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Garden of the Gods

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Garden of the Gods

You won't be in the room when he dies. You'll tell them you don't care to see it. I'll pass, you'll say. You have no interest in watching. Why would you? Something about it feels wrong, voyeuristic. Besides, this is the man who taught you how to live and you'd prefer to remember him that way—singing along to Sinatra and showing you how the world shimmers wild for eyes willing to see it. You don't need him to teach you how to die as well. You're pretty sure you can figure that out when the time comes.

He will have been in the hospital about four months when they finally do it, pull the plug. You'll mark the time in weekly visits during which you'll scramble for signs of hope. Any sign will do, anything that points toward life. During each visit, you won't say much. You'll sit back and you'll watch him closely, collecting snippets of optimism. You'll leave, pockets stuffed with these little fleeting moments like trinkets. A few phantom gems of rich laughter here, a couple comforting winks there. You'll covet each and every one of these, and each night you'll go home to craft grand illusions out of them while you should be sleeping. This is how your insomnia is born. Your mind won't be able to rest. It will stay up all night, threading these small memories together into the same conclusion over and over: he's going to be okay. He has to be.

You'll forget to take into account, however, that reality doesn't always turn out all boondoggles and tchotchkes, that the universe is a much more temperamental artisan. Which is why, when the time comes, you won't be able to take it. Why you will fold yourself up and stow yourself away—closed until further notice. Why you will deny yourself the simple release of mourning and call it strength. Why you will run and run and run until you realize that the very thing you're running from is still in your pockets, weighing you down.

It will take years to realize this. You'll be twenty days a legal adult when it happens, when they pull the plug. He'll be weaving in and out of consciousness when you spend your eighteenth birthday there with him in hospice care. Your grandmother will have signed your card for the both of them, and later you'll realize this as you watch his trembling fingers struggling to peel the aluminum covering off his plastic grape juice container. You'll offer to help, but his pride shoos you away. This will sting more than you expect, watching this man—your mother's father by way of adoption, your only father by way of a deadbeat—become aggressively undone over grape juice. As you watch him, bedridden, fumbling a juice container for the fifth time, you'll look away. Your gaze will land upon his pair of prosthetic legs at rest, useless and casually crossed in the corner, and you'll think back to how this all started with just a small stone. *A stone*, you'll think.

You'll remember the road trip out west that you and your grandparents took ten years before. Your mind will find itself revisiting the Garden of the Gods, one of your favorite stops on the trip, in Colorado, and the flat, white walls of the hospital room will become boulders—craggy, tectonic bursts of a million shades of warm citrus and adobes towering over you on either side. You're a wide-eyed wildcard of curiosity at eight, climbing everything with traction and asking more questions than there are answers to, while Grandpa and Grandma follow not far behind. Every once in a while Grandpa groans, complaining of a sore foot. But nobody thinks anything of it, him included. He's getting older and you've been walking around all day. He'll be fine once you get back to the hotel.

Standing on top of a dahlia plateau, looking out into the sun-kissed valley below, you can see everything, the whole world. You've never been so high. You ask, into a moment of windblown silence, why is this place called Garden of the Gods?

Grandpa walks into your peripheral and stops, peering into that sprawling swirl of colors from the top of the world. For a moment, nobody else exists; it's just the two of you. The sun is tired, brushing its last blush strokes of the day—the same stunning reds and oranges as the rock formations all around you—across an infinite wisp of blue sky. If any moment could last forever, it would be this one.

Finally, he answers your question: just look at it.

The steady beeping of life support machines counts heartbeats as memory gives in to a forever of snow out the window. The walls will be blunt-white and very real. Your back will be to the bed where the remains of him lie. You'll have the sudden urge to turn around, to walk over to him, just like you did with your first steps, and fall into his arms. You'll want so badly to

rest your head on his chest, like after so many bad dreams, and get lost in his lulling blend of Barbamol, Old Spice, and his soft tenor song. You will want to come undone completely, to sob into his arms right there in the hospital. There's so much you'll want to tell him; there's *too* much you'll want to tell him. You won't know where to begin and so you won't do any of it. You'll stay put, looking distantly out the window, avoiding the bad dream playing itself out behind your back; try to escape the sounds of the only real father you've ever known weeping, begging for death to step in and relieve the pain.

You'll try counting snowflakes to keep your mind off it:

**One*

[It all started with one little stone stuck in the shoe of a diabetic].

**Two*

[We didn't stop walking, we didn't think anything of it].

**Three*

[The red pebble ground against his ankle like a saw].

**Four*

[He said everything was fine. Until the gangrene moved in].

**Five*

[The gangrene wasn't crazy about the kidneys].

**Six*

[Neither was the diabetes].

You won't be in the room when he dies, when they pull the plug. But you'll know ahead of time that they're going to do it. You'll arrive at the hospital and immediately know something is wrong when you see that everyone's there, the whole family. You will be right beside your mother when they buzz you into the hospice wing of Strong Memorial Hospital. Your younger siblings will be trailing behind in a rosy-cheeked cloud of confusion. You'll notice Grandma first. She'll be leaning against the wall with lips pursed so thin she could have swallowed them. There will be a strange weight to her eyes, which will be fixed on the ceiling, a look only God could interpret. Next, you'll notice that Uncle Joe is sitting with his hands clasped over his paunch, his eyes closed behind his thick bifocal lenses as if he is lost in a deep meditation or trance.

That's when you'll know that it's over, that they're going to pull the plug. After a few long, speechless hugs, the young doctor arrives to give you the short of it: he no longer wishes to go on. He has chosen to end his suffering.

We are taking him off life support.

The words, as soon as they leave the doctor's lips, draw tears in unison. Your mother drops down and shatters, holding close the heads of the little ones. Grandma steadily rocks back and forth on the balls of her feet, ever looking upward. She's shaken, but stoic. And, before you know it, Uncle Joe forces your head into his cushiony chest, telling you over and over that everything will be okay, everything will be okay—a gesture that, although well intentioned, will prove much more comforting for him than for you.

You will be staring blankly into the light over Uncle Joe's shoulder, trying to imagine what life means without him. Nothing will come to mind. You will feel like crying, like somehow validating the tears of your loved ones, but you won't be able to.

You will have disengaged that part of yourself the moment you entered the hospice and read the foreshadowing in everyone's faces. You will have shut yourself down. All you will be good for on that day is to act as a rock. You will have sturdy shoulders and silence to offer in response to despair. People will rest their heads on you, drooling unanswerable questions onto your collar. Hug back, whisper *I know*; it's all you'll be able to do.

Later, your mother will ask how you're holding up. Lie. To her and to yourself. Tell her you're fine. Keep on lying until you eventually find yourself in some of the uglier corners of coping, particularly those known to sling dime bags and forty ounces of emotional amnesia. You'll find yourself trying to smoke, snort, pop, and shoot away the truth, but it will never give. Pain is as resilient as it is persistent. It doesn't just go away with time. You have to put it in its place, train it like you would a dog. Put it on a leash and walk with it, always at a short distance, but don't let it guide you. Keep a firm grip and lead it where you have to go.

After what could be twenty minutes or three hours in the waiting room, your mom will ask if you wish to say your goodbyes before they pull the plug. She explains that he'll be able to hear you, but won't be able to respond. In a daze, you will nod yes and the doctor will give you the go-ahead. As you approach the heavy closed door to his room, you'll frantically try to catch every second of the last eighteen years like snowflakes on your tongue, but there are just so many.

Once you enter, you'll close the door behind you. You will see that he has an oxygen mask pressed deep into the creases of his wrinkles and the only indication that he is still alive is the digital beeping of a heart monitor artificially marking time. You'll take a seat beside the bed and try to collect your thoughts.

You'll clear your throat a couple times to see if he responds. He doesn't. You'll whisper unintelligible syllables to test your voice. You'll look over to see if he responds. He doesn't. You'll start to wonder if there's any real value in doing something like this in the first place. What could you really say to bring to cadence an entire life's worth of love and appreciation? What could you tell him that he doesn't already know about life, about you? You wonder if he knows that he has been like a father to you, that he has helped to shape the man you have become. He must. You hope he is aware of how much you respect him—for his work ethic, his honesty, the way he'd do anything just to make you smile. You hope he knows how completely and innocently you love him. How you'd follow him into fire if he said it was chill.

You will think all of these things. You won't say any of them. You'll sit in that chair by the bed, barely able to look at him, and you'll choke on your own silence. For fifteen minutes you'll sit there unable to even say the word *goodbye*. It sits like a shard of glass stuck in your throat the whole time and it burns when you try to let it out. You'll try and try, but you just can't do it. You might be thinking that he isn't lucid enough for it to matter anyway. Maybe you're thinking that it won't matter much whether or not you say it because he won't have any recollection of it once they pull the plug.

Or perhaps you're thinking, somewhere beneath it all, that if you never say goodbye, maybe he'll never have to leave.