

Past that now

On Sundays, Debbie braves the forty-five mile drive down the 101 to Santa Clara to visit her dying grandfather. Debbie likes to go early, before the small parade of friends and family who visit after Sunday morning church and dim sum exhaust him. She also leaves early even though each time she drives away, she can't help fearing it might be the last time she sees him alive. She says a prayer of gratitude as she arrives in front of the Blossom Hills Care Center. The building feels like a hospital disguised as a college dormitory. After three months, she still has trouble accepting this as Grandpa's new home.

Although Grandpa's mind is still razor-sharp, his heart only pumps at half capacity. All that remains is to make sure he is comfortable and takes his pills as the inevitable end draws near. Given a choice, Grandpa would have quietly faded to dust in his apartment. He was adamant that he didn't want to be a burden to anyone, but just uttering that notion forced his family to actively engage in planning for his care. After much froth and consternation, everyone compromised on this nursing home so he would not have to live with any of his three children, but still be well looked after.

The staff recognizes Debbie. They are kind and Debbie ignores all of Grandpa's Nurse Ratched allusions. "He's doing well today," reports a nurse as Debbie signs in. Grandpa has been going through good and bad cycles for a while now, but recently the good periods aren't as long or as good.

"Do you have an orange?" Grandpa asks as Debbie enters. He seems more energetic than last week. He is already seated in his wheelchair. He can't take more than a few steps on his own anymore, but he hates his bed and leaves it at every opportunity. He wears a loose sweatshirt from the school where Devin, Debbie's cousin, went. It hides how much weight he has lost.

“Good morning, Grandpa. Yes. I’ll give one to you later,” she answers. “How come you don’t say hello to me first?” She bends to give him a quick peck on the cheek. He has three children and seven grandkids. He has never admitted so, but Debbie knows herself to be his favorite. She manages to avoid the worst of the family politics but she still cares what he thinks.

“Good morning, Debbie. At my age, I can’t waste words. Any could be my last,” he says.

She accepts his deprecating humor with a smirk though the words scrape at her heart. Last year, she would have launched into vehement protest. She would have argued that he still had a long life in front of him and his cynicism invited bad luck. But at this point, it doesn’t matter much. They both know the truth. “Still, that’s not an excuse to forget your manners,” she says.

“You should smile more,” he says.

“I will,” she answers. “You should too.” She knows he only wants her to be happy but it is difficult. Showing her teeth makes her feel naked.

He parts his lips showing off pearly white dentures. “How’s this?” he says.

“Stop that,” she says. She forces herself to smile for him. She pats him on the shoulder. She circles behind him and pushes his wheelchair out of the room and down the corridor, a wheeled contraption they are both forced to tolerate. Her footfalls echo down the hall.

“Your mom called. She’s not coming this week,” he says. Debbie’s mom has been an infrequent visitor since Grandpa moved. She doesn’t drive and she hates forcing her severely myopic second husband, to drive down from the city. Debbie’s uncles both live in Santa Clara and chose a nursing home according to their convenience so Mom lets them do most of the work. And

although Grandpa continues to maintain that he doesn't want to be a burden on anyone, it's in his nature to complain if someone fails to visit.

"I'm sure she'll come see you next week," Debbie assures him even though it is probably untrue. After a lifetime of attempting honesty, she has recently learned that truth sometimes matters less than hope.

"We talked for ten minutes on Friday. I think she was timing us and hung up as soon as she'd completed her duty." Debbie pictured them each talking on the phone holding a stopwatch, mentally pushing time to move faster.

"We all get busy, Grandpa," says Debbie. She rarely spends more than a few minutes on the phone with her mom either. Conversations have been reduced to scheduling and important family updates. Her mother can't go three minutes without criticizing her as if she is still a clueless teenager. She hates having to defend her mom.

They reach the entrance and Debbie rolls his wheelchair outside and around the corner into the quiet green courtyard. A small fountain dribbles water on stone. Other than some chirping birds, they have the place to themselves. She leans in and speaks quietly, "Would you like your orange now?"

"I was beginning to worry that you had only been teasing," he says.

"Of course not," she answers. Debbie takes a pack of cigarettes from her purse and pulls one out for him. He lights it and inhales deeply. He looks immediately gratified. Orange has been their secret code word as even the word smoking had become verboten. She hands him the rest of the pack, which he tucks into the pocket of his sweatshirt.

Debbie has never smoked. She hates the smell, but in the last few months she has found herself stopping by the local convenience store to purchase cigarettes for her grandfather. She tries not to think of it as a last request or an act of defiance, but as a simple gesture for a loved one.

She watches him nervously as he enjoys his smoke. At first, his chest inflates like a narrow balloon, but when he exhales, some part of him floats away with the charred vapors, leaving less of him. The doctors and family have long since outlawed Grandpa's decades-old habit, as if this latter day forbearance would somehow keep him alive. Debbie doesn't see the point of denying him anymore.

Then on his third breath, Grandpa starts to cough. Debbie watches helplessly as these awful retching spasms go on for several moments. She knows the end is near, but she has no desire to watch him expire right in front of her, choking on her cigarette.

"Are you okay, Grandpa?" she asks.

He takes another gasping breath before answering, "I haven't been okay in a long time, but for the moment I'll live."

"If you keep this up, I can't pass you anymore oranges," she says. She can tell he is in more pain than he will let show.

"Just kill me then. Your weekly visits and these damn oranges are the only things I still look forward to," he says. His eyes follow the smoke drifting from the end of his cigarette.

"Grandpa, you need to stop talking like that." Even Debbie can only take so much.

“Sorry, I guess I am a pain these days,” he admits. “I feel exhausted. Everyone shows up out of obligation, then looks at me like I’m already dead.” He bravely takes another puff and breathes without incident.

“That’s not true. I’m here just to spend time with you.” Most of Debbie’s friends have gotten married, had kids and moved on to other stages of life and the shared bonds have lessened. Most of her family is also too busy to concern themselves with her except at the obligatory get-togethers. Grandfather remains one of her best friends.

“You’re right dear.” He extends an arm to reach the ashtray. For a moment, the pain becomes clear on his face before he drops the butt. He immediately lights a second. “I wish your grandmother could have seen you all grown up. She would have been so proud of you.”

“Why? I haven’t done anything special,” says Debbie. As her mom constantly reminds her, she has yet to find a man or produce offspring and is rapidly approaching an age where those things will no longer be realistic.

“What are you talking about? You’ve done so much. You went to college. You have a great career. Your grandma was a smart woman born at the wrong time. She would have given anything for the opportunities you’ve had.”

Debbie blushes. She never thinks about her job in such grandiose terms. She is just a mid-level accountant inhabiting a small windowless cubicle, but Grandfather is clearly proud of her. Debbie dimly remembers her grandma as a kind but tired spirit with warm hands, who passed away when Debbie was only 4. “I survive Grandpa, but that’s all.”

“That’s plenty,” he answers. “You can take care of yourself. You don’t need to depend on anyone. Not all of us get that luxury. Look at me these days. I love my children. I just don’t want to depend on them all the time.”

As if summoned by magical incantation, Debbie’s mom emerges from behind a corner. Her eyes blaze with demonic fury. Her sturdy shoes clack against the pavement as she marches on them. “I knew it!” Debbie’s stomach twists into a hard knot. It is not the first time her mother has used those words after catching her red-handed at something. She reflexively feels like a 6-year-old with a hand in the cookie jar.

Her mother gets right in Grandpa’s face. “I knew you were smoking!” She grabs the cigarette from his fingers, flings it to the ground, and stomps on it for good measure. “Don’t you know these things are killing you?”

“Good morning, Margaret. Congratulations. You’ve caught me. What do you want to do? Kill me? Cigarettes are the least of my worries.” He is unperturbed. He smugly challenges her to do something.

In the past, it took prolonged exposure, usually over several hours, before their impolitic natures would combust into open warfare. Now, first glance was enough for the bayonets to emerge.

Sensing the futility of a frontal assault, Debbie’s mother redirects her ire toward someone she has spent a lifetime bullying. “Debbie, how could you give him cigarettes? Do you really want his blood on your hands? How could I raise such a stupid daughter?”

“I don’t know, Mom. Maybe you’re not the superstar mother that you always thought you were.” Debbie has overheard her mother comparing parenting to sculpting and her own skills to Rodin as she shuffled mahjong tiles with her regular foursome. She attributed any imperfection in the

finished product to an uncorrectable flaw in the working material inherited from the father's side. Debbie knows that in her mother's mind, what Debbie has done is indefensible and just the latest in a lengthy list of disappointments. Nothing she says will change her mom's view on that point so she doesn't try.

"Maybe it's a blessing that you don't have your own child to wound you with such ungratefulness," her mother answers. Debbie sometimes thinks of her mother as a millstone, set to perpetually grind her down until nothing remains but finely powdered grist. Debbie has serious doubts about her own desires or abilities to be a mother, but she knows she could do no worse than her own. She wants to blame her lack of a relationship on her mother, but deep down she knows it's not true.

"Oh, leave the girl alone, Margaret. Your issue is with me, not her," says Grandfather. He looks up from his chair, trying to make her look him in the eyes. "You haven't been here in weeks. How did you know?"

"Everyone has been telling me you smell like a chimney. You haven't been fooling anyone," she answers.

"I guess I'm not as clever as I thought," he answers sheepishly.

"Neither of you are as smart as you think," says Margaret. "This has to stop. You're literally killing yourself."

"I'm dying, dear. What does it matter if I want to smoke while I still can?" He hides his hands in the pocket of his sweatshirt, gripping what is probably the last pack of his life. Debbie hopes that her mom can't figure that out.

"You can't do this!" says Margaret. "Debbie might as well be handing you a loaded gun and putting your finger on the trigger."

"You're exaggerating, Mom." says Debbie.

"I am not. Everyone is talking about it. They visit and it's obvious that Grandpa is smoking. He is terrible at hiding it. Then they blame me, not his two sons who live five miles from here. It's me, the bad daughter, who is responsible for killing my father. I should be telling everyone it's actually my senseless daughter."

"Mom, enough already. Stop blaming me for everything. Stop treating me like a child." Her finger is firmly in the dike, but she can't stop the flood of insults continually streaming from her mother.

"I'll treat you like an adult when you start acting like one," her mother retorts

"Was it Pastor Simon?" asks Grandpa. "He always seemed too concerned with my decaying body after he was done being concerned with my eternal soul."

"No, it's not him. Does it really matter?" answers Margaret.

"Then it was probably Mrs. Yang or Mrs. Oh. I can't stand those chatty old gossips. Yes, it matters. I just want to enjoy the few peaceful days I have left. And I don't want to see any rats again as long as I live. Even a spiritual rat." Grandfather says.

"Then no one will visit and you will die all alone." She spits it as a curse.



“And for some reason you think this will bother me,” he answers. He isn’t quite shouting yet, but is clearly agitated and Debbie feels uncomfortable.

“Can everyone calm down?” Debbie asks. Even as she utters the words, she knows they will have the opposite effect.

“What makes you think I’m not calm?” snarls her mother.

There is a soft click followed by the scrape of hard shoes shuffling on the pavement. Margaret’s second husband, Ken, makes his way towards them. He uses a cane and always walks slowly, but on this morning he is especially deliberate, not wanting to intrude on a family affair where his role is still uncertain even after nearly twenty years of minimal participation. “I was just going to sit in my car,” he says, “but I could hear every word anyway. As can anyone within fifty yards.”

Three years after Debbie graduated college and four years after Debbie’s father passed away, Ken married her mother. Debbie didn’t feel one way or another about him. He seemed like a normal guy whose only notable failing was his choice of a tempestuous spouse. Maybe he needed the drama. And yet, Debbie couldn’t bring herself to fully condemn Ken, as both people were less miserable together than apart. She is irked by the obvious truth that he is a better match for her mother than her volatile dad ever was. Debbie maintains a politely respectful relationship with Ken, but she had never called him, Dad, as neither of them would be comfortable.

“Hi, Ken,” says Debbie. “Sorry, you’re right, but we were a lot quieter before Mom showed up.”

“That’s only because you two were sneaking around like delinquent school children. I was right,” Margaret says to her husband. “Debbie’s the one who has been poisoning my father with cigarettes.”

Ken simply shrugs his shoulders. Maybe, she is expecting him to take her side, or at least compliment her sleuthing abilities, but he doesn't say anything. It's his nature to just ignore any problem and hope it works itself out. He's comfortable as a passive audience member, standing there silently like he's watching a movie on television, until someone else eventually feels compelled to say something. It's a strategy that works for him when dealing with his wife. Still, he probably wishes that he had stayed in his car.

"What do you want from me? An apology? I'm not sorry, Mom. Whether you want to face it or not, none of this makes a difference at this point," says Debbie. She wishes she could feign the cool indifference Grandfather exhibits, but she hasn't figured out how to stop her heart from caring.

"Margaret, listen." Grandpa seems tired of this whole conversation and wants to offer what peace he can. "I appreciate that you care. I appreciate that you are out here causing this ruckus because you believe it is the right thing to do. I'm not going to stop doing what I need to do. If one more cigarette kills me one day sooner, even if that's today, I've accepted that already. But I love you for being here and trying so hard. Thank you. Right now, you're looking out for my best interest. I've never seen you seem so much like your mother."

Margaret starts to cry as if the weight of the compliment crushes her. The only time Debbie ever saw her before was at her dad's funeral. "This is not what is supposed to happen. When I confront you, you're supposed to see that what you've been doing is wrong and want to change. You're supposed to want to live longer because you have us. Why are you trying so hard to die when we all want you to live?"

"I just need this, Margaret," Grandfather answers. "I need to live what days I have remaining in my own way. I don't need an intervention."

Debbie wonders if anyone in her family is really capable of change. Ultimately, they are all their words and actions, and each generation is continually locked in battle with the one before. They fight because that is simply who they are. Maybe it only stops if she never has kids.

“Let’s not fight anymore,” he continues. “None of us.” He turns to look at his family. Then he reaches into his sweatshirt and pulls out the pack nestled inside. The cellophane crinkles softly. With practiced hands, he slowly taps one out and brings it to his lips. The lighter shines like a tiny gentle sun as he begins to smoke. Debbie holds her breath and prays that he won’t cough again.

“You’re right, Grandpa.” Debbie turns to her mom. “I’m sorry for going behind your back on this. I want to stop fighting.” She wants this moment where they can simply accept each other as family. Where they can forgive and love despite their flaws. And maybe if they can have one moment, they can learn how to have more. She turns back towards Grandpa and bends to give him a hug

Her mom watches for a moment. She is still crying. “I still don’t know if I can forgive you two. You both lied to me. You’ve made me look like a fool,” she says.

Debbie is sad and angry. She feels like her sins are tiny compared to what she endures from her mother. She takes a deep breath, as she prepares to continue the fight.

Then Ken approaches Margaret and hands her a tissue. When she takes it, he puts his hand on her shoulder. “Do you remember how we came to be here today? You lied too when you told your father we weren’t coming just so you could catch him in the act. I don’t think anyone really has clean hands in this matter.”

His mom nods and Debbie wonders why his words can reach her mom in a way her own never could. Her mom wipes her eyes. Margaret turns to her father. "Okay, peace," she says. She also bends to give him a hug. Then she turns to hug Debbie.

"Thanks, dear." Grandpa offers cigarettes all around. Debbie considers for a moment, but she says no thanks. So does Ken. The birds continue to chirp and dance around the small fountain. Margaret bends so Grandpa can light hers. His hands are steady. Debbie has never seen her mother smoke before, but clearly she has some experience as she exhales a perfect letter O.