

An old man lays very still on his deathbed, clinging to the diminishing air of life about him. Across the room sits his son and daughter-in-law whose faces are no longer visible behind the veil of surrendered grief, not to mention decades of worsening cataracts and presbyopia. Their mourning figures meld into the dimming background of what will certainly be his final image before the curtains draw closed, where the centre of attention is on the granddaughter clinging to the bedposts, whose youthful ignorance insulates her from the poisonous sorrow of the scene, who radiates a liveliness the old man has to expend every last shortened breath trying to recall the feeling of. The feeling of being six years old again, watching his grandmother's chest rise and fall just as softly as the snow outside the bedroom window. He can see it again, just as vividly as he did all those years back, the way his own reflection in her eyes grew clearer just as the depth in her eyes slowly disappeared. She breathed in a slow, strained breath, and began to whisper so quietly that he had to move his face right up to hers to hear.

'If you had asked me when I was younger when the happiest time of my life would be, looking back at it all now, I never would have thought that the honest answer would be so recent as these past six years. I could never have imagined until you came along how much it would fill my heart to be given another chance to watch those first few years of a life yet lived. Not even when I had your father did I realize this, back when I was still so young and distracted by all those things that I can only now laugh at and wonder why I worried so much about. By the time you came along, I had at last come to learn what truly mattered to me, all the little things worthy of my excitement and despair alike.

'Remember when your father first brought you here? And this house was a whole new world for you to explore. Despite our every effort to stop you, you crawled nearly every inch of it before you hit your head beneath the coffee table.

'Remember when you had just begun to walk on those two stubborn legs of yours, how you'd use the curtains in the living room to hold on to? And then one time after making it nearly five steps on your own, you stumbled and grasped for the curtains, only to pull them all down in a heap on top of you, flailing and crying.

'Remember when you had been found by your parents flipping through an anatomy book from the bookcase of that same living room, and how they thought that you shouldn't be looking at all these pictures of men and women without clothes on, so they tore it from your innocent grasp and put it out of reach on the top shelf? Remember how, when they had left the room for hardly a minute, how you clambered up the bookcase using each shelf like a rung on a ladder? And when mom and dad came rushing back in to the sound of your cries, they could only watch in helpless horror as the whole shelf tipped over onto you. Oh how relieved they were to see you emerge unharmed, either laughing or crying, from a pile of paperbacks in between two of the heavy wooden shelf-boards.

'Remember, too, that frigid winter morning, I was making you oatmeal in the kitchen. It was just about to come to a boil in the pot, when your mother called the phone in the other room to ask about you, so that by the time I got back to the kitchen, there you were, next to the overturned pot on the ground crying a pitch that nearly shattered my heart. You, standing there,

in a steaming pool of milk and rolled oats. I remember more clearly than anything the pain I felt deep inside myself at having to watch the hot milk soak, faster than my frail legs could carry me to save you, through the fibres of the wool socks I knitted just two weeks ago when the weather began to chill. Then, how selfishly painful still it was to listen to, from behind closed doors, your father plead desperately to your furious mother not to take you away from me. How terrible it was to know that it was my fault more than anyone else's that you, oh my brave grandson, had to live for the rest of your life with those burns on your feet. That you'd never again be able to walk, run, and explore the world the way you always deserved to.

'I hope you remember all of that. If I can ask of you one last thing, after you've already given me so much, and oh how I regret that I have taken from you even more, please remember this for me. Please remember how you cried so that one day, when you're older, you can look back at it and laugh. And more than that, remember how you laughed so that one day, when you're older, you will know your own childrens' laughter.'

And before he managed to promise her that he would, she fell into a deep, breathless sleep.

The grandson kept repeating those memories and those words to himself on the car ride home. He wasn't sure how to describe how he felt, not so much sadness as an inspired determination to make good on his unheard promise. He felt, perhaps for the first time in his life, something other than a whimsical curiosity with the vast world around him, but instead, a passionate conviction that there was something to live towards, something to motivate his every step into the unknown.

He repeated those memories and words to himself for most of the rest of his life. Perhaps the exact wording and details of those memories varied over time as his perspectives and vocabulary evolved, but the underlying sentiment, what he felt in those oft replayed moments, those never changed. Like so, he was guided by this unwavering light for many years.

As for the boy's scarred feet, they healed up remarkably well and scarcely hindered his ability to move about. He even managed to overcome his fear of stovetops within a few years and had no trouble walking barefoot on gravelly beaches in a few years more.

When the time came, ten years later, that his grandfather was about to pass, the teenage boy found himself having to kneel down at that same bedside to meet his grandfather's gaze that already seemed a thousand miles away. Eagerly but solemnly, he awaited for the silence to be broken, what grand prophecies or sage words would come forth from this man who always seemed to say so little, perhaps, after having seen so much. He stared deep into his grandfather's eyes, searching for something, anything, to hold onto before it was too late. He waited and waited until it seemed that the rays of the summer dusk had already grown dimly red and horizontal through the bedroom window, casting their motionless silhouettes on the opposite wall. No matter how deeply he reached, his grandfather seemed to sink deeper still.

In this moment, his patience began to wear thin, and his grandfather could see it clear as day, the way a hemp rope stretches and narrows as it chafes against even a polished rock for an eternity. But to the grandchild, no longer able to see himself in the depths of those eyes, he was

blinded by his unreigned yearning for some sort of worldly sentiment, and deafened by frustration in this unending silence. For now, more than ever before, he needed something to hold onto. The boy often saw his life as a naval journey whose course took him through all sorts of trials and treasures, but he was always at the mercy of a merciless or, worse, indifferent God that paid no attention to his muted cries amid what had become, in recent years, he felt, an unending storm.

Not yet even a man but wearied nonetheless, how ignorantly blissful that younger version of himself seemed to him now. The little boy that fought with such determination enemies that paled in comparison to what he now faced, back then guided with such naïve conviction from the nectarine rhetoric of an old dying woman who couldn't possibly have seen nor foreseen what challenges awaited. Trials of social rejection and emotional alienation. To have grown apart from childhood friends who busy themselves with various frivolous activities and cliques. And, even worse, when they try and fail in their mutual nostalgia for times past to rekindle what's already been reduced to ashes. To convince himself that he's met the most beautiful and peculiar girl, only to find that she feels the exact same way towards somebody other than himself. Or worse, to find that she feels the exact same way towards him, but for that initial excitement to be crushed by the gradual realization that the contents of his mind fall, once more, on deaf ears. To be surrounded by people he felt could not possibly understand him and who would only ever see in him a lunatic should he open his mind to them. To force himself to bite his tongue while hearing out the ramblings of friends who spill their guts to him about all their troubles, usually petty, only sometimes grave, begging for salvation from, for answers to these unanswerable questions that he's become sick of hearing from people who never seem to realize that he's already asked himself these same questions a thousand times and failed to answer them a thousand more. To grow sick of hearing how everything happens to you, you are at the centre of the storm that only you know. You are the only ship at sea that anything ever happens to, and all those others are just an accompaniment to your heroic story. To watch people he tries and fails to save fall from the tightrope, nearly dragging him along with them. To give a damn about something that actually matters where nobody else did, only to accomplish nothing at all. To be told by everyone around him things they do not understand. To realize that he's not the hero, that he's just like everyone else desperately searching for something to hold on to.

It's at times like this, here in his grandparents' darkened bedroom awaiting his grandfather's death, that his grandmother's words sound only contemptible to him. Most of the time, he receives from them blissful energy. But every now and then, he finds himself in a tortured place where they cannot reach him, and he wishes there was something of an entirely different nature to help him in this transcendent, confusing realm.

And so, wordlessly, his grandfather smiles gently, closes his eyes, and never opens them again.

On the car ride home, the boy was deeply troubled. He was furious at his grandfather for leaving him with not even a word. No grand sentiment nor guiding light. He felt, as he often did in those days, utterly lost. Admittedly, he had been secretly anticipating his grandfather's

weakening condition because he had hoped that, in that bedroom on that night, he would hear something to renew himself, return the colour to his life that his grandmother gave him ten years ago. A small part of him though, questioned whether he should instead be upset with himself. That perhaps there was something he had yet to understand, and that this seed of doubt would only grow in him over time.

Hardly did he bother himself much with this latter memory for most of the rest of his life. Instead, he lived by those cherished memories from his grandmother alone. To this end, he was very successful. He met a woman with whom they shared a love more than anyone they had ever known. They had a son, whom they loved even more than that. At times he found himself infatuated with worldly passion. Such was the case when he married his beloved wife in a private ceremony in the woods, away from the judgment of friends and family. When he delivered his dear son after nearly crashing into an ambulance pulling into the hospital. Such memories he would continue to hold dear to his heart up until his death. But there were other times when this worldly passion quite nearly destroyed him. When his wife dangerously miscarried on two subsequent attempts to have more children. When he lost his job and fell into alcoholism during an economic recession whose sociopolitical dynamics he was utterly powerless against. When he let himself be seduced by a younger woman at his workplace and then could not bear his guilt upon hearing his wife's pained forgiveness. When, despite his every attempt to be the father he always wished he had, his son ran away from home at fourteen, only to turn up on their doorstep five months later with a look in his eyes that told of unspeakable horrors; the father never dared ask about them. When his wife began to let herself be consumed by thoughts of self-destruction, not unlike those friends he knew from his school days. When he lost her to a fall from the balcony of their small apartment on the tenth floor, described in the obituary as a tragic accident. Despite all that had happened, not to him so much as the people he had sworn to protect, he somehow always found his way back to that cozy bedroom staring deep into his grandmother's eyes. Or else he would never have been able to save his son from what he had let him fall into. To see his granddaughter grow up under these tirelessly caring eyes.

To open himself to her penetrating gaze, as he does now in the hospital bed, in his final moments living in this turbulent universe at the dawn of a fine spring day. Outside the window, the morning rush hour has picked up. Outside the closed door, the commotion of doctors, nurses, and patients rushing to and fro grows louder. It is here that he finds himself somewhere beautiful, tranquil.

Only now he does he recall once again the evening of his grandfather's death. The look on his face just before he closed his eyes, he sees it clearly now, was the look one has when he uncovers a dusty artifact that he remembers fondly from his childhood. It was the look of recognition. His grandfather could see the fervor in his grandson's soul through those desperately pleading eyes, and in them his grandfather saw himself, knew exactly how his grandson felt at that very moment. And chose, perhaps in vain, to try to share with his grandson an ounce of the serenity he could only then have made use of, but could only now understand.

His granddaughter is only ten years old now. He considers carefully how what he might say, or not say, would affect the course of her life. Though, what he comes to realize is that no matter what he ends up doing or saying, he must trust that she will find her own way to a place not necessarily the same as his own, and that only in this blind faith amid the senseless wind, will she ever lead herself from stage to stage. For now, he is about to pass through the final stage himself, beyond which the river empties into the vast, stagnant deep.