

My Mother's Zen Garden

As we throw our graduation caps into the air, I wait for the moment of liberation I'm supposed to feel, and it does not come.

My classmates and I flood out of the auditorium, a sea of blue gowns. The sun is blinding, shimmering off the strip malls of west-side Albuquerque in waves of heat. Dusty wind scours my face and blows my hair into my mouth. I take my heels off first thing, risking the broken glass in the parking lot. Each student, like the seed of a cloud, is surrounded by their people. Our class flowers, big faced Gerber daisies, hang at our sides.

Jacob sneaks up behind me and tickles the back of my neck. "We're free," he says. He takes my shoes from me, and my hand, and leads me over to his parents, who are squinting into the wind, waving us over.

Jacob's mother grabs him right away, swaying back and forth in a melodramatic embrace, and his father pats me on the shoulder, giving me a little shake. "Congratulations," he says. "Where's Eleanor?" he asks me. My mother. Jacob's parents, both musicians, know my mother from the symphony, nearly a decade past. They know that she never shows up to these events.

I shrug. "Too many people, I guess."

The question is a formality that they let drop.

Jacob's mother holds my hand and gives it a squeeze. "Congratulations," she says.

Every time someone congratulates me, my cheeks burn with shame. I didn't do anything, I

want to tell them. I just graduated from high school. I want to tell him how easy it was, and how the rest of my life is a bit more tricky. I want to back away and let them be a family, remind them that mine is at home waiting for me, but they keep bringing me back into the circle.

I pull Jacob away for a moment. “My mom's probably waiting for me,” I say. He hands me my shoes, and I steady myself against his body as I put them back on.

“Can I come over for a minute?” he asks. Over the past six months, as we get closer and closer to each other, this question is asked with increased frequency. Though we grew up together, Jacob has never been to my house. At this point, I don't think he ever expects me to agree. But graduation, so far, has felt meaningless to me. Something is supposed to change today, I think, and so, hesitantly, I say yes.

On the way to the car, I throw the daisy away.

Jacob has stopped at the chain link of my front gate and is staring at the yard. The ground is dry, half gravel, half dust. It would be just like the other yards in my neighborhood, full of goatheds and empty beer cans, but my yard is not like the other yards. Nailed into the ground are squares of plywood, pieces of scrap metal, plastic bags, and dissected screen doors. They're all in a grid, and they cover the yard so that you can hardly see the dirt underneath, a junkyard parquet. In the cracks and the empty places where the fragments don't quite fit, little ant hills have formed, and tree roots from the neighbor's yard push up here and there, disrupting the pattern. But look closely at the debris, think of the pieces as tiles of a mosaic, and you could almost call it beautiful.

Usually, if a friend absolutely has to come by the house, I say it's my mother's Zen garden, laugh and shake my head—meaning: how silly and harmless, how embarrassing moms

are—and try to get them in and out as quickly as possible, before my mother even knows they're there.

Jacob is squinting into the yard. “Why are there plastic bags nailed to the ground?” He says this with an even tone, not looking at me. This time, I don't laugh. I stay quiet, take his hand, open the gate, and lead him boldly through the yard as if it's a battlefield and only I know the path to safety.

My mother has covered all of the wood floors in the house with contact paper so that the living room is awash with sea coral, the hallway, orange plaid, and so on. If you're not used to it, it could give you the spins. When I was in mid school, she tried for a music motif in my room, rainbow colored treble clefs and sixteenth notes, but I peeled it up as soon as I got home from school that day. The rest of the house, the walls, the shelves, are white and empty. If you look in the pantry it is well stocked with non-perishables—corn, carrots, and beets—and the refrigerator always has bread, milk, and cheese—the staples—but there's no produce in sight. I don't think I saw a fresh vegetable until the wilted, iceberg salads in the grade school cafeteria. Until Jacob invited me to dinner with his family, I had never known the joy of homegrown squash, tomatoes, and kale.

The house, where we have been for my entire life, is like a giant tomb stone, being washed and polished, the grounds weeded every weekend, as if the dead really lived there, demanding that we never, even for a moment, forget them.

When we walk in, my mother is sitting on the piano bench in a long, silk housecoat. She jumps up right away, quivering with neurotic energy. “Oh,” she says, coming over to hug me, “how did it go?”

“Fine,” I say. “Long. I'm glad to be out of there.” There, the auditorium, and there, the

high school.

She strokes my hair and I look into her face. She has tears in her eyes. “But everything went well? Did they sing your class song? Did you take any pictures?”

“It was just a silly ceremony,” I say.

She peeks around me. “You must be Jacob?” she says. He is well composed, all things considered, as he comes forward to greet her. “I’m Eleanor,” she says, holding out the twisted fingers of her left hand, and he takes them without hesitation. “I’m so glad to finally meet you.”

Here is what I know about my mother from other members of my family, the ones who call from time to time from out of state, “concerned” and wanting to remind me that she may be a danger to herself and others: she had three late miscarriages before she had me, at which point her husband, my father, who I have never met, left her anyway. That same year, her father was killed in a ranching accident, then, when I was still an infant, her sister, with whom she was very close, died in childbirth. Before I was born and for the first few years of my life, my mother was a cellist. She taught privately and played in the Albuquerque Symphony. She was in a car crash where all of the bones in her left hand and wrist were crushed. She stopped playing and has been living off of disability and child support checks for as long as I can remember. All except for my father—who seems to have disappeared completely into the ether save the wage garnish his lawyer sends along—these things sound like purely freak accidents to me, things that belong in another time where unjust tragedies run rampant. I might even distrust the credibility of these distant family members, but I have been living in the aftermath of this era for eighteen years now.

Here is what I know about my mother first hand, from sharing this house with her: in the mornings, she puts on a pot of coffee, then she takes a watering can filled with diluted bleach and

herbicide out front and she “waters the yard.” It’s for the ants, she says. We don’t live in the greatest area, but my mother will, without fail, wave and smile at anyone who passes by—gang-banger, drug addict, and abuelita alike—in this commiserative way that somehow, always, gets them to wave and smile back. Then—and I only see this part weekends and summers but I can assume it happens when I’m gone, too—she gets the paper and throws away the obituary page so that she can have her coffee and read the rest in peace. At some point, she goes into her room—she’s got the cartography floor—for the rest of the afternoon. I don’t know what she does in there, but on the occasions I’ve gone in, I have found her sitting on her bed, staring out the window, almost catatonic. Then it’s time for her walk. I followed her once, keeping my distance, and she walked all the way downtown, sat at an empty bus stop for almost an hour, the same way I find her in her bedroom, staring straight ahead, expressionless. Then she walked back home. I hope that she has a different destination each time, or most times, for her sake, and I have learned to stop worrying about her, remembering her special smile-and-wave technique. But I also fear an ominous decline.

I lead Jacob into my room and shut the door. It’s a pretty floor, I think. Solid wood, tongue-and-groove—funny how you never really see a room unless it’s the first time or there’s a stranger in it—I think it’s oak. I’ve got plants hanging and sitting on the windowsill: devil’s ivy, jade, aloe, and spider plants. My mother never comes in here. Jacob is wandering around, looking at the collage of images I have taped to my walls, and, preoccupied, I am looking out the window at the monstrosity of the front yard.

“You know, you don’t have to go to college here,” he says. “You could apply for scholarships, wait a semester, and go anywhere you want. Or you could travel. What is college

going to teach you anyway that you're not going to learn eventually in the real world.” I've been hearing about Jacob's plans all semester: the quintessential graduation road trip to search for his place in the world. He's had an itch for escape since we were kids. He's been teetering on the edge of his proverbial, loving, caring, well-constructed, nest, and that graduation cap flying up into the air was the last push. I would never ask him to stay. Now, he explains his zig-zagged route across the country, all the must-sees along the way. “You should come with me,” he says.

I shake my head, smiling. I can't quite imagine what it would be like to be on the road. I see pre-scripted images. A sunhat and a scarf flying from the back of a convertible. A glamorous movie-star vacation with pearls and long, tortoiseshell cigarette holders.

He kisses me on the cheek. “I'm not joking. Come with me.”

I don't answer. I am fixated on the yard again. “She doesn't want anything to grow,” I say, quietly. He joins me next to the window. “She doesn't want anything to grow out there, that's why she nails all that crap to the ground. Plants, animals, she can't stand them. She only likes people.” I've never told anyone the real reason before because it's not something my mother admits and it doesn't make any sense, and because I'm afraid whoever I tell will think I'm crazy, too, will think that I am my mother's daughter. I look like her. People tell me that I have her eyes.

And as soon as I say it, I want to tell him how badly she wanted *me* to grow. That things weren't always quite this bad. That she fed me and bathed me and read to me and taught me how to play the piano. How she marked my height against the kitchen doorway on my birthdays. That she functions. That we take care of each other. That I have to be here to take care of her.

Jacob swallows. “You can't stay here,” he says. If I open my mouth, I am going to scream. We hold hands and look out the window at the plastic bags in the Zen garden. It's all

trash, ugly and sun-bleached. There's no pattern there. I see the future: my mother white-washing the walls, over and over again, and the tendrils of the devil's ivy overgrowing, filling my bedroom until they suffocate me.