

## Canvas Petals

It rained at the interment. A hot, muggy, mid-May downpour. I watched the fine lines of water fall straight from the sky from under the tent. Someone's kid asked about lunch and if there would be macaroni and cheese.

The pastor was midway through his sermon, which he was using as an excuse for conversion. As if the sudden passing (although it wasn't sudden, but expected, and while we all wanted her to last a little longer, she probably did not) was merely an excuse for him to convince the emotionally vulnerable that their soul would be safer with the Lord.

"The Lord is close to the broken-hearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit," the pastor said. His tone was soft, sad, weary. He had known my grandmother for decades.

A few seats over I felt my grandfather tremble and weep.

"Here you go, all the macaroni you can eat," I said. I was holding my cousin's daughter, Leanne.

"I want ham."

"Oh, we got ham here," I said, and walked her to a crudités platter. "Look at all this ham," I said leaning her in close to a pile of peeled carrots.

"That's not ham," she giggled.

We went through the various things that were and were not ham while the adults in the room talked amongst themselves. I caught my dad and my aunt talking in the sunroom, both of them looking like they'd rather not be seen talking. My aunt looked over to me, her face red swollen from sadness.

My dad walked over and took Leanne from me and said quietly, “go talk to your aunt for a second. I’ll be over there shortly.”

My aunt Julie sat on a floral print sunroom couch, which I knew was their old couch from their old house, but was still nicer than anything I owned. She swirled a glass of white wine and stared absently into the lush green of her expansive back lawn.

“How are you?” I asked. But she said nothing, just kept staring at the grass until my dad came back.

He launched right into it. “Jules and I were talking and we think it’d be best, for now, if dad stayed with you for a little bit.”

“Wait, what?” I could see my grandfather sitting at the kitchen table next to another old man. They said nothing, just sat with coffee in front of a full plate of small cakes.

“Well, he can’t stay in that house alone, and you know your mother and I travel a lot.”

*True*, I thought. She was gone right now. Doing some business in Indiana. I looked at my Aunt Julie. Shame spread across her face

“We just, we can’t,” is all she said.

About a week after the funeral I picked him up from the bus station. My roommate came with me. My grandfather sat on the bench sad and slouched, clutching a small canvas bag, a suitcase propped against his leg.

“Is that him?” Troy asked.

I nodded.

“Fuck,” he said.

“I know, man. You sure you’re cool with this?”

“Man, you can’t afford to live in that house alone.”

“I mean, they did offer to pay my rent.”

“Well then shit, man. Of course I’m staying. It’ll be fun,” he grinned.

“You still gotta pay your share,” I teased

“You hungry?” I asked into the rearview mirror. Troy had tried to move to the backseat but my grandfather wouldn’t have it, climbed into the back. He was still holding his bag to his chest.

“I reckon” he said. His voice was wheezy, always had been. Dark whiskers poked out of his nose and crept toward his lip.

“Craving anything in particular?”

He shook his head.

Troy chimed in: “Enchiladas. We should go get enchiladas.”

I looked to the back for approval. Grandad was staring out the window. He nodded. He was crying.

It went like that for several weeks:

“You wanna watch a movie?” I would ask.

“Sure,” he would say, and I would look over and he would be clutching a pillow and weeping.

“You want dinner?”

“Yes,” he would say, crying.

Do you need anything from the store? Crying.

Coffee in the morning. Looking out the window. Crying.

Then, one morning before I left for work, he said to me, “I think I’d like to go to the arts and crafts store soon.”

“Sure. I’ll take you when I get home.”

By the time I got home I had forgotten all about the art store. I walked in the door wanting a shower and dinner, only to find him on the couch, hat and coat on, ready to go. It was the same way he’d always been any time I’d shown up to his house when he and my grandma were getting ready to take me somewhere. He must’ve sensed my frustration, picked up on the fact that I’d completely forgotten about the plans we’d made. “Can you still take me?” he asked.

“Of course. Yeah. Just let me put my stuff down and change clothes real quick. No problem.”

“Troy wanted to go too, but I think he fell asleep.”

“I’ll wake him up,” I said, amused by the strange bond my best friend and my grandpa had formed. After the first week of him living with us, I asked Troy what they did together when I wasn’t around, and he shrugged. “I dunno, man. We just kinda sit. Watch TV. He likes old comedies, so we watch those. Drink coffee and talk.”

We only had a small window of time to get across town to Bob's Art Shack, which was about as close to an actual shack that the city would allow for a business, but we made it. A clerk with piercings and shaved dyed hair greeted us with a casual nod, which Troy and I returned.

Grandad said, "Good afternoon, miss, can you help me find some oils and canvas?"

The clerk looked up from their work behind the register and pointed him around the corner. "Over there, behind the modeling clay."

Grandad looked and said, "Thank you very much," and followed the curved point the clerk had given. I left him to it, wondering what inspired this sudden artistic curiosity. Looking back, this was probably the first clue that I might not know this man at all. But I didn't know it at the time.

After a while I wandered to the back of the store and found my grandpa shopping for canvas. He'd filled a basket with oil paints, brushes, a few tools.

"I didn't know you painted," I said.

"Oh, not in a long time. Always wished I made more time for it. I figure now's a good time to do it."

"What are you gonna paint?"

"Not sure yet," he said. "I guess we'll see."

On the ride home he clutched the paper bag full of supplies to his chest the same way he'd clutched the canvas bag on the bus station bench.

I should have noticed the signs much earlier; they were there, after all. The first unfamiliar flower that bloomed in the small dead bed bed that bordered the front porch, a single stalk bearing radiant petals amid the remnants of dead bushes. How long had the flower been there before I asked Troy if he'd seen it? It never grew, seemingly never changed, but others started to appear, identical. The heat had no effect on them; the leaves never wilted from lack of water or too much sun. As far as I could tell neither Troy nor my grandfather were taking care of the bed, but soon it was full of them. Any mention of the flowers went unnoticed.

"I'm gonna check on him," I said one night. We were watching a movie.

"Why? Just let him sleep, man."

I ignored Troy and peeked inside the garage. Troy was right, my grandfather was asleep in the chair, again, only this time I noticed drops of deep red orange paint falling from the brush barely held in his limp fingers.

He had painted a field of flowers, the same flower as the ones growing in the front yard. I didn't think anything of it. He was at home all day with nothing to do but think about what to paint, if only to keep other thoughts away.

The next night I got a call from my dad, the first time since the funeral. I took the call in my car, staring at the flowers, illuminated by the moth-swarmed porch light.

"How ya' doin'," he asked, trying too hard to sound casual.

"Alright," I said.

"How's dad?"

“You want me to get him for you?”

“No, no. You don’t have to do that, I don’t have a lot of time. Just wanted to check in.”

“It’s been months now.”

He didn’t respond to that. “You getting the checks?”

“You know I am, dad. Surely you’ve seen them clearing in the account.”

“I have.”

“Then why ask?”

“You’re making this difficult.”

“Why did you really call?”

“Not sure,” he said. “Take care of yourself.”

“Uh huh.”

I sat in the car a while longer. I wanted to rip the steering wheel off. I wanted to rend metal and scream. I imagined yelling with such power that the entire car expanded around me like Saturn’s rings.

I wasn’t ready to go inside. The night was cool for midsummer in the south, and I had picked up a few beers on the way home, intending to enjoy them with Troy, maybe my grandfather, though I had never seen him drink a beer before.

I lifted the latch on the gate as gently as I could, slipping through the warped wood like a thief. I avoided the light, grabbed a chair, and sat under a tree near the back fence line.

I didn’t see the woman on the bench until my second beer.

I had been staring at the grass, my eyes taking a while to focus in the dark, and when I looked up, there she was, sitting on a bench under a tree. I was sure that neither the bench nor the

tree had existed in this yard for as long as I had lived here. I squeezed my eyes together as hard as I could as if that would prevent the woman or the bench or the tree from existing when I opened them again. It changed nothing.

I stared at the woman for a long while. I wondered if maybe I was the illusion and she was the resident, but that was just the beer. I mustered some courage and stood up. No response. I took a few shaky steps forward. Nothing. Now that I was closer I could see her smiling. Not a big toothy grin, but the smile of the unworried. A warm evening smile.

“Hello?” I whispered, but got no response from the woman. I moved closer. Now I could see that she was wearing a long thin dress with small flowers printed all over. No matter how close I got she didn’t respond, and the smile never wavered.

“Excuse me,” I said, now close enough that she could’ve heard my nervous breathing. Still no response.

I felt my phone go off in my pocket and I jumped back. Troy.

“What’s up, man,” I asked, trying to sound calm.

“Man, where are you? I can see your car, but like, *where are you?*”

“In the backyard. Come out here. What’s Granddad doing?”

“The fuck are you doing out there, creepy? He’s in bed. Has been for a minute. What’s going on?”

“Just come out here. I’ve got beer.”

“Word.”



The two of us stood in the backyard staring at the woman in the floral dress with the ceaseless grin and drinking our beer. She was young, maybe early 20s, with rosy cheeks and short hair with pronounced curls. She reminded me of every picture I'd ever seen of a woman from the 40s or 50s. The dress had puffed sleeves and a collar. In her hand she held the same deep red-orange flower that had suddenly appeared in the front. The bench was wrought iron painted white, with a beautiful curved floral design on the back.

"What the hell is this?" Troy asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Are you sure he's asleep?"

"Oh definitely. You can hear that man snore through the whole house. You hear it right?"

"Eh. My dad snored when I was a kid. I think I've found some way to tune it out."

"Lucky. That shit keeps me *up*," he said.

"I want to check something out," I said, starting to piece some things together. "Come on."

I started to rush to the garage but Troy stood still in the yard, still staring at the woman. "Come on, man," I repeated.

"Hold on. I'm gonna touch her," he said.

"What?"

"I'm gonna touch her," he said again.

Troy stepped closer to the woman, who hadn't moved an inch, didn't even seem to be breathing, and said, "I'm sorry, ma'am, but I just...I don't know what else to do in this situation." He reached an arm out, and put his hand on her shoulder. He jerked his hand back and stumbled back as if he had been shocked.

I darted toward him. "You okay?"

“Touch her,” he said. “She feels like canvas.”

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s go to the garage.” I didn’t have to touch her to know he was right.

The sight of the back of the easel was somehow more terrifying than the frozen canvas woman in the backyard. I already knew what I would see when I turned it around. I stepped around the small table and looked at what my grandfather had been painting. Amid the field of orange flowers there was a woman sitting on a bench beneath a large tree. She wore a blue dress spotted with small flowers. Her cheeks were a rosy pink.

After Troy and I found the painting in the garage, we sat in silence in the living room. Troy had gone to pick up more beer and we sat and drank and didn’t speak. Occasionally one of us would get up and go look out the window, checking on the woman. She never moved.

I woke the next morning to the sound of my grandfather making coffee. I had fallen asleep on the couch, still in my work clothes. Troy was probably already at work. I didn’t envy him. I felt miserable.

“Thought you might want some coffee,” my grandfather called from the kitchen.

I stared at him, unsure of what to say. Then, remembering why I was even asleep on the couch in the first place I bolted to the window. She was still out there.

“Who is that?” I asked him, pointing to the woman on the bench. Small orange flowers like the one she held in her frozen hands had appeared around her ankles. They hadn’t been there the night before. The tree had doubled in size.

He didn't look out the window, as if he knew she was there, as if he had put her there himself, which I suppose in some way he did. He poured a cup of coffee for himself, and one for me.

"Before I met your grandmother I lived in Montana. Worked on a sheep farm. I was 19. My parents, well they still lived in Wichita then, and I can't say they were too thrilled about me running off to work on a farm. Dad, he was a tailor. I don't know if I ever told you that. He and Mom ran a store, made suits for men and dresses for women, and well I didn't care too much about suits and dresses so I ran off to Montana on a whim."

"Why Montana?"

"Why not," he asked. "Isaac, I didn't know what I wanted when I was 19. 'Why Montana', well why anywhere? I may as well have blindly poked my finger on a map somewhere for as much thought as I put into running up that way." He jabbed his finger into the air when he said this. "Are you hungry?"

"I am, actually. Starving."

"Let's get some breakfast," he said. "You should eat."

"What about her?" I said, pointing out the window.

"She'll be here when we get back."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know," he said, "but it's a long story and I'd rather eat before I tell it."

A young kid with the first thin mustache of his life shaded over his lip served us runny eggs, toast, and small perfect circles of sausage.

“Can I get you anything else, uh, sir?” He said, looking at my grandfather.

“No thank you, young man,” he said, and jabbed a corner of his toast into a golden pool of yolk. “Sheep farming wasn’t glamorous, and it didn’t pay much, but the family I worked for let me live with them.”

“How’d you get the job?”

“I asked.”

“No, but how did you even find out about it?”

“Oh. Well, I found a hotel when I got off the bus, so I could have a place to stay for the night, and I just asked the young woman at the desk if she knew of any work in the area. She pointed me to a newspaper and told me that’d be my best bet. I found an ad, checked into my room, and then called the man. Next day I was digging holes, building fences, learning how to work on a farm. I ruined a pair of my nice pants ‘cause I didn’t have time to get farm clothes. I stayed in that hotel a few days until Mr. Welty—that was the family I worked for, the Weltys—told me to just move in with them.”

“Just like that?”

“Sure, why not? I wasn’t trying to do anything but work.”

“I just, well it’s not something I could see happening these days.”

He shrugged. “Maybe not. The Weltys were good to me. Mrs. Welty was whip-smart, handled all the finances for the farm while me and Mr. Welty worked with the animals. We grew some food out there, mostly for us, but we sold some of it, too. One day while I’d been shearing sheep, Mrs. Welty called me inside. She’d gone and bought me a whole bunch of new clothes to work in; I was still working in my good clothes. Things had got so busy on the farm I just kinda

stopped thinking about good clothes and work clothes. But Mrs. Welty told me to give her my good clothes and she'd get them fixed up. And she did." He cut his sausage into little squares and mixed them into the remaining egg, covering each one in the viscous orange gold yolk. He sat there, mixing his food without saying anything, his eyes sinking into the familiar bus station sadness.

"The Weltys had a daughter," he continued. "She was still in school, so I didn't see her around too much. And when she was at home Mrs. Welty made sure she focused on her schoolwork."

"Is that the woman?"

Grandpa shook his head, a solemn look in his eyes. "No. Just listen. About a year and half after I started working for the Weltys there was a terrible accident. Mr. Welty and I were out trying to get some sheep that had got through a hole in the fence. We were carrying them back to the farm, me with one and Mr. Welty holding two, one under each arm. I still to this day haven't met a man as strong as Mr. Welty, but I'll never forget what happened next.

"We were coming up from behind the house when we hear this shriek, just the most terrible sound you ever heard in your life. The sound of a heart being torn in two. We were halfway across the field when we heard Mrs. Welty from inside the house just wailing. When Mr. Welty heard that it was like he knew. This man, this giant man holding two sheep like they didn't weigh a damn thing, he just fell to his knees. Like he and his wife had a bond, and what she felt he felt, what she knew, he knew. And I saw him collapse in the tall grass and fall to pieces, pounding his fists into the hard cold dirt. The sheep ran off and he didn't make a move to go get 'em."

"What happened?"

“A bad wreck. The police had called Mrs. Welty and let her know that their daughter, Imogen, had been killed in a wreck.”

“That’s awful.”

“No one comes out of this story happy, I’ll just tell you that right now. We drove into town to identify the body, talk to the police, all that, the Weltys brought me along. I suppose at that point they probably thought of me as a son; I know I certainly thought of them as my parents, despite my own parents back in Wichita. When we got to the station the police asked the Weltys some questions, and told us what happened.

“Imogen and some friends were out at the burger joint, doing what kids do, having fun, you know. What I would’ve been doing if I hadn’t decided to run off and grow up so fast. And well Imogen got into a car with this boy and they went out for a ride, harmless stuff, but then it all went bad from there.

“While the officer was talking to the Weltys I could see in the back, sitting on a bench, this poor woman, staring into nothing. Well, turns out, she was in the car that hit Imogen’s and killed her. Now, the police were saying no one was getting charged with anything because the way the accident happened it was the boy who was driving Imogen around’s fault, and well, he’d died too. This poor girl who sat unblinking and shocked out of her mind, she was just an unfortunate casualty of this whole affair. Officer’s words. Mr. Welty didn’t like this, was beside himself with grief. And this poor girl on the bench, she got all the anger and rage that manifests in a grieving parent.

“The officers tried to console him, but they couldn’t. It was a scene. Mrs. Welty left the building, ashamed and broken. We drove back to the farm, but I didn’t stay around much longer.

Mr. Welty had lost everything, he said. Didn't care anymore, didn't have it in him to go on. This house that had once been so full of joy and light was nothing but a reminder of what they'd lost. So, he dismissed me, paid me what he could, and thanked me. And that was it. I left the farm.

"I went back to that same hotel I'd gone to when I first got into town, and talked to that same girl at the counter who helped me, and wouldn't you know I ended up in the same room. Funny, that. And well the next morning I went looking for a job again. This time I ended up working as a grocery clerk. Well, a few weeks into working at the grocery store I see this woman come in and it's the young woman from the police station.

"She's still got this look about her, this gaze that seems to go nowhere, but at least she's out and moving around, I think. I wonder if she recognizes me, but it's pretty clear she doesn't. I ask her if she needs help, and she says she's fine, and she does her shopping. She comes through my line, I check her out, and that's that. At least, that's what I thought at the time. See, the town I was in was real small, so it wasn't uncommon to see the same people doing different things multiple times a day. So when I got off shift, I went down to get some dinner, get a burger and a shake, and there she is again, this woman. Now, this time she recognizes me, and she laughs. Isaac, when I heard her laugh I fell in love."

"I thought you and grandma met in Texas?"

"I'm not talking about your grandma," he said. "I'm talking about the first woman I ever loved. I'm talking about the woman I thought I'd marry."

"Why didn't you?"

"I'm getting there," he said, and I could feel the sadness in his words cut through the diner. "Ursula and I hit it off quick. She was....I don't think there's a word for it. We spent every

moment we could afford together, and for a while, things were about as good as I could ever wish them to be. I never told her about the first time I saw her, and if she recognized me from that day she never mentioned it. Truth is, I don't think she ever knew, maybe not even in the moments before she died." And when he said that, it felt like he might fall out of his chair. It was the first time his voice broke in the whole telling of the story.

"How did she die?"

He took a few sips of coffee, a gulp of water, and continued. "One night, me and Ursula were out walking the square. I don't know how long we'd been being followed, but not a day has passed since that night that I haven't wondered in some capacity if I could've somehow done something different. I've been living with the dull pain of regret my whole life. We were walking through the town square. It was all lit up and the air was crisp. There was a rich floral smell permeating the whole town. It was perfect. I had half a mind to propose right then and there except for the fact that I didn't have a ring nor enough money to buy one.

"We were walking and Ursula tripped on a crooked pave stone and nearly fell face first into the sidewalk, would have if I hadn't caught her." His eyes had glazed over, as if he were there again, young again, but the lines on his face deepened.

"I found a bench, a beautiful white bench with a lovely curved back, flowers and vines shaped from metal, and I carried her over to it. There was a small bed of flowers on either side of the bench, beautiful red orange blooms standing straight up on thick green stalks. Ursula had just bought a new dress and she couldn't wait for me to see it. Blue with small white flowers printed all over it. Maybe the first time I ever cared about clothes in my life, seeing her in that dress. Her



sitting on that lovely bench among those flowers, under the protection of a large bur oak, I'll never forget it."

He wiped his tears away before continuing. "I don't know what drove him to it. I don't know what he thought he was gonna get out of what he did, but the minute I saw Mr. Welty coming up from the sidewalk, with his pistol drawn and his face red and those empty eyes and that hideous look on his face, I knew what he wanted and what he didn't want anyone else to have and I froze. And even when he saw me and I knew then the betrayal that he felt at seeing me with this woman that lived when he knew it should have been his Imogen and not this stranger that he could never love, he didn't stop, but he did scream. That same scream that we heard Mrs. Welty wail from the farmhouse, that same rending of a heart."

"I focus on that last image before tragedy because it's damn near impossible to forget the last time I saw Ursula, slumped over that bench, now sprayed with red and those flowers now crushed beneath the weight of a body bereft of love and life and light. I focus on that last image of her on the bench because it's the only thing that can keep the horrible tragedy of her death from consuming everything."

"He didn't even flee. He didn't do anything but sit on the steps and wait. And I couldn't do anything but hold her and cry, that same cry that he and his wife had cried. That same wailing. Her hair matted with blood, her new dress ruined, and the only thing I could do was hold her until it ended, and it never ends. It never ends."

It rained at the interment. A cold, biting late fall shower. Raindrops like glass shards falling from dark clouds.

“Are they gonna rip the tent, mommy?”

“Shhh, honey,” the mother said through tears. The child didn’t understand. The pastor was yelling over the sound of the rain beating against the tent.

“The Lord is close to the broken-hearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

I held a single red-orange flower, felt its canvas petals in my hands while I ignored the words being yelled through the rain.