

growing things

The usual double-stomp of rubber boots on the front bridge. The whine of the screen door. Then in he burst, bucket in hand, eyes wide with childhood.

He was beseeching us to guess before he was halfway in the house, his first word lost in the flowerbed.

"...how many I got t'day!"

I could hear them knocking around in the salt beef bucket, like billiard balls rumbling in the belly of a pool table. Potatoes. Maybe seven or eight. Tiny and pitiful and good enough for him.

"Five!"

Five reasons to not wait for anyone's guess.

The scholar emerged from muddy plaid and took his place on the couch, entombed by paperbacks and the first draft of a novel. He took a pen from his pocket, opened his notebook to the back cover, and made five short strokes: four straight-up and one diagonal slashing victoriously through. I could hear it from across the living room.

Ten years ago, I would have rolled my eyes. When other dads were skilled fishermen and farmers, mine was master of the metaphor and MacBeth. I was ashamed. Now, I just pretended to be. To treat him the same. To keep things normal.

His thumb was not green but grey with the smudgery of sonnets and sermons. But potatoes were another form of poetry, willed from dead space with living, breathing enthusiasm. His hands were meant to turn pages, not soil, nor fat cod drying on Fogo flakes. At sixteen, he boarded the ferry – to grow his vocabulary, a family, and a scattered stunted spud on a less isolated patch of land.

We were both growing things now. Me, a baby. Him, a tumor. Both feeding off our bodies, getting bigger and stronger and ready to ruin everything. I hurled deals into the great beyond – *Take this, let me keep that*. But I kept getting rounder, which I took as a big fat forget-about-it.

A grapefruit had been growing in dad's bowel for ten, maybe twenty years. Like a story unfolding while the protagonist's back is turned; he realizes his role midway through the final chapter.

The unluckiest kind of cancer: the one with no symptoms until it has its own postal code. The day they cut it out was the day I saw its replacement – wiggling around on the screen like an upside-down beetle. Three inches of terrible timing.

The size of a new, pink eraser, found on the floor of the high school hallway, now at home in my sweaty palm. When I was a little girl, dad would take me with him to fetch a book he had forgotten, or make copies of an English quiz on the giant Xerox machine. I'd snoop around the musty staff room and its glorious towers of paper. Steel typewriters were sentinels on every desk, glaring at me with snaggy,

metal teeth, warning me to keep my hands to myself. Before we headed home, dad would find a scribbler and stick it in my pocket. Jackpot. I hoarded them in the bottom drawer of my dresser, rarely making a mark. Blank pages were pressed silk, too easily ruined by an imperfect thought or dangling participle.

Here in my hand now – a photo of my own child. A surge of reality turns it to sandpaper, scratching my fingerprints off until I'm nobody special.

One soul would enter stage left, the other exit stage right. Would they cross paths, brush shoulders, share the space long enough to sprout something forgettable. Or would they pass like dandelion snow on the wind, miss one another by a breath that may as well be a lifetime because, either way, they're strangers. For nine months I waddled around and wondered, trying to believe in miracles, occasionally pondering what would happen to the order of things to come if I threw myself down the stairs.

I remember when these stairs were carpeted orange shag. I'd stomp up to my room, propelling all my teenage angst downward through my body into each stupid step.

"Don't be so opprobrious!"

I drove him to his vocabulary's edge. Once, after I had slammed my bedroom door with tectonic-plate-shifting rage, he came up to my room, took the drawers out of my dresser one by one, and dumped the contents onto the floor, then left without a word. I wrote an apology with fancy glitter pens.

I'm sorry. With a sad face in gold metallic ink.

I was a sad face on a prize pumpkin perched on the edge of his bed when the doctor said the second surgery was a flop. The only hope for a cure, flushed away with my mucus plug. The young surgeon said he still had hope, but I could smell a rotting plum down the hall and the stench of bullshit in his every word. The dead-end news was a rusty trowel in my gut all the way to China. Dad just stared out the window, smiling at the crocuses poking through the patchy March snow.

I lay in a tub of scalding water, silent and numb, a massive earthworm making waves beneath the taut skin of my belly, reminding me I was still alive.

Dad lived in a fortress of paper, bookmarks jutting out to trip those who would disrupt him. I'd approach gingerly, extending a story to be graded. He'd put down his book or journal or pile of essays on Julius Caesar and turn to accept my loose leaf, feigning interest in my fat, curly typography. He'd speed-read my meager work, his lips and eyebrows fox-trotting around his face, mesmerized by my genius.

"Well done, daughter!"

He made his mark in just the right spot; never the same thing twice. I'd have another tale for him within the hour. And a sandwich made with every possible ingredient in the fridge, including his own tomatoes he grew out back in the greenhouse that used to be the dog pen.

Dad's stitches were closing around his decaying liver, and my eight-pound mass was ready for harvest. But nine days past my due date, I was still holding him in, making time stand still, delaying this and whatever else was about to rock my

world. We'd all live off this hope, this little black and white ultrasound picture in my purse. It'd be Christmas Eve forever, the anticipation of good things bringing more joy than their arrival and the sinking knowledge that it'll all soon be over.

By day ten, I was overthrown by the sheer animal urge to bear down. And then there he was: the living, breathing proof that time had passed, things had grown, change was upon us. He was sucking vigorously on the air, searching blindly for my breast. He had just broken my vagina; now he wanted another piece of me. Fast-forward a few months and he'd be laughing hysterically as they lower my father into the ground.

He found his home in the hollow of poppy's chest where I spent many a morning reading storybooks to the bass drum of his heart. Both their faces: perfect calm. Like they knew something nobody else did. The moment swept me away, then dragged me back to earth with a crushing smack of irony: here is the man I will bury, holding the boy who will bury me. Less than an inch of flesh and flannel lay between brand new and irreparably broken. There was a fucked-up beauty in it; I see it now. The meaning of life, colliding in a little blue blanket.

The summer sun let us forget if not heal. Inside, organs were quietly packing it in, ready to call it a life. Outside, we pretended we would all live forever. We danced around the cancer, almost thankful for the bastard because at least we had fair warning. A neighbour had dropped dead with a massive heart attack, lying on the floor in a pool of things left unsaid.

Dad finished his book and grew strawberries, small and pale but sweet. And I grew to love my child, our distraction from the truth, our one perfect thing. Dirty diapers, ceaseless crying, sleepless nights: it was pure joy because it wasn't grief. By October, the leaves were falling faster and the sands in the hourglass followed suit, swishing by like the beach was finally calling them home. But dad was slowing down, the pain in his side making it difficult for him to walk. He took his meals on the couch with a dishtowel on his chest for a bib, the checkered cloth enabling a feeble game of peek-a-boo, the boy pulling himself up from the floor to pull away the rag.

"Boo."

Each time, poppy was still there, to both of our surprise.

I retrieved a notebook from my bottom drawer, unperturbed after all these years. I flipped the pages past my nose. Typewriter ribbons and mildew. The sweet aroma of a simpler time.

The slanted garden sank into a morphine slumber, crab grass filling in the spaces like it was never there. I collected his poems in a banana box; the colour of the paper whispered the age of each piece – from parched sunflower gold to new lily white.

I christen the little notebook. How do you spell eulogy? That looks right, but not next to the word dad.

A green, die-cast train comes to a halt at the base of the casket, a boy crawling after it, grunting with glee. Four feet above him his grandfather's hands are folded upon one another. They look odd without a book, or a pen, or a bucket of something plucked from the earth. His face is sunken and clay-like and not his own, but he is surrounded by his favourite things so I know it's him: books, flowers, trees at each corner of his coffin in rich forest green, and people – their faces proud and kind and resilient.

I pick up my boy who chortles at the sight, blissfully oblivious to the colossal shift that has just occurred beneath my feet. There *he* is and here *he* is, the bookends of my existence. The front pocket of my boy's overalls, where a frog should be, is the perfect size for a notebook.

I imagine the casket brimming with tiny potatoes, their gnarly eyes following me around the floral wallpapered room.