

No Relation

My intentions were not entirely selfless. For the months in which I had come to know her, I had also come to know a familiar feeling, one born from necessity and desire. I wanted to be near her. I needed her to like me. So, whenever she called me that morning, tearless and dizzy, I answered. She was at her boyfriend's house. They had had an argument, the kind that takes time and distance to process. There was nowhere else for her to go. I told her that it would take me an hour to get there. She said that it was okay, and I called into work to go and pick her up.

After we left, I searched for a sign that would lead us home. I did not recognize the names of the roads plastered on a single one that we passed, and we drove in circles before I finally found what I was looking for. I took the exit, turned on my phone and started playing Irish music.

She told me that she liked it, and asked where I had heard it from. I told her that I had been learning more about Ireland because it was where my ancestors came from. She asked if I wanted to go, and I told her yes, more than anything in the world. Whenever she asked why, I told her about the weather and the greenery and celtic legends. I told her about King Arthur, who sleeps in Avalon, recuperating from the wounds he incurred at the Battle of Camlann and dreaming of his return home, before it occurred to me that if he did return home, he would no longer recognize it.

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My mother is tired. She does not sleep without dreaming. After my sister is born, my father leaves her. Five years later, she gives birth to me, another child of the deserter, and three years after his second departure, my father hangs himself in an old room with the shoelaces from the new shoes my mother had bought him. He had called her to threaten to do it if she would not stop him. My mother will not know about it until a few days later because my grandfather cannot pay the phone bill. Whenever she pleads with him for more time, he reminds her that my father had used up all the minutes. He could not be more right. A dead phone dangles from where the dial tone rings out.

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Her father was dying. We wandered among the tombstones of a local cemetery. I had never been there before because none of the names were of my family, though its proximity to my grandparents' house did not go unnoticed by my grandmother, who joked that the next place she'd be moving to was right next door. I thought about that and did not like to see the names on the rocks in the dirt.

We walked without destination and I managed to keep the pace with her. She was tall and took long strides. I felt the cool pools beneath my arms and I wanted us to leave. Nothing is quite as miserable beneath the Texas sun as expedient aimlessness.

At several tombstones we stopped to admire the masonry. Some of the familial names I vaguely recognized as pupils from elementary school whose faces I could conjure with surprising clarity, but only those singular frames from the reels of their existence. On occasion, we passed by markers commemorating a husband and wife returned to one another.

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She meets a new man. He provides, but he is not kind. I am five years old and I know he is not my father. I ask her what happened to him, and she does not answer me. So I ask again. And again. And again. And again, with no change of inflection, no subtlety or grace. It is at night when she finally tells me. She does not look at me when she says that he hung himself. I did not know that people could do that. It is now a week later when she finds me in my room, black thoughts bleeding through cracked plaster. I tell her something bad will happen if I don't turn off the lightswitch at the right moment. She tells me it makes no sense, but she does not know that the sense is not something which is made. Afterwards, I am being tested for Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). The doctor asks me if I worry often about bad things happening to the people I care about. I answer yes, and he asks me what sorts of bad things. I tell him that I think of people dying a lot, and that it scares me enough to do the things I feel compelled to do. He doesn't say anything, just nods his head and scribbles something on his hard plastic clipboard. My mother watches me from the corner of the room, but I am unable to stare at anything except the floor, the cracks of which I will avoid stepping on because I do not want to break her back.

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She did not know this place, but it knew her name. Hundreds of miles from any relation, in a small town removed from any semblance of her history, her family name is carved into polished rock. I will not be disingenuous and say that it was an uncommon name, but commonality cannot compare to timing. It stood out an obelisk bigger than all the others.

She stood in front of it and did not say anything. There was no wind to speak of, and I watched her stand motionless, silent, serene. Somewhere, a dog barked behind a fence and the cicadas were singing, but even the sound of the world around us kept its distance.

On the way back to the car, she asked me how I honor the dead. I did not have an answer, because the truth was that I only thought about them from time to time. My family did not have any preserved traditions, only enduring memories.

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I am awoken by a great lurching, the kind where you know something bad is about to happen and you have mere seconds to prepare for it. I am running down the hallway with vomit dribbling down my chin and onto my pajamas. The first bathroom is taken and I burst into my parents' room to use theirs. Their room is the darkest one in the house. Old blankets hang over the windows like the hides of a hunter. I do not make it and it all comes spilling out over the crib of my baby brother. The Provider yells at me while chunks of half-digested food crawl up my throat as I try to swallow it back down. My apologies are lost beneath volleys of bile and brisket. I start to explain that I tried to hold it in, and that it was all too much, before another river of sickness launches out of my throat. I manage to cup it to my face with my hands and smear glaciers of puke up my nose. I am crying and my mother comes over and places her arms around my shoulders and directs me to the bathroom. In the dark of the room I had run past it.

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A pale horse stood beyond the fence. She watched it and I watched her. It shuffled towards us, wrapped in the final hour of the day, when the grass turns gold. We stayed longer than I was comfortable with. People loved property more than they did poetry. What if someone was watching us, aiming down the barrel at two strangers leaning on an old wooden post? I looked through the windows of the house adjoining the pasture. Dark squares with no light. I heard the hooves in the grass as it came closer. The entire time I was searching for death, she was looking it in the eye.

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I call my grandfather to talk about space. He had bought me a telescope, so that I might look at the moon and tell him about all the beautiful scars that run across its face, and an encyclopedia of the known universe, so that I might tell him about the storm on Jupiter that has raged for two hundred years and likely will for two hundred more, or the pillars of creation that hold the beginning of history behind their walls. I tell him about the mountains of kraken rock that swim through the dark matter between star systems until their voyage from nowhere concludes with the sound of screeching meat upon a burning earth. I tell him of the concentric arms of galaxies slowly spiraling towards one another for a collision billions of years in the making which will spew celestial intestines into the phantom void encircling it and the incalculable volume of light that will shine around it all like the violet sclera of God's eye. I tell him about the edge of all things, if there is such a thing, and how the heat behind the propulsion of the universe will exhaust itself and a primordial coldness will freeze the planets in their orbits along with all of existence beneath a sheet of black ice. I hear him over the phone press his lips together and blow outwards, making the "BRRRRRRRR" sound, and I laugh so hard I snort. I tell him that, contrary to whatever noise he might have heard me make, I did not find that funny, and don't you know that the death of all things is no laughing matter. He tells me indeed, nothing is so grim as that which will never happen in our lifetime, and I tell him about the black hole at the center of everything which could swallow all life if it truly wanted to. He laughs and says it would have to notice us first, and the odds of that happening are about as slim as our being here. I tell him that that's not zero, and he says it's basically zero. I lapse into silence and I tell him that I'm scared. He asks of what. I tell him that I'm scared of people dying. He asks why I had gotten it into my head to worry about something like that. I tell him that I don't know, and that I don't understand any of it and that I wish he wasn't so far away, why was he so far away. He does not talk for a long time, just breathes into the phone. Then, he tells me that he doesn't know why either; that even if he could tell me about all the events that had spawned this distance, none of it would make any sense, but that the next time I come to Odessa, he'll take me to the sand dunes, where I'll get to see more light in the night sky than I've ever seen. He tells me that things are never so far apart as they seem, that time was never so long once you reached the end of it and that what we see of the stars is actually a picture of the universe from four hundred million years ago. He tells me not to be afraid, and that the great secret of the cosmos was that it had already died and would die a thousand times again. We are the stuff of stars, he says, and one day, long after days have ceased to be, long after our sun has coated the night sky with ultraviolet beams of radiant death, when we are floating in the boundless vacuum with the dust and the rocks amid a gaseous atlas, we will come together and live again. I tell him that I never want to stop being able to see him, and that I don't think I believe in God. He said that it was okay, but to never stop believing in Heaven. Six months later, he is dead, and the stars above the dunes shine bright and lonesome.

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She was trying to write a poem about her father. I told her that we should go and visit mine. On the way over, I had to look at the name of the cemetery to make sure it was the right one. We parked the car and walked to the office. It was Sunday, and they were closed. I told her that it didn't matter, that I didn't need directions and that I would find him.

We walked down the rows while the sun beat down on us. The cemetery was bigger than I remembered. I did not know how much of that was due to the fallibility of childhood memory and how much of it was due to the new dead residents. I thought about how many people had died since I last came here, how many lives were finished while I was still living mine, and I began to feel selfish and stupid. I started walking fast, scanning the markers, none of which were the one I was looking for.

I crouched to examine a group of others which had been left long untended, names nearly buried with their bodies. Sweat trickled down my face and I could feel her standing behind me as I squinted into the earth. I began to wonder whether he was even there or if he had ever been there. Why had I brought her to this place? She had nowhere else to go; that was true. But that was not why I had offered. I had wanted to show her that I knew, that I understood, that I could feel what she was feeling, but instead she watched as I stood among the tombstones with no relativity, no remembrance, and no relation.