R.I.P. (Rest in Progress)

The gravel crunched under Rita's sneakers, too loud for the kind of silence that felt like a held breath. The graveyard fence was barely chest-high, but climbing over it had felt like crossing into somewhere she shouldn't be. The iron bars still rattled behind her as though they continued to feel her weight; trembling long after she passed. She sprinted past the perfect rectangles of dark green Japanese Boxwood bushes, which seemed like they had eyes in their centers, watching. A few white oak trees were sprinkled further into the graveyard.

Rita imagined the Universe painting over plain darkness with Stygian paint, and then going over it with a coat of Vantablack. "*Remind me again*," she whispered annoyedly, "*why this couldn't wait 'til morning*?".

Ace flicked on his phone flashlight, the beam cutting a pale tunnel through the rows of leaning stones. "*Because it's not the same in daylight. I tooold you already: Professor Irison said we need to* ***feel the atmosphere*** *of the place*", his voice seemed to echo, bouncing off the stones and thinning out until it sounded like someone else had said it, further away.

"*Yeah, well, I'm certainly "feelin' it"...*", Rita muttered, with an eye-roll thrown in for good measure. The night air wrapped around her skin like a damp cloth, heavy with the smell of wet leaves and a faint, metallic tang that reminded her of rust. Her tongue tasted copper when she swallowed, and she rubbed her arms, one

at a time, as though she'd walked through spiderwebs. Her breath fogged faintly, even on this warm autumn night.

They moved between rows of headstones. Some were polished granite, with dates from the last decade. Other, older ones leaned at odd angles,— like the stones took "rest in peace" as a command, and started to slowly lay down to snooze, themselves, —names fading under moss and rain. One cross-tilted stone had cracked down the middle, the halves pushing away from each other like cells splitting. Rita caught herself imagining that if she pressed the halves back together and the stone reconnected as one, angels might hum from the heavens. Or, at least, the weeping angel statues strewn around the graveyard might.

Rita slowed when the light skimmed across a headstone standing taller than the rest. The letters seemed freshly carved, sharp and clean, but the stone around them was blotched with lichen.

"**MICHAEL RAPTIS, 2004—**"

Her stomach tightened. "*That's… creepy.*"

Ace angled the light, squinting. "*Why*?"

"*Because*, "2004". *That's* ***our*** *year. He'd be twenty-one.*"

Ace shrugged. "*Lots of people die young.*"

"*No, it's not just that*" she said quickly, after letting out a frustrated sigh. Her voice came out sharper than she meant. "*It's the dash. It's like- it's like it's... waiting.*"

Ace gave a small smile that didn't reach his eyes. He tapped the side of his phone like it was acting up, but his hand trembled once before he shoved it back into his pocket. "*You think too much.*" He kept walking, light bobbing ahead.

But once she saw it, she couldn't *un*-see.

"**MERCEDES ATKINS, 2005—**", "**ATTICUS HIRSCH, 2005—**", "**JESSE HUNTER, 2003—**". The stones stood like open parentheses; unfinished sentences; burgers with no top bun; a half-drawn picture. The more she read, the more the missing numbers pulsed in her mind, like unfinished math problems waiting to be solved.

Rita hugged her arms around herself. "*Ace, I'm serious. This isn't funny.*"

"*I'm not jok...ing.*" His voice went low as he became distracted. He paused at another stone, brushing moss from its face with the back of his hand. "*They're not all like this. Look.*"

But when she leaned in, the letters blurred, shallow scratches on old stone. No name at all. She blinked, rubbing her eyes, but the blankness stayed.

Ace tilted his head. "*What are you seeing?*"

She swallowed. "A *name. And a year. Just like the others.*"

He looked at her, the light casting a hard edge across his face. "*I don't see anything.*"

Her pulse picked up. "*You don't—*" She stopped. "*So what do you see?*"

"*Nothing. Just stone.*"

They walked farther, silence pooling around them, heavy as fog. Even the insects seemed to have gone quiet. Rita realized she could hear her own heartbeat, thudding in her ears, as if the graveyard itself was amplifying it back at her. When the wind stirred, the trees whispered in a language she didn't want to understand.

She read the next one.

"**RITA HEWITT, 2004—**"

She froze. Her throat closed up, words scraping against it. Her legs moved backward before her mind caught up, stumbling over the gravel path. "*Ace...*"

"*What*?" His light swung toward her, nearly blinding her.

She pointed, her finger trembling. "*Right there! Don't you see it? Please tell me you see it.*"

He stepped closer, phone beam steady on the stone. His expression didn't change. "*It doesn't say anything, Rita. It's blank.*"

"No! *It's right there!*" Her voice cracked, trembled, quivered, shook. "*It has* ***my name***!"

He shook his head slowly, but his jaw tightened. For a fraction of a second, the light caught his pupils dilating, as if he recognized something he wouldn't admit. "*Rita... nothing's there.*"

She clutched her hoodie tighter, heart fluttering, heat flooding her chest despite the damp air. The letters glowed in her vision, etched too deeply to deny. The dash stretched out into infinity, empty and patient.

Ace's light flickered once, then cut out.

The darkness fell so quickly it felt like a curtain dropping, thick and total. Rita's breath came fast, ragged. The only sound was the gravel shifting under their shoes. Then, faint but unmistakable, came the sounds of a camera shutter clicking, and then some snickering. Not from either of their phones. From somewhere in the rows now in their wake.

Behind them, the iron gate slammed shut with a final, ringing clang.

And the graveyard was silent again.