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The Paradox of Loss

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THE PARADOX OF LOSS

Abby Pugsley

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Stones & Lilies

It was the perfect time of year for a girl to visit her grandparents. The heat of summer was beginning to give over to the coolness of fall, and the nearby lake provided an oasis brimming with the promise of adventure. On this evening, the little girl and her grandfather followed the winding path from the cabin to the edge of the lake.

The still surface of the water perfectly mirrored the colors of the dimming sky. Like a path of stepping stones, a line of lily pads hovered on the water, fading into the distant horizon. The closest one trembled a bit and filled with water. It submerged, then surfaced again. A moment later, the next lily pad in the line did the same. On it continued.

“What was that?” The little girl’s eyes grew large in wonder as she watched the ripple pass into the distance. She had just attempted to skip a stone across the surface, but it sunk the moment it hit the water. Did her stone create this strange ripple? She stepped back from the edge and looked up at her grandfather.

He laughed and took a shaky step closer to her across the rocks, leaning heavily on his wooden cane. “Nothing to fear, Alonna. There are old stories about this lake. Stories older than me.”

She tilted her head. “What sort of stories?”

He got a far-off look in his eyes as he stepped into an old memory. “My dad used to bring me here all the time when I was a little boy. Sometimes we would play, sometimes we would swim, but sometimes we’d just sit by the water and he’d tell stories. One night he told me this story that his father told him.

“There is a country on the far side of this lake. It is a place filled with flowers and music and fairies and dancing. It’s the kind of place where adventures don’t ever end.”

The little girl’s eyes widened at the thought.

“This lake is so special and magical because it’s the in-between—a kind of meeting place between that world and this one.

“They say that some nights, if you’re quiet, you can hear the musical sound of tiny paddles touching the water. The fairies are rowing their boats back and forth, bringing magic to our world and calling people to come with them.”

Her mouth opened in awe as her imagination basked in the wonder of such a world.

“Can I go?” she asked.

He laughed quietly at her eagerness. “In the story, the only people who can reach the other side are the ones who are called to come.”

They both grew quiet, their minds separately set on the other shore. The air hung thick with the scent of perfume, wafting up from the many lilies blooming on the surface of the water. The wind started to pick up a bit, and the girl thought she heard fragments of a melody blowing by.

She looked down at the rocks at her feet. “Poppa, I don’t think I should throw any more rocks. It might sink their boats.”

He smiled faintly, remembering his own concern when his father told him years ago. “It’s okay, Alonna. You can’t hurt them.” His eyes twinkled a bit as he bent closer to her. “Besides, that never stopped your Grammy.”

He turned slowly to gaze out over the long corridor of lily pads hovering on the water. He looked tired, even a little sad, leaning on his cane like it was the only thing keeping him from crumbling to the ground. The little girl had not really noticed her grandfather’s old age for all of the adventures they went on together, but she did now. She studied him as he closed his eyes and breathed in deeply.

After watching him absorbed in the breeze for a moment, she turned back to her stone-skipping. She crouched down to study the rocks around her feet and thought about the last time she had been to the lake. Grammy and Poppa had both come with her, and Grammy had shown her how to find the best stones for skipping. Flat and smooth.

She picked up a stone and turned it in her hand over and over, noticing its swirling lines of gray and specks of green etched underneath its smooth varnish. Years and years of water had smoothed its rough edges into the velvety surface she held now. She did not know how old it was, or whose hands had held it before her, or the number of times it had already been skipped across the water before returning to the shore, waiting to be held again. But here it was in her hand now. The colors were pretty, and she thought of how Grammy never skipped the pretty ones. She put them in her pocket and carried them home.

She fumbled with the stone, trying to hold her fingers in the exact way Grammy had shown her to skip them. She was good at finding the stones. She just couldn’t get them to fly right—not like Grammy could.

Grammy could flick her wrist and release a rock into a seemingly endless pattern of skips across the water until it was so small you couldn't see it anymore. You could only see the quieting trail left in its wake, as if an invisible figure had just sprinted out into the horizon.

The little girl slipped the stone into her pocket; skipping stones wasn't the same without Grammy here.

She walked a few steps back to the place where the rocky shore met the grassy bank, and gathered the stalks of some delicate white flowers in her fingers, burying her nose in the little buds. These flowers smelled worlds different than the ones that filled Grammy and Poppa's cabin today. They smelled wild and pretty—not tired and old. She was glad to be out of the cabin; her mom couldn't seem to stop crying, and the tired flowers just kept coming with cards and more cards.

She caught sight of some vibrant purple flowers to add to her handful, and gently tore them from the ground. These were Poppa's favorite. Delighted at her discovery, she picked a few more, assembling a bouquet to surprise him. She pictured his face when she'd hand it to him. *There's my Alonna-girl, he'd say. Always finding the beauty.*

A clatter against the rocks startled her into looking up. "Poppa?"

He was not standing behind her on the shore anymore. His worn wooden cane lay on the rocks.

Movement by the water caught her eye, and she turned to find her grandfather walking across the water, each step cradled by a lily pad. He was already several yards away from the shore.

"Poppa!"

She ran to the water's edge and placed a sneakered foot onto the first lily pad, eager to follow. It submerged beneath the water's surface, sinking under her weight. Her foot hit the rough ground below, much like her thrown rocks, plunking to the bottom without the grace of a skip.

Jarred by the sunken attempt, she took a watery step back. Glancing up frantically, she found her grandfather growing more distant. When the lily pad rose to the surface again, she tried to clamber back on, grasping the edges of the leaf as if to keep it from shrinking into the depths. But for all her clenched fingers and bated breath, it sunk again.

"Poppa! I want to come!" She screamed the words with all the breath in her, desperate for him to hear her and return. But he was so far away. She tried to step onto the next lily pad from where she was standing in the water, but her soaked sneaker only slipped through again. She was nearly up to her waist.

Her grandfather was only a small figure on the horizon now, moving farther and farther away. He was going to the other side and she was not; tears sprang to her eyes at the realization. “Don’t leave me,” she whispered, breath caught in her throat.

The wind picked up slightly, blowing through the space between her soaked shirt and damp skin and sending a fierce shiver through her whole body. She withdrew from the water, falling to the cold stones. The magic of the lake from minutes before turned cold and dead to her eyes; it now kept her from her Poppa.

The last rays of light dipped behind the distant shore, and the little girl pulled her knees to her chest, tears falling. She knew the path back to the cabin by heart, and could see through the trees the dim light of the kitchen window where her parents were. But she lingered just a little bit longer on the shore, watching for tiny boats and wanting, even more than to see the other side, to see her Poppa return to her.

An Ache for What's Behind

This season turns: not in blazing color
like leaves that fall from lofty limbs,
nor in the softly shedding snow of winter days,
but rather, its shift
is painfully veiled within my chest—
an abrasive, disquieting mourning
for something I longed to see last forever.

The Things We Cannot Keep

My father likes to joke that I am the minimalist member of our family. Whenever I run out of hangers in my closet, I comb through the shirts and skirts and dresses, touching the fabrics and pulling out the ones I rarely wear. While I'm at it, I sort through my desk drawers and the box under my bed and the built-in bench between my closets that accumulates junk I don't want to look at. I pull out items I rarely use, like the decorative shadow box my grandma gave me a few Christmases ago, or the Jansport backpack covered in bright pink roses that I used through high school. The heap I accumulate to bring to Goodwill is often formidable.

My family has lacked for nothing. I can't help but wonder if my urgency to be the one who lets go instead of holding on to stuff is born from a shame of having more than I need. My fierce aversion to accumulating things, like I'm trying to convince the world and God himself—*my treasure is not in this world*.

But there's still a shoebox under my bed full of letters from my childhood pen pals—Lauren and Sarah and Sally and Amy. There's a shelf filled end to end with books I haven't read in years, but bring me joy just to touch or see side by side. There's a drawer in my desk brimming with more pens than I'll ever need, and a shelf in my closet holding a long line of unused journals of glorious variety, just waiting to be filled.

Despite my best efforts to prove otherwise, there are things I treasure and don't want to be without.

* * *

When I was twelve, my family visited my grandparents out in Laramie, Wyoming. While we were there, I inevitably wandered down to the basement to explore where my retired-astronautics-professor grandfather had a workspace for his projects. It was hard to navigate, with boxes and shelves overflowing with the stuff accumulated over a lifetime—planks of wood stacked against the wall, old photography equipment that looked untouched for at least a decade, shelves full of tools visibly disheveled into a system known only to him. In one corner of a small room, there was a large barrel filled to the brim with hundreds of cords, twisted together in an endless mass. I asked him why he had so many. He laughed from his belly and raised his bushy white eyebrows as he peered down at me. "Why, you never know when you'll need one!" I couldn't imagine ever needing so many of one thing in a lifetime.

* * *

When I get engaged, my eight-year-old brother places two cut-out paper figures in my hand. They hold hands with each other, taped into place, forming a circle with their thin papery arms. “It’s for your water bottle,” he says with a shy smile as he places it in my hands. I examine the colorful marker lines that make out the faces and bodies of me and my fiancé. “And look,” he says, pointing to the little hand of paper me. “It’s your ring.” The little dot of green marker barely shows through the layers of paper hands taped over each other.

“Thank you, Jonathan.” I give him a hug.

A couple months later, I am sorting through the items in my room, trying to decide what to keep, what to get rid of, and what to pack for my move to Indiana. My hands sift through the countless pieces of art that my little brothers have given me over the years—cards and pictures and handmade paper games. I do not want to throw them away, yet I do not have a place for all of them.

My fingers fall on the paper figures Jonathan made for me. I weigh whether it’s worth adding to a box and putting away for years, simply for the sake of keeping the memories somewhere I know I can still find and touch them.

* * *

The summer before we get married, John helps his dad get rid of the old black pickup truck his family has owned for years. This truck carried them through countless blizzards to the next town over for John’s robotics meetings, and on long drives up north for annual camping trips.

Now, the frame is disintegrating at the edges, and it sags into the grass of their backyard where it’s sat for too long, undriven. He takes a mallet to the hitch, trying to loosen it from where it’s been slowly rusting into the truck through Indiana’s hot summers and blustery winters.

They take it to the scrapyard on a Tuesday morning at the beginning of September, towing it with their silver Toyota Tacoma and a thick chain.

I come over to visit John and his parents that night. The four of us sit in their living room, exchanging questions and sharing moments from the day. It is not long before the conversation turns to the truck.

“If I knew that we had just gone and parked it in a field somewhere,” John says, “where I knew it still existed and I could theoretically visit it, it wouldn’t really matter. But knowing that it’s actually gone feels different for some reason.”

John’s dad nods in agreement, eyes closed. A half-smile rests on his face, amused at the irony of it. “It doesn’t make sense. We’re not using it, it’s just sitting there. In all technical terms, it’s no different whether it’s here or in the scrapyards. But seeing it crushed like that—” He balls his hand into a fist and taps it against his chest with a grimace. “It hurts.”

John nods in response. “I’m not sure I needed to see that.”

We sit in silence for a moment. I can sense the emotional weight this holds for them, and I wonder at the mystery of it.

Their memories are deeply woven into the physical object. The crushing of their pickup truck transforms it from a functional part of the world to an unrecognizable piece of scrap metal, but more than that—it seems to crush their ability to hold those memories in quite the same way.

“Should I have taken off the tailgate? No, you moron, it’s gone!” His dad shakes his head, laughing at himself. He rests his forehead in the palm of his hand as he leans back into the couch.

Somehow, they turned over their memories when they handed over the truck. When they closed the driver’s door for the last time and walked away, it was shutting off their ability to touch, to smell, to be immersed in the truck that carried them and their memories for many years.

* * *

The first morning after my family moved into our new house, I opened my eyes and was immediately disoriented. It took a moment for me to reconcile the disparity between the scene I saw and the scene I’d woken up to every morning before. My body had home memorized: it was so woven into me that waking up to purple walls in a foreign room instead of blue walls in my childhood bedroom *hurt*.

Seven years old, and my sense of home tied to the white house on Blythenia Road was being forcibly divorced from my frame, day by day.

I haven’t done more than drive by that house in the past fourteen years. Yet I can still picture the thick tree in the backyard, where I dug a hole underneath its branches in an attempt to create a little pond oasis in the middle of our rolling green lawn. There in the corner along the far fence are the bramble bushes I accidentally pushed my little cousin into on a sledding afternoon that

was icier than I accounted for. I can see the school bus squealing to a steady halt like clockwork in front of our house, and my breath warming the bedroom window as I watch the kids across the street mount the steps and ride away. I can picture the cloth tapestry with little embroidered people and crops and houses that hung in the hallway outside my bedroom, the tapestry I would study whenever I sat there in time out. I can see the linen closet with the space underneath its bottom shelf where we kept the laundry hampers—the space we converted into a fort and carried our Magic Tree House books inside to read by the light of our flashlights.

But I cannot feel the warm tile under my feet in the sunroom where I used to play tea parties with my sisters, and I can't hear the sound of birds chirping in the backyard on a spring morning. I can't make out the scent of the freshly bloomed magnolia tree beside our house around Easter time, or the golden forsythia bursting radiant along the driveway. And I cannot feel the carpeted stairs under my bare feet as I run as fast as I can to the dreaded basement to grab another gallon of milk for the dinner table.

I haven't set foot in that house since I was seven. What was once a deep and very real part of me has faded, faded, faded and now I'm left with none of the tangible and only the shadow of memories, the shadow of sights and sounds and smells, the world I touched and loved as a little girl.

* * *

The childhood home, the mile-weary pickup truck, the barrel brimming with cords, the full shelf of books—they seem so small in the scale of eternity.

I can mourn for the loss of someone I have known and loved, and that seems like a worthy, weighty thing to grieve. But when my heart aches for what I've touched and loved that is material, my mind reverberates with church-grown phrases, like *make sure your treasure is not in this world* and *you came into this world with nothing and will take nothing out of it the same*.

And a feeling of shame creeps in, because where is the good in loving the things I cannot keep?

Yet we are embodied and eternal. I am a physical being, living in a tangible world that God declared good at the dawn of the time. When I touch and love and collect and keep the things that matter to me here—and sometimes mourn for the things I cannot return to—I can't help but wonder, maybe I'm growing in my capacity to live in a new earth one day where there are no endings.

The Pianist

- Adrian -

I used to play for sheer joy. When I was little, I would sit on the wooden piano bench in the small living room of our house, my bare feet dangling above the floorboards. My stubby fingers would coax a melody out of the keys. Discordant. The song of a child, which sounds so little like what you'll hear from pianos touched by the fingers of experts. When you hear it, you know—those fingers are still discovering what it means to make music. They are focused less on a song and more on the reality that when you press the keys, sound is born—sound *you* brought forth. Caught up in the fun of sliding your finger down the keyboard, right to left, then left to right, in one massive whoosh.

My mother says I was first drawn to the keys because of my father. My memories of him are few and distant, but I can remember his playing. When he played, I was enchanted. Shortly after he was gone, my mother started teaching me some songs. Everyone in this city learns to play at school, but my mother wanted me to learn early. She sat beside me on the bench and taught me scales and names of notes and how to put them together into melodies. She taught me how to read the music and mimic the notes on the page with my fingers. When I was stubborn, I would not practice the songs she told me to play, but I would make my own. And when I made my own, something unusual would happen.

My music would change things. At first, it was only a subtle warmth or a spark as my fingers moved over the keys. Then one time my mother walked into the room where I was playing, and the tired lines from her face had smoothed over and she was nearly radiant as she listened. She seemed in some ways oblivious to the transformation, but it was as clear of a shift from night to day as any I'd ever seen in her face. Another day I played, and the collection of flowers in a vase on the windowsill—picked last week and towards the end of their bloom—perked back up and looked like they were still fresh. Their colors were even more vibrant than when they were sun-warmed in the ground.

When I started going to school, I quickly learned that I was the anomaly; no one else played like I did. And no one else seemed to experience life like I did. Every day for twelve years, I strove to stay neatly within the lines at school, while my playing at home bloomed life in every corner.

Now, I don't have the strength to play like I used to. Ever since I came to this place, I have not played for joy.

This room is singular in purpose. It has no windows, and the only light comes through the immense glass face at the front of the building. Numbers and hands made of steel. Walls of stone. Other than the pallet in the corner, the room is empty but for the place I sit—a grand

piano. Its white keys nearly glow, the only light thing in the dimness of the room. Immense gears link the inner workings of the piano, the strings, to the movements of the clock.

I have not been here for many sunrises, but I have been here long enough that the memories I have of home and joy are dimmed by the solitude of my movements in this space. The single door forms the only exit, and it is locked from the outside.

I play at the change of the hours: I play the songs they give me to play. A different song for each hour, the same songs each day. Every evening after I play the song for the mark of midnight, I stand up from the piano and walk over to the face of the clock and watch the people in the streets enter their homes. In a matter of minutes, the cobblestone streets will be dutifully empty.

Not too long ago, I walked those streets below. Like everyone else, I was blind to the reality of this city.

* * *

“Adrian!”

My head swivels at the sound of my name. When I see who it is, I quicken my pace. My tattered leather shoes click against the cobblestones. I just want to be home.

“Adrian, wait up!”

“Leave me alone.” I don’t want to talk about what just happened at school. In fact, I’d rather it just fade into the red dust, fade from the memory of this town. Isn’t that what this town is good at? Forgetting? I scoff at the thought and keep walking as fast as I can.

I feel a sharp tug on my sleeve. “What?” My voice is sharp as I turn.

A girl stands there, patched dress hanging down to her thin ankles, an expression on her face that brims with a mixture of hurt and resolve. I do not know her, but I know she came from the school. I know what she will ask.

She lifts her chin. “I want to know how you did that.”

A bitter laugh escapes my mouth. She makes it sound so simple. “Why would I tell you?”

The resolve in her face deepens. Her eyes seem to pierce me. “Well.” The corner of her mouth lifts in amusement. “You don’t seem to have an overabundance of friends.”

For some reason, that is the last thing I was expecting her to say. I suppose that's what keeps my feet rooted to the spot on the cobblestones, instead of treading a path away from her. A silence hangs between us, a tense string connecting us in the middle of the street.

How did you do that?

I picture myself trying to explain why I played like I did at our test at school, when the music came so flawlessly from my fingertips in line with the sheet music and then shifted in a heartbeat. Why the air seemed charged when I played from my heart, an electric level of new life falling over the room. I cannot explain why this kind of playing has come like second nature since I was young, or why I am different from everyone around me, but I know what moved me.

I picture this girl understanding, and that's the strange thing—I *can* picture her understanding. My frustration seeps away a bit, softened.

She tilts her head in a question, light hair falling gently around her face.

“I just want to understand what that was.” Her voice is barely a whisper.

I am keenly aware that we are standing in the middle of the street, in the middle of the city, in the middle of my path between school and the privacy of home. I meet her gaze again, and decide to venture a feeble trust with her.

“Not here.” My voice is low.

“Okay.” She does not seem fazed by my words. “You know the bridge on the east side? Meet me underneath, just after sunset.”

With a nod, I move away and leave her standing there, a solitary figure in the middle of the street in the afternoon light.

I arrive home and push the door open, which creaks loudly before I shove it closed and set the latch in place. My mother won't be back from her work until after nightfall, so I set down my bag and head into the kitchen. Outside, I hear the chiming of the clock begin. Its sound reverberates through the streets, penetrating homes, and shaking shelves with a subtle trembling.

Ignoring the sound, I pull out the ingredients for dinner. I reach into a jar and fill my palm with rice. Like a stream, I let the grains fall into a pot of water.

As the water steams into the rice, I crush a piece of garlic with the side of a knife on the scratched wooden tabletop, releasing the pungent, earthy scent into the air. The action releases tension I've been holding in ever since I left school. I cut onions and peppers in small pieces and let my thoughts fall over the day at school. It was not a normal day at school. It was testing day, which meant that every student in our year was evaluated on their precision and skill in playing a piece they had never seen before.

But it was more than that. Today, the Triad had been there—the elite group of leaders in our city. The three men sat beside our teacher, watching and listening attentively as we took turns rising from our seats and making our way to the front, to the grand piano, and playing the piece they set before us.

I've played for years. There shouldn't have been a problem. And I've played at school for years, learned to keep to the sheet music, never let my fingers or my passions stray beyond. But today, I slipped up.

I turn back to making dinner, wondering how I will tell my mother, *if* I will tell my mother. It frightens me.

* * *

The underside of the arching wooden bridge is riddled with shadows, though the sun has not quite finished dipping behind the horizon. I imagine that this place does not get much brighter than this, even in the heat of midday. Faint graffiti marks pepper the wood above me, and I wonder who else has made this their hideaway in years before. I call out cautiously, barely louder than a whisper, and though I'm not sure why, nervous for what will stir from the shadows—"Are you here?"

A figure unfolds itself from the shadows on the far side. "Yeah."

The very distinct scent of rotting vegetables floats up to me as I walk towards her, and as my eyes further adjust to the level of light, I can make out the shapes of countless piles, some heaping with food waste and others with bottles or pieces of pipe or strewn wood. This is a massive trash heap.

"Lovely spot you picked."

She grins. "Doesn't get much safer than this."

The place she just rose from is covered with a faded blanket, and we sit.

“Do you live here?” The question slips out. “I mean, you seem so comfortable here.” I berate myself for the insensitivity in my words, but she doesn’t seem too affected.

“When I don’t want to be at home, I come here.” She looks away for a moment, seemingly weighing something. Then she turns back with renewed intensity. “But honestly, Adrian. When you played, it—I’m not sure how to describe it. I’ve never felt that before. What happened?”

I cover my face with my hands, sighing deeply. Now that I’m here, speaking the words out loud is more difficult than I thought it’d be. I picture the moment earlier at school, and the emotions start to fill me again.

“The song reminded me of someone.”

* * *

The auditorium is full. Every student in the school—so every student in the city—is required to attend the testing of the final-year students. The days of testing stretch over several weeks of classes because there are so many of us. One by one we take the stage, holding nothing in our trembling fingers that are about to be called upon for perfection. Sitting at the solitary piano in the center of the stage, we wait a dragging moment as the headmaster of the school walks across the stage and places before us a few pages of sheet music. It is not one we have been taught. It is likely one we have never seen before. Every class, every day, every year of our studies has led to this moment. Playing flawlessly within the lines means honor, opportunities in the city. Playing outside those lines means that for all your years of studying, your future will amount to little more than a life of menial work.

I clench the dark plastic of the chair beneath my thighs, the pads of my fingers digging pressure into the seat. I am nervous, yes; though I probably don’t look any more so than my peers surrounding me. For most of them, the risk is making an error—a wrong note, an ambitiously quick finger, an unfortunate miscalculation of the presence of a sharp (or the lack thereof). I am nervous for those things, but also nervous for what is always a possibility when I play—the risk of playing so far beyond the sheet music that they remember me.

“Adrian Leverly!”

I rise from my seat, almost mechanically. The noise of every footfall, every rustle of my clothes against skin, every breath, seems strangely amplified to my ears. I sit. Breathe deeply. Heart pounding, I straighten my back and lift my chin. The headmaster places sheets of paper in front of me, black lines and dots whirling together. This will require me to call on every ounce of practiced skill I have in me. With every shred of energy I have, I engage my mind in focus on the

notes in front of me. I will close the door—*hard*—to the deep well of emotion that comes so near to surfacing every time I play.

My eyes are fixed on the paper ahead. My fingers fly, deep diving into the song and filling the room with sound. The notes bounce lightly when they should, and rumble hard when they should. The melody is precise and clean. A sense of pride and elation swells in me; I know I am playing well. I push the feeling aside and focus, focus. As I play on, the tune shifts to sweeter; slower. Something in the chord progression sounds old and familiar, and my breath catches in my throat when I realize that this is a song my father played for me as a child.

Something in me turns painfully at the memory, and in a moment, the door within bursts wide open. My eyes close and in a rush of feeling my fingers carry the melody beyond the sheet music. I play unhindered, then come to a sharp stop when I realize what I'm doing.

Alarm courses through me, and I open my eyes to catch the sight of my fingers sparking. I quickly place them in my lap between my knees—as if that will help the fact that every student in this school, every teacher, every member of the Triad has just seen me play beyond the music. Without looking at the faces in the crowd, I can sense that I played life into the room. The air hangs with a stunned silence. I rise to my feet, bow as is custom, and quickly make my way off the stage, up the long aisle, and out of the auditorium. A growing wave of hushed murmurs follows me out of the room, but I do not look back.

I do not know what consequences I will reap from this. My father's melody echoes in my head, and my veins are thunderous with emotion as I push open the front doors of the school and step into the heat of the afternoon.

* * *

“Has this happened before?” The girl tilts her head, trying to wrap her mind around what I am telling her. I can just barely make out the shape of her fingers playing with the edge of the faded blanket we're sitting on in the almost-dark.

“All the time. I've just gotten good at shutting that off around other people. Keeping to the sheet music.”

“Do you have to do that?”

“My whole life, my mother has warned me not to let others see. And now that the Triad saw... I don't know what could happen.” I sigh.

“They didn’t say anything in school today. After you left, they just acted like it didn’t happen. Maybe they’ll just let it go.”

I consider her words, the possibility in them. “Maybe.”

“So does the clock not affect you like it does the others?” She leans close.

I frown, trying to make sense of her words. “Affect me?”

She nods, insistent. “You know, the way the clock chimes and your feelings fade?”

A sense of dread builds in my chest, and I can feel blood and heat simultaneously racing to my head. Something in her words seems deeply familiar, yet I cannot put my finger on the experience she is talking about. I let my mind rewind, thinking through the countless times I’ve stood out from the others in school, how I responded to situations, and the growing sense of isolation I’ve felt over time. I originally chalked it up to the coldness or indifference of those around me. But even my mother—the times I have played for her, and the music moved her and brought life into her face and her limbs—how quickly did it fade to apathy? It never swelled so far beyond apathy to change anything.

I squeeze my eyes shut, thinking about the times the clock has struck and what has accompanied those moments. It scares me to find that I cannot—I have never thought to look for it. It is the background of my days, and unnoticed as a result.

“How does it feel?” I clear my throat. I am trying to wrap my mind around the gravity of what she’s saying goes on in this town—and the gravity of the fact that I, alone, may be untouched by the clock’s toll.

“It doesn’t feel like much—honestly, that’s the scary part.” She pulls her knees up to her chest, and I notice it’s starting to grow chilly. “A few years ago, I was planning to spend the night down here - just camp out under the bridge. Things at home were rough between my parents. The clock struck at midnight like usual, and I was barely aware of my feet carrying me home until I walked through the front door at the twelfth chime. It was like...I don’t know. Like clockwork, even.”

She pauses for a moment. “And you know what? My parents weren’t fighting anymore. I guess the clock had dulled their argument, their anger. They were preparing for bed together, quiet and subdued. That was when I realized—the clock was not just a clock, keeping time and signaling the hours. It was keeping *us*. Keeping us from hurting, from running, from fighting. Keeping us from doing what we might regret.”

“You think it’s a good thing?”

“I know that I was scared to be at home. When I came back, things were fine.”

I think about the hurt I’ve felt—the isolation from the people around me, the loss of my father and every day without him, the disappointment when I fail with my music—and a tendril of jealousy seeps through me. Why am I different in this too? Everyone else in this blasted town gets their feelings numbed by the ancient clock on the outskirts of the city, except for me. Everyone else can forget, can carry on. Not me.

A fury races through me when I realize that this is why, for all the years that have passed since my father died, I have never seen my mother shed a tear over his absence. Her quiet carrying on, her indifference over the empty spot at the dinner table that *cut* me through and through...it all clicks together in my mind. The tower is at the center of it all.

I want to ask more, to understand, but the reverberating of the clock’s midnight chimes fills the air, and I watch the girl rise in response.

* * *

It is just after five in the morning. The sky is still dark, and the city, quiet. The maze of streets below me is not illuminated by even the light of the moon.

I push myself up from where I’ve spent the night on the small pallet in the corner. My view is normally of tower rafters and the glimmers of starlight through the face of the clock, but last night was too cloudy to enjoy any sort of view. The distant sound of ascending footsteps makes its way to me from behind the single door. The bolt clicks out of place, and the door shoves open. The old man with a thick beard thrusts out a tray with a plate and a cup, wordless as usual. His is the only face I have seen for the time I have been in this room. Maybe if it was more than a moment, or more than a simple exchange of goods, it would do my soul some good. But every day I never feel more alone than in the moment after the door closes, leaving me alone with myself.

I eat. Rice, broth, vegetables. I drain my cup to the bottom and then lower myself onto the piano bench. The glimmerings of dawn are barely evident in the sky as I set my fingers to the keys and play the city awake. The sound courses through me and through the city and fills the streets, and when I finish, I go to the glass face of the clock as I do every morning, memorizing my view of the place I used to know as home.

The city is surrounded by an expanse of red dirt, dead and cold for miles. There are no winding rivers through the bitter landscape, or distant seas glimmering on the horizon. The city itself rises out of the wilderness, a dark and haphazard maze of wooden buildings. People are filling the winding streets as the day begins. At the heart of the city lies the school, its bright stone walls and broad windows standing in stark contrast with the rest of the shadowy city.

At the city's edge lies a massive hill that is covered with red-streaked boulders. The few trees in the entire land lie on this hill, their trunks of strong, coarse bark twisted and bent, bowing down toward the earth in the heat of the sun. It is a wonder they grow at all through the rocky earth.

The room where I stand is at the top of the tower that rests on the peak of this hill. This massive structure of stone juts up into the sky, a towering face over the city. Massive hands of steel turn, keeping time over the city's inhabitants. It has been this way since before the oldest living generation can recall the stories their grandparents told them about the old days.

Every day, between the hours of six in the morning and midnight, I play for each hour. Sometimes it pierces straight to the heart of those who hear it; other times, it merely passes through the background of their awareness, a bird passing unnoticed above. Either way, the music changes things. For those who consider leaving the city's limits, the sound of the music dulls their mind and their desires. For any ambition they had toward a life beyond the city, at the sound of the tolling chimes, it is replaced with a quieted "Maybe tomorrow." Those who have lost a member of their family and feel the weight of grief, the chime of the clock washes over them and the sadness quells to nothingness. Those who live in the city carry on the rhythm of their lives in quiet and disciplined sync with the music of the clock.

I am the timekeeper. I play to move people. When I play, they have no choice but to be moved.

- Mel -

It was just a few moments, a few bars of a song. But it was unlike anything she had heard before. For a split second while she was listening to Adrian play, she felt something she could not identify—something almost akin to pain. She jumped to her feet as soon as the bell signaled the end of the school day, and chased down the boy who played like there was a different kind of life in his soul, flowing right out into his fingers. And she asked him the question that was burning on her tongue, asked him to explain this thing that moved him, and moved her for a moment, yet ran contrary to every part of her existence.

It did not linger; the clock struck noon and she was relieved to find the feeling fade. Still, her questions remained.

Because no one had ever played like that before.

Then when she heard him talk about his father, it was like looking into another world. Adrian mentioned the memories that had come flooding back when he recognized the song as one his father used to play. She can still picture the tears that came to his eyes when he talked about having his father in the world one day and gone the next, left only with memories that grew more and more dim the more distant he grew from them.

She can still see the look in his eyes when she talked about her suspicions about the clock tower and the way it kept the people of the city from feeling things too strongly, and he responded, “You think it’s a good thing?”

She turns the question over and over in her head as she falls asleep.

But how could it not be a good thing?

* * *

By the sixth chime of the clock, Mel is out of bed, pulling on fresh clothes and her worn gray shoes. Before long she is dashing down the haphazard wooden stairs of her family’s apartment building to the streets, where she joins the masses of students heading toward the school.

They dutifully file into the auditorium with little chatter; the predominant sound echoing through the space is the clamor of footsteps finding their places. It isn’t until Mel has found her seat in the middle section with the others of her year that she registers what is unusual about this morning: no one is talking. The student body moves with a focused, rare precision. Deadly unified.

Everyone is in their place, expect one. Mel's eyes scan over the rows and fall on an empty seat near the front. It is Adrian's. She recalls their conversation from the night before. Had something happened to him, as he feared? Her mind whirls through the possibilities as the first student takes the stage for testing.

Would it be strange to say that the students who are tested today collectively play better than any of those in the weeks before? In any case, they are more focused, more disciplined, rising in succession and taking the stage like clockwork.

Even the swell of the boredom that usually rises within her by the seventh or eighth performance is strangely absent today.

Like clockwork.

Her mind fastens on the thought.

Something has changed. The clocktower is stronger.

Even as her mind whirls to make sense of the mechanics of how this can be, she considers with satisfaction the rhythms of this day, from her feet hitting the floor at the stroke of six this morning to the disciplined performances before her now. This, *this* is the world working the way it's supposed to.

* * *

With each new day, Mel rises promptly at six. This is no fluke. It is the new normal.

On this morning, when she enters the kitchen, her mother, father, and grandmother are all already gathered there. Her grandmother is the only one seated at the table, eating. Her father is standing by the sink drying dishes, and her mother is sorting through the pantry.

Each family in the city is designated a specific home day out of the week, so that the production of the city does not quell. Rather than attending school or showing up to their work center to play the notes related to their industry's task, they take that day to keep up the tasks that receive little attention throughout the long days of the week—buying food, cleaning, preparing meals, mending, and resting. It is all for the purpose of accomplishing more.

“Morning,” Mel greets them, and her parents give nods of acknowledgement without looking away from their tasks, while her grandmother sits, spooning food into her mouth with a distant expression.

Mel grabs a piece of bread from the cut loaf on the counter and sits down at the table as she registers the abnormality of this scene. When was the last time she found her parents working so peaceably side by side at the start of a home day?

She sinks her teeth into the piece of bread. What was doughy and soft at the beginning of the week has grown tough and rigid, resistant to every bite. Breakfast on home days has never been something to get excited about.

“I want you to go to the market first thing, Mel,” her mom says without turning around. Her hands are moving in rapid rhythm, removing items from each shelf before wiping it down with a cloth.

“What do we need?” She swallows hard, the crusty bread scraping against the sides of her throat, making her cough.

“The list is on the table.” Her mother’s hands don’t stop moving. “And don’t wander like you always do. Just get what we need and come back.”

She’s heard her mother say those words before, but now, they don’t even matter. She is already on her feet, walking toward the door.

* * *

Mel walks quickly down the cobblestone street, her skirt brushing lightly against her legs with each step. The clock tower looms larger as she heads north toward the market. The streets are already bustling with people moving in and out among the many teeming wooden carts as they find what they need and go back on their way. She is relentlessly tuned into her surroundings, her eyes constantly in motion, absorbing the interactions around her.

She approaches the bald man with large, rough hands behind a cart full of hare meat. “I need four.” The man counts out the coins she places in his broad palm, promptly wraps the meat in brown paper, and hands it to her. At the next cart, she does the same, placing wrapped loaves of bread into her basket as the woman with jittery hands gives them to her.

Moving from cart to cart, she buys what she needs. Soon her basket is full of meat, bread, milk, and vegetables. As she makes her way back through the market heading toward home, her eyes fall on a woman buying bread.

This woman is surrounded by three young children standing calmly by her skirts, and a baby in her arms. The children are completely quiet, not restless as they wait. One turns his head just as Mel passes, and the two lock eyes for a moment.

It is just a blur of a moment, and she continues walking briskly toward home. The void expression in the child's eyes lodges in her mind as she goes.

The city is quiet, though the streets are thronged with people. Not a single person goes out of their way to acknowledge someone else. The air is void of greetings and arguments—all but the noise of feet shuffling on their way.

Mel is nearly back home when she stumbles. She hits the ground hard, the breath forced out of her lungs. Her basket has given up its contents, potatoes and beans and loose kernels of corn strewn through the street, falling between the cracks and coating in dirt. The glass bottle of milk has shattered.

Dong. Dong.

It must be seven already.

She rises in frustration, picks up the pieces she can, and turns back to the market. She should have been home by now, not retracing her steps.

Dong. Dong.

As the sound of the clock falls over everyone she passes, their expressions seem to loosen and lift, a light coming in behind their eyes.

Making her way back to the dairy cart, she asks for another bottle of milk and hands over a coin in exchange. The woman smiles as she presses the cold bottle into her hand.

Dong. Dong.

On the way out, she passes the woman with her entourage of children, who are now chasing each other around the market. The little boy throws his head back and laughs wholeheartedly as he manages to stay a step ahead of his sister.

Dong.

Mel breathes deeply, taking in the fresh early morning air and basking in the sounds of laughter and people talking. She can feel her own face relax. Tilting her head back, she looks up at the tower.

She has felt this way only once before.

- Adrian -

There is a weariness that clings to me within these walls that I have not known before. When I walked the streets of the city below, I could feel the wind sweep over my skin, and the heat of the sun warming my face. I could sit across from my mother at the dinner table and hear her voice and eat with her. I could play the piano in my living room—any song that came to me, any chords that rolled out of me as an overflow to the world I loved.

Now the only thing left is me. Me with my thoughts and this piano— this piano where every key I touch feels like a weight.

I cannot find it in me to play anything but the songs they give me. I used to play for sheer joy, and now I only play because they tell me to.

And when I play this morning to wake the city, I realize that I hate it.

Resting my forehead against the glass face of the clock, I make out the shapes of people moving in the streets, heading to their work centers and school and the market. At first my breath clouds the view on the chilled glass, but as the sun climbs, the expanse clears and I can just barely see the faces of those in the market on the near end of the city.

As I watch through the glass, each second turns over to the next, the hands of the clock traveling forward in an unceasing cycle. I watch their turning and know I'll never see the end. The hands are unrelenting, holding me captive in this ever-moving loop of time.

I feel so trapped, I want to slam my arms on the keys until they break or I bleed.

I don't know how long I stand there, watching the hands and feeling this fury coursing through me.

Then I see my mother's face.

She is walking through the market, basket in hand and face set like a flint on the task in front of her. A shot of grief shocks through me at how normal she appears. If the loss of my father never brought a tear to her eye, why would I assume that losing me would be any different?

A loud sob escapes my lips, and the sound surprises me as it echoes in the four quiet walls. Tears spring to my eyes, and I let them fall. They run down my arms and paint my hands as I mourn for the life I have lost and the mother I cannot reach and the city that does not feel a damn thing and does not know anything different.

I want to shake the city awake. But I am only a puppet on strings in the hands of the men who brought me here. I am helpless, trapped in this tower where I can reach no one.

My mind falls back to the girl from the street. She felt something when she heard me play in the auditorium at school that day—something that compelled her to chase me down and ask. Somehow my music pierced through and lifted the cloud left by the clock. My music broke through her confidence that a world stripped of feeling was a better one, if only for a moment.

And maybe, just maybe, my music could do that again.

I have no doubt the Triad will make me pay for this, but there is no one else who can break the clock's hold on the city. A resounding clarity of determination fills me, and pushing aside the sheet music, I sit down with tears still in my eyes.

If I cannot play from joy, I will play from sorrow.

The Mending

A spool of thread rests in its mid-unraveling on the table top. A candle, blackened and burnt to a stub, sits in quiet testament to yesterday's work. In a small heap, the remnants of a large piece of fabric lie next to a pair of silver scissors. A worn doll has fallen over onto its side on a chair.

Entering his workshop for the first time this morning, the man throws open a window and breathes deeply of the morning air. It carries in the voices of children playing in the streets. An almost-flicker of joy bleeds through him at the sound. Maybe it's the warmth on the breeze, or the smell of the world after last night's rain, but it surprises him that the sound no longer sends quite the same sadness through him as it once did.

He pulls out his tray of thread spools and sets it on the table. Sweeping the scraps from yesterday's work into a bin, he prepares the space for his next project.

A shriek pierces the morning air.

His heart leaps and he freezes in place, reliving the crash of cart wheels and the scream of a child years before. *Not again.*

Barely collecting himself enough to move, he fumbles out the door. A little girl sits crying beside the road, unharmed, holding a doll soaked in water and coated in mud: ruined. Several young boys lurk nearby, their culprit role etched into the smirks on their faces. When they catch sight of the man in the doorway, they scatter.

His heartbeat stilling in relief, he retreats into the room and wearily presses his back against the wooden door. The girl's tears weigh on him, as if they were from his own daughter.

His eyes fall on the doll in the corner, as they have every day for the past three years. A deep tear travels the length of one leg, and a single button eye stares back at him, hollow and vacant. The other dangles by a single thread from its face.

Perhaps he has let it sit there, unmended and unloved, for long enough.

Hands quietly set the thread in the needle, and in and out, in and out, the master sews. Pressing the tender, torn pieces of the little leg together. Each stitch is an undoing and remaking. He mends what he can, each stitch a lingering reminder of the broken frame he could not mend on that spring day years before.

When he sets down the needle, only minutes have passed, yet it seems like the weight of years

has lifted from his frame. The doll is not perfect; he cannot restore it to how it was before. But it is whole again. And for today, that is enough.

He stands to his feet, doll in hand. Opening the door, he lets the light of the day in, and steps across the threshold. Wordlessly, he makes his way across the street to where the little girl is sitting alone, trying to wipe the mud from her doll to no avail. He kneels beside her and extends his worn and stitched offering. She reaches to receive it, and with a pang deep within him, he lets her take it.

He is mending what he can.

See

Most come for the sea. Some come with a handful of college friends to stand in line at the clubs and party, while others come as a family to relax in the sand and watch their kids play in the waves. Years ago, this place was dubbed “The World’s Most Famous Beach,” where tourists could flood the sand to relish life away from their reality for a week or so. A glorious place to escape.

It is a bright morning in mid-March: spring break season. Most come for the sea, but not all.

* * *

The ocean roars, a chaos of salt against the shore in the morning light. A man taps his foot from where he sits in his red and black lawn chair, the sound of music playing through his small cassette player. *If I leave here tomorrow, would you still remember me?* The chords of “Free Bird” fill his ears with a rush of joy, and he leans back comfortably.

He tilts his head with a grin to a passing man. He means it kindly, but the man eyes him suspiciously in return. Tourists buzz past him. A woman in a bathing suit avoids eye contact as she clutches her daughter’s hand and hurries past him to reach the steps down to the beach. He used to absorb those responses like a punch to the gut, but they’ve become too familiar to carry the same sting they once did.

The growling of his stomach reminds him that he hasn’t found food in a couple days—not since he pulled a soft white Styrofoam container out of the garbage can. It was cradled in a clean white grocery bag, and cracked open to reveal an ample amount of fried chicken. A little soggy, to be sure, but that hardly mattered. The grease dripped down his gray fingers and through his unkempt beard with each glorious, tearing bite against bone. A rare treat.

That lucky find lasted him longer than usual. But hunger is starting to harden into a dull ache in his stomach again, so he rises from his chair under the oceanview pavilion. It is still morning, which means he may need to walk farther away from his usual haunt to find food.

He makes his way across the park and bends over the edge of a nearby garbage can, his hands moving through rustling plastic and damp paper. To his surprise, this one wasn’t emptied yet this morning. His hands gloss over a half-eaten core of apple, a few stray fries left in a McDonald’s bag. A glint of gold catches his eye in the dark barrel of the trash can. He reaches down into a wet paper cup to grasp it.

A ring.

A vibrant ruby sits in the center of a golden band, an intricate design etched into its metal. He lifts it closer to his face, letting the sunlight fall through it and catch its edges. As he runs a calloused, dirt-lined fingertip over the etching of the band, something twists inside him. He hasn't touched something this beautiful in a long time.

As he turns it over in his hand, a man drops a plastic bag into the trash can beside him and eyes him and the ring with suspicion before walking away.

Willy barely registers the look. He is immersed in a memory. *I would have given her a ring like this.* It's been so long, it feels like an image from another world. From another man's life. He would've given her much more if he could. Finding this ring is like a glimpse into the life he lost, and he lingers in it.

Across the park, the man stands with a police officer who has been patrolling nearby, pointing toward Willy standing next to the trash can.

When approaching footsteps break through Willy's reminiscence minutes later, he looks up to see a man in uniform.

He freezes, the ring still grasped between his fingers.

* * *

Ten years earlier.

I don't realize I've lost my watch until I've been on the beach for a few hours. It was a gift from the aunt I got my name from, and I took it off earlier so it wouldn't be ruined in the salt water. Frantically retracing my steps back to the public changing stalls on the deck above, I make my way over the sand, up the splintery wooden stairs, and across the open space that houses a few covered tables overlooking the ocean.

My eyes scour the pavement.

“You lose this?”

My head snaps up. A man in worn and baggy jeans and a stained sweatshirt stands a few paces away from me, holding out my watch.

I take in his thick, wild hair and wrinkled, dirt-lined skin. The distinct scent of weed wafts from him. Stepping forward quickly, I grab the watch out of his hand. “Thank you,” I say hesitantly.

Something subtle shifts in his face, noting my distrust. “I thought someone might be coming back for it.” He nods to me and ambles over to a nearby pavilion.

I stand still for a moment, running my fingers over the watch. The deck is busy, with people passing to and from the beach in a flurry. I notice a few other homeless men sitting under the pavilions, marked by their unkempt appearance and the nest of belongings around each of them. I had not seen them when I walked through here before, but then again, I wasn’t looking. The other tourists either ignore them, or acknowledge their presence with an uncomfortable glance or wide path of avoidance around them. I recall the suspicion in my voice from moments before with a pang of shame.

I turn to walk back down to the beach where my family is waiting, but something makes me hesitate. I am curious about this man who picked up my watch off the pavement and gave it back when he could have kept it without a word.

Before my brain has time to second-guess, I walk over to where he sits in his lawn chair. “Hey.”

He glances up, surprised. “Yeah?”

I’m not quite sure how to start this conversation. My eyes fall on a small, portable cassette player sitting next to his chair. “What are you listening to?”

He grins. “Rock. Always rock.”

I nod knowingly, as though rock is the center of my world as well. “What’s your name?”

“Willy.”

“I’m Carlee.” He nods at the information, a slight grin on his face. “Have you lived here long?”

The smile fades from his face. “I grew up in Maine.” He seems reluctant to expand on that, but the words slowly come. “I couldn’t really tell you how I got here. It’s like the wind just carried me.”

I study his expression for a sign that he’s messing with me but find none. “You have any family?”

Something darkens in his face. “I had a sister.” He pauses as if he’s going to say more, but then doesn’t.

“Did she pass away?”

“No.” His head jerks up and the word comes out with a fierceness that seems to surprise him. He raises a shaky hand to rub the creases of his forehead. His voice softens a bit. “No, I don’t think so. I haven’t seen her for years.”

I get the sense that he wants to say more. I am quiet, taking in the glazed look in his eyes. Slowly, his story comes.

“She was raped,” he admits in a faltering voice. “I couldn’t help it, I was so angry—I hurt that man bad. Spent twenty years in prison.” He grips the arm of his chair so hard, his knuckles turn white.

His words hang between us, and I feel a weight settle on me as I process all that this man has been through. I don’t know what to say in response. It occurs to me how little I had seen when I looked at him before; I hadn’t seen his hurt, and I hadn’t seen him as someone’s brother. Before I can find my words, a woman passing by grabs my arm in concern. “What are you doing?” she hisses. “Get away from him!”

I shake off her grip and she huffs away, clearly confused by the scene.

“I’m sorry.” I look at him with all the sincerity I can, willing him to know what I mean without explanation.

He shrugs and looks out over the cresting waves and crowded beach for what feels like a long minute. “After a while, you get used to it. People either don’t see ya, or they see ya wrong.” When he turns back to look at me, his eyes betray haunting depth. He leans back in his chair. “It was good to meet you, Carlee.”

* * *

Willy takes a step away from the trash can as the man in a uniform approaches him. He cannot help the shudder that rushes through him at the sight, paralyzing him where he stands, hands trembling at his side.

His eyes shift nervously as the police officer addresses him.

“Sir, I just heard from someone who was concerned you may have stolen something.” His voice is not unkind, but the accusation he voices strikes Willy hard.

“I found it.” Willy can hear the defensiveness seeping into his own voice.

“Where is it?”

Willy hesitates before slowly lifting his shaking fist, cracking it open to reveal the ring within.

“I’m going to have to take it and make sure it gets back to its owner.”

Willy does not move.

“I’m not a thief,” he says quietly, finally looking him in the eye. “I’m not a thief.”

* * *

Most come for the sea, but not all. There used to be a man sitting in the park beside the ocean, whispering into the air for anyone who was around to listen: *I don’t know how I got here. It’s like the wind just picked me up and set me down.*

This was the closest thing he had to a home. But it did not shelter him from passing gazes of suspicion toward his hair or clothes, or from threatening assumptions about the cut of his character. Spring breakers whirled past him daily on their visits to the ocean, but there came a day when morning dawned on his red lawn chair, sitting empty under the pavilion. And tourists passed all the same, indifferent to the change. Or maybe even, feeling a bit safer for his absence.

Most come for the sea, but not all.

hands.

grass-whistling hands.

My grandpa could pick a blade of grass from the backyard, stretch it between his brown, weathered thumbs, and whistle across it with a brilliant rippling sound that rivaled the song of any bird I'd ever heard.

It was a spring matter, when the grass had broken through thick and fresh after a long sabbath. It was an Abby-and-Grandpa matter. My sisters were not enamored by the magic Grandpa could work with a blade of grass like I was. They either didn't have awe enough to watch, or patience to stay. But I could be found sitting beside him on the back step, gazing up in wonder, every time. *Pick, stretch, blow. Pick, stretch, blow.* The grass yielded to his fingers each time. A cry, somewhere between songbird and wailing banshee, would cut through the air to my delight.

My 5-year-old fingers fumbled with a torn blade of grass, haphazardly held between my fingertips. A mixture of breath and spit met the blade in my wholehearted attempt to hear the burst of sound issue forth. Yet all I could hear was my little wind slopping against the soft skin of my fingers. I was a student with eagerness in droves and a severe lack of skill, yet he was endlessly patient in his bequeathing.

"Look for the thickest piece you can find. It catches the sound better." My fingers raked through the small patch of yard in front of me, seeking the perfect blade.

"Now line it up right against the side of your thumb—see, like this?" His hands enveloped mine as he helped me position the piece of grass. "Put your other thumb right against it. Hold it tight! If it wrinkles, it won't blow."

I smashed my thumbs together with gusto and pressed my lips to them, blowing with all my might. The noise was far from a song, and I thrust the blade down in disappointment.

"Look," he said gently. He set his hands next to each other, pressing the sides of his thumbs together without grass between them. "You see where my thumbs meet at the top and bottom?" I nodded. "That little space in the middle—that's where the grass goes. If you hold the grass tight at the top and bottom, there'll be a place on each side for the air to go through. That's where you'll blow."

He demonstrated, his breath whistling effortlessly over the blade in his hands.

“Keep trying, Abby.” His eyes seemed to disappear in the folds of the smile that filled his face. “You’ll get it. You will.”

corn-husking hands.

The crisp curl of green leaves, thick with summer, peeled back as my fingers scratched towards the hidden pearls of corn. The kernels gleamed through their wrapping. I grabbed and pulled a little too hard towards one end of the husk and a few kernels exploded, leaking golden juice in a musky spurt.

His hands, dark and dotted with age, smelling like sunlight and summer air, hardly looked akin to my pale stubby fingers. We worked through the plastic bag of corn ears between us on the front porch steps, shedding their leaves and creamy wisps of silk. The wide, deep blue pot my mom had sent outside with us slowly filled, even as the air hung quiet between us.

My grandpa wasn’t much of a talker—at least, he didn’t think he was much to listen to. He would always laugh at himself while he told a story, stumbling over words and pausing, finding his footing. I didn’t care. I just liked being with him.

hospital hands.

“He’s not doing well, is he? I think we better come up.”

I sat on the cold wooden steps, knees curled up to my chest. I could only hear one half of my mom’s conversation with her mother on the phone in the kitchen below, but her words dropped bits and pieces enough. I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed like I hadn’t before in my short eight years.

The next morning, my sister, mom, and I drove an hour up I-83 N to Lancaster General Hospital. Grandma and Mom talked in hushed voices before we went into his room. Grandpa had woken up from his stroke and thought he was in Kearney, Nebraska. Kearney was the small town of dirt roads and cattle fields where he was born. He hadn’t been there for years.

He looked unfamiliar under the hospital bedclothes and fluorescent light. “Hey, you troublemakers,” he greeted my older sister and me as we entered the hospital room. Did he really recognize us, or was he just saying that? I stood awkwardly by the foot of the bed, not sure what to do with myself. My eyes traced a frame that looked so different from the Grandpa I knew. The

skin of his hands looked so thin and fragile, their deep blue-green veins weaving dark and ominous just beneath the surface.

We stayed for hours. I sat in the little waiting area across from his room, hands pressed against the fabric of the seat beneath my thighs, trying to conserve some bit of warmth in the cool hospital hallway. My sister sat beside me, her attention held by a magazine in her hands. We got some food from the hospital cafeteria, and I ate a peach that was so far from ripe, it crunched like an apple under my teeth. The hands of the clock on the wall across from me journeyed slowly and methodically around its face. We were waiting, but I did not know what we were waiting for.

I only caught crumbs, bits and pieces of what was going on. I caught them in Mom's face when she stepped out of Grandpa's room with a red-tinged, watery gaze. I caught them in the tired slant of her shoulders. I caught them in the quiet voices of the adults around me. *Stroke. Confused. Open-heart surgery. Not looking good.*

I caught them and squeezed my small palms together, despising the helpless space between them.

hill-climbing hands.

“Abby, you want to go on a walk with me?”

A thrill ran through me at the invitation. An Abby-and-Grandpa adventure. I pulled on my red and black lined rain boots as he donned his thick white sneakers. The fall breeze was cool and musty against our skin as we stepped outside. We took the usual path down my winding driveway, past the peeling green mailbox, across the quiet country road, and around the horse fields. Our path curved back into the woods beside the Gunpowder River. The sky thick with clouds hung shadows over us, while the ground was alive in a flurry of color. The bed of leaves both crunched and padded underneath our shoes as we walked.

We made our way to stand by the water, finding rocks and skipping them into the chilly flow. After a while, he gestured toward the towering hill to our right. “What do you think? Want to climb it?”

My eyes scanned the hill with delight. We walked in these woods often, but that hill was a kind of forbidden territory. Covered in fallen trees, bramble bushes, and boulders, it wasn't inviting to travelers like the path we normally walked. If we climbed it, we would be forging our own trail up the steep incline. “Oh yes, Grandpa, can we?”

He laughed at my eagerness, and we started up the incline.

It was an adventure, weaving our way through tree branches and rocks jutting through their bed of leaves, and clambering over fallen logs. Pulling out a pocket knife, Grandpa cut through thorny branches in our path and held them back for me to pass through. He stretched his leg over a log and stumbled a bit before pulling himself over with shaking hands, the exertion of uphill motion clearly taxing him. He shook his head, laughing at the moment. I laughed along, but it struck me that my nine-year-old arms wouldn't be enough to catch him if he stumbled and fell.

It was less than a year ago that he was in the hospital. My delight faded as my worry grew. What if he fell? What if he hit his head? What if he was weaker than he thought, and pushed himself too hard? The air felt very cold all of a sudden.

I came to an abrupt halt. "Actually, Grandpa, I don't want to do this. It's kind of a big hill. Can we turn around?"

He laughed. "Is this too much for you, Abby? We're halfway there!"

"Please? Can we just go back?" If I voiced my concern for him, he would surely laugh it off and deny any need for caution. I pleaded internally that he would listen.

"Well, you can stop if you want. I'm going to keep going. I want to see the top."

Stunned that my plan did not work, I froze beside the fallen tree, watching him make his way up the rest of the hill. Surely he wouldn't just leave me there by myself? Surely he would see I was serious, and come back when I didn't follow him? This was my one way to protect him, and it wasn't working.

He made it to the top and waved down to me with a beaming grin. "You missed a good view, Abby," he said when he reached me again. I didn't have much to say to that. I was just glad he was safe.

I still wonder if he knew what I was trying to do that day.

I never got to ask him.

empty hands.

A Wednesday morning in the dining commons finds me folding grains of granola into a bowl of thick yogurt and fruit. I watch the berries bleed against the yogurt, turning the ivory slowly to

crimson. My throat catches when I realize John is watching me from across the table with thoughtful eyes. “Are you ok, Abby? It seems like there’s something on your mind.”

I look down and take a spoonful into my mouth with a wince. Greek yogurt and frozen raspberries. You would think I would have learned by now that the combination doesn’t yield sweetness on my tongue. Even so, the tang feels strangely appropriate, echoing the tilt of my thoughts.

“Today’s three years since Grandpa died.” My voice breaks with the onset of tears I didn’t invite, and I look down into my bowl of crimson yogurt. My next words fall quiet under a wavering voice. I can’t look him in the eye. “I know it’s lame, I don’t know why I’m crying. It’s been three years. You’d think I’d be over it by now.”

He shakes his head and reaches across the table, hand extended. I look up through the blur of tears and slide my fingers tentatively into his. “It’s not lame,” he says quietly and surely, his warm eyes exuding comfort.

Grandpa never got to meet him, but I like to think that they would have gotten along. The Nebraska farm boy in Grandpa nodding to the Indiana boy who asked me out. They remind me of each other. Their love for the outdoors and afternoon walks and comfortable silence.

I wonder at how someone can fill your life up just by *being* in it. I wonder at how empty hands can feel after loss. And I wonder if one day I’ll forget the way Grandpa’s hands moved when they taught me to whistle with grass, or husked corn beside me on the front porch before dinner.

Afterword

“The lessons of impermanence taught me this: loss constitutes an odd kind of fullness; despair empties out into an unquenchable appetite for life.”

Gretel Ehrlich

Our lives are filled with transitions and changes: impermanence. The natural world shifts from season to season, our physical bodies grow and fail, friends move away, vacation ends, the people we love pass away. No one’s life is untouched by loss.

I have always been drawn to write about the ache, the tears, and the difficult. When my grandfather passed away suddenly at the beginning of my senior year of high school, that loss became the driving force for many of the stories I would write over the coming years. There’s a temptation for me to second guess my inclination to write stories about people who have lost something. As a Christian, shouldn’t my writing be marked by joy?

But there is far more to stories about loss than may initially meet the eye, as Ehrlich alludes to when she writes that “loss constitutes an odd kind of fullness.” The grief we feel when something is lost reveals how deeply that thing or person mattered to us, the pain demonstrating the value of what was held. In the losses we experience, we find our depth and capacity for life.

There is a paradox riddled throughout our lives here on earth: we are made for eternity, yet we experience impermanence. I am drawn to write stories about the space in the middle of that paradox.

“Hands” was the first piece of this project that I wrote. I wrote it several years after my grandfather passed away. Though I have many years’ worth of memories with him that remain strong, this piece focuses on a tangible, physical part of him that I cannot experience anymore—his hands. It is about the eternal impact that one person can have on another, even long after they are gone. Those small moments forged in the context of relationships accumulate, and have an incredible potency.

This emotional drive also forms the undercurrent for several other pieces in this project. While “Stones and Lilies” was initially born in response to a piece of visual art by the artist Christophe Gilbert, I also drew deeply from my relationship with my grandfather and my experience of grieving his loss. “The Mending” is another story in this project that deals with grief but from the perspective of a parent losing a child. In that piece I wrote about the process of healing that often occurs with time, while I also illustrated how the felt sense of loss often persists after healing.

“The Things We Cannot Keep” sheds a light on the topic of loss from a slightly different angle. While most of the pieces in this project are dealing with the loss that accompanies the death of a person, this piece looks at a lesser discussed topic in most evangelical conversation - the loss of material possessions. Here, I wanted to illustrate the attachment that we can have to the physicality of the world we live in, and raise questions about how that connects to our nature as eternal beings.

The poem “An Ache for What’s Behind” was written in an airport in Frankfurt, Germany, on the way home from a trip to Israel. That trip was a glimpse of heaven through the relationships, sights, and sense of belonging I experienced. I wrote this poem while pacing the airport terminal with tears in my eyes as we waited for our flight. I felt sad yet conflicted, because a trip seems like a small thing to mourn. This piece is an acknowledgement of the losses we grieve that may not be obvious or justified to others.

“See” is the fictionalized account of several homeless people that I met on a mission trip to Daytona Beach, Florida. It is meant to illuminate some of what many homeless people have lost, including possessions, family, dignity, and respect from others. Here the story explores the misconceptions that we can develop about people that keep us from knowing them and their stories and likewise, valuing them or grieving them.

When I think about how my work fits into the landscape of literature in the world, I go back to the stories that shaped me as a child. I was an avid reader of fantasy, and those stories fed my imagination and lured me toward other worlds. Stories like *The Giver* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* pulled me into the lives of characters who experience elements of the world that I know, but also elements of magic, or the supernatural.

Magical realism is a genre filled with stories that depict the natural world, yet with layers of depth and meaning through the addition of supernatural elements. I see elements of this genre in “Stones & Lilies” and “The Pianist.” This genre gives me space to write about grief and loss more closely than in a strictly fantasy world; there is room to dwell in the gritty ordinary details of life while incorporating a sense of eternity and the supernatural that cannot necessarily be explained.

Like “Stones and Lilies,” the short story “The Pianist” began in response to a piece of visual art. As the story developed, I found immense influences from works such as *The Giver* by Lois Lowry and *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino. *The Giver* explores the question of what happens when a city loses its memories and emotions, while *Invisible Cities* shows a myriad of imagined cities that each display themes of control, memory, and what it means to be human. In this story, I am exploring the role of emotions and creativity related to productivity, discipline, and control.

Ultimately, I envision the trajectory of this narrative going farther than the version of “The Pianist” that appears in this project.

Throughout this project, I am asking questions about what things are worth grieving, and what those losses tell us about what we were made for. I have no doubt that I will continue to process and wrestle with these questions for the rest of my life. My hope is that I can do so in a way that invites others to sit with these questions as well, and to ultimately find life in the midst of loss.