

## Finale

**I look through the window** and see the piano movers waiting, leaning against the hydraulic lift on the back of the truck, cigarettes dangling from their mouths, and then I turn away. My grandmother's hands dance to a ragtime rhythm and she nods punctuation at the end of each musical phrase. Her fingers, bent with age and arthritis, jump octaves with ease. She knuckles some high notes and rides a glissando down the keyboard. The music stops and reverberates off the bare walls and through the empty house. She sits for a moment, looking at the keys. Her shoulders rise a bit as she inhales as if she's about to say something, but doesn't. She reaches up and drops the fall and runs her hand across the polished wood like she's soothing a thoroughbred.

"I'm ready, Jack," she says.

It's my grandfather's name she uses to address me, but I don't correct her. Now's not the time to explain. I place my hand under her elbow and help her up from the bench and we make our way to the door. Her steps are short but steady. I open the door and help her through. We stand on the porch a moment as she looks out across the yard. The piano movers straighten up and ditch their cigarettes.

I give them a nod.

As we descend the steps she pats my hand and says, "You're a good grandson, Peter."

I open the passenger door and she sits and places her purse square in her lap. I pull the seatbelt down so she doesn't have to reach around. She takes the buckle and looks at me. "At this point I don't think it really matters." Her finger release it and a hidden spring reels in the slack. I start to say something, but I know everything I could possibly think to say she's already heard at some point in her ninety years. So I close the door and walk around to the other side of the car.

"Your grandfather would've never owned a Japanese car. He built planes during the war to shoot those peckers down."

I nod. The Grumman Wildcat FM2 was built by General Motors. My grandfather oversaw their production as a line manager at the Turnstedt Division. Mitsubishi built the A6M Zero. I drive a Honda. I put the car in reverse and as we pull away I see the piano movers in my rearview mirror buckle their back support belts and make their way toward the house.

My grandmother looks out the passenger window of the car and watches the homes of her neighbors drift by for the last time. Her knuckles turn white as the grip on her purse tightens.

"Mom wanted to know if she could bring you anything."

She doesn't say anything, and then she shakes her head. "Isn't that sweet of her."

At the end of the street I turn onto White Horse Avenue and pass Blackstone's Dinner, the restaurant my grandfather took me to for breakfast when I came to visit as a child. We drive a bit farther and I see a sign for Dunham's, a department store my grandmother worked at for three decades. I recognize the name from the gift boxes filled with dress shirts and slacks sent every Christmas.

"She knows this isn't easy for you."

My grandmother nods. And then she looks at me with eyes like a sharpshooter. "Seems to me she's making it easy on herself sending you along to fetch me."

Several things run through my mind, and as each tries to escape through my mouth I clench my teeth and keep them captive. We take the entrance to the Turnpike and I accelerate into the flow of traffic. Cars cluster at 80 mph. The man driving the Cadillac next to me is holding a folded newspaper on the steering wheel with his thumb and a cell phone in the other hand. A light rain begins to fall and I turn on the windshield wipers.

"Forest Manor sounds more like a cemetery than a nursing home."

"Mom says it's an assisted living facility. The best in the state."

"It's a place people only leave when they're dead. Call it what you will."

I change lanes and keep the distracted Cadillac driver in front of me, careful to watch for brake lights in front of him. "Mom says they have a piano."

She rubs her knuckles and looks out the window. "Your grandfather bought me my piano in 1946 with a bonus check from GM. I haven't touched the ivories on another one since then."

My instructions were simple. My mother said, "Take your Nana by her house after the movers have boxed and removed all her belongings. Make sure the piano movers are scheduled for 1:00, arrive ten minutes late, tip them twenty dollars each and ask them to wait for another fifteen minutes while she plays a few tunes. Bring her to Forest Manor afterward to meet us so we can show her the apartment. Do you think you can handle that?"

We come up on the Gordon Road exit and my grandmother says, "Get off here."

"That's not—"

"You're going to miss it."

I change lanes and a car honks. I exit and see a sign for Princeton Memorial Park, the cemetery where my grandfather is buried.

"Turn left."

I nod and follow her directions.

I try to help her as she walks through the grass to her husband's grave, but she shakes off my hand. I slow and let her walk ahead alone. When she reaches the gravesite she places her hand on the tombstone and looks skyward. Her mouth moves but I'm too far away to hear what she says. I check my watch and can imagine my mother's impatient foot tapping as she waits for us at Forest Manor. But I don't rush.

My grandfather passed away over twenty years ago. He suffered a stroke in a library and landed on a pile of books about space travel and continental drift. Unseen by anyone for far too long, the ischemic cascade robbed him of his essence. After a week in the hospital he succumbed quietly amidst the beeping and whir of an automated heart and blood pressure monitor. My grandmother was there when he passed. A week later, she was in the same hospital with a broken hip and a concussion after falling down the stairs to the basement. She was found by a neighbor who she often suspected of spying and eavesdropping. In the hospital she pointed to her rescue as proof that her accusations were well-founded and that she was indeed not paranoid.

My grandmother drops to her knees and I move toward her, but I realize she's praying and stay back. The wind gusts and rustles the leaves on the trees and floats strands of gray hair from her head. After a few minutes I move in and rest my hand on her shoulder. She crosses herself and I help her up. We walk back to the car in silence, arm in arm.

Back on the Turnpike, we are only a few exits away from Forest Manor. She looks at me and I know something is on her mind. "What is it?"

"Take me to the shore."

"Mom and Dad are waiting for us."

"Your grandfather would be so proud of you. He was a company man, too."

I turn and she's looking straight ahead with her hands on her purse. She's not focused on anything, just looking out onto the road as if it were a blank slate waiting to be filled. She pulls a tissue from the cuff of her jacket sleeve and dabs her eyes and then replaces it. She does not snuffle or plead.

We pass the Jamesburg exit and she reaches over and pats my shoulder.

"Keansburg," she says.

Moments later, as if she had sight of my car and watched me pass the exit for Forest Manor, my mother rings my phone. I look at the picture that accompanies her number. She's in a business suit, sitting on the corner of her office desk with a rolled document in her hand. The photo came from her business' website. I hit ignore and put the phone back in my pocket and accelerate into the passing lane. The phone rings six more times in the next thirty minutes. I don't answer any of the calls.

We pull into the public beach at Keansburg and my grandmother gets out of the car before I have a chance to put it in park.

"Wait here," she says as she closes the door.

I sit for a moment and watch her disappear behind a dune. My phone rings again and I don't bother to see who it is. "Christ." I struggle with the seatbelt and get out of the car. The sky is gray and the wind and the tide are coming in. The sea air pelts my face with bits of sand and salt as I make my way toward the water. I see my grandmother's sensible shoes, abandoned in the sand, and the foot prints left by her bare feet. Ahead, she is walking into the surf. Flotsam swirls and her dark dress ripples in the wind until a wave crashes and pastes the fabric to her body and legs. She staggers under the weight of the water but remains upright. I slog through the sand to

reach her. The water cedes the beach and she drops her purse into the retreating water. It tumbles across the sand and floats into the wash, vanishing under the break of the next wave.

"Wait!" My feet sink into the sand as I begin to run.

She turns back to me and raises a hand. I see her smile in a way she does only when she has let go of herself. Those times when she is lost in the world of a book, when she tells stories from a time before she was married, or when she becomes the music of a song and the rhythm moves her body and her hands dance across the keys of a piano.

On the beach with the waves crashing in on her, she is unguarded and free.