

~4100 words

There are no Angels Singing

The hospice smelled of cabbage, candles, and dogs. There were birds too, but no cats. In his short time there, Dylan had seen a guitar, a Nintendo, Chinese food boxes, and a mini trampoline. Apparently, anything was allowed, including alcohol and recreational drugs with permission. His mother had heard about the hospice and its philosophy on the evening news. "Don't die sad," suited her.

"So?" asked Dan Stewart, the hospice manager. He and Dylan were standing over Dylan's mother. She was "blissed out" on morphine, Dan's words.

"Her plan mentions a party, singing and dancing. Are there local folks?"

"Nope," said Dylan. "Just me."

"Pets?"

"Nope."

"A favorite movie?"

"Nope."

Dan frowned. "There must be something. Music?"

"Judy Collins," said Dylan.

"Excellent. We'll start there," said Dan. He was well intentioned, an orchestrator. He knew how to hold death in his hands and blow on it. He was forty-six, five years older than Dylan, and used a cane, his left leg damaged in an accident.

"She goes by 'Ma Sara'," said Dylan. "I changed it on the white board."

"Wonderful. I wish I knew her better. And you too."

"I'm not sure you do," said Dylan.

Dan explained that Ma Sara would probably not regain consciousness. Despite his pleas, the hospital had dithered and delayed in moving her. Most hospice residents have more time.

Dylan mentally cataloged what he knew about Ma Sara's last wishes. Her cremation and scattering were prepaid. The Goodwill had agreed to take her few belongings. Three letters were to be mailed, each stamped with a different Disney character. Ten I-Ching coins were to be tossed off Mission Beach into the Pacific Ocean on a Thursday, precisely at 12:44 PM, after which Phil Smithers, the bartender at Lyons, would pour shots of Galliano gratis. Sip it slowly his mother had advised him in an email. Think of an ice cream cone.

That was it. A simple life and a simple death.

Dylan stroked his mother's hand and considered that he might not follow her instructions. Even near death, she looked restless. He

pulled her sloppy hospital gown up over her shoulder. He would bring her something more attractive to wear tomorrow; she liked to look good for visitors. This visit from Portland, his sixth in as many months, would be his last. Over the past twelve years, before the cancer, he had visited his mother exactly once.

#

It was dark by the time Dylan got to Ma Sara's place, a thirteenth-floor section 8 apartment overlooking San Diego bay. On prior trips, he had stayed in motels, but wanted to get a head start on packing her belongings this time around. He put his suitcase in the tiny bedroom and walked out onto the lanai. It was warm outside. He liked the heat and the spectacular view. Not bad for \$550 a month and a voucher. Her budget didn't allow for more.

Inside the apartment, Ma Sara's unframed nature paintings covered an entire wall. Dylan remembered a day when he was ten. Ma Sara was painting and sunlight was streaming into her studio. Green and orange paint blotted the canvas and scratchy brush strokes guided their conversation.

"What is it?" Dylan had asked. A bottle, a vase, a pear, a factory? The ghostly under-sketch held no clue.

"It's our life," she had said brightly. "Us. You, me, and Dad." It looked like a bridge to Dylan. It turned out to be a horsetail fern.

He remembered Moishe, Ma Sara's instructor, and feeling strange when the man held his mother's hand. He remembered a yellow flower that earned Ma Sara a hundred dollars at an amateur art show. She paraded like a queen, fanned the bills, and screamed with joy. Moishe loved it. He may have loved her.

He remembered his father not loving it.

All of this was before Dylan knew that his mother would never stray from nature and would always say "It's our life."

Around the time of the art show, Dylan's father left for good. Ma Sara called him a bad man, Moishe too, too demanding and critical.

At the time, Dylan wondered how so many bad men and flowers could co-exist in the world. It didn't make sense.

#

The next morning, Dylan picked out new clothes for Ma Sara, an African caftan and head scarf. He piled some paintings into the back of his rental car and drove to the hospice. He was almost to Ma Sara's room when he heard the plaintive voice of Judy Collins.

I've looked at life from both sides now

From give and take

And then somehow

It's life's illusions I recall

I really don't know life at all

Dylan pressed his ear to the door. He felt like a voyeur. Judy's flimsy words made him angry. Illusions were bullshit. After his father left, he and Ma Sara moved often and everywhere, Washington to Oregon, city to town, apartment to trailer home. They moved when Ma Sara lost her job and when Dylan failed a class and when her boyfriends lied. He survived by analyzing small details, the sound of a key or the speed of a car, and avoiding trouble. When that failed, he simply did what he was told, sometimes with unfair harsh results.

He had learned not to have illusions. If the lyrics were a balm to Ma Sara, they were a lament to him.

He opened the door, walked to his mother's bed, and kissed her forehead.

"Much better," said Dan a half hour later. Ma Sara was dressed in the caftan and scarf. Her eyelids fluttered involuntarily. Paintings filled the room. Dan pointed at an abstract of circles, squares, and squiggles and said, "Wow, flowers."

"Anything happen last night?" asked Dylan.

"She mumbled a bit. The name Judy. The singer?"

"My daughter, her granddaughter," said Dylan.

Dan laughed. "She wants Judy to brush her teeth more often."

"So do I," said Dylan.

"And the music?" asked Dan.

"It's fine."

"You don't like it."

"I don't like how it invites people to be confused."

"Fair enough."

Ma Sara stirred. The two men sat in silence. A heat pump kicked on outside and laughter floated in from somewhere deep in the house. Dylan smelled pot.

"You really believe in this, don't you," said Dylan.

"Believe in what?" asked Dan.

"Making it fun. Light. A fucking trampoline? Seriously?"

A few moments passed before Dan responded.

"I believe an effort has to be made. That it is the right thing to do. Whatever your beliefs or relationships or fears, endings matter."

"I suppose," said Dylan. "You're a saint,"

#

For the next two hours, Dylan and Dan talked about Ma Sara's paintings and watched her shift uncomfortably from side to side, sighing and moaning. Dan checked her morphine to make sure it was flowing. Watching Ma Sara reminded Dylan of observing a newborn.

The hospice doctor arrived to examine Ma Sara. Dan left to visit other rooms and Dylan went outside to get some fresh air.

The meditation garden behind the hospice was surrounded by shrubs and flowers. Dylan sat down on a cement bench and read a metal plaque, vague words about the interplay of nature and life. He hated the inflated coaxing of grief. A teenage girl joined him. He ignored her. He had long ago carved out the emotional space necessary to survive his mother's death and he didn't want to share. The girl's thumbs flickered over her phone like hungry baby birds. Behind her, a shed's door stood slightly ajar. A hospital, the one where Ma Sara had fought her disease, towered behind the shed.

Some movement on the hospital's face attracted Dylan, a window washer in a harness, working quickly, belaying himself from pane to pane. He could fall so easily. Why doesn't he fall, wondered Dylan? Why does he do something so potentially fatal? Suddenly the shed's door swung open, revealing a dark empty space. The girl saw it too and was startled. A few seconds later an orange cat appeared, slumped onto some blue tiles, and started to lick its paws, as if it had just eaten something.

Dylan did not feel better knowing that the cat had caused the door to open. He looked at the teenage girl and wondered when his small daughters would start asking questions about Ma Sara's death, who she was, what she meant. He wondered if he could keep any of his promises to Ma Sara and what type of karmic retribution was in store for him if he didn't. His youngest daughter, Judy, had just started second grade and didn't understand why he wasn't home. Last night on the phone she had yelled, "I hate Ma Sara," and Dylan had admonished her, telling her that she couldn't hate someone she didn't know. "Yes I can," she said. "Hate, hate, hate. There." He worried that the sharp, out-of-proportion anger he often felt toward his children would never diminish.

The girl completed her text and stuck her phone in her purse. She inserted her hands under her legs and extended her neck to absorb the sun. She nodded at Dylan and smiled. He let her wander into his space.

"Could you do that?" she asked, pointing at the window washer.

"I've done that," said Dylan, "Metaphorically speaking."

"Don't you just want to pluck him off, see what happens?" asked the girl. She had the expression of someone who wanted to talk about anything except what he or she was really thinking and feeling.

"I know what happens," said Dylan.

"What's that?" asked the girl.

"He climbs up and does it again and again."

"Why doesn't he do something else?"

"Because it's all he knows."

"I hate that," said the girl.

"Don't say hate," said Dylan.

#

When Dylan got back to Ma Sara's room, a hospice worker was hand-bathing her. His mother had always loved to be touched, handled, soothed, and caressed. Dan, or the doctor, had moved a painting onto a desk – purple roses scattered across a dining room table. It was her best piece.

"Let me help," said Dylan. The worker handed him the sponge. He dipped it in the warm water and wrung it out. He placed an arm under his mother's body to support her. Her face was up and her right arm, her IV arm, was flat at her side. He gently washed her face, neck, shoulders, arms, and hands. Her skin was soft and pale, bordering on jaundiced. He knew her swollen knuckles well. Too well. Too many restaurant jobs and too much punching. He could say it out loud now, punching, and talk about it freely, the result of hundreds of hours of therapy. He had even discussed it with her the last time they spoke. She was somewhat remorseful. She acknowledged that she had spared him most of the physical, but not the psychological.

Dylan stroked his mother's temple. Her thick brown hair was still full, no gray anywhere. He gently pushed some strands back behind her ear under the scarf. He remembered her licking her hand and rubbing it hard against his cheek when he was a kid. He remembered the sour lactic smell. He remembered her stories, how she had grown up on a rural farm, one of several children born to harsh, unforgiving parents, and how she had struggled in school, too ill-tempered to fit in. He remembered how she had liked boys and later men and how she had given her charms freely and how greedily she was consumed. He knew all of this from the whispering and comments and recriminations shared and repeated over the years around dinner tables and during car trips, recollections hardened by repetition. He hated his sharp judgment of his mother. He hated how many times she had changed her name,

originally Susan then Chandra, Kim, and Pat. A recent Indian boyfriend had suggested Ma Sara. He said it conveyed the divine.

Dylan finished washing Ma Sara. He gripped her hand, hoping for something in return but there was nothing. Her shallow breathing scared him. Dylan wished the hospital had transferred her sooner and that she was alert. He had wanted his wife and children to say goodbye, but they said no; they had other things to do.

#

That evening, Dylan took calls from Ma Sara's brothers, both Chicago laborers, both divorced, both still pounding nails and laying floors.

"I'd fly out, but I gotta work," said the first one. "Jesus, I can't believe she's gone."

"She's not gone yet," said Dylan.

"Almost," said the brother.

The other brother had more resources and felt obliged to help.

"Can I buy the casket?"

"She took care of it," said Dylan.

"How? She doesn't have any money," said the brother suspiciously.

"She saved up."

"Well, bully for her," said brother two.

Dylan said goodbye and hung up. He turned off the TV and went out onto the lanai. The lights of Coronado twinkled. He imagined young couples strolling the edge of the night water, shoulders down, explaining themselves, burdens in front of them. He went inside and

found a candle the color of an evergreen tree. It took four tries to light it. The last match singed his fingers.

The candle flickered. He stared into the darkness and wondered about Ma Sara's last twelve years. Her possessions held some clues. Eighty-six prescriptions lined the dining table, Vicodin, Cipro, and more, mostly pre-chemo drugs, thousands of pills. Soft, cheap lingerie filled her top dresser drawer, clasps and straps tangled. A hidden box of inflatable casts, finger splints, and ace bandages peeked out from under the bed; he hoped she had given as good as she got.

He regretted his decision to stay in Ma Sara's apartment, sleep on her mattress, absorb her longing, and touch her secrets. He decided it didn't much matter; distance was not an option and may never be again. The candle's wick sputtered and the smell of paraffin drifted into his nostrils. He shivered and decided that after she was gone, he would reform his memories.

He called his wife to say that it wouldn't be long now.

#

The next morning Dylan woke with a slight headache. He showered and donned shorts for the first time since arriving in San Diego. On his drive to the hospice, he began to feel very open and free. When he arrived, Ma Sara's room was dark and he thought she might be gone until her small shape stirred. Separate from the IV tail, she barely existed. Dylan placed the green candle on her nightstand and lit it. He saw a note from Dan and headed upstairs to check in.

Dan was sleeping on an office cot and woke when Dylan knocked. He sat up and rubbed his eyes like a small boy.

"You wanted to talk?" asked Dylan.

"A man stopped by last night. A friend of your mother's. He mentioned Lyons."

"The bar," said Dylan.

"He wants to meet you. He'll be back."

"Okay."

Dan rubbed his bad leg and winced.

"What happened to your leg?" asked Dylan.

Dan sighed. "I mangled it mountain climbing. Fifteen years ago. I was unconscious for a half hour, dangling from a rope. I heard zills, finger cymbals, and felt very cold, icy cold. The doctors wanted to amputate."

Dan pulled back a blanket. His leg looked like a crooked tree branch.

"I hate my mother," said Dylan. He began to shake uncontrollably. Dan stood up and wrapped a blanket around Dylan's shoulders and held him, held his head, held his body.

"None of this is easy or lovely," said Dan. "There are no angels singing."

"If she loves something, she kills it," said Dylan. "She never trusted the feeling."

"You should go see her now," said Dan.

#

Dylan had been sitting for an hour. Ma Sara had not moved the entire time. He felt a presence in the room and looked up, expecting a

hospice volunteer, but it was an older, gray-haired African-American man.

"How she doin'?" asked the man.

"I don't know," said Dylan.

"This here is pretty nice," said the man. "Better than her place."

"I'm her son," said Dylan, extending his hand. "Dylan."

They shook.

"I know. Seen your picture," said the man. "Delbert. I'm a friend of your mom's."

Dylan knew they were out there, somewhere. Ma Sara was never alone and always alone.

"I was her driver," said Delbert. "Took her on errands."

"How'd you meet?" asked Dylan.

"Oh, you know," said Delbert. He was being polite.

"Mind if I say something to her?" asked Delbert.

"No, please."

Delbert pulled a chair up to Ma Sara's bed and put his face near hers. He whispered and then began to cry, chin-trembling male tears, regret, perhaps, thought Dylan, but more likely the sorrow of good memories enlarged. After a few minutes, Delbert wiped away his tears and kissed his fingers and brushed them against Ma Sara's hair.

"You go now," he said. "I want you to go."

Dylan felt a long-suppressed rage take hold.

"You don't get to tell her that," he hissed.

Delbert blinked, confused.

"You don't get to come in out of nowhere and tell her to die," said Dylan.

"I...I didn't say that," said Delbert.

"What did you think you were saying?" asked Dylan.

"I was saying what she said when my mom died. You know. Don't hold on for us. That's all."

Dylan eased off. "Sorry. I took it different."

Delbert stared back intently, his red eyes watering with emotion.

They sat that way for a long while, Delbert stroking Ma Sara's hair, Dylan steeling himself, the two of them not knowing but knowing each other. After a while, Dylan said, "Dan said you wanted something."

Delbert was silent.

"Well?"

"How much you know about her growin' up?"

"Enough."

Dylan and Ma Sara seldom visited her parents in downstate Illinois. When they did, Dylan was petrified. Rusty downspouts crisscrossed the overgrown yard, the crumbling front porch housed rats, and empty Jim Beam gallons filled the basement. After Ma Sara found hundreds of dried dog turds behind the living room couch, they never visited again.

"I wished I had known some stuff before my mom died. By god I do," said Delbert.

"Okay," said Dylan, getting impatient.

"Your mom's dad. He raped her. Grandpa too," said Delbert.

Dylan did not say anything.

"Happen all the time. All the time. Everywhere. Sheesh."

Rape. The word came so easily to Delbert, as if he was saying candy or water. Dylan knew it was true. Ma Sara had never said it out loud, but it had hung in the air Dylan's entire life, like the thrown punches. It poured through the generations. That a complete stranger could so easily share Ma Sara's worst secret seemed strangely appropriate to him.

"Don't worry," said Delbert. "She can't hear. She almost gone. I seen it before. It won't be long."

Dylan thought about reenactment. He thought about reading the same book to his daughters over and over again. He thought about the African tribes that send their dead to the afterlife in colorful painted wood caskets that resemble much-loved cars. He imagined laying Ma Sara in a casket covered with painted flowers and nailing the lid shut. He imagined his mother as a child trapped in a farmhouse with dogs circling.

Delbert patted Ma Sara one last time and nodded to Dylan.

"Nice to meet you."

"Same. Stay if you like," said Dylan.

"No. I gotta go. She talked about you. A lot. She loved you," said Delbert on his way out.

Dylan left the room and walked out to the hospice garden. The girl and the window washer were gone and the cat was sunning itself. Dylan stroked its stomach and it purred. He knew that when he went back inside, Ma Sara would be gone. He saw her outside the horrors and criticisms and constraints and misfortunes that had shaped her but that were not her. He decided he would tell his daughters that Ma Sara was brave. He would tell them that on their own love is not enough. He would tell them that their bodies are not their souls.

#

Dylan was wrong. When he returned, the doctor was checking Ma Sara's vitals. Dylan asked what he thought and the doctor indicated an inch. The response felt odd to Dylan, the space between two fingers, a life reduced.

He sat in the chair Delbert had occupied moments earlier and grasped Ma Sara's non-IV hand. Ornate rust-colored Hindu henna scrolls adorned her palm, fingers, and wrist - curlicues, loops, circles, lace, dots - beautifully rendered with the precision of a fine artist. Dylan closed his eyes and ran his fingers over the delicate patterns.

"Who did that?" asked Dylan.

"I don't know," said the doctor. "Someone."

It looked like Dan's handiwork or someone Dan knew.

Twenty-two minutes later Ma Sara died. She was unlike anyone else's mother.

#

That afternoon, Dylan made the necessary phone calls, signed the appropriate papers, and drove to Mission Beach. Stunningly beautiful young women and men were everywhere, kissing, holding hands, roller

blading, playing volley ball, sunglasses and smiles turned to the sky. He strolled along the boardwalk in a mental fog, perusing the vendor's tables. He bought his wife and daughters toe rings. An aspiring entrepreneur, a young woman, suggested he buy something for himself.

"What?" he asked. "I have everything."

"How about this?" She held up a long leather strap divided into strands.

"What is it?"

"It's for your wrist. Here. I'll put it on."

The woman wound the strap around Dylan's wrist and snapped it into place. He examined it and sniffed the leather. Something about its pressure, its bondage, made him sad and he started to cry.

"Are you okay?" asked the woman.

"My mom just died," said Dylan.

"I'm so sorry," said the woman.

Dylan sat in the sand and watched the ocean. Its rhythm calmed him. He remembered the time he and Ma Sara had painted his bedroom. It was after his father had left and he was a teenager. He wanted midnight blue walls. Ma Sara cut the corners and he rolled, dark paint specks accumulating on his hands and face.

"Here, have some more," she had said, flicking her paintbrush at him, forcing him to cover up. It tickled and he laughed.

"Now you do it," she said and held her face to him, smiling, her eyes closed tight.

She was so beautiful, so radiant, the expectant face of an innocent, ready to withstand anything, and he realized that he was the only person she had ever truly trusted in the world.

#

Two days later, at the funeral home, Dylan signed Ma Sara's death certificate and chatted with the owner. She would be scattered in the Pacific Ocean off La Jolla. Did Dylan want to be there?

"I'll send you the latitude and longitude," said the owner. "Your mother was very thorough. Do you want to identify her?"

Dylan was confused. "I know who she is...was I mean."

"We need to make sure it's her. I can do it from her photo."

Dylan nodded. The owner left and returned a few minutes later.

"It's her. You'll be happy to know they took the long bones."

"Happy? Long bones?" asked Dylan, confused.

"I'm sorry. Her femurs. She was an organ donor."

"Why are they called long bones?" asked Dylan.

"I don't know," said the funeral home owner. "They're substantial, I guess."

"What will they do with them?" Dylan asked

"Beats me. Build a prosthetic maybe."

Long bones. Dylan repeated the word. Of all the things that carried on. Long bones. Substantial. Ma Sara would have liked that.

When he told Dan later, Dan smiled and joked, "Maybe someone is beating a drum."

"You're a little sick, aren't you," said Dylan.

"Yes I am," said Dan. "Yes I am."

#

A couple months later, the news of Ma Sara's scattering arrived in the mail in the form of a red dot on a map of the Pacific coast. The map was neatly folded inside a gray box that had held her ashes. The longitude and latitude were noted as promised.

Dylan covered the box and tapped its sides with his middle fingers, playing it like a drum, finding a rhythm. He was okay with the hollow sound.

The End