

Black Tupelo

*J.J.*

We saw this real old lady sitting in the hallway in a wheelchair and she had her mouth open. There wasn't anybody around to take care of her, like a nurse or something.

When we walked by she jerked and made a noise. My mom said something to her, like "hi" or something, but we didn't slow down. I don't think Mom likes this place any more than me and my brother do. It always smells weird, like somebody fixing tomato soup in a bathroom.

But we have to come, Mom says, to see her dad. He's my grandfather, but I never knew him. Mom makes me and Donnie stand next to him when we get there and say "hi." He just lays in his bed. His eyeballs don't fit right in his eyeholes and his face looks scary, especially when he smiles. After we say "hi" we go sit in this one chair by the door with our iPads. We both have to sit in the same chair because there's only two chairs and Mom puts hers next to the bed and talks to her dad.

She tells him stuff like what me and Donnie have been doing. It doesn't sound like what really happened, but I don't care.

He tries to talk sometimes, but it's just noises, usually. Or "Same, same." He says that a lot. "Same, same." And once I heard him say the f-word, real plain. Mom told him not to talk like that. I just kept looking at my iPad.

Mom says her dad likes seeing us, but that's crap. He doesn't even know who we are, and even if he did, what's the difference? He's just laying there, all "same, same," and we're on our iPads.

But she makes us go.

#

*Granddad*

After lunch I dozed a little—I'm old now and sometimes I can't remember where I nodded off. I might wake up on my old sofa in the family room, where I watch TV. Or maybe at my kitchen table by the bay window, with my coffee and morning paper.

But instead it's a place I don't recognize.

No, I remember. A nursing home. Not my real home with the sunny window and the sofa. That's over. But my home from now on.

This woman comes to see me here. She brings two boys. They don't say much.

Sometimes, on my lucid days, I know her: my daughter, Lexie—and the boys are my grandsons. She tells me about their lives and makes the boys talk to me. Those days are the worst. I see how I must look to my grandsons. A pulpy mass that used to be a human being, now a breathing corpse whose heart hasn't gotten the message yet: It's time.

I'm tired. I'm tired of here.

I'm going soon, to the next place. Bliss or torment or nothingness, I'm going.

But there's something about these boys. Something important, from a long time ago. I can't go yet.

They're here now, sitting in silence, the two of them wedged into the chair by the door.

"Hey, boys," I say to them. "Remember me?"

The words come out as whistles and groans, and the boys keep their eyes down.

They don't remember, not yet. How could they?

But I do.

#

*Lexie*

I'm standing at Daddy's bedside thinking, he's better today.

Well, not really. He'll never be better. But he knows me today; he knows the boys.

My god, he's a wreck.

But he's still Daddy. He's still the man who loved me, protected me from the pig-lady behind the bed skirt and fixed my toy box and made my hiccups go away. And later he helped me figure out boys, and myself. He was a real person, with a life. He's not this dying carcass.

He'll be gone soon, and it's sad, but, hey, I know I'm blessed, honored, that I had the chance to know him before. Before all this.

But my boys, squeezed into the chair by the door, lost in their electronic toys. It's not fair to them, and it's not fair to Daddy. They're going to remember him as some kind of pathetic monster who lived in a metal bed with rails in the bad-smells place. They never knew him when he stood tall and strong, when he laughed, when his eyes smiled and his voice was the voice of love and safety.

I want my boys to know the man their grandfather was, their real grandfather.

Especially now that their father has disappeared.

#

Their father. Jack. My husband, the genius, with his erratic hours and his secret projects.

Last Monday he didn't come home. The next day I called the secure facility where he works. They said they'd call me back.

In fact, they sent someone over. Eric, he said his name was. Young, thin, wearing an unbuttoned plaid shirt over two big T-shirts. He wouldn't come into the house.

He had a shovel.

“Where’s the jungle?” he asked.

We hiked across the back yard to an overgrown patch where the property line swerved and the landscape sort of folded back on itself. “That’s what Jack and I call this corner. We don’t come back here much.”

Eric was carrying the shovel near the gleaming scoop end, with the handle high in the air, as if he’d never held one before.

“Is there a rock? The Indian Rock?”

“How do you know about Indian Rock?”

“Just show me.”

So I showed him the rock. Jack had told me once what kind it is—something about glaciers. It was the size of an old steamer trunk or a dog house, or maybe a child’s casket (*My god, where did that image come from?*), with a natural pattern on one face like a bas-relief arrow.

Eric began to dig, straight down at first and then back under the arrow.

He wasn’t very good at it and it took a while, but he finally found what he was looking for.

#

The letter—folded in an old book of math tables inside a rotted leather satchel—didn’t explain everything. It looked like Jack’s handwriting, all right, but messier, like bad calligraphy. *Don’t worry, he said. Really. I can’t come home right away, but I want you to come to me. Bring the boys.*

He told me exactly what to do. Don’t be surprised at anything that happens, he said. Don’t be upset.

And don't be afraid.

#

*J.J.*

We're in my brother's room, packing our suitcase. Donnie's got toy dogs everywhere. His favorite is a big Scooby-Doo that was my Mom's when she was little. We're just taking one suitcase for both of us. Mom says we can't bring our iPads.

"The place you're going," she says, "they don't have iPads or iPods or cell phones." She takes Donnie's Dogbert T-shirt out of the suitcase and puts in his yellow one with a wolfman on it. "And they don't have computers in their houses."

Donnie's sitting on his bed, wiggling his loose tooth with his tongue. "Do they got televisions?"

"Just one in the house where you're staying," Mom says. She's smiling. "You can ask Mr. Lockhart for permission to watch it."

She told us about the other kid who lives there with Mr. Lockhart. A girl named Lexie, same as Mom. She's my age. But she'll be at Girl Scout camp.

"What if we don't like it?" I asked her. "Can we call you to come and get us?"

Mom put her hand on my shoulder and looked right at me. "J.J., Mr. Lockhart will take good care of you. I promise. It's just for one night."

I'm not telling Mom, but my stomach feels excited. She told me I'm in charge of my little brother while we're gone, and it's boring around here anyway.

#

*Lexie*

We've been waiting about an hour, the boys and me, in the fading daylight. I'm sitting on

a smooth part of Indian Rock and Donnie's sprawled on the suitcase near my feet, leaning back against my legs, watching his big brother throw stones at a fat gray tree stump a little way down the hill.

Jack's letter told us to stay within a thirty-two foot radius of Indian Rock between 7:20 and 8:20 pm. To wait. And—of course—not to worry.

I trust Jack, but I worry anyway. He's been wrong before.

J.J. throws another rock and when it strikes the stump, I imagine what the tree must have looked like a few decades ago, maybe canted a little to the left, and I can almost see the dusky form of a field sparrow alight on a thin, long-gone branch. I blink away the image but it fades in again, a vivid shadow against the darkening sky. J.J. flings the next rock sidarm. It snicks the stump and caroms high, hangs at apogee for a moment, then drifts toward the ground—its lazy spin catching the last of the evening light—sinking more slowly now, until it pauses above the grass, reverses its trajectory, taps the stump, and arcs back into my son's hand.

My fingers touch Indian Rock and find it as solid as ever, still warm from this afternoon's sun, yet I feel it dropping away, and me with it. The boys clutch their stomachs, grinning. The light is suddenly brighter and Jack is there, is here, on the path, smiling at us. And the world is in balance again.

"Hi, guys," he says. "Right on time." I don't recognize his clothes: high-waisted jeans and a lush paisley shirt with a pointy collar.

The boys go to him and he holds them close. I'm right behind them.

"Let's move," he says, and we follow him toward the road.

But a scolding chirrup over my shoulder stops me, and I look back. The tree's not just a shadow any more, and the sparrow's as real as dread. It cocks its head, dark eyes gleaming. Then

it chatters and darts from its perch, which sways for a moment and grows still.

I think I've been warned.

#

*Granddad*

When the woman got here, I was working in the back yard, raking up from a freak squall that tore through the neighborhood last night and agitated my trees. She came marching around the side of the house with two boys and a suitcase.

Her features were in constant motion, as if she were trying on a dozen expressions and couldn't pick one.

I leaned the rake against a Black Tupelo—it's like a big Dogwood—and held out my hand, but instead of shaking it, she passed me the suitcase. There was something about her face that made me want to smile and ask her to stay for supper.

"Are you—" I began, but she was already talking.

"I guess the agency called you about the boys," she said. "I don't have much time. They're good boys. They'll be good for you. Just treat them like your own."

"Slow down," I told her. "They'll be fine. Tell me about—"

"I've got to go."

She leaned in and gave me a hug I wasn't entirely expecting. The back door opened and we both looked up to see my daughter Lexie sticking her head out, watching us. For once she wasn't saying anything.

The woman made a sound that wasn't quite a word and said, "I thought she'd be at camp. But I almost remember now. A boy or two in the back yard that day."

"She'll be going this afternoon with—" She tried to push away but I held her arm. "Wait

a minute,” I said. “The agency guy said the boys would be here just for tonight, right? That you had some kind of family crisis?”

She looked at my face, scanning it. She blinked a few times; her eyes glistened.

“It’s my father,” she said, holding my gaze. “My dad. Daddy.”

Those eyes. I felt them warming me. “What happened?”

“He’s dying,” she said. “If you could just be with the boys for a while. We’ll pick them up tomorrow.”

She kissed my cheek and broke free, skirted the yard debris, and vanished the way she came. Odd that she’d had a hug for me—a kiss, even—but nothing for her own kids. The boys stood gazing after her.

I dropped to one knee and felt yesterday’s rain leach through my pants. “Well, guys, I guess she really didn’t have much time, did she?”

The older boy looked at me and nodded. “We said goodbye before.” He stuck out his hand. “I’m J.J.,” he said. “This is my brother Donnie. What do you want us to call you?”

The little one, Donnie, curled his lip and pressed a canine toward me with his tongue. “I gots a real loose one,” he said.

A flash memory of my granddad: looking up at him—his pleated pants belted high around his waist, a cigar in his shirt pocket—showing him a loose tooth, feeling the rough edge, tasting the blood. Granddad.

J.J. laughed out loud, but I didn’t know why. “We’ll call you Granddad, okay?”

Maybe the kid was psychic.

“Granddad,” Donnie said. “Granddaddy-Granddad.” His giggle reminded me of Lexie at that age.



Lexie stepped onto the back porch. “Daddy,” she said. “You have to help me get ready.”

“Come on boys,” I said. “I want you to meet someone.”

#

*Lexie*

Jack and I drove around the neighborhood after I dropped off the boys. The car seemed big, all hard vinyl and smooth seats and too much window glass. The world outside was bright and unfocused, reflections in brushed aluminum.

“Will the boys be okay?”

Jack glanced at me. “They’ll be fine.”

“How do you know?”

He turned on the radio and found a station playing something instrumental and complicated. Not quite familiar.

“It’s like conjugating verbs,” he said. “The boys are fine. The boys were fine. The boys will be fine. Present, past, future.” He smiled. “The boys have been fine. The boys had been fine. The boys will have been fine.”

“Perfect,” I said.

We stopped for ice cream at the Dairy Dreame and sat inside by a window. I used to beg Daddy to bring me here. Maybe he’d bring the boys.

“But what if . . .” I wasn’t sure what to ask.

Jack shook his head.

“But what if the boys say something to the little . . . to Lexie?” I said. “Something that changed things. Changes things.”

“Like the time traveler who killed his grandfather before his dad was born.”

“Like that.”

“It won’t happen that way. It isn’t happening that way. It didn’t happen that way. It will not have happened that way.”

“So our actions are predetermined. Pre-conjugated. We don’t have a choice. No options.”

He licked the ice cream melting down the side of his sugar cone. Vanilla. “No, we can choose any option we want. But it’s not possible to choose more than one. And the chosen option is the single reality, past, present, or future—Einstein’s persistent illusion.”

“But you’ve been wrong before, Jack. Like the time you swore I wouldn’t get pregnant. We weren’t ready for another kid.”

He shrugged. “And we got Donnie. You don’t regret that, do you?”

“No, of course not. J.J. might have, at first. We’d promised him a puppy, remember?”

“I never forget anything,” he said, and popped the last of his ice cream cone into his mouth.

We sat in the Dreame watching the world pass by.

#

### *Donnie*

Me and J.J. went in the house with the Granddad man, and he showed us the bathroom with the big toilet and the room where the TV was. Then the girl that lived there showed us her room. She had some dolls, but she had some good toys too, like magnets, and I played with them. She was going somewhere. Her clothes were on her bed, and a suitcase too, and I saw her Scooby-Doo underpants. I told J.J. and he said “shut up” but he wasn’t mad. Her name’s Lexie like my mom’s, and I got in her closet and laid down and watched her and J.J. playing. She sword-fought him with a flashlight.

After she left, me and J.J. ate some sardines with Granddad on crackers and watched TV. Sardines are little fish with their heads cut off, and mustard. We played this game that was in a box with a spinner, and after that Granddad showed us how to do a trick with quarters. Then me and J.J. slept in Lexie's room. I woke up and got scared because I wasn't in my room, and me and J.J. went to find Granddad. His room was big. I wanted Mom, and J.J. told Granddad that Mom's name was Lexie too. Granddad took us back to Lexie's room and gave me her big Scooby to sleep with. It's like mine at home that Mom put in my bed when I was little and got scared, but it's newer, because the legs don't flop as much and the fur is softer, but one ear is attached crooked just like my Scooby.

The next day we helped Granddad pick up leaves and sticks in the yard. I had to pee real bad, and Granddad let me pee on a tree because nobody saw me. We put the sticks in big cans in the back of his truck, and we went to this place where you can dump it. J.J. sat by the window on the way to the dump-it place because he's older, but I got to on the way back because Granddad said it's fair. I put my head out to smell the wind, and Granddad didn't stop me like Mom does. Then we got ice cream at a ice cream store and Granddad pulled my tooth out. It was just hanging on and it bled a little but Granddad said ice cream would stop the blood.

We watched TV at Granddad's house and then Mom came and got us.

#

*Lexie*

When the boys and I visited Daddy at the nursing home the next time, he barely looked my way. He was all about the boys.

"Well, well, well," he said. "It's Donnie and J.J. Hi, fellas."

J.J. grinned at him. "You're talking good, Granddad," he said. "We had fun at your

house. Didn't we, Donnie."

Donnie opened his mouth. "Look, Granddad," he said.

There was a hole where his tooth used to be.

Daddy smiled. "It didn't hurt, did it," he said.

Donnie shook his head. "Nope. Didn't hurt."

Donnie dug his tooth out of his pocket to show us, and just that fast, Daddy's smile vanished. He stammered something I couldn't understand. He thrashed and pointed and his eyes got wide and rheumy. He moaned and reached for us, and as we held his hands, I felt his agitation melting away. He closed his eyes and his breathing got quiet. His grip loosened.

Donnie stood very still. "Are you dead, Granddad?"

"Hush," I said. "Let's let him rest."

At the door, I looked back and saw Daddy's eyes watching me, deathly still. A lake at sunset, without a ripple.

Then he blinked. "Hey, Lexie," he said. "Come over here."

"He doesn't sound dead," Donnie said.

J.J. nodded. "He doesn't even sound old."

And he didn't. *Hey, Lexie*. How many times had I heard him speak my name? How many more times would I hear it?

"Lexie, my change purse is in the drawer," he said. "Get it."

I looked at him. "Daddy. You sound good. Like you're . . . getting better."

"I'm burning," he said. "I'm burning inside."

Years had softened the leather pouch. I gave it to Daddy, who opened it with steady fingers and prodded inside. He removed a chip of ivory, or seashell.

“I’ve kept this with me for a lot of years,” he said. He placed it in the center of my palm.

“To remember that day.”

Not ivory or shell. A tooth. “Donnie,” I whispered.

Donnie looked up and grinned, and I couldn’t look away from the dark wet gap in the corner of his smile.

#

I send the boys into the hallway to wait for me. I want Daddy to myself now.

I can feel the life radiating from him. He’s still a withered wreck, but it’s only a costume.

A Halloween joke we’re both in on, with the Day of the Dead an eternity away.

“Thank you, Lexie,” he says. “For the boys. For how they’ll remember me now.”

I can’t answer and it doesn’t matter. I’m basking in him, exalted, rejoicing in him.

“Daddy,” I finally say, but I’m thinking, *He’s back. He’s not going.* Somehow he seems to read my thoughts.

He shakes his head. “It’s over for me,” he says. “My candle is burning at both ends now.”

“No,” I say. I remember the poem. *My candle burns at both ends.* I clench my throat, my eyes, my mind, but I can’t block the next line. *It will not last the night.*

“No,” I say again. I hold his hand and it’s more than a hand. It’s a link between him and me, his ancestors and my descendants. It’s elemental, molecular, eternal. I can feel his DNA spiraling in my cells, coursing through my blood. “It can’t be over.”

“It isn’t over, sweetie,” he says. “It’s now. That’s all we have.”

A sudden thought gives me hope. “Maybe we’ll go back again, and see you another time,” I say, “when the boys are a little older. Maybe spend a weekend.”

He closes his eyes and I think he’s sleeping again, but he whispers something. “No,

Lexie,” he says. “I don’t remember that.” When he opens his eyes, his gaze is infinite love. “And I would have remembered.”

It’s too much. Tears burn my eyes and I don’t try to stop them.

“I love you, Lexie,” Daddy says. His voice is weaker now. “Tell your sons I love them.”

“We love you, too, Daddy. I love you.”

“I want to sleep now,” he says. “It’s a good ending.”

He squeezes my hand and lets it go. I tuck the blanket around his shoulders and take the boys home.

#

*Jack*

Lexie told me how great her dad was last night, so we all came to see him today. But it’s pretty much over. I’d like to have said goodbye to him—there’s not much chance of that now. But at least the boys got to go back and visit him, when he was healthy—that’s the main thing, and that worked out great. Without a hitch, really.

He looks like he’s sleeping, but he’s not waking up.

The boys are sitting in the chair by the door. J.J.’s in his blue sport coat with the anchor buttons and Donnie’s wearing a light brown shirt and one of my ties, a red one that’s way too long for him. They wanted to dress up today, maybe sensing this was the last of their granddad.

Lexie says they’re usually playing with their iPads but today Donnie’s dozing, twitching now and then, whining a little in his sleep, and J.J.’s staring into nothing, his hand resting on Donnie’s shoulder.

Donnie wakes up and he’s looking around and sniffing like he’s going to sneeze and Lexie’s dad chokes and rattles a little before falling into shallow, irregular breathing. I’m

thinking this might be the end.

“J.J.,” Lexie says. “Take Donnie outside for a while.”

J.J. says “Come on” but Donnie doesn’t move until J.J. gives Donnie’s red tie a tug. Donnie grins and lets J.J. lead him away.

We watch the old man for a while. He’s still out of it, but his breathing calms down.

Lexie rummages through the bedside drawer. “I want to show you something Daddy kept,” she says. She opens an old leather change purse. “Look at this.” She hands me a tooth.

“What is it?”

“It’s Donnie’s. The one he lost when they went back to see Daddy.”

I turn it over. “The kid’s got big teeth,” I say. “And he needs to brush better.” I give it back to her and she frowns at it.

“It does seem bigger,” she says. “Bigger than the one Donnie kept.”

“What do you mean, ‘the one Donnie kept’?”

“His tooth,” she says.

“What tooth?”

“The same one. The one he lost.”

“No, there can’t be two,” I tell her. *There can’t be two.*

#

Lexie’s dad moaned and when we turned, his eyes seemed to be staring into the abyss. “Donnie!” he said.

Lexie went to him and that’s when we heard the fierce scabbling in the hallway. The door burst open and a streak of fur bolted through, trailing a red nylon leash. The thin tawny dog, maybe a mixed breed, raced to the bedside and danced on its hind legs to lick the old man’s face.

“Get down from there!” I said.

The dog turned and bared its teeth, its muzzle quivering.

“There!” I said to Lexie. “Do you see the missing canine? That’s the tooth in your dad’s change purse.”

With a whimper, the dog rested its snout on the old man’s shoulder.

Next through the door, the nurse: a big guy who wasn’t smiling. “That dog cannot be in here,” he said.

Then J.J. staggered in, red-faced, blowing air: “Sorry,” he said. “He got away from me.” He grabbed the dog’s long red leash and stood with his hands on his knees, his head down.

I think that’s when Lexie’s dad passed, at that instant, because we both felt it, a horrendous loss that pulsed through us like a toxic wave of darkness, so crushing I couldn’t speak for a moment, but that moment seemed a lifetime.

I felt empty. “Go on,” I said to J.J. “Take him back outside.” The dog tucked its tail and followed J.J. out the door, never looking back.

#

We talked about it later, Lexie and I, about that moment of horrific emptiness. J.J. claims he felt nothing, but his eyes wander, and they have an unfocused look.

He sits and strokes his dog’s amber coat—the two of them huddled into the easy chair in the living room, or hiding in silence on the floor of J.J.’s closet—and once we caught J.J. crying and he wouldn’t say why. Then a week later he asked his mom and me if we were ever going to have another kid. Lexie and I talked about it that night and I told her that maybe one kid and a dog is enough for right now. And I think I’m right.

But I’ve been wrong before.