

Past the Backyard

I REMEMBER IT RAINED THE Sunday before grmpa died. Our parents drank Cabernet in the kitchen and talked about Ben Shahn drawings they needed to hang over the fireplace. They all stood around the stove, laughter sizzling like the roast in the oven. But grmpa leaned rigid on his cane to watch us kids through the kitchen window.

In the backyard we jumped from puddle to puddle. Alice and Emily chased each other around the terra cotta sundial, which looked glad to be getting some kind of use in the rain—standing alone in the middle of the lawn. Me and Noah played tag between the oak trees.

Ramona and James used the wide flat stones leading to the screen door for hopscotch pretending they couldn't touch the space in between. The back of the house looked like gram's china teapot, the one she kept on the slanted shelf in the dining room. The house was a little slanted too.

At the table grmpa sighed uneasily over his roast, but he groaned and leaned back in his chair and said, "By god that's delicious." He patted his belly and looked at us kids, wanting to be imitated. We joined him making faces at each other. Eye rolling, tongues hanging out. Our parents leaned on each others shoulders pleased to see their family together in one place. Even the silver knives had a cheerful smile.

After dinner we all sat in the den, rain still sliding down the windows, but we were safe and connected and felt loved. A *New York Times* was passed around. Wine dark coffee instead of Cabernet. And the Steinway plunked out "Send in the Clowns"

thanks to Uncle Eli.

From his chair, grmpa wheezed on his pipe, nodding to the terra cotta sundial in the back yard, as if some specter of the reaper was already waiting outside. He said it reminded him of a story. One he had to tell, one that us kids needed to hear. One that I think my cousins forgot. But a story that I remember well. So we lay on our stomachs at grmpa's feet and listened to his voice roll like thunder over granite mountains.

"In one of the world's deserts—far away—is a village that is a symbol of impatient humanity. A place where people have built their lives on top of rocky spires. They piled boulders, one on top of the other, and smoothed out the sides so no one could reach them. And they climbed a top these spires to sit five hundred feet above the ground for the rest of their lives.

"Now their world ends at the abrupt edge of their little island. Step too far and they plummet to their deaths. And all around are people who had the same idea, to build perch themselves atop these spires, to strand themselves on a rocky island.

"But the most cruel and anguishing thing about this village is that once they have stranded themselves all they want to do is leave. They sit and sit and watch an watch. The sun goes up, the sun goes down, and all they want to do is see the world around them from another point in space. They cry out to the other people around them, 'I wish we could switch places, I wish I could come over their for a little while and you could be over here.' All they want is a little change of scenery, a little change of perspective.

"Some of course have tried to leave their island, have tried to jump across the empty space that separates them from the rest of the world. They fling their bodies out on nothing hoping to land solidly. But all who have tried fall to their deaths unable to

bridge the gap.

“And still, with decaying corpses around the bases of the spires, with buzzards picking at the bones of human remains, new people arrive everyday. To build new spires they can sit on top of. The people on top of their islands shout at them, try to warn them, ‘Stop don’t do it, don’t become like us, keep your feet on the ground,’ and the newcomers say, ‘why, why bother keeping my feet on the ground, they aren’t taking me anywhere. I don’t want to go much farther than a few feet anyway.’ So they continue to build.

“My dear, dear children, do not build your lives on top of stone pillars, keep your feet on the ground. Do not build islands that keep you from leaving that make you their prisoner. You may feel like your life has limits, you may feel like there is not enough time to do everything you want. But you, are limitless, you are infinite so live that way. Do not fear getting old, do not fear dying. Fear never getting out your front door. Fear being stranded by the things and the people around you. Fear waking up every morning with a only a familiar view out your window for company.

“And promise me that you will look after one another. Make sure to look after each other.”

His voice rumbled around the living room for a moment then faded down the hall and up the stairs. He nodded once more at the terra cotta sundial, as if to say goodbye. And on Wednesday he was gone.

With passing years, Gram lived for herself. Lived in her teapot house balanced on its slanted shelf. The cousins grew older and built lives that kept them from visiting home, kept them from seeing their family more than once a year. They studied political science and were given research grants in South

America, had kids of their own. But not me, I never got past the backyard.

Gram died on a Sunday. I came over to have dinner that night, but when I walked in, there was no Cabernet on the table, or roast in the oven. Gram was still in bed, still in her nightgown. And all that was left was a paper saying, “this island I give to you, do with it what you may.”

So I picked out her casket. The cousins cooked the lunches and kept me from doing anything in my own house. “Stay off your feet. You’ve done enough.” Ramona wept silently over dry dishes and smoked salmon. Nieces and nephews ran around the terra cotta sundial in the backyard. We watched them play through the kitchen window. For the first time the house felt whole again, like a cycle had come back around. I looked for a bottle of Cabernet to show them how nice it would be if we could get together every week like this. Talk about Ben Shahn drawings and watch the kids jump from puddle to puddle. They would stay, move in to the community, they wouldn’t abandon me here to sit on top of their own islands.

But they left me with stacks of boxes piled on one another, creating cardboard columns I had to look upon. Reminders of a lesson unlearned and doomed to be repeated. I saw myself, with great grandnieces and nephews gathered around my feet, retelling a story that rolled through the halls of this house like thunder through a granite valley. “People have built their lives on stone columns,” all the time the terra cotta sun dial nodding at me from its place in the middle of the lawn and the whole house slanted like a china teapot perched on the very edge of a shelf. Perhaps they will learn what we could not. ■