acting like they were entering a dark underworld they'd discovered on behalf of the world at large. They carted in all their equipment, laid black tape on the ground, and hung lights in the dark corners where Ola usually hid, propping poles with fuzzy duster heads against walls which waited to pick up the whispers of the place that usually only Ola heard. It was intrusive. They were all just pawns, Reg included, and Ola knew it from the moment they arrived— from how they looked past her like she was a fleck of dust on the counter while discussing

her tee to when they made her act like she was cleaning up on camera even though she'd worked all night making the place spotless. The crew called the t-shirt remarkable and spun it around for half an hour shooting different angles. They interviewed Reg in front of it. Ola was in the background when they swung their cameras around for b-roll.

Reg rolled in two hours late rocking a brand new track suit, flexing like he wasn't trying to look fly. The other employee, Zik, came in even though it was his day off. Reg had opened the business and hired Ola and Zik, who each worked four-hour shifts every day and alternated Saturdays and Sundays to keep sane. He called them his lil' crew, like they were walking ghosts of the days when he and his boys haunted parked trains in the Bronx train yards— days that were actually nights that started late and went to early morning, spraying in the dark and letting the sun rise on letters only they could decipher scrawled across rusted trains that gleamed in brilliant green, gold, yellow, red, orange, blue. Now his work was in galleries and he got featured in documentaries on hip hop and street culture— things once underground, now elevated to public scrutiny. Ola started hanging around him when she was twelve and he taught her how to paint. Her mom stopped worrying when Reg pushed her to go to art school and promised her a job to help pay tuition. The cash she made in the shop offset the debt. Spraying tees taught her line, color, space, and a steady hand which she took to acrylic and canvas, her real passion. The shop even got tourists— one of the few things they came to the Bronx for besides the zoo and the Yankees, and tourists didn't keep away locals who still called it the best place to memorialize a loved one or to get a batch made before the Puerto Rican day parade.

They interviewed Deanna in her home the next day. She let them in and the producer came right into her living room and said he was a hugger. She let him hug her. It was early, but Deanna didn't sleep well anymore anyway. She planned to clean up seeing that she'd be on camera and all, but the day'd gone by and the urge never hit. She passed out at the kitchen table the night before and woke up annoyed that the boy hadn't washed the dishes, then caught sight of his empty chair as a fresh pang grabbed her by the neck. Her blood should have stopped at the same time as his— she swore it did— but there were traces of his out on the lawn always just steps from her feet because she couldn't make herself take a hose to wash it away. She couldn't wrap her head around it. She woke up each day, despite herself, blood flowing through her veins anyhow, anywhich way.

She let them into the three-bedroom she used to be so proud of. She let them into the living room where she'd brought him home from the hospital wrapped in her grandmother's quilts and whispered devotion into his soft sweet-smelling face, where he took his first steps over the same beige carpet, where he declared his love of manga and legos in front of a tower as tall as him, and followed her footsteps in Star Trek obsession and was never shamed to let folk know he was a trekkie. She let them in because she and Kris watched it sometimes on weekends. Sometimes she would put down her hand of Magic and go pull some old thing out of her closet that was in a style they were featuring. Kris never could get over how his mama seemed to have all of it in her closet. "See honey? We did all that already! I should pawn all this stuff. Probably worth a lot," Deanna would chuckle to herself. They'd check out some detail on a butterfly collar blouse or a jumpsuit with a matching scarf before getting back to the game, the show a soundtrack to the hours.

He wasn't shot by police so the big name activists didn't care and he wasn't shot by anyone white so there were no news stories or protests calling it hate, but that's what it was. Hate spewed at him from bullies almost every day since he started school had finally found its way to the spot on his body that would topple him over the edge and from her forever. He stole his grandfather's pistol whose safe Deanna's daddy always swore was locked, not realizing that Kris was brilliant enough to crack a code on an old 1970s safe. He put the pistol to his chest where the pain hurt most, sitting among different versions of letters he'd written to the bullies, cursing their futures. The bullying had been going on since third grade. Deanna stayed on the school about it, but their efforts never worked for long, so Deanna filled Kris's head with mantras of self-love and never skimped on praise and quality time to prove his worth. That helped enough for him to make a friend who ended up betraying a trust—that Kris crushed on a girl who was out of his league. The friend spread Kris's secret wide enough to make Kris a target for the rest of middle school. By high school, he stopped complaining about bullies, though Deanna was smart enough to figure they were still there, lurking on the screens. But she calmed down her efforts believing the mantras had done the trick. He seemed like he was growing into himself. Then the afternoon came when Deanna found him there with her daddy's pistol and she left her body, all of her blood merging into his, and she surprised herself by waking up the next day and the day after. She found him on the floor in his bedroom and dragged him out to the front lawn. She still doesn't know why she did that. First, it seemed that it was to call for help though he had no heartbeat. Then it seemed that it was to show whoever could see that her beautiful boy was someplace she couldn't reach and how crazy that was because she'd

always known where he was and he was right there in her arms, looking at her. But when her parents came and the police and the funeral home to take the body and a few reporters, she wailed, shouting them all away. She would speak to no one. Her parents held her, let the coroner take her baby, and managed the funeral. The funeral was the last public thing Deanna did before the show.

She let them in because she found the show entertaining, not sad, and she watched it with Kris. She spent the whole day with the crew talking about Kris, for sure, but they also got to know each other and laughed, even. It was the closest she had felt in a very long time to being herself. But they ended up using her face, a still of her carrying the tee-shirt, on the cover art for the show's season. When anyone streamed the show online, they clicked an image of her. She didn't know where to start: She thought of calling to find out why of all the images from the season they had chosen hers for the cover, as if she, a Black woman with a dead son, was a poster woman for grief. To have the image of her holding his tee-shirt like she was nothing more than a tragedy— that pissed her off. They had edited the episode to return again and again to the one time in the afternoon when she'd dabbed her eye, *she wasn't even crying*, to make it look like she'd wept. She'd only talked about the tee: what it was like to first see her boy's face large enough to cover one, how wearing it lit up her day, though it reminded her he was gone (the acceptance was therapeutic. She laughed when she said that, didn't she?), that no matter how soft or comfy it was, it was never him, but how it sometimes did the trick for an hour or two and, one miraculous time, close to twenty four. But in the end, the insult of it— to be known for the worst thing in her life— was almost worse than the injury. She missed him every day. Sometimes the pain was like her entire body was being set on fire and she would lay in bed and writhe in agony until she passed out from exhaustion on sheets soaked in mucus and tears. But she would never let anyone know that. That's not who she was. The tragedy had happened to her and Kris was gone, but it didn't define her. Instead of contacting the documentary team and demanding they change the cover, she went to the shop and demanded they take the replica of her shirt with Kris's face from their display window. Ola was the only person there.

The welcome bell stopped short when Deanna slammed the door. Ola looked up from her phone and stood up straight. She remembered the first time she saw Deanna. She had come in with none of the pretense of grief that Ola was used to. She didn't shed a tear that Ola could see. Most clients came in so dogged out by grief and rage that they took the artist's skill for granted. They

dropped off a photo of their loved one and accepted condolences and a promise for delivery at the end of the week. When they showed up at the end of the seven days, sometimes the person's eyes or nose weren't rendered right, but they always paid the balance, took the shirts, and left. But Deanna had auditioned Ola.

*This your first shirt? - How long you been doing this? - Got any sketches I can see?*

When Ola showed her the portfolio, Deanna demanded to see work that was only Ola's.

*Uh- uh. I know some of those pictures in there are from Reg. I want to see what you can do. You gonna be the one doing the shirt, right?*

Ola nodded and flipped through the book and showed Deanna three shirts she'd done.

*The second one is the best. The eyes look funny on the first one and the neck looks off on the third one. I'm going to need to see sketches before you put anything on a shirt. Can you do that?*

After Deanna left, Ola had stared at the photo of Kris and tried to imagine how he died. He didn't look thug. She figured it was sickle cell or some childhood illness and pictured Deanna standing at his hospital bed, holding his hand until his last breath. She stared into his eyes. Dark brown, intelligent, deep, gentle. She started sketching, intending to draw his face but she drew flowers, then trees, then a large panther. She didn't draw his face until later that night when she was sitting in the audience at an old church that the art school used for events. A sculptor was on stage, a visiting professor whose course coincided with Ola's shifts at the shop. Ola's advisor had gotten on her for not taking the course.

"I don't see you taking risks here, Ola. I want to see you step out of your comfort zone, make some sacrifices for your art."

Ola reminded her that she needed funds for school. She had to work. Ola searched for her advisor at the talk that night, wanting some acknowledgement, but the woman wasn't there. Every

time she scanned the crowd, she only saw other students who looked just as hungry to be seen as she felt. The sculptor was a white woman whose work examined full-figured dark bodies. She said her work subverted the white male gaze of classical sculpture. She used the word *voluptuous* a lot. Ola noted how she spoke as if she was the first woman artist to combat patriarchal norms and how she never mentioned any personal connection to the people she depicted. She worked in a bubble of inspiration, unbothered by the outside world while claiming to confront it. The pretense was exhausting. Every time Ola went to jot down a note, she found herself sketching. Almond, ovalsque shapes came first. When they started coming in pairs, she realized they were eyes that belonged to the boy from the photo. She kept going until he stared back at her, bodyless. She drew Kris again and again until the auditorium filled with applause and emptied out around her.

She filled up two sketchbooks in two days with sketches of him, his clothes rendered in bright acrylics. He was wearing an oversized red hoodie in the picture Deanna gave, standing in the kitchen on an ordinary day, but someone, maybe Deanna, in a sentimental mood had snapped his picture in perfect light. The sun shone through the window, a ray catching his high cheekbones, making his eyes look radiant. That's what Ola can't capture. It's a kind of light that won't translate in spray paint. She snaps a pic of the photo and gazes at it anytime she scrolls through her phone. Ola paints the hoodie in green, then yellow, then orange. She puts him in front of the panther. She puts him in front of a globe. She tries to give him wings to make him fly, but he ends up looking like a jacked-up superhero.

Deanna liked them more than Ola expected. Instead of just one image, she wanted a montage: Kris in front of the panther, Kris in front of the globe, and Kris wearing a pair of angel wings, each image framed with a ring of stars. She imagined that at school they would have said the montage underscored the subject's complexity, but Deanna just loved seeing her son in different settings. She'd gotten the smallest order— twelve to give to close family— and put one on right there in the shop. Reg thought the shirt was good enough to put on display.

The first call from the TV crew came a month later. By the end of the year, the show came out with Deanna's face on the cover holding the tee. And now Ola was staring at Deanna, the sound of the shop door slamming still echoing between them.

"You kidding me with that, right? You getting customers with that shirt?" She thumbed toward the tee in the window.

“Look, I totally understand.”

“No you don’t. Don’t say you understand.”

“I get what you mean, is what I’m trying to say. I wouldn’t want my son’s face up there either.”

“You have a son?”

“Me? No.”

“Any kids?”

“No.”

“Ok then you don’t get what I mean.”

“Got it. I’ll let Reg know.”

“You got any more of my shirts laying around? I paid for that, you know.”

“What’s in the window is just a mock-up. When you came here you signed away the rights to any artistic images of your loved one.”

“I didn’t sign away anything about my son, you understand me?”

“I’m sorry. Kris meant a lot to me too. I saw the show.”

The bitterness in Deanna’s laugh burned Ola like it had come from her own mouth.

“Look sweetie. Kris didn’t mean a lot to you. You didn’t know him.”

The simplicity of the statement shrank Ola down to size. She wanted to prove her wrong.

“I have an idea I want to tell you about. It’s going to be a project just about Kris.” She wanted to paint Kris on canvas from the jump. This was her chance.

“No, no, and no. No more projects. Just take down the shirt. That’s all I want.”

“I know Kris killed himself. If you let me paint him on canvas, I think he could mean a lot to people.”

“He meant a lot to me.” Deanna’s voice was gruff.

“What?” Ola was losing her courage.

“Did I stutter? Take down the shirt.”

Deanna took it to her Pastor next. He said it was normal that the show chose to feature her broken heart. It was a beautiful episode and the picture of her with the tee was touching. He even said she should be thankful.

“Give your anger to the Lord. Let’s pray on it.”

Deanna didn't want to pray. She'd already given her son to God, now she was supposed to give her anger away too? And the TV people took her image and the shop had taken and used Kris's. What would she have left when all the people had profited from her grief?

Ola wouldn't let it go. She called, texted, and called again. The more Deanna ignored her the more she insisted. Kris deserved more. Deanna was being selfish. If Deanna picked up the phone, Ola would tell her about uplifting Black nerds and statistics about bullying she read online. She wouldn't leave a moment for her to say no. Deanna blocked her calls after two weeks. Ola did what she had to do. She went back to Deanna's file and snatched the photo of Kris she used for the tee. The pic she had on her phone wasn't good enough. She needed to hold the photo in her hand, keep it with her.

"What you doing?" Zik asked when he came in for his shift.

"Grabbing something real quick," Ola said.

"You mean stealing?"

"So, you're supposed to care?"

"Nah. Not really. But for real, what you doing? You got a hustle? Put me on."

"Painting this kid."

"The one who shot himself? That's dope. It's going to be a gift for his mom?"

"His mom? No. She umm..."

"Oh, it's a surprise? She don't know yet? What you going to do with it?"

"You'll see. Someone has to do something."

At home she primed the canvas, tested colors. She did a small one in the afternoon and then they got bigger. The sharpness of his eyes slipped through her fingers as quickly as she could dab the irises but by the third canvas, the hue of sunlight she settled on revealed a new expression in them, and by the fourth he looked elegant, regal even. She could feel herself getting closer to capturing him as a tragic figure.

Reg came by later. He walked into her room without knocking. She noticed the intrusion, but she didn't stop painting. He picked up a pad and flipped through the studies— Kris's hands on

one page, his eyes, and nose alone on others. After the studies, Ola had tried her hand at a few abstractions: Kris chopped up in geometric figures layered in oil and acrylic.

“I want that one,” Reg said, fingering the lines of Kris’s broken arms.

“You’ll have to talk to my agent.” Ola didn’t look up.

Reg laughed. “You got people now? Ok. How about this? I’ll get my agent to set you up with a show. We’re gonna sell these. This not for your little class assignments.”

He said one of the largest would sell for no less than a grand. If she sold two that would be more money than she’d ever made at once. She’d spent a lot on the supplies and the cash could help. This was the kind of risk she needed to take. No one in her program had ever had a real gallery show. This was bigger than Deanna now and the sooner Deanna realized that and got on with her life, the better.

They scheduled the show for the beginning of fall. At school, Ola didn’t tell anyone that Deanna wasn’t on board, but no one asked. They would have all called Deanna crazy anyway. Now that Ola was getting big Deanna could have had more opportunities to profit off of Kris, but, of course, no one at the school would use the word “profit;” they would say something like “tell his story,” not mentioning the fact that his story was crafted after he was no longer around to have a say in it, but Ola buried the thought. There was so much to get ready for the opening.

It was called “Dead Boy.” The flyers, which had graffiti tag font, were posted on campus, in the shop, in laundromats, hair salons, and barbershops. Ola and Reg did interviews with all of the free magazines and, thanks to Reg’s connections, Ola’s “Dead Boy” even got press in a few major art zines. Only a local blog that interviewed Ola included a statement that Deanna, the dead boy’s mother, couldn’t be reached. Ola wanted Deanna to see the paintings, the write-up of Kris’s life the gallery had done along with statements on bullying, and be so touched she would forgive the fact that all of it had taken place without her consent.

The store window was busted open a week before the opening. The shirt was gone. Deanna didn’t know who threw the brick, but she was glad someone out there saw things her way. Reg wouldn’t press charges about the vandalism— the t-shirt didn’t mean that much to him— which his lawyers called to let her know, talking to her like she was a child.

“I don’t know anything about that, but call my phone again, my lawyer will pick up.”

The tiny shards of glass that covered the sidewalk outside of the store inspired Ola. She sketched Kris disfigured and broken among glass and bullet holes, splattered with blood, while she worked her shift. Reg loved it, claiming the controversy would add to the show's appeal. He wanted her to add the new pieces to the show. He said the splattered paint reminded him of a new technique he wanted to show her. They watched videos of an artist fixing a nail to her knuckles and busting open spray paint cans, the released pressure causing a violent spray of paint. He wanted Ola to do it at the show. The paint would spurt over Kris's face on a canvas they'd have prepared in advance, but the audience would think it was a spontaneous act of creativity. It would be something of a performance piece. That night Ola practiced in the alley behind the shop. She took a nail and aimed at a can. It took ten tries before she worked up enough force to penetrate and control her fear of stabbing her own hand. The color splashed out and hit the wall in angry gushes. She thought of Kris' face. Why couldn't he just fit in? Why did he go and kill himself? Hadn't he let the bullies win? She thought of Deanna being stupid and stubborn enough to miss out on the platform that Ola was giving her. She thought of the TV crew ignoring her while they exploited her creation.

She tried to call Deanna again. Her lawyer answered. Deanna was suing the TV company and she would go after the shop next. As for the TV show, she had agreed to be interviewed, not to being the front cover of the show. As for the shop, the tee in the window was insensitive. She did not understand when she gave them her business the possibility of her image being used that way. She did not understand how much profit would be made or that she would not see a penny of it. Deanna took the phone from the attorney.

"All these people out here making money from Kris's face. I'm not seeing a penny. Now you too?"

"Is that what it's about? Money?"

"You know good and well that's not what it's about."

"You should just come to the show. See what I've done for his story."

"You sound just like them, you know that?"

"Like who?" Ola said, but Deanna had already given the phone back to the lawyer. He said that Deanna was proceeding with a restraining order against her, but Ola was tuning out. Maybe Deanna would hear her if she yelled.

"Like who?" She shouted into the phone. "This is my art! Like who?" The lawyer hung up.

Reg said the cease and desist they sent to the gallery was a joke. The gallery agreed, saying they should have known better: artistic renderings are creative expressions, and the fact that Deanna had given the image to the shop weakened her case. She should also be careful, they added, because they knew she was behind the vandalism. Ola doubted that part but she nodded hard in agreement, determined to believe them.

Pickers surrounded the opening. They held signs: “STOP EXPLOITING BLACK PAIN” “OUR GRIEF IS NOT YOUR ART” “JUSTICE FOR KRIS” “LET DEANNA BE!” Ola was the target. No one mentioned the TV show. She wanted to yell back to the protesters to come inside and experience her art before they passed judgment, that they were on the same team, that she wasn’t the enemy. But she kept silent and entered the gallery from the backdoor.

There was no room to breathe. Everywhere she looked people eyed Kris’s disfigured face. At the end of the first hour, Reg showed up and parted the crowd like he was manning a battle. Ola stepped forward and presented her hand. He affixed the nail to her knuckles. She took her place and prostrated herself in front of a canvas. She had never done that before but something about the audience, the protesters outside, and the energy of the media buzz made her feel dramatic. Her body trembled. She felt as if she was an ancient timeless Goddess kneeling by a river. Her torso felt long like Nina Simone sitting at a piano. She was a humble vessel praying to her instrument. She raised her arm and with her full strength did the motion she had practiced. This time though, she let out a wail as she brought down her fist and collided with the can. Ripples of paint burst out. The paint covered Kris. She was a Black woman Pollack. The audience gasped and broke into applause. The first piece was complete in twenty minutes and was on offer for \$500,000. It was more than anyone in her family besides Reg had ever made. It sold in minutes.