

Gemma's Story

by Linda Simoni-Wastila

They moved the memorial service to Saint Joe's because so many people wanted to come — the kids from school, everyone from church, the soccer league, the musicians he hung out with. The whole town came. Even here, the pews are packed. Good for Nikko - he loved a party, maybe too much.

Mom sits beside me, worrying a hanky in her lap. She twists it tight and releases. The cotton whirls open like a ballerina's tutu, stark against the black of her dress. She hasn't cried since she found Nik, not that I have seen anyway. Then again, I haven't really cried either. Just once, when I talked to Grams. I turn around. People stream in. Daddy shakes hands with everyone, even hugs some. He borrowed my make-up this morning, to cover the brown circles under his eyes.

Miss Miriam sits alone in the third row, very straight and still, hands folded in her lap. She's wearing purple, the color of blueberries. Looking at her, I kind of want to sit next to her because I'm alone, too. Josh didn't come back, he's still somewhere in Seattle. She must be worried sick, like we were with Nik. Mom refuses to be in the same church with Reverend Martin, so he's staying away to give her space. Which makes me sad, because Nik liked him, respected him, and would have wanted him at the memorial service. So stupid the disagreement. Both Nik and I voted for Rev Martin. The vote caused the split, it's why Nik and Josh left. Sometimes I wish I'd gone with them, but I'm not as strong as them.

Was.

I feel bad for Miss Miriam. She taught the Coming of Age program and after all those sleepovers and retreats, she knows me better than mom for sure, and probably dad, too. But she's not crying, she doesn't even have her notebook out. She keeps looking at the huge Jesus bolted to the cross hanging behind the casket.

Right over Nik. Which makes me want to laugh because none of us, even Miss Miriam, believe in God or Jesus or even miracles.

Miss Miriam always was kind to me, and to mom, and mom needed all the kindness she could get. I mean, I respect mom, she survived cancer and all while she was pregnant with me, but something about getting through all that crap made her heart tough, like an over-cooked piece of beef, and no one likes meat you have to chew forever. Sure, daddy holds her hand in church, they hold hands everywhere, but she's cold. Glacier. I blame her coldness on the chemo and radiation. Back then, doctors tended to overshoot doses and the methotrexate and all the rads turned mom into a bitch. The treatment is what made me a peanut. Strangers think I'm in the fourth grade. My friends call me T-cubed — tiny tough tiger — and I guess I am, though I am dreading driver's ed because I can't reach the gas pedal without sitting on my biology book. Dad always says what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. We'll see.

In the end I blame everything on the chemo. Because she's the one who made Nikky crazy enough to look for rope, find the pills. I just wish he hadn't given in.

The organ sighs. I stare at the notes crumpled in my hand, my poem to Nik, my twin, my best friend. The ink has bled on my hand, purple streaks, and it hits me: I am alone.

I wonder if Jesus cried at the end.

