

Under a Willow Tree

Demonstrating the Use of Creative Writing in
Understanding Architecture

by
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A thesis
presented to the University Of Waterloo
in fulfillment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Architecture

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2024
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Author' s Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

How might our personal state of mind change how space is perceived? At a very emotionally heightened moment, like when someone is dying, how might two people standing in the same room see it differently? This is a thought experiment that questions our assumptions as designers. What could we design and control? What should we design and control?

This thesis dives deep into these ideas by directly examining thoughts, emotions, perceptions through creative writing. I wrote a fictional story following two characters. A grandmother as she grows weaker and eventually dies and her granddaughter caring and grieving for her. I hope to demonstrate the potential in using creative writing as a tool for designing architecture.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank Val for being a very supportive supervisor for a very unusual thesis. Thank you for getting me through my moments of crisis. I still can't believe I was allowed to make this.

I want to thank my panel, thank you for your time and feedback.

I have to thank my family, who shall never read this thesis and that is for the better. But I need to thank you none the less for you are the original inspiration of this story. You are the reason it is shaped as it is. And of course, thank you for your unending support.

Finally, I want to thank all the friends I've made throughout this journey. Before now, I could not even imagine the love and dedication I see in our friendships. Thank you for all the support, for I feel you all made this journey a joyful one.

Dedication

This story is dedicated to the women of my family. Your strength, bravery and grit inspire me.

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Front Matter

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Prologue

Praying in the Hospital

Pearl

“The tests came back,” the doctor said, a mask of calm and compassion painted on his face “it’s not looking good.”

I am not surprised; this doctor is not very skilled in his bedside manners, I knew it was bad the moment he walked in. The doctor went on about treatments options and I tried to keep up. “Do you understand what I am saying?” No. I don’t... And I don’t want to. “I can write it down for you. Can you read?” I shake my head no; I have had quite enough for today. Hospitals are simply too much. The bright lights tire my eyes, the smell of disinfectants makes me nauseous. I want to leave. I want to go home.

This prayer is meant to squeeze time and space. Because Pearl is praying while she is listening to her diagnosis, but also later as she is waiting for her cab. I do want a jarring moment, as if the reader is an elderly woman in the hospital who simply wants to go home. But not actual confusion and issues keeping up.

Pearl is introduced here, and I am rather concerned about this first impression of her personality. There is a fine line between stubborn and stupid. I believe she is someone that knows herself and when she says she's done, she is done. For others looking in, her stance needs to look uneducated, their opinions tinged with ageism.

I repeat the prayer over and over and over. As each bead slides past my fingers, I pray for guidance, I pray for peace. Chanting under my breath over and over and over again.

Hospital staff rushes past me, rattling. They are pushing a very old man, his body choking with each breath, a nurse holding an oxygen mask to his face. He is struggling to live.

I return to my prayers. The rhythm soothes me, grounds me. I feel the fine grain of each wooden bead as they pass until I reach the beginning. I bow my head and reflect.

He was not struggling to live. He was struggling to die.

I look at myself, here in this hospital waiting room. I can see where this will lead.

The cab is here. Good. I do not wish to be here. I wish to be in my home when I die.

Chapter 1

Home Again

Sunny

“Don’t forget to leave early for Andy’s piano lessons. The class starts at 6pm but there is always traffic going in that direction, so you have to be out the door by 5:30 at the latest.” I remind him as I fidget with the seatbelt of the cab.

“I know, I know. It’s all under control.” I can almost hear my husband Chris rolling his eyes over the phone at me, but I can’t help worrying. I’ve never been away for an extended period. A business trip here or there, a weekend away with the girls. Nothing like this.

“I could send you a reminder. With the time difference-”

“Sunny!” Chris interrupts sharply. “Your grandmother is dying.”

This is where Sunny is introduced. Here and with the first few chapters, Sunny is meant to be a willful person that likes to maintain control. She does not listen; she is not very observant. The cab ride passes a beautiful scenery, but she barely sees it. She is preoccupied with the future and ideals. Being called home by her grandmother is not something she planned for and that is a problem in and of itself.

While Sunny's husband Chris is a side character, I think it is good to first understand who Sunny is as a mother and a wife. Sunny can leave Chris with the kids for this extended period; Chris is a good and present parent and husband. Sunny likes to maintain control not because she has to, but because she wants to.

“Don't say that” I whisper.

“But it's true. You need to be there for her, and you can't do that if you're mentally here with me. I can hold down the fort at home while you're gone.” Chris sighs softly. “Have a little more faith in me.”

I know he's right, but it feels like admitting defeat. I consciously release the death grip I had on the seat belt. “Okay. I'll call you again tomorrow. I love you.”

“I love you too.” Chris said and the call clicks to an end.

I guess there is nothing left to do but wait. I stare out at the distant mountains in the passing landscape. The mountains here are famously beautiful, featured in many poems and paintings. They say they're incredibly tranquil. I know it to be true, but I do not see the empirical evidence before my eyes right now. This scenic route is wasted on me, I know.

The separation anxiety has been building up. I barely slept during the 14-hour flight or the 6-hour train ride that followed. Now that I'm on

the final leg of the journey, the adrenaline that has been keeping me going is starting to fade.

I cannot stand idleness; I pull out my phone from muscle memory alone. One pointless task after another. Clearing my inbox, checking my calendars, scrolling through my social media feeds. A visual of a cartoon monkey, erratic in his craving for entertainment flashes in my mind. I push it away and keep scrolling. What else am I to do?

It is an eternity before I finally arrived.

The cab barely rolls to a stop before I hear the bellows of Aunt Mai.

“Pearl! Pearl! She’s here!” She screeches into the house.

Mai is one of maybe a dozen adults I referred to as aunt or uncle as a child. I had forgotten about her; quite a feat considering just how exuberant Aunt Mai is. “Pearl! Pearl! Where are you?” She continues to yell.

“Hi Aunt Mai” I force a smile. I wonder why she’s here. I did not have to wonder for long.

“The moment I knew you were coming; I knew I had to give your grandmother a hand. Pearl’s arthritis makes it rather difficult sometimes as I’m sure you know.” A pause. I nod and smile. She’s digging for dirt. Of course. “So, I had to come by and help air out some rooms, help with dinner. Your grandmother insisted on fish. Said it’s your favourite.”

“That is my favourite,” I comment halfheartedly as I heave my suitcases out of the trunk and pay the cab

I changed the relationship between the two main characters and Mai, this supporting character. I did not want the added complexity of additional family members, wishing to focus solely on the relationship between Pearl and Sunny. Mai could also be a great way to frame Pearl as a character. Mai and Pearl, being older, act as options for Sunny to choose between, what does she want to be when she grows up?

Pearl protects Sunny. Where Pearl behaves somewhat as a sounding board and they can talk about thoughts and opinions, not just life updates. Mai is the judgmental friend that makes everything a competition. She is the friend that will readily help when asked because she is a good friend, but she does have the ulterior motive of nosing around in your business and lending a helping hand is a great opportunity to do just that.

driver. The best way to deal with Aunt Mai is to have her say her fill. That I do remember

“Pearl talks so much about you. Got a fancy job overseas.” I nod, tugging the suitcases up the stone steps, silently berating myself for packing so much. “Does it pay well? How are the hours?”

“It’s alright.”

A tall, pimply teenage boy appears out from behind me and picks up my suitcases. “I’ll put this at the top of the steps.” He vanishes as quickly as he appears, I didn’t get a good enough look at him. “Thank you!” I called after him.

I spot Grandma for the first time as she rounds the corner. “My sunshine. You’re home.” I rush to her. Grandma pulls me into a great embrace and the world stops spinning quite so fast. I squeeze back tight.

I pull back first, I want to take a close look at her. I know she’s doing the same for me. Grandma has aged, more white hairs, more wrinkles around her eyes. But her body does

not seem frail, and she smiled as bright as ever.

“My granddaughter. All grown up.” Grandma tears up, a wobble in her voice.

I pull her into another hug. “Don’t cry.” I always hated it when I made her cry. Even if these are happy tears.

“Child, you must be so tired from the journey.” She wipes away her tears. “Go upstairs and clean up a little. Dinner is almost ready. You can eat a little something and rest up.” Grandma leads me deeper into the house, as if I need a guide here.

I take a deep, cleansing breath when I finally get upstairs. Mai’s pestering questions are suffocating. And Grandma.... She’s just hard to look at right now.

I head directly to the bathroom, wanting to wash off the grime of the long journey here.

I startle to a stop when I open the door. I feel dizzy staring at the tiles, but there is nowhere else to look. Of course, I knew about the upgrades Grandma made to the house, I was the one to advocate for it. In fact, I

Sunny is jumping between two stances regarding her childhood home, her grandmother’s home. She does not need anyone to show her around, it’s her house, she is at home here. But in the bathroom, it is not decorated in the way she would want, Sunny puts aside her preferences because it’s not her place. She’s a visitor to this house, not a resident.

remember being pregnant with Mikey at the time. I was pulling up samples on my laptop while talking with her on the phone while Chris rubbed my very swollen feet. That was four years ago.

I'm seeing it all for the first time now. I remember helping Grandma choose the tile pattern, a variation on delft tiles since she loved porcelain so much. I knew that she wanted it everywhere, but I didn't realize how everywhere she wanted it. The resulting effect is very... visually stimulating.

I'm sure it makes her happy, so that's all that matters. Even if moderation should have been exercised here for a more balanced appearance. It's not my place to complain. I love that she loves it.

I move past my personal distaste and enter the bathroom. There isn't enough time for a thorough cleanse, dinner is almost ready. I wipe down my face and neck with a towel and some warm water. A stark contrast from the choice of either ice-cold water from the well outside or boiling water in a kettle. The magic of indoor plumbing.

As I wring out the towel, I look in the mirror; my intrusive thoughts take over. *This is the medicine cabinet.*

I know I shouldn't snoop. *But it is my duty*, I convince myself. *Grandma struggles with the language sometimes. Maybe she misunderstood the doctor!?!* The imaginary devil on my shoulder is very persuasive. A good excuse to have when one is knowingly crossing boundaries.

I open the medicine cabinet. I have no idea know what's I'm looking at; but that's what the internet was for. I snap a few photos to refer to later. But as I struggle through the multitude of pill bottles, I elbow a cup onto the floor.

The tin cup clatters to the ground. "Shit!" I clap my hand over my mouth before I attract any more attention.

Returning the cup to its place, I noticed the items on the vanity for the first time. Grandma has been brushing her teeth with the same tin cup for as long as I can remember. The same ancient tin cup now has a few more dents in it. The same carved wooden comb, now cracked at the handle. So much time has passed, time I was not here.

I squirm in discomfort but quickly shift my attention elsewhere. I carefully place all the pill bottles and countertop items back in their places. I look in the mirror, adjust my blouse collar and head downstairs.

"You're just on time, go bring these to the table for me." Grandma

Over the course of the first 2 chapters approximately, Sunny exists in spaces but does not always experience those spaces. She is a busybody and preoccupied by her own thoughts and opinions. The moment in the bathroom is the first of many breaks where she suddenly sees her surroundings. As the first of these moments, it starts out briefly and as something Sunny is capable of removing herself from.



1 – Tin Cup

hands a large bowl of steaming soup to me and rushes back into the kitchen.

On the way to the dining room, I pass the teenage boy from earlier, putting away a bucket and mop before leaving the house. I finally get a good look at his face but still can't recognize him.

I set down the soup and return to the kitchen to grab the utensils. "Who's the kid?" I ask Grandma.

"You might remember the teachers that live just down the street" Grandma walks around the counter as

she talks. “Their son comes by after school and helps around the house for a little extra cash.”

“Right around the bend?” I ask as she grabs the utensils and from me and points at a plate of steamed fish. “He’s quite large for his age, isn’t he? I remember him turning two right before I left for university.”

“Kids grow, it’s what they do. That kid is very strong though. He helps carry in the firewood. He’s a good kid.”

I nod with agreement. “He seems like a good kid.” But then I recall the mop he was putting away. Is Grandma having so much trouble that she can’t mop the floors either?

“Grandma, is your back hurting again? You should have said something!”

“Stop fussing.” She waves off with annoyance. “My back is fine, my feet are fine, my knees are fine. The child wants to make some extra money, he’s trying to save up for school. I found a few extra things around the house for him to do. Don’t fuss over nothing.”

There’s this idea that time goes by faster as you age. As children, waiting till next week takes forever but when we’re older, a week is gone in a flash. There is obviously a large age difference between Pearl, the grandmother, and Sunny, her granddaughter. The items Sunny is seeing on the vanity stretch back in time, nearly an infinite amount. Now, Pearl is not asked, but the idea is that if she was, she would be able to say, I remember purchasing the tin cup, the wooden comb. It is not from forever ago, it was only a few years ago.

I have not used this idea of talking to oneself too much, but this is something I would like to explore. This is different from simply thinking, there is an internal debate. It is something that should fade away as the story continues and Sunny’s character develops more, her thoughts become less conflicting.

I am finding this first chapter somewhat hard to navigate. On one hand, Sunny knows that she is being summoned home to care for her dying grandmother. But Sunny does not want to admit that her grandmother is actually dying, she is still holding out on a miracle.

The grandmother, Pearl, wants Sunny to come home and she wants them to spend time together before she dies. However, Pearl is at this current point, not extremely weak, nor does she wish to be. Pearl does not want anyone to think she is incapable, but Pearl also wants Sunny to feel the need to be there. Should Pearl be playing up the cases where she is weak, or should she be playing them down?

Which of course, prompts me to think a lot more about it. My mind is racing through scenarios. The firewood is obviously inconvenient, but this is an old part of town and it's too expensive for the city to add gas lines and too expensive for a lot of residents to cook and heat through electricity alone. It's a lot cheaper to pay a teenager from down the street to come by with firewood than to hike the electricity bill that much. Completely reasonable arrangement.

But mopping the floors? Grandma has a habit of keeping things clean. When I was growing up, I received a lot of criticism from her on the way I mopped. "With no strength and no enthusiasm." Grandma used to say. I can't quite imagine that task being delegated. *She's lying* said the voice in my head.

I look back at Grandma, examining her as she reaches to put food into her bowl and mine. "Eat, eat. Before the food gets cold."

Grandma is old, not incapable. Not much has changed, I'm convinced. Only a few additions to

the porcelain shelf. A different set of scroll paintings by the doorway, the old ones were tattered anyway. Same plaster walls. Same polished wood floors. Same antique carved furnishings.

The cobwebs in the corners? It's hard to reach so high up. Grandma shouldn't be balancing on chairs like that anyway. The dust gathering on the porcelain? It's not like we eat off those plates. I must have finally convinced her that cleaning is not a valid hobby.

So, I brush away the cobwebs.

Sunny is the Main Character while Pearl is the Protagonist. It is mainly the actions, decision and experiences of Pearl that moves the story forward. But the Sunny is influenced by the events of the story, changing her view etc and experiencing spaces in different ways.

Chapter 2

Shopping

Pearl

I am not a fan of these tactics, but it is necessary for the sake of time. Even if I don't truly know how much time I have left. I can tell from the tension during last night's dinner conversations, Sunny is not taking my diagnosis well. She expects the dying to be so weak that they are practically gone already. I do not care to linger in such an undignified state.

So, today's planned trip will go even worse than I had initially assumed. I suspect Sunny might not even go with me if she wasn't ambushed. Which is exactly why I set the scene here today.

I forced myself out of bed at the ungodly hour of 4:30am. I did my morning prayers before I went to make breakfast, a truly labourous task with the wood stove. I

could have compromised and made a simpler meal, but my Sunny hasn't been home in so long, I want to make all her favourites. I cleaned up the kitchen and was dressed and ready to go out.

Such efforts are not good for my health, but I promise to be more careful. I have no desire to relive the incident at the market last month. Very silly of me, getting up early to get a few things done around the house, only to have my blood sugar drop while I'm out shopping at the morning market. Such a fuss it made.

When Sunny arrived downstairs for breakfast at 7:36am, a very respectable hour especially considering the last few days of travel she endured, I made a point to hurry her through breakfast.

"Do you think you can be ready to leave in 15 minutes?" I feel guilty suggesting it, but it is a necessary evil. I silently pray for forgiveness.

"Um. I can try. Where are we heading today?" Sunny says with a yawn. She seems decently rested but the dark circles around her eyes point to a much deeper weariness.

I guide her to sit and eat, rushing her along. "Errands. Shopping." It's not a lie. Not technically. It's just not informative.

She nods, digging into the breakfast I made. "It's as good as I remembered." A retribution, though I doubt Sunny would agree.

I do feel bad, but I do not know how I might get her in the car otherwise.

Sunny

“You want to go shopping at a cemetery!?!?!?”

I was beginning to nod off in the taxi ride here, until I saw us turn into the driveway very clearly marked as a cemetery. A very rude awakening.

“Yes. I was thinking of picking out a cemetery plot. I would really appreciate your opinions on the matter.” Grandma says so matter-of-factly, completely disregarding my shock. “I made an appointment. Do try to be polite.” She says like I’m a misbehaving child.

I suppose I am like a misbehaving child, given how my first instinct was to pout and refuse to leave the cab. I hesitate but step out with little fuss. I guess I should find out what this appointment is about.

“Sunny! Say hello to Mr. Zhou. He is the cemetery facilities manager and will be showing us the grounds today.” Grandma waves me over, where a bulky middle-aged man with greying temples eagerly shakes my hands.

“Very nice to meet you, Sunny. I’ve heard so much about you.” His smile is impossibly bright, his handshake is overly firm. Not firm like those pissing contests that sometimes happen in the boardroom, but like a gentle giant who doesn’t know his own strength.

“Hello, Mr. Zhou.” I say with a tense smile. I want to dislike him, but that wouldn’t be fair.

“Should we jump right in?” Mr. Zhou was practically giddy with excitement, “The cemetery is quite large and I’m afraid I would need to leave you to your own devices in an hour.”

The character Mr. Zhou I did not plan for, and very much created and edited on the fly. He is necessary because there are a lot of questions asked in these situations and Pearl is not a character that would depend on online research to answer her questions. I had started with Mr. Zhou holds is cemetery operator, someone who would know a lot about the cemetery as a space and may be charged with the work of selling burial plots and doing all the behind-the-scenes paperwork. There was a major conflict of interest there, should Mr. Zhou in any way shape or form be a salesman, Sunny would take up the role of Grandma's greatest warrior; attentively listening, frequently questions to avoid the emotional manipulation of her elderly grandma.

This is why Mr. Zhou's position in the cemetery was revised to be a facilities manager, someone operating the forklifts, raking the leaves, and digging the graves. Sunny would then ease her combative nature and

I'm still in shock that I am here at all. "An hour sounds like quite a lot of time." Trying to get a sense of what to expect from this guided tour.

"Not at all!" I might not dislike Mr. Zhou, but his enthusiasm certainly grates me nerves, especially first thing in the morning. "The cemetery has many sections that are very different. And I know your grandmother will have a lot of questions." Giving Grandma a winning smile. "And before I forget!" Mr. Zhou hands each of us a pamphlet, "There is a map of the property at the back."

I fold it up and stick it I my back pocket without so much as a glance. I don't see why I would need to know.

"Oh yes." Grandma pulls out her reading glasses and a slip of paper. She looks back and forth from her notes and the map, "Mr. Zhou, would you mind if we take a look at the shrine first?"

"Of course!" Mr. Zhou waves us over to an old, rusted cart, "Sorry it's a bit dirty, working vehicle." He attempts to dust off the area with

his hands but Grandma waves him off. Pulling out her napkins from her purse and giving the seats a quick wipe.

“No need to worry.” Grandma is always prepared, normally a good thing. But I wouldn’t be here today if she wasn’t so eagerly planning her funeral now, would I? “Plus, you’re doing us such a great favour, letting us intrude on your workday.”

Mr. Zhou starts off the old vehicle with a sputter, “No problem at all. Happy to help.”

Something doesn’t seem quite right. Grandma said Mr. Zhou does... what? “Mr. Zhou, do you not normally run tours?”

“No, this would be my first! There is a separate presentation where most people interested in purchasing a plot would attend. Pearl asked so many questions that she was referred to me instead.” He really is rather enthusiastic about this opportunity to lead a tour. It’s a shame it’s for a cemetery and not a garden or zoo.

“Mr. Zhou is the best person to ask.” Grandma adds on, “Very

have more opportunity to see the cemetery as a space. Furthermore, the bright and enthusiastic energy I always had for Mr. Zhou would make more sense, as a first-time tour guide who gets to show off his hard work.

How do I express that idea that someone is so religious that they are stupid about it. What I would say in Chinese would be someone who instinctively bows before every image of Buddha/God/any deity. It would make more sense in certain areas where these images are ubiquitous, the person would waste their days bowing. There is also a more buried implication from mythology that not all deities are good, be careful who you bow down to. A person that bows before any and every god is careless and stupid.

knowledgeable, I much prefer someone that actually knows the places.”

Mr. Zhou beams with pride, “It truly surprises me how many people pick plots without ever visiting the sites. Just a number on a map for most of them.” He shakes his head, tsking “Ah. Here we are.”

I look at the shrine as we approach, it’s quite ordinary. A wooden structure painted with religious motifs. It’s not sparkly and new but it’s not so worn and abandoned that it might be deemed a safety hazard. Very ordinary.

“We can go in?” Grandma asks.

“Yes, but no one is buried here anymore.” Mr. Zhou offers an arm as Grandma makes her way up the steps. “It’s an old shrine, many traditional burials built immediate to it.”

I guess they forgot me here. I stay in the cart and pull out my phone.

In the distance I can make out a few words of their conversation. I hear Grandma say, “I will just be a minute. I would like to send a prayer.”

I roll my eyes; it's going to be a while. I went back to my phone.

“Sunshine!” I don't know when Grandma finished her prayers, “What do you think of the shrine?”

I make a show of turning my head, looking around “It's fine.”

Grandma stares at me for a moment, I know she wants me to say more but I don't want to play this game. She finally gives me a nod and returns to Mr. Zhou and the map. “What path is this one?” She asks, pointing, “And that one?” He patiently guides her through all the options.

The pair return to the cart with a destination set, “We're going to the pond!” Grandma announces with great enthusiasm.

As Mr. Zhou drove us off, Grandma peppered him with more questions. “How long have you worked here for? What's the job like? Do you enjoy it?” Very polite, curious conversation starters. I promptly zoned out.

Pearl

“Well, isn't this just lovely” I exclaim, moving toward the pond.

Sunny grumbles something that I will take as agreement, she truly is upset about this whole thing. Anyhow, I feel like the sound of flowing water makes for a soothing atmosphere.

I move toward the pond and sit at the stone ledge. “And there's fish!”

“Yes, an estimated 200 in this pond.” Sunny might not be willing to keep me company, but Mr. Zhou will. His factoids have been quite welcome.

I examine the pond more closely. I do like the engraved names and dates forming the pond’s edge. I stroke the surfaces; it feels so delicate. “Are these the headstones? Are these people nearby? Or are they buried elsewhere?” I questioned, looking around.

“Depends on if they chose burial or cremation.” Pointing at the rolling hills, “Most burials are in those fields, at least the ones I know of. Cremation is normally often scattered nearby. I’m always stopping people from scattering the ashes into the pond. Not good for the fish.”

“I suppose not.”

I try to take in the pond as part of the landscape. It was more of a reflection pool within a large plaza, framed by rolling hills on three sides and an impressive arcade on the fourth. There were gravestones in the distance, but they are barely visible through the thin wisps of morning mist. The air smells clean and fresh, I understand how one might find oneself frolicking in a field. Spring is just around the corner.

“Mr. Zhou, do people linger in this plaza?” I want to imagine Sunny here, but I’m having a hard time.

I must have finally stumped him, “Not that I know of. There are often people coming and going, especially on holidays. But I don’t think I see people just sit here much.”

I nod, there is something too monumental about this space. It’s not a good place to grieve.



2 – Koi Fish

This description does not feel like Pearl thinking to herself. This feels like me, an architecture student, talking to myself. This description should capture the essence of this place without the use of jargon. Or even less than that, something more fundamental than layman's terms. Closer to a child who does not know enough words to articulate, yet through their expressions and motions get their thoughts across all the same.

“You must agree Sunny, it’s quite majestic here.” I called back to Sunny, trying to engage her in the conversation.

The expansive fields feel freeing, but also very exposed. The Grecian motifs in the arcade are very grand and formal. It’s very elegant and graceful. And the pond! Dotted with lily pads swimming with koi, I find them quite comforting. Even if the sound of water isn’t quite what I wished it would be. I do like it very much, but I think I would have preferred something smaller. Something more intimate.

“It doesn’t suit you.” I do not know when Sunny decided to leave her post at the cart.

I am glad to see her finally expressing some opinions though. “I agree with you.” I lean on her as I stand. “I think I would like to see the flower gardens.”

Sunny

The flower garden is just that, a flower garden. Unfortunately, there just isn’t all the much to look at. It’s

not only a flower garden; it's a flower garden in late winter. There are a few hints of new growth peeking out here and there.

I would have found a bench and gone to my phone, but the soggy ground loosened some pavers, and I don't want Grandma to trip. Now that Mr. Zhou has left us for his actual job, I need to keep a closer eye on Grandma, should she get excited and wander off.

I really ought to be on my phone though. Better yet, I should be home on my laptop. I took some leave and made sure I can do work online, but a client is having a crisis. Their financing went awry, they're being sued to oblivion, and we need to pull all the court ordered documents. It's a real mess and I really should be there. I bet my team thinks I'm a self-serving monster, disappearing at such a moment. It's not why I left of course, but I can't lie that I'm not relieved not to have this scandal attached to my name.

I suppose compared to that trainwreck, an unbearably long hike

Sunny has some sort of vaguely important consulting job that garners her plenty of respect from her peers. There needs to be acknowledgment that this trip is a disruption to her life, both her home life and her professional life.

outdoors on a slightly chilly morning is literally a walk in the park. Even if it's a walk I very much did not sign up for. It's just an outdoor walk. There were fields with rocks. There were ponds with rocks. And now gardens with rocks. Sure, those rocks were gravestones. But it's just rocks and it's not all that unusual for rocks to be found in fields, ponds or gardens. No need to make a big deal out of it.

Grandma is having fun and I need to be supportive. At least I think she's having fun. Just because I hate it here, that doesn't mean she should too. I'm trying hard to keep my misery to myself.

I walk with my grandmother, letting her lead. There are many options for where to go with these formal, highly pruned gardens. I find myself staring at the ground a lot, tipping my head down to shade from the overly bright sun. We get to a cobblestone walk where the sun glints off many of the stones. At first, I mistook it for quartz or some other sparkling stone. But the light is too intense, too reflective.

"It's brass." Grandma answers my unspoken question. We stop at the closest paver and lean in to take a closer look.

I jerked back when I read the inscription. It was a grave marker. I guess I forgot I was in a cemetery. I move down the path but there are more of these grave markers, more inscriptions. I focus instead on the bare bushes on either side. Not bare exactly. Tiny buds peep out, a bright spring green. In time, they would grow new branches,

they will try to escape the confines of this arbitrary, geometric shape they have been molded into. They will be punished for their efforts. But for now, these tiny buds can grow and thrive in peace.

Having found myself in a different depressive cycle of thought, I turn upwards, looking for something different to focus my attention on. I find nothing. The sky and nothing else. Not even any birds or clouds. A safe place to avert my gaze, but I find myself looking away from the sky too. It's too bright, the painful burning type of bright.

So, I find my eyes back on the glinting plaques embedded in the paving stones. The inscriptions are quite simple; a name, two dates. But it's not the words written or even the way the metal is beautifully laid into the stone. And it is very beautiful, I have to admit. It's the collection, the mosaic it creates in the path.

I wonder... "Grandma. Are these people buried here?"

These brass pavers are inspired by the Holocaust memorial Stolperstein or Stumbling Stones. They are laid in front of the last known addresses of Holocaust victims, inscribed with names and life dates. I found this memorial to be very gentle, poetic and moving. It feels very human to know that those who were taken walked these streets.

I feel somewhat uncomfortable to be using this idea in a regular cemetery as I have here. It does not hold the same power being placed on a garden pathway rather than at someone's doorstep. Likely my true criticism lies in the cemetery being so isolated from our daily lives.

I had originally wrote this last line of this fragment for Pearl, since she is the one directing this tour. But I think the line can now be read as spoken by either Pearl or Sunny. I rather enjoy this ambiguity, since this is a moment where Sunny become more engaged in the selection of the plot. Not as an offhanded opinion that is intuitively formed, but as a deeply considered opinion.

“Not buried. But their ashes are sometimes scattered in the surrounding bushes.”

I nod, it’s more elegant this way.

I stared out into the garden, taking in the whole image. The hedges with only the first signs of spring, the dull stone walkway dotted with metallic ornaments, the evergreen forest in the distance, all against the intensely blue sky. It does make for a lovely scene, but it’s not... Enough somehow.

I noticed Grandma waiting for me at the edge of the garden.

“I think it’s time to see the forests.”

Pearl

I think it would be nicer in the summertime. When leaves are rustling, when the shade is a reprieve from the hot summer sun. Right now, I mostly see potential. Though I’m very glad there’s so many evergreen species mixed in in this forest. It’s very calming, being surrounded by the colour green. I want it to still be green in wintertime, just in case.

I find it very calming, walking in this forest. The carpet of pine needles, fragrant with each step, gives my old knees a much-needed cushioning. The gravestones are tiny dots next to the towering height of the trees, I find it very appropriate. I walk with a quiet tranquility, hand in hand with Sunny.

After quite some time, aimlessly wandering, I found a nice, dry patch of dirt. It took a lot of effort for me to lower myself to the ground. Sunny certainly made a lot of fuss about it. But now that I'm down here, I might as well stay for a while.

I like this spot, here at the edge. The transition from grasslands to forests. There is a slight incline so we can enjoy a nice, full panoramic view. The sounds of the birds and the trees behind me add a serene quality to this place. This would be a good place to rest.

I look over at Sunny, sitting beside me. Sitting crisscross apple sauce like she often did as a child. The book in her lap has now been replaced by a cellphone. My sunshine has grown up to be a busy busy woman.

It certainly makes me feel rather silly. I'm here putting so much time and effort into planning for when I am gone. I doubt I was at the front of her mind every day before this point. I was always grateful when she called, happy to just hear her voice. But I did not want to put an expectation on her time. I never asked her to call more or talk for longer.

Am I putting an expectation on her time in death? Expecting her to cry for me? Expecting her to miss me? Isn't that what I'm planning for? Painting a scene that

might never happen? I certainly do not wish for her to be weighed down by grief. So maybe I should not be doing all this.

Or, according to Mr. Zhou, I am doing Sunny a favour. After all, she's so busy, the stress of planning a funeral might be quite a heavy burden. I want to relieve as much as that as I can. So why not choose a plot that I like? A spot where it's very pleasant to look out from, in my opinion at least. I would like to know her opinion.

Or I can just ask her. I don't want to disturb her, but I think it's at least somewhat important.

"Sunny, darling. What do you think of about this spot?" I ask.

Sunny looks around, "Think what about this spot?"

"Well." I'm not too sure what. "Do you like it?"

I watch her think. "Sure. It's pretty here. Would do well to have a proper bench here instead of sitting on the ground."

"What about this tree? Do you like this tree we're under?" I prod further.

Sunny puts her cellphone away with a sigh and takes an exaggerated look around. "It's a tree."

I am not fond of her behaviour today, but I have only myself to blame. I did not ease her into the idea of death. "I think it might be a good spot to have a picnic under this tree someday." I am trying to be gentler.

"I would rather have a picnic in a normal park." She says with distaste, "I don't want a memento mori with my meal."

I know she's just prickly today, but I can't help but feel saddened by her reaction. I try to see the landscape in front of me objectively. I try to see what she sees.

The rows and rows of gravestones is a reminder that is hard to ignore. There's the hills and trees are dotted with pale green. I can imagine this place in midsummer. When the foliage grows lush, I can almost imagine the thoughts of death being overwhelmed by the vividness of life.

That's the whole point, isn't it? That's what I'm trying to tell her. When I'm gone, go home to your husband and children. They need you more anyway. Go back to your daily stresses, raising children, climbing ladders. I hope you think of me sometimes, but not too often. I don't want her to be sad, I couldn't stand the thought of her crying, even if I won't be there to see it.

Sunny says rather suddenly, "It would be a nicer place to sit if it was warmer out." I think she feels bad, and I love her enough to accept this non-apology.

Later, when she does think of me, I do think this would be a nice place to do so. "But with a proper place to sit that is."

Chapter 3

Awkward Conversations

Sunny

I perch awkwardly on the couch, half listening to the conversation. Grandma dragged me with her to the temple and now she and the abbess are drinking tea and chatting. I smile and nod at the appropriate moments, but my mind is wandering off to some work report I need to write up.

“Is the tea not to your liking Sunny? You’ve barely touched your cup.” The abbess asks politely.

“No, this is fine.” I insist, taking a quick sip. I guess I forgot about the social niceties in my daze.

“Are you sure? I can make you another pot.” The abbess begins to stand up, manners dictating her actions as a gracious host. “I have a lovely white tea you can try.” She is being very nice, and I don’t like it.

“There’s no need.” My grandmother pulled the abess back into her seat. “She doesn’t drink tea.” Grandma tsked, “Only coffee. Spent too many years away.”

I can feel my face heating up in embarrassment, but I nod. I just know this little fact will spread through the gossipmongers in a day or two. “How fascinating!” Rural villages like this one get awed by any sort of difference. I zoned out of the conversation again, this time with annoyance instead of boredom. If they stocked better coffee, maybe I wouldn’t be sticking out like a sore thumb now. I know my bitter mood is at least in part due to my caffeine withdrawal.

“Would Sunny still be inheriting your tea set? I know how important it is that you use your porcelain.”

The abess’s question threw me off guard. Was it a theoretical question or did Grandma announce to the world her impending doom? Is she nosy and asking about an expensive tea set or is this a question about revising a will?

“Whyever not?” Whatever discomfort I feel, Grandma does not feel any of it. “I don’t see why she can’t put coffee in a teapot. I’m not sure how that would work but she’s a clever girl.” She gives my knee a little pat, “I’m sure she can figure it out.” I appreciate her confidence, but I am still not following this conversation.

The abess is truly aghast, I would laugh if I wasn’t a bit shocked myself. “Doesn’t have to be coffee. Any liquid will do really.” Grandma laughs at the joke she hasn’t told yet, “My husband used to drink spirits out of those

teacups on occasion. He was quite the opposite. Any container will do, to hold his alcohol.” I’m confused about what she was getting at. But I think she’s not talking to the abbess anymore. She gives my knee a squeeze, “You are right though. I would like my porcelain to be in use. It’s better that it’s used for coffee than not used at all.”

While I like the sentiment, I’d rather have my grandmother than be drinking coffee out of a teacup. It’s not that she has a will and spelled out what I’ll be inheriting. I know it’s a standard legal document, Chris and I made one when Andy was born. But I don’t like how she’s thinking about how I’ll be *using* her tea set when she’s gone.

I don’t like that she’s given up already. I need to have a serious conversation with her.

I soon saw the opportunity and I didn’t want to let it slip away. This talk needs to happen sooner rather than later.

I know I’m ill prepared for the task but it’s too late now. Time is of

I am questioning the need for this alcoholism comment. Pearl did not have a particularly happy marriage, but her husband is not very important to developing the story. This comment at this moment also feels somewhat distracting, I’m not sure how to fix that while maintaining this message I wish to send; that while something may be purpose made, it will not always be used as intended. That it is better for something to be used ‘incorrectly’ than not used at all. And to bring up the alcohol example is to say coffee is not harmful, to the cup nor to their family.

This is one long conversation that spans 5 different sceneries. I want this feeling that this is a conversation they end up having repeatedly. I really appreciate how this format relieves the pressure for each fragment to cover the entirety of this emotionally charged conversation.

In many ways, this is the tour of the house. Since Sunny, as a former resident, has no need for a formal tour, this conversation shows up most of the spaces semi-relative to each other.

the essence. There's a short break in the rain that's been plaguing the area the last couple of days and Grandma decided to use this time to care for her garden. Grandma won't stop until it either starts raining again or she is done clearing away the old growth. These white dress pants are a sacrifice I am willing to make for her to be my captive audience. If I go inside to change, she might just finish and be on her merry way.

"Grandma! Why don't I help you with that?" I walk to the next row in the garden, so I am facing her.

Grandma looks up, adjusting her straw hat, "You're no help in the garden, always digging holes in the wrong spot. And look at you! You cannot garden with those clothes on. You need to go change first. Or even better, I am almost done. You can go inside and make me tea."

"These pants are easy to wash." I lie, kneeling in the dirt and picking up a spade.

Grandma shakes her head and mutters to herself. I hear the word stubborn somewhere in there.

I am decently confident I know what I should be pulling at, the dried dead stuff. But I check with Grandma first, just to make sure. We work silently till the rest of the row before I try to start the questions.

“Have you ever considered talking with another doctor about your illness?” I can see Grandma visibly tense at my questions.

“No. Do not want to.”

Short. Blunt. No room for argument.

I try going in a different direction. “Can I talk to your doctor? Ask about some alternative treatments?”

Grandma’s frown deepens, “No. No asking questions. There’s nothing to talk about.”

“How about I-”

“It’s raining.” Grandma stands up and starts cleaning up her gardening tools.

I’m shocked that she would stop tending to her garden to avoid my questioning. I look up as a fat raindrop land in the middle of my forehead.

What is implied that I may or may not need to explicitly say here is just how important the garden is to Pearl. I can’t tell if I should spend more time describing the physical features of the garden here or later. Given the season and the activity (early spring and clearing out dead leaves), it is not the optimal time to wax poetic about the garden. But I do like the idea of first establishing the work that goes into maintaining a garden worth waxing poetically about.

I hope what I have established is a certain rhythm for Pearl's dialogue. I am aiming for something somewhat chatty, she enjoys making polite conversation and learning more about people, as seen with her questions for Mr. Zhou. What I want for this gardening scene is this sudden change where Pearl speaks in a blunt and almost rude manner. Pearl is not very educated, and she is self-conscious of that. Pearl speaks as she does to try and hide as much of that as possible. It is part of the identity Pearl builds for herself. Sunny abruptly questioning her here causes Pearl to slip up, forgetting pleasantries and grammar all at once.

I guess it is raining. Frustrated, I quickly scrambled up and head inside too.

Inside, I can feel the warmth of the kitchen but no delicious aromas just yet. I came at a good time.

“Why don't I roll out the dough. You can do the filling.” I step in, taking the rolling pin from her hand. Grandma doesn't like asking for help in the kitchen, but that doesn't mean she doesn't want it. Plus, I have a new tactic to try out.

“Remember, not too thin. We don't want them to break in the pot.” Grandma reluctantly let me take over the task. She still doesn't have faith in my cooking abilities. I can't blame her; I don't have the best history.

“I've been practicing. I'll eat the broken ones if I do too poorly.” I glimpse a hint of a smile as she turned around. I finish rolling out the dough for the first one and hold it up in front of the window for Grandma to see, she gives a single nod of approval. Now she's in a good mood.

We work in compatible silence for a while. Grandma moves around

the kitchen with ease, grabbing a larger bowl, rinsing off some utensils, tending to the fire. I stand in my place, continuing my sacred task of rolling out dough. Slowly, checking each one in the light of the window. The kitchen, being built off from the main house, is one of the places that did not go through many modernizations over the years. It feels familiar and comforting as steam begins to fill the air.

We finish the first batch and drop it into the pot of water. The activity pauses as we wait for it to come to a boil. This is probably the best time to start the conversation, but I still hesitate. I will need to tread carefully. “So, my husband mentioned something interesting this morning.” I pause, waiting for a reaction. “You know that his parents are both in the medical field. They made a few inquiries about your condition.”

“Sunny!” I can hear her voice pitch lower, there’s an incoming lecture.

I ignore her tone, busying myself, “They have some friends that are experts.” Stirring the pot that does

I imagine an old, primitive kitchen. I have this memory of squatting in front of a fire in my own grandmother’s kitchen, using a tube to blow at the flame. I remember being overenthusiastic with my task and making the fire too hot for the food being cooked. I imagine this kitchen to be somewhat similar. I think it is a good space to have this sort of intense earthiness, where the act of making a meal is very physical. Food is cooked on an open fire. The thickness of the dough is not measured with some measurement tool but with the light passing through it. Where steam dissipates slowly, not sucked away in a fume hood. This is a space with a lot of atmosphere. This is a place that reminds you why homes were centered around the hearth.

not need stirred, “They would be happy to meet with us to discuss. Just get some more information.”

Grandma shoves me aside to put the lid back on the pot. “How about you leave the pot to me.” She said with more force than I am used to from my grandmother. She might as well be saying how about you leave *me* be.

“You don’t even know what they have to say.” I say in a smaller voice. I feel myself shrinking. Grandma may be 3 steps away in this cozy kitchen, but she may as well be on the other side of the world.

She takes several deep breaths, clutching her prayer beads again. When she finally starts speaking, she speaks with forcefully calm and measured tones. “That’s about what they might say. It’s about me asking you to not seek additional treatments. I asked you to stay here with me, to enjoy the time I have left together.” Grandma added another log to the fire. Shoved really.

“Why aren’t you curious?” I find my eyes casting down to the stone countertop. It hurts to look at her. *Why aren’t you hopeful?* I wanted to say.

“I already know what they will say.” She said so simply, so purely. “I need to move to a big, noisy city with these fancy doctors and take a whole lot of medications. And they might not even work! I will be sick. I will be tired. I will be far away from all the things that truly matter to me. No. I am not curious.”

I know I’ve lost the battle, but not the war. But I don’t believe her. She doesn’t need hope, but I do.

I focus my attention on the next batch of dough. Directing all the frustration I feel into each knead. I wonder if we'll taste my anger in the food later.

I take a bite. And another.

I barely register the food in my mouth. The silence is heavy at the dinner table. I can't stand it.

"Why won't you even try?" I ask, slamming my chopsticks on the table.

Grandmother gives me a side eye, letting me know without saying a word that she thinks I'm being rude at the dinner table.

I refused to fold under the pressure this time. "Well?" I press on.

Grandma set down her chopsticks firmly. Neatly. "I'm old."

"Gran-" she shut me down quickly.

"If you want me to answer your questions, you have to let me speak." She looks at me with pursed lips.

I mutter an apology. My knuckles are white as I clutch the edge of the ancient dining table.

"You've seen me in these past days. I am very embarrassed to say it but it's true. I forget words, I misplace things, I get confused."

"I forget where I've placed my keys all the time!" I butt in.

"Yes, yes, it happens. But it is so much more. A few months ago, I was hosting our biweekly book club. Someone brought some fruit and had it laid out on this lovely porcelain bowl. I asked whose it was when we were

cleaning up and someone said it was mine. They found it in the kitchen cabinet! I had to take a real close look. The designs just look so foreign to me, I really thought everyone else was wrong. But it was!” She waves her arms in emphasis “And it was part of a set, one of my favorites in years past. How could I have not recognized it?”

Grandma’s incredulous tone said more than her anecdote. I find myself trying to dig my fingernails into the wood surface of the table. Pitting my rage against the hardwood; who will win?

“There was another incident when I was doing my nightly prayer.” I can hear a shake in Grandma’s voice. Is it. Fear? “I was praying for you, your family, our community. I was praying for Mr. Lin that just been diagnosed with cancer. And I cannot, for the life of me, remember the cancer he had. We were discussing it only a few hours earlier!”

You don’t understand Sunny, darling. I forget things, I forget names. It doesn’t really matter. But sometimes, I forget who I am too. Not my name, but I forget myself. I forgot what my favorite sweet was as I stared at the store shelves. I stood paralyzed there for I don’t know how long.”

“You don’t seem old to me.” My voice is shaking too.

“I am old, Sunshine. Look at yourself. You’re all grown up, so I must be old. I am not saying I wish for death, but I do not want to fight to live.”

I drag my nail across the surface repeatedly. It's like scratching an itch that comes back stronger each time. I can't stop.

"You're hoping for too much. Surviving this disease will mean I am healthy again. I can enjoy every day I have left with ease, with comfort. Or I can fight a tough fight, earn a couple more days of weariness and suffering, and die at the end all the same."

I'm fully crying now. "But. I don't want you to go."

"And I don't want to leave you. But you will be fine without me. It is my wish to die gracefully, peacefully. Here at home. I just hope you stay here with me while we can both enjoy it."

Grandma pauses, waiting for me to catch my breath. She must think I'm being so dramatic. I focus on the dent I made on the dining room table, trying to center myself.

"You know," Grandma beings in a hesitant tone I don't often hear from her, "Raising you helped me so much. More than you can ever imagine." She stirs the food in her bowl but

There is a dual climax in this chapter, this is the first. Where the heat of the argument reaches its peak. The second climax comes later when Sunny, whose point of view we see this entire chapter though, comes to terms with Pearl's wishes for her end of life.

doesn't make a move to eat it. "I know that everyone dies but some people die too early. Your parents, my daughter dying, I was in a deep melancholy. I was ready to die of a broken heart." She took my hand and squeezed with more force than I thought her small and delicate hand could handle, "You were a small child. Scared and alone. You needed me but I needed you too. Every day since has been a gift and I have not taken it for granted. But I will not be greedy and ask for more than what I deserve either." She lets go of my hand and corrects her posture. "Eat, the food is getting cold."

I try to find the dent again, but it blends right in with the decades of wear and tear. This conversation is over. I step outside and scan the sky, cerulean blue. It's comfortably warm with a slight breeze, not too humid. Perfect.

Today's task is to sun the thick, heavy winter duvets before stashing them away until next year. They need to be completely dry in order to prevent mold. It's a task I remember toiling away at every year as a kid. It's even worse if the day is not hot and sunny enough, I would need to take them in at night and bring them back out another day. But today's weather looks promising. With luck, I'll only need to hang out the duvets once. I go in search of the laundry line but it's not in the corner it's usually kept. I checked a few places in and out of the house but am at a loss.

Grandma emerges from inside the house, I forgot she was watching me from the living room. She leads

me away, “Come.” It’s been weird since we argued over dinner a few days back. I can’t really tell who is giving the silent treatment to whom. Maybe this is a sign we’re getting over it?

We walk past the gardens to one of the house’s side walls. Up attached to the house is a device, like a garden hose but with a laundry line. “You must connect this piece to the pulley system” Grandma instructs, pointing to the other side of the yard, where a pulley is screwed onto the trunk of a tree.

This obviously homemade contraption does work, much to my surprise.

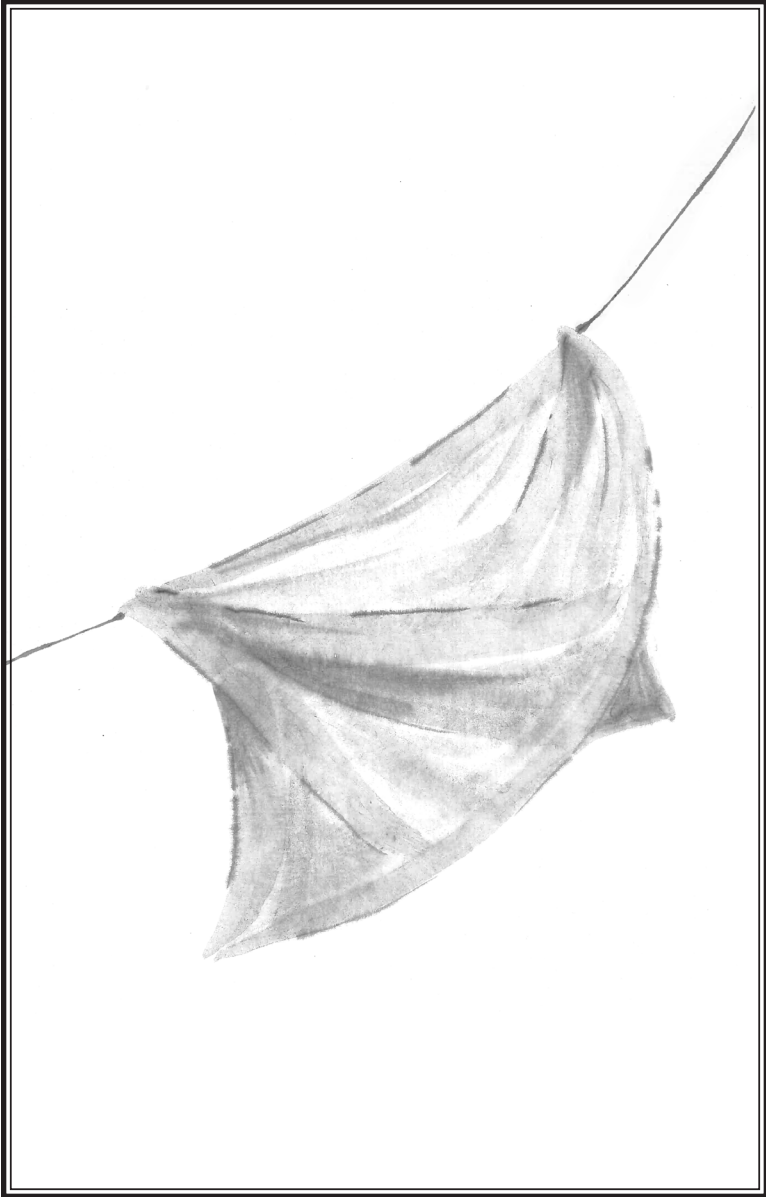
It takes a dual effort to get the heavy duvets up on the line. “I wish the dryer was large enough to fit the duvets.” Trying to engage in some camaraderie as we work. Fill the awkward silence somehow. She doesn’t respond, not really. I don’t think a huff counts.

“Does the village have a laundromat? One with a larger dryer? I should have asked earlier.” I try again.

“I do not know. I did not think to look.” Her words are short, but her tone is not quite as hostile as it has been. So, I try to keep going.

“I guess you wouldn’t have to. Not since I got you the washer and dryer a few years back.”

“Sunny,” Grandma says suddenly. “The washer and dryer are a great example.” I’m not sure what she’s talking about. “This is that you did not ask. You did not listen. You brought a very expensive gift, without questioning if I wanted it or not.”



3 – Laundry

“But Grandma! You didn’t have a washer and dryer. And I checked to see if the renovations were compatible with running those machines!”

Grandma holds both my hands in one of hers and strokes my hair back gently with the other. I feel like I’m a small child again. “Yes, it was very thoughtful of you. It is a good gift. I simply wish you had told me before hand.”

“I wanted it to be a surprise.” I know I’m shrinking into myself, like a turtle retreating into its shell.

She grips my hands tighter. The sun is feeling too bright, too hot now. “I know. But I would have told you to buy something smaller. Something less expensive. I’m a one-person household! I do not own enough clothes to fill the washing machine. And the dryer uses so much energy. It is much too expensive to run.”

“If I told you, you would have told me not to.” I argue back.

She smiles, “That may be true, but only because I don’t truly need it.” She pulls me down and presses

There is a level of contradiction that I see in people like my parents or grandparents that I want to capture here. I think it’s a common situation, but I may be assuming too much. It is where if you were to get them a gift that is too cheap, it is disrespectful. If you were to get them a gift that is too expensive, it is wasteful. But they also secretly like it? They say you shouldn’t have but you should have. It’s not what is said out loud, but what’s implied.

This is to establish a family dynamic where words cannot really be taken at face value, which is why Sunny was unrelenting with talking to more doctors even when Pearl said no. I also want to establish how Pearl is very set in her ways, both in terms of how she behaves historically and how she is now putting her foot down and choosing how to spend the end of her life.

a kiss on my forehead. “I’m glad you thought of me and wanted to make my life better. But often times, I don’t mind line drying my clothes.”

I don’t think we’re talking about the washer and dryer anymore.

“I know there are things that I do not know, and I know that you want to help me. I promise, I do appreciate that.” Grandma has me wrapped in a bear hug now, “But for some things, I have made up my mind long ago. You do not need to waste your efforts on me.”

I want to argue back, but I don’t know how. Every time I think I know what I’ll say to her, I don’t.

Every time I search the house for her, I run away at the last second. I’m not sure why I still want to argue with her, but I must try.

I can hear Grandma praying, chanting scripture she’s doubtlessly memorized. I turn the corner and see her kneeling in front of the altar, the setting sun lights her in an ethereal glow. It’s a familiar and comforting sight. The various statues deities lined up, the tray with the mount of ashes nearly overflowing, the perfectly pristine bowl of fruit. Just like it always was.

Grandma pauses her chanting, or is she finished? I hover at the doorway listening intently. “Please watch over my granddaughter Sunny, her husband, and children. Please watch over my family”

I smile at the familiar line. It’s the same prayer she says at the end of every phone call. I could join her now, kneel next to her. Add the prayers I say back every time. But she

keeps going, “Please let my death be a gentle one. Please let death come swiftly and painlessly.”

I feel my jaw drop. I freeze trying not to make any noise, trying to disappear.

“I know there is no point in fearing death, but I fear for those left behind. I pray that my passing is not a burden on my dear granddaughter. Please help her find the strength to let go.” I can hear the tremble in her voice. I think she might cry.

I rushed away quickly and silently, tears in my eyes. I hate that I’m running away. Again. But I can’t handle a rational discussion now.

I slipped out of the house and hid behind the large willow in the garden and started sobbing. She can’t die. I don’t want to lose her. *I can’t lose her.*

I’m not sure how long I cried for, long enough that the air is now chilly. I squeeze my legs into my chest, more for warmth than for comfort now.

I know I’m being silly and unreasonable. But I can’t imagine a world without my grandmother. I’m not stupid enough to think she’ll

Crying under a big, old willow tree was a motif that naturally developed and is now the title of the story. There is a similar scene in one of the final chapters on grief. I think a weeping willow makes for a good place to cry.

It was somewhat accidental since I was just having fun drawing a willow tree, but I do think it is a great tree to cry under. The fact that willows often grow near rivers paired with their swinging branches make for a very nice scene. And even though it is never used or mentioned in the story, I like how willow bark is a very important healing ingredient. I think it is quite beautiful to be drawn toward this source of healing when you are hurt.

never die. It's true, I don't have the strength to let go. I hate that she's worried about me when she's the one that's sick and dying. I hate that I will be left alone. I hate that she is right.

There's nothing more to argue.

It feels wrong to give up hope, but hope is just an illusion. I am the one that needed convincing all along.

Chapter 4

Falling

Sunny

I can see it, happening before my eyes. I can feel myself slipping out and away, into this third person observer, idling watching the tableau, seeing what the individual players cannot.

Death very suddenly became real, a looming figure, a shadow in every corner. Lurking, waiting. It may not be in this moment, this day, this month, this year, but it will be in this lifetime. When the moment is right, Death will not hesitate to curl his spindly fingers around you and never let go.

It's as if he was hibernating under the carpet, the tranquil music of everyday life was his lullaby. Sleeping so still that he was forgotten. But he was rudely awakened. Accidental as it may be, he was shaken violently from his

I am not happy with this passage. I find it ill-fitting in so many ways. The language tries to be poetic; I cringe at my mediocre attempts. I see the beginnings of many ideas, all badly executed and incomplete. I have decided to admit defeat with this one, but these are the ideas I couldn't quite put together.

I am quite fond of the book *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak.¹ In that book, the narrator is Death, but not in a typically dark or menacing way. Death is a worn and tired civil servant, asking for our sympathy. While I did not want that version of Death to be what Sunny imagines in this passage, I did want to use this idea of giving Death a certain character beyond relentless and greedy. But I could not make it fit the moment. I could not imagine the character traits that would properly add to the scene.

Another semi literary reference I was trying to draw from was the novel *Room* by Emma Donoghue, though I experienced the story

slumber. As Death unfurled himself, stretching to his full height, he loomed over us all.

My grandmother falls to the floor, her screams of pain piercingly silent. Her body limp and for a moment, lifeless.

I will be better prepared next time, Death whispers, taunting me. Now that he is awake, he will not be sedated.

Pearl

Sunny acts like the world's ending. If it wasn't so suffocating, it would be funny.

The sweet child has always had an intense focus in her eyes. A drive to do everything at 110%. A fierce determination to achieve every goal. It was a trait I was always so proud of. I still am. My pride is simply mixed with annoyance and frustration now.

Sunny the drill sergeant is a flurry of movement. Helping to move a shelf at one moment, screaming directions at the kids the next, then to rolling up the carpet. I just know that if Mai didn't recruit more kids to

help, Sunny would have rearranged the room all by herself and probably would have thrown her back in the process.

And before I know it, Sunny's transformed the living room into a makeshift bedroom.

My display of porcelain now resides in the dining room. My carved wooden chairs moved to the vestibule. My table and tea set got pushed to the corner. My beautiful Persian rug rolled up and tucked away in storage.

In came a hospital bed, a flimsy curtain on wheels and a chamber pot. I am not looking forward to using a chamber pot.

It's very sweet how she worries and cares for me. But I tripped on the carpet. My knee doesn't even hurt that badly. But all this feels like too much.

It lacks privacy. It lacks dignity.

I may be dying, but I would like to do so with some self-respect intact.

I feel as if I am the one being torn apart and sold for parts. I cannot bear to watch the home I built in the last

as a play at the Princess of Wales Theatre.² It is about a woman who was kidnapped and held captive in this room for 7 years and her 5-year-old son who was born in captivity. It is a story that is very well suited for the stage, being mainly set within the confines of a singular room. The way the stage was used, the way characters stepped out the scenes behind them changed allowed a layered storytelling. People are moving, the space is changing but one person is removed speaking their soliloquies. While I know this isn't unique to this play, but this is the play I think of because there is a spatial element from the set of Room I am trying to incorporate.

This scene is likely the best example to use to demonstrate the architecture of this thesis.

There is a full circle that is disturbing and disrespectful, but I do think it is true. I think the elderly and the young share a lot of characteristics and both extremes require similar aspects of care. It always feels wrong to state the obvious here because I feel that I am disrespecting the elderly. But I think more accurately, we generally do not give children enough credit.

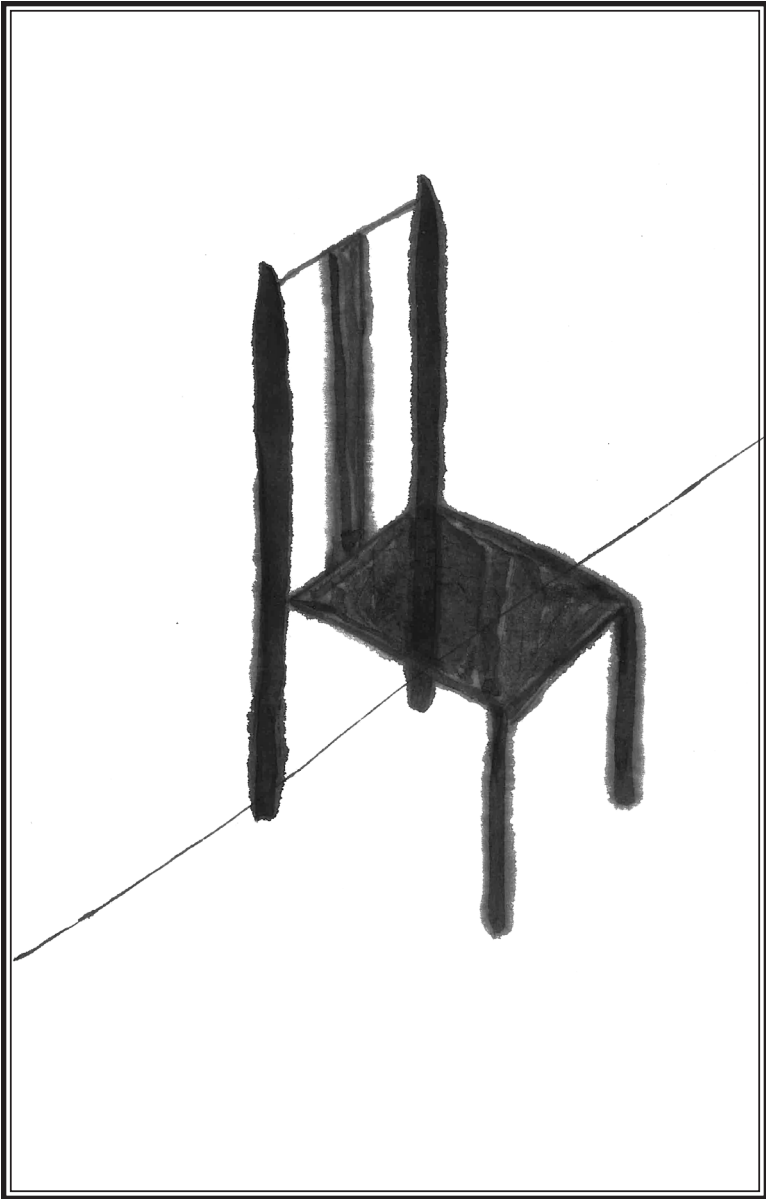
several decades dissembled room by room.

Sunny

I recall a class I attended during my first pregnancy, one of those mommy prep courses at the community center. They showed me how to massage babies, how to rub their tummy, move their legs. It's supposed to help with digestion, it was reassuring to go to those as a first-time mom.

It pains me to think how similar this feels. I feel quite the opposite of reassured, honestly.

“Sunny, now move here.” The physiotherapist points to her left. “Extend your arm this way so Pearl has something to hold on to.” I do as she says. “Now, Pearl. Lean this way. 1,2,3,4,5. Relax.” I feel this instinct to hold tighter, move in, as my grandmother wobbles in the pose. “We’re going to do that stretch 4 more times okay?” The physiotherapist resets our positions and helps us through the movements again.



4 – A Dining Chair

We were lucky to have booked this physiotherapist. She even specializes in geriatric physiotherapy. There were not many options in the village and a trip out to the nearest city twice a week would have been draining for me, and Grandma. Not to mention the waiting lists. I can't imagine having Grandma just sit with the pain from the fall for months as we wait.

But a friend of a friend already had a physiotherapist they loved who was doing house calls in the village. We were thankfully able to squeeze in an appointment. I do need to be more thankful. The fall wasn't that bad, mostly bruises. And these physio sessions are the extent of the medical treatments Grandma needs. *There is much to be grateful for.* I know.

We finish up with the series of exercises and move on to the electrical stimulation. The physiotherapist guides Grandma to her new bed in the living room and hooks her up to the machine. I don't like watching this part, her body all wired up. Even as unobtrusive of a machine as this one, I turn away.

I begin to move the furniture back to their places; do they still have a rightful place? It's hard to look at the dining chairs now that they also serve as handrails. The occasional bench when the short hallways become a mile long.

I see it now; just how frail my grandmother is. How time has worn away at her body. How many times do my children fall to the ground and scrape their knees? How

many times have I picked them up, brushed them off and sent them off on their merry way?

The shock of the fall has passed, and I am left with this heaviness. This knowledge that it's only a matter of time. That I am powerless to stop it.

Pearl

I do not fear death. There was quite a lot of it growing up. The drought, the flood, the famine. It was sad but more for those left behind than the dead. What I never quite expected was old age. Time passes so quickly. In the blink of an eye, I'm here well into my 80s. My husband long gone. I did not wish to have outlived my only child. And my friends... there have been so many funerals.

Today's is not so different. He was a friend of my husband's back in the day, they would drink and play cards late into the night. I can only tout the years I have known him, not the closeness of our acquaintance. We raised our children together. The two kids liked to fight about one silly thing or another. He was rather

A bit of a fun fact, there are some grave sites that are rented not owned.³ Many cemeteries have hills not because that is the natural topography, but because there are layers of graves.⁴ Early in my thesis, I thought about permanence and thought the cemetery would be the place of permanence. But the more I researched, the less true it appeared. And whenever I would bring up my findings, these things that are turning about in my head, there is sometimes an aggressive reaction back. People really hate the idea that their final resting place is not very final. This scene doesn't specifically mention those facts but I want Pearl to feel the discomfort so many people feel when faced with those facts.

heavy-handed with his punishments. It certainly made me appreciate my own husband more.

The speeches stretched on, there was fumbling, there was sniffing. Nobody was a particularly compelling public speaker. Bringing up memories, some happy, some sad, some just bland.

I find my eyes wandering. I have not been to this area of the cemetery before. The village is growing fast, the cemetery plots are filling up fast. There are different influences sneaking in, but the landscape still holds a certain character. I'm not sure why I am so surprised. Maybe the thought that this will be the place that will never change. I choose not to sit with the discomfiting thoughts.

I turn and examine the grieving family. The size of the tears coming out of his widow's delicate frame is quite impressive. Her daughter kneels next to her, arm around her shoulders, as she tosses paper money into the flame. Two of her sons stand solemnly behind them, one with tears slowly leaking out, a betrayal of his intentions. I seem to recall more children in their family but cannot know for sure. In the crowd, I pull out a few people who look to be grandchildren and in-laws. A fine turnout.

I was very critical of his parenting years back then, but seeing his family grieve here I likely judged him too harshly. He was likely a decent father, maybe a good husband. I will never know. But I know that he will be missed.

As the ceremony comes to a close, people begin to scatter. Not a terribly long ceremony, thankfully. I too go to line up to say a few words to the family. The mellow music coming from some awkwardly placed speakers around the area. I gave the same spiel I give at every funeral these days. Something about a better place. Something about let me know if you need help. They rarely take me up on that offer.

I decided to walk around for a while longer, I like to take advantage of the change in scenery. I stop often, leaning heavily on my cane. I wonder if this was purposefully done, these flat plains and neat rows. I wonder if it was profit driven. You can fit more bodies this way. Not that it's any of my business. But I do feel rather exposed in this space. I have to gather my strength to begin moving once more. I do not wish to linger.

I am unsure of the mood here. This entire chapter by nature has to be very stressful. But I think I'm going too far. There should be a bit of a spiraling into depression feeling going on, but this is starting to feel depressing and repetitive.

Endnotes

- 1 Zusak, *The Book Thief*.
- 2 Donoghue, *Room*.
- 3 Eggener, *Cemeteries*.
- 4 Bryson, *At Home*, 2-3.

Chapter 5

Tomb Sweeping

Sunny

How many years has it been? Twenty? Twenty-five? Maybe even more since I've last been to this cemetery, I recall being very young. But this scene feels like an out-of-body experience. I am watching my younger self, passing through this space.

I stare up at this gate, one that looks like so many others. I have forgotten about it, blurred together with other times and places. It's so common that maybe I'm making it up. Maybe this gate was installed yesterday, and I am grasping at straws. I'm not sure I care.

These stone treads though, I know I remember these. I can feel the centuries of footsteps, imprinted on the granite steps. I remember touching them. I remember being scolded for getting my clothes dirty.

I have been searching for an excuse to include stone steps in a scene. The high school I attended is very old, it is around 170 years old now. The main building had these granite steps that are indented from the thousands of students walking up and down over the years. It has always been my favourite thing about the school. The steps show use, they show time. Every time I am in the stairwell alone, I find myself looking down at those indentations, feeling them under my feet and imagining the generations of students that walked here before me.

I remember seeing my breath. It was winter and the sky was so bright it hurt. A more softly blue sky is now hidden by the young spring foliage. The leaves dancing in the wind. Laughing. I don't remember the trees being so happy.

I can hear water in the distance. Through the shrubs and grasses I can peek at a burbling brook. Might there have been a trickle of water running through here? Or did it freeze entirely? I cannot tell.

I remember giggling. The ugly scrunched up face on this creature was so very funny to me as a child. I was also scolded for trying to touch his face. It's an ominous stone figure from some mythology, placed here to protect this space. I see the lichen eating away at its dignity. Yet it continues to stand, growling, demanding respect.

Finally, we arrived. I don't remember this place with too much clarity. I think I was too busy playing with rocks and sticks. I doubt I helped with the grave sweeping. I believe I was told off from climbing the

gravestones and decided to look for diversions elsewhere.

This is the family plot where my grandfather is buried. Him and his family. I never knew him, I don't know anyone here. All these people whose existence led to mine. People by fate I did not get the chance to meet. I feel surprisingly curious.

I do not like the tone of this fragment, especially as it fits with the rest of the chapter, but I do like the description of the cemetery. I also don't like the way this fragment introduces the chapter, but in many ways, the chapter is titled 'tomb sweeping', it's not exactly causing confusion.

Pearl

It's the curse of simple, repetitive motions. The mind is too free to wander. Sweep left. Sweep right. Left. Right. Left. Right.

I'm beginning to have some doubts, especially when I am here. Surrounded by the remains of my family. I could be buried here with them, next to be husband and his parents, grandparents and so on. Correction: surrounded by my husband's family. It's certainly a better decision financially than to buy my own plot in an entirely different cemetery. If I was one to care for real estate, it can be said that this one is a much better location, closer to the village. Easier to visit.

There was a very irritating observation I made while visiting cemeteries. There was a pair of bevel markers at the Mount Hope Memorial Cemetery in Cambridge that said 'Mother' and 'Father'. There was no other identifier. I found it maddening how it feels that these people were entirely erased. They did not even include the mother or father of whom. At best, they are the parents of whoever is directly beside them. Their memory is tied to this physical location.

Maybe I don't want to lay next to strangers I don't know. I toy the thought as I swept around the headstone of some uncle I can't remember. But it might not be much better lying here with strangers I do know.

"Grandma. Why don't you want to be buried here?"

"I was just pondering that myself." I busied myself, cleaning up the last tomb, my mother-in-law's. "We should find a place to sit."

Sunny led me to a rock nearby. Not exactly a seat, but it will do for now.

I choose my words carefully, "Where to begin? I have been alive too long for this to be my family." That doesn't make any sense, does it? I try again, "Here, a lot of people die young. Your great grandfather there, he died right before I was set to marry your grandfather. He was in mourning so that delayed the wedding by a year. And your grandfather, died when your mother was only 4. That

influenza killed many in the village. Your mother might have had siblings otherwise.”

“But my mom is not buried here.” Sunny commented.

“No. A son is raised to be your own. A daughter is raised for someone else.” An old saying that’s always bothered me. But it’s been true so far. “Your mom is buried with her husband’s family.” I would have liked to sweep her grave today.

“That’s messed up.” I do love her blunt honesty, like a child that does not know how to lie.

“I suppose it is.”

“So, if you don’t want to be buried here, why not be buried with your parents?” Sunny asks.

I’ve wondered that too. “Because it’s been too long. I was given the opportunity to marry a good family, so I did. But it took me far away.” I think of my parents, my siblings. I think of the letters informing me of their deaths. “Now, everyone I know is dead and gone. Both there and here. I would only be intruding by going back now.”

“I still don’t get why you don’t like it here. It’s quite pretty.”

“It is.” I agreed. “Perhaps it’s because there’s too many bad memories. I came here often with your great grandmother, it’s always hard to please a mother-in-law you know. Or it might be because I do not feel that I belong. These people were gone in my life much longer than they were here for. Or maybe it’s simply because I prefer a location with a real bench to sit on.”

I got up with quite some effort. That rock really did make for a terrible bench. But at least my earlier doubts are now gone. I would much rather be elsewhere.

“Come child. We need to present your ancestors with the offerings.”

I guide Sunny swiftly through the motions, presenting the gifts, saying our prayers. I am quite ready to move on.

On the walk out of the cemetery, I see Sunny hesitate at a fork in the path. I offer what I know her mind must be grasping for. “That path leads to an older section of the cemetery. We have family there too. We swept those graves once when you were young.” My mother-in-law was particularly determined to appease all those ancestors. I chose not to follow her example after her passing. But it was an especially auspicious year, and I couldn’t help but be extra careful.

Sunny continues to stare at the path. I suppose my tired legs would do good with a climb. “Would you like to go see them?”

She nods, so we take off.

I prefer the mulch on this side path over the gravel of the main trails we were on, it makes for a softer landing for my knees. I will admit though the locale holds some unpleasant memories for me, it is a very lovely place to walk. The weather is too nice to be hiding indoors anyway.

It is a slow climb with changing landscapes. We pass neat rows of graves, first in manicured lawns, then in overgrown forests. We pass a forgotten grove of fig trees,

slowly reabsorbing back into the thickets, their slightly bitter scent now makes me long for the honeyed sweetness of midsummer.

We walk deeper still, into the older parts of the cemetery. The difference is subtle, the path winds more frequently, the stones are covered in more moss and mold. It takes a keener eye to recognize those mounds as graves.

“I didn’t realize how large this cemetery was.” Sunny broke the silence.

Sometimes Sunny feels just like the child she once was. “We are a small village. The cemetery was able to keep expanding for a very long time.” I stopped us at a spot where a break in the trees allows us to see into the valley. We walked quite far and have been afforded a panoramic view, “You can see the village from here. If we were a bigger city, the town would have expanded, it would have swallowed the cemetery long ago. Everything redeveloped, the graves long gone.” I sigh, that still might be the case in the future.

Without explicitly saying that Pearl is listening to each footstep they take, describing the sounds, I want to make it clear that there is a difference in the noise of these steps. I want the reader to know that as they go down this particular path, the atmosphere changes to something softer and serene.

I am thinking of Monet's Haystacks, his failing eyesight and how it affected his paintings.¹

There is a particular beauty to those works that his cataracts allowed him to see. I want that to play into this softer, hazier, gentler atmosphere.

“Would be a good place for some very expensive vacation homes.”

Sunny quips.

“Clever girl” I laugh, I have not felt so light in this cemetery for a very long time. It's nice to be out of the village, its residents, and structures hazy in the distance. Or is it my eyesight giving in? Either way, it's a beautiful scene.

We stand, staring out into the valley for some more time before continuing on our way.

Sunny

The old family tomb felt smaller than I remembered. It is still a massive stone face with intricate engravings, a cavity carved into the mountain itself. But it doesn't feel so overwhelmingly tall and scary anymore. I also didn't remember all the neighbouring tombs, I'm sure each has its unique inscriptions and motifs, but they have all blended together with age. It is both unique, special, significant, yet anonymous. I would not be able

to identify which tomb held the remains of my ancestors without Grandma here pointing it out.

I rejoin my grandmother on the main path, where she is patiently waiting. I notice that she's leaning on her cane more than usual. "Can we take a break for a bit before we head down? We can sit on this outcrop." I suggest even though I'm not all that tired. I should have suggested it earlier. She was slowing down near the end, leaning on my arm more as we went along. Stumbling a bit on roots and pebbles. But I already know that she won't be admitting to such a weakness today. There are ghosts she wants to stand up to.

I cleaned off the rocky surface the best I could and help her down. "Yes, this place has a nice view." The nice view Grandma pointed out is rather ironic, we've climbed high enough that we see more mist than landscape. We're looking out but there's not much to see.

She notices my confusion, "Maybe not right now, but oftentimes. Some years are colder. There would only be the first signs of spring dotted in the trees. You can see aged, wrinkled faces in the barren rocks. Some years are milder. A lush greenery carpets over the mountains, as far as the eye could see."

I try to envision what this place might have looked like over the years. How it might have looked when Grandma was young, on a clear and bright day. "I think it would have been beautiful either way."

"It was. And I saw it all." Grandma strokes my hand in a rhythm. I imagine this place, not just in her memories,

I haven't quite decided what the point being made is. It is meant to be significant, but I do not have clarity on the topic yet. I have been thinking about legacy, how closely linked it is with having children. But even when it is about some sort of career achievement, someone who achieved some level of fame in their lifetime, it still feels somewhat dehumanizing. Possibly, my point is that everyone is an intricately complex human being. There is so often this wish to flatten a person down to a few basic ideas. And when the person in question is no longer here, there are no new opportunities to learn about them, they are eventually reduced to a particular branch of the family tree or a 2-sentence career highlight. Possibly, my point is that if 'legacy' is what it means to be remembered, you might as well be forgotten. That somehow feels a bit more humane.

In turn, the architecture of remembrance, the structures we construct in

but other ancestors further along the family tree. "It was my favourite part about this place."

"Grandma." I ask hesitantly "Who's buried here? In the tomb I just saw. The old family tombs?"

She must have paused for only a moment, but it felt like an eternity to me. "I don't know." she said with such sadness. "We used to make this trek up often. Mother-in-law was always insistent on it. A real stickler for tradition" She laughs without humour. "So many times, I swept the graves of people I've never met and know nothing about. People that are not even my blood relatives." She scrunches her brow, thinking hard, "I believe the last time anyone was added to the tomb was my father-in-law's grandfather. Likely 150 years ago. I can't name one thing that man accomplished in his lifetime."

I stare at her aged and wrinkled face. I begin to truly understand why she needs to do it differently. Why she wants to pick out her plot, why she wants to die on her own terms. I can see the need to maintain control

after a lifetime without it. I hugged her tight. “It would be so sad. To be buried with such grandeur but not know what to remember the person for.”

Grandma sighs, “That. And the tomb sweepings, the prayers. What does it even mean to pray to our ancestors?”

“Do you not want me to talk to you when...” I couldn’t quite get the words out.

“No.” Grandma says firmly. “I want you to talk to me every chance you get. I am always happy to hear from you, and I would be happy to hear anything you might wish to say. It doesn’t matter if I’ll be able to hear it. I want you to confide in me, always.” She gives me knee a solid squeeze, a handshake or sorts. We’ve closed a deal. Grandma continues, “I just don’t want to be lumped into this arbitrary idea of the past, of tradition, a nameless faceless blur. I don’t want to hear the prayers of descendants who know nothing about my life and my person. Nothing but that I bore a child that bore a child that bore a

their name, they will never be able to encompass all they should about a person. The reality is that it is simply too large of a task, for designers, it will always be too ambitious of a project.

child that bore a child and so on. That's not what a legacy should be."

"Legacy." I ponder the word. It's been years, but I remember being young and ambitious, wishing to leave a great legacy. But I don't think that's what Grandma wants either.

"I don't care to have a legacy, not in the way of fame. I don't need immortality, I never wished to be in any history textbooks." I can see Grandma choosing her next words carefully, "I can be forgotten. But I do not want to ever be not human."

I nod, even though I don't quite understand.

Endnotes

- 1 Monet, *Haystacks (Series)*.



5 – The Outcrop

Chapter 6

Writing by the Garden

Pearl

I asked Sunny to find me a desk so I could write as I sat by the window. The small, movable tray she found is perfect. Pens, paper, a cup of tea. I am ready to begin.

But I sit here, staring at the empty page.

Maybe sitting by the window was a bad idea. Every time a bird flies by, every time the trees bow to the wind, I look up.

Instead, I can start with a list. A list of people I would like to write to. There is Sunny of course. I think there are a few things I would like to say to my friends here. Maybe a few distant relatives.

A loud metal clang breaks my focus.

Out the window, I see Sunny holding an empty bucket, an assortment of gardening tools scattered around her. I

This chapter is tied together by the act of writing. Pearl is trying to pen letters, some to send out now; hoping to reconnect with people from her past before her death, some to be opened after her death. There is a heaviness to these letters, it is for some, the first time in a long time. For others, simply the last time. Pearl knows that her letters to Sunny will be read and reread. She also knows that this will bring her comfort.

I find it funny how I found myself falling into this trope. Writers love writing about writers. But in this case, I do not think of myself as a writer and Pearl most definitely do not think of herself as a writer. It is even the exact specificities of the trope, I am writing about my struggles as a dabbler in writing because the character I've written is another dabbler in writing.

see her bending precariously over my rose bushes, trying to reach a spade.

“Sunny! Stop!” I scream out the window, scrambling to stand. My pens and papers scatter to the floor as I rush to the back garden.

I get there with more speed than I thought was possible and I am reminded why. My momentum is too great to stop, the gravel beneath my feet flies into the air. I brace myself for another fall.

But it doesn't come.

“Grandma!” Sunny had jumped in and caught me. “You shouldn't be running around. Especially without your cane! Where is your cane anyway?”

My cane? I really would not know where I might have misplaced it. I really ought to say thank you. Be grateful to be prevented another painful recovery. But I chose to ignore Sunny's question. Pride is a terrible thing.

“I was worried that you would fall into the rose bush.”

I know Sunny is rolling her eyes at me. I am feeling rather silly now too.

“Well, you asked me to do some weeding. Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to start weeding now.” She’s trying to make a point, I know. Rather ridiculous since she’s pulling at the wrong plants.

“These are sweet potatoes” I bent to pick up a leave from her discard pile. “These. These are the weeds.” I painstakingly reach over to the ivy on the ground and pluck a leaf. “See. Much darker in colour. Different shape too.”

“What about these?” Sunny asks, crouched, pointing deeper into the plant bed. Is she asking because she is curious? Or is she humouring an old lady that’s not used to being quite so useless?

“Those are wild ginger. Good for coughs. Don’t touch.” I have some doubts that Sunny will remember these instructions. “I could bring a chair out here and supervise.”

Sunny gives me a side eye; she doesn’t like being micromanaged. “It’s too hot outside. Grandma, you should go into the house.” She starts leading me back to the house. “Didn’t you say you wanted to write some letters? Just stay by the window and I will call if I’m confused.”

“Very well.” The heat is getting to my head, I think. The uneven brick steps are starting to feel loose. I grip onto Sunny’s arm tighter.

Sunny sets up the chair and I sink down into the cushions. I know I will have a lot of trouble getting up now. The slight breeze from the window is a welcome

relief from the humidity. She picks up my pens and papers and sets them on the little writing table.

I can't help but watch poor Sunny weeding in the blazing afternoon sun. It's sweet of her to want to help, but the child has a black thumb. I wince as she pulls a weed rather aggressively, damaging the nearby plants as well. There won't be much of a squash harvest this year. I was about to yell out for her to be careful. But very realistically, I won't be around for the squash harvest this year either. I hold my tongue and turn back to my writing.

I search for words worth putting down on paper. Words that don't come, not yet at least. It's hard to focus with a full house, I tell myself.

Maybe the key is to write them all down. All the thoughts, each idea is a few characters, scrawled so roughly even I cannot comprehend what it's meant to say. The brand-new notebook is already beaten and bruised by my abuse. I wrote a sentence and immediately scratched it out. The single floor lamp placed beside my bed is too bright and I can feel the weariness in my eyes. I'm not sure it's so late that I should give up. Call it a day and just go to sleep.

"Granny?"

I look up and see little Mikey peeking in from the doorway. "Darling! What are you doing still up?"

"I can't sleep." He says, snuggling his blanket.

I gesture him over, "Your blanket, you'll get it dirty on the floor."

Mikey gathered the fabric into a big ball and waddled over to me. “It’s my favourite!”, snuggling it tighter.

I search for signs of sleepiness in his face but do not find anything. “It’s very late you know,” I sigh. I am fully aware of my pointless statement. I put my notebook and pen away. If the child made it all the way from his assigned bedroom upstairs down to my makeshift bedroom/living room, I am sure I would be occupied for at least another half hour.

Mikey looks up at me with bright eyes and a big pout. “I don’t want to go to bed,” he whines. I think those big eyes get him what he wants often, but I’m immune. He looks a lot like his mother when she was young.

“You know,” I make an exaggerated thinking face, “You sound rather like your mother when she was your age.” I take his tiny hand in mine, “In fact, you might be just like her.”

He tosses his blanket on my bed and pulls himself up. Mikey burrows himself right beside me and drapes his blanket over his shoulders like a cape. “What was Mommy like when she was little?” He is very eager for a story. He is just like her.

“Your mother,” I say as I pull him closer so I can put my arms around him “was always too excited to go to bed.”

“I’m too excited too!” Mikey interrupts with a bounce, “We’re going to the zoo tomorrow!”

I squeezed him closer to me, I’m afraid the small cot won’t hold against his bouncing. “Exactly. Your mommy used to tell me sleep is too boring. That she wants to

have fun.” I say as I stroke his head; his hair is so soft and fine. He stops bouncing but moved on to flailing his arms about in excitement.

“I tell her sleep is boring too! Soooooo much time doing nothing.”

The children have so much energy. I really can’t keep up. “Then I should tell you what I told to her.” I laughed “That you can stay up all night and have all the fun you want to have. But you’ll be missing out.”

Mikey tangles himself in his blanket and looks at me skeptically. “Missing out on what?”

“Why! So many things!” I say as I wave my arms around too. “Your dreams are a whole new adventure! One you can only go on when you are asleep.”

I see him purse his lips, thinking hard “You’re lying.” His eyes narrowed with suspicion. “Dreams are boring.”

I’m not sure what white lies his parents have been telling him to get him to sleep. I’m not sure if he’ll believe me. “Maybe your dreams.” I say carefully, “But mine are super fun. Look at me now. I can’t get out of this bed on my own. But in my dreams, I can walk and run. I can fly!” I add in more big gestures for emphasis, raising his arms in a flapping motion with my own.

“I want to fly!” Mikey giggles.

“Then what are you waiting for. Go to bed. And dream of flight.” I try to scoot him off the bed, he may not be tired out but I certainly am.

“Can I sleep here tonight?” he asks, looking up at me with the puppy dog eyes again. Maybe I’m not as immune as I thought.

“You don’t want to go back up to your own bed? I promise your bed is comfier.”

“I want you to help me dream!” He gives me the sweetest hug. I can’t say no now.

“Alright. Just for tonight.” I say, tucking him in. “Just for tonight. I’ll help you dream.”

Mikey squeezes his eyes tight and pretends to fall right to sleep. He even adds a little snore.

I turn off the lamp and close my eyes too. I feel the frayed edges of Mikey’s blanket, I find myself twisting away at it with my fingers.

I wonder if I should write letters to my great grandchildren too. Would Mikey wish to know the story behind his favourite blanket? Would Sunny tell him herself?

But does Sunny know? Maybe not.

A graduation present I made for Sunny. It was the first time I left

There is a very similar blanket in my house, it’s a wedding present for my parents from my great aunt. It’s not quite so special, it wasn’t lovingly hand made, but it does feel special. I wasn’t so personally attached to it growing up but when my brother was born, he became overly attached to this blanket. I remember having to wash the blanket after he wet the bed as a toddler. I remember how he would realize that his blanket was missing and cry these huge tears until it was returned to him. That was when the blanket truly started to fall apart. It has since been repaired countless times, sewn into a new duvet cover to contain the damage. It reminds me of Theseus’ ship, is it still the same blanket?

Even now, this blanket is still a permanent staple in my brother’s bed. But I shouldn’t be making fun of him too much. If I search deep in my memories, I remember that this blanket came with matching pillow covers. I used those

pillow covers long before my brother was born. I remember those pillow covers disintegrated in the same way the blanket did years later. I also cried like a baby when we got rid of those pillow covers.

the country. The quilt I made was heavy and took up two thirds of my suitcase.

In a blink of an eye, this little girl was fully grown and graduating from university. And I was still hanging on to the child she once was. The quilt was made from the jeans she wore growing up. The tough fabric was worn thin and ripped beyond repair. I never knew why I saved them. All I knew was that I was missing her. I'm not sure where I got the idea for a quilt. Was it the neighbour maybe? But I do remember the hours I spent at the sewing machine. I remember giving the quilt to Sunny, how she cried as she hugged me. I never want to assume that she treasured it the way I did. I do not want to burden her future because I am holding on to her past. But I'm glad she kept it. I'm glad Mikey loves it so much. I can see it being worn thin in places once again. My fingers stroking along the frayed edges of the quilt.

I'm not sure how much time passed, but I hear Mikey's breathing soften. He's finally asleep.

At this rate, the quilt itself will be worn beyond repair in a couple of years. Especially with the way Mikey uses it. Or Mikey would forget about his favourite blanket before long. Or maybe it would be mended continuously to prevent a heartbreak. I hope so. But either way, the children will move on, as children do. They will likely forget about me. After all, I have not had too much opportunity to create many memorable moments with them.

I look out wistfully at the children playing in the garden. I wish I could be out there with them. But I am trapped in this chair, my frail and stiff body turning my home into a prison. But at least I have this window out to the garden. The afternoon sun pouring in reminds me that summertime is upon us. Who knew I could grow such a fondness for an opening in a wall.

Their father jumps out from behind the large willow and chase the kids. He catches them and giggles erupt. “Chris is a good father.”

To be loved is to be changed. Recently, I have been learning more about embroidery and as I take on this hobby, I have been in turn learning more about mending clothing. A frayed blanket is a blanket that has been well loved. The hope of mending a frayed blanket is the hope that the blanket will be cherished. Only the most beloved items are so lovingly repaired. Even tattered, such a blanket will survive every declutter.

To be obtrusively explicit, this is an analogy to architecture. Architecture that is not well used, not well loved, will not be the ones that change with the times. Love is what separates disposable and permanent architecture.¹ Love is also a source of creativity. For when we are asked to discard the things we love, whether it be a blanket or a building, we will bend over backwards, use every and any excuse, pour our heart and soul into arguing why what we love is worth keeping.

I feel that I am getting distracted. I cannot quite decide what this fragment is about. Is it about Pearl's deteriorating body and her looking at the life she will miss with her great grandchildren? Or is it about Sunny balancing the demands of caretaking the old and raising the young?

Sunny is standing behind me, combing my hair. I now have a hard time lifting my hands above my head. "He is. The kids love him." She responds, giving my hair the gentlest possible tug. "He's really stepped up while I've been gone."

I can feel the conflicting emotions from Sunny.

"And you're a good mother too." I try to reassure her. "They love you. They miss you. And I'm sorry to have taken you away from them."

"I don't mind being here." Sunny insists. She finishes up and plants herself on a footstool by my side. She wants to make a point.

"And I love having you. But I know your absence must be felt at home." I find her display of determination very sweet. "I just don't want you doubting yourself and your abilities because you're temporarily away. One day, Chris will need you to step up too and I don't doubt you will."

The kids started to hide as he counted down. "Do you remember

how you and the neighbour's kids used to play hide and seek in the garden?"

"I remember climbing the willow. It was my favourite hiding spot. No one ever thinks to look up."

"I remember the panic I felt every time you jumped down from the tree." I laugh at the near mirror image plays out in front of us. "I remember having to tell myself to breathe after each landing."

Sunny laughs too. But only after her own son successfully lands on the ground. "I was ready to sprint outside." Still shaking out the tension.

"That's what children do." I patted down on the stool beside me, telling her to sit. "They force us to be young. They give us a reason to run and jump and play." I sigh, tired just thinking about all the motions. "Raising you filled me with a lot of life for a very long time." Sunny leans toward me and rests her head on my shoulder. "But it's all caught up in time. Now a little peace and quiet is all I want."

We sit in a companionable silence, watching the trio outside.

I think I found the message I want to send to the kids. I do think they are too young to be burdened with words from a long dead relative. But I do want to write something for Chris.

It would be a cumbersome task, which is why I had chosen not to initially. I would need to find a translator of some like, or he would need to find someone to translate

my handwriting. It would be worth the effort. I need to thank him.

I'm sure he already knows that I am grateful, but he deserves a reminder. Not all husbands and fathers would be able to handle an extended absence from their wives. I also know that he has been very supportive of Sunny, in her career, as a co-parent, here. It soothes my heart to know that my Sunny is in good hands.

"Go join their games outside" I tell Sunny. I have some writing to do.

And the more I write, the more quickly I write. Old proverbs quoted by stern teachers flicker through my mind. Something about repetition, something about practice. I knew they were right before, but the confirmation, even if it comes at my old age, is still nice to have.

My concentration was broken by the arthritis in my hands. I debate simply working through the pain but decided it would be better to wait for it to pass. I glance out the window, into the garden. The sky is bright, but it won't last long. My joints have been successfully predicting the weather for some time now.

I sit back and begin reading the letters I had already written. Some close friends. Some distant relatives. It's surprising how many people I want to send a little note to. People I haven't spoken to in years. I am surprised how much I wish to say. I am surprised by how much I long to hear back from them. To know that after all these decades, they think of me too.



6 – Song Bird

I wish I could make a better impression, but I force myself to look past the deteriorating handwriting. I know it won't be getting any better at this point. I feel an itch to cross out and reword every other sentence, but I know I would struggle more rewriting these letters over again.

I set down the letters. Now is not the time for perfection. It never was.

I miss the sound of the birds. I didn't realize how much joy the songs brought me. I was too distracted

With any art, there is a level of perfectionism that comes from the iterative process. I have always struggled with knowing when to stop designing, I am feeling the same way now as I learn this art of writing and editing. I think it is important to show Pearl struggle to put words down on paper, but eventually accept a subpar result. I hope to capture a certain self-consciousness that Pearl feels, especially because she feels the end drawing near. Especially

because she herself feels unintelligent and therefore, her words are not worth preserving.

I think this feeling of uncertainty is analogous to my stance on architecture. I wanted to think about time and permanency because it feels to me like there is nothing that is worth the effort of preserving permanently. Architecture is resource intensive. Should we not try harder, iterate more, make the perfect design, in order to build something that deserves to be built? Yet at the end of the day, there cannot be an expectation of perfection; we must do something or risk doing nothing at all.

wishing I could still go out in my garden. A few short weeks ago, all I wanted was to be out there instead of looking out at it all day.

Now, the slightest breeze makes me shiver; I long for an open window. It would do me good to appreciate what I am capable of doing today.

I close my eyes and bask in the warmth of the afternoon sun. I can't fully lean into the rays, but I can feel the heat on my hands, gently radiating.

I say a silent prayer, a word of appreciation for this window which I love, and I return to my letter writing with renewed determination.

Endnotes

1 *Architecture Lecture.*

Chapter 7

The End

Sunny

The knock at the door breaks my focus. I really do need to send out this email, but I can't leave the guests waiting at the door. Work emergencies no longer hold the same urgency to me, but there are some that still require my immediate attention. I just don't have a lot of attention to pay these days.

We should just install a revolving door out front. It feels like there are several guests coming and going each day. "Aunt Mai. Come in." I greet her with as much enthusiasm as I can muster. She's here daily now.

"I made some bread. You need to eat heartier meals Sunny." She pushes a large loaf into my hand. "It has sunflower and sesame seeds. Good for high blood pressure." She gives me a look that told me whether or

This fragment is meant to show the dual sided blade that is community. While this is a time of need and the community is trying to lend a hand as best they can, the helping hands come at the price of scrutiny.

not it's true, she thinks my blood pressure is through the roof. "I'll go check in on Pearl. You go back to your work." Aunt Mai knows her way around. I give her a tight smile then retreat to my workstation at the dining room table.

I understand why it's called the fishbowl effect. The walls are too close. People are watching from all angles. I can feel her gaze, inspecting me in detail. I wonder what made her think my blood pressure is high. Was it my progressively worsening posture? I can feel my back curling in on itself like a roly-poly. Maybe it's the bags under my eyes? I stopped bothering with concealer weeks ago.

I don't know what she's looking for. I don't know if it's something I can fix.

But it's much more than Aunt Mai, I've lost track of all the strangers. There were many from this community. Some knew me, many didn't. Some people travelled far for a visit, friends from long ago, coming to say goodbye.

I wonder what they see as they pass through. They must think I've started clearing out the house before she's even dead. They don't see how we needed to remove almost all the furnishings so Grandma could be wheeled outside. Each time knowing this might be the last time Grandma can enjoy the garden she's worked so hard to build. They might think I am torturing her with the gruel I feed her. They don't know how sensitive her stomach become with these pain medications, how she can't stand to eat much of anything.

I can't tell if I passed their judgements. Am I too sad? Am I not sad enough? I don't even know if this is an appropriate level of sadness for me, much less for them. Their gaze is too intense to ignore. And Grandma. What do they think of her? Is she too frail to be opening her home to visitors or is she too healthy to be claiming to be at death's door?

I'm rarely in the room for long periods. Grandma is always sending me off to fetch tea and biscuits, some book or artifact. I do prefer it this way. So, I turned away. I leave Grandma to her visitors and their farewells.

Pearl

I am dying too slowly. I immediately realized how odd of a thought that is. How much it contradicts all my beliefs about gratefulness.

I turn to the abbess sitting by my bed, she has been such a dear friend, someone I enjoyed spending time with during the past decades. But we are no longer speaking

as friends. We are not talking about our days, our little anecdotes, and reflections.

She's been a frequent visitor, giving me updates about the life she continues outside these walls. But today, she has been solely quoting from scripture. Words about finality, words about closure. Did we really run out of stories to tell?

The words she's chanting are more of a comfort to herself than to me, but I'm not sure she knows that. I wish I could ease her pain somehow. Not just her, everyone. But my attempts only seem to trigger tears. I suppose that I can only make people sadder.

"Do not fear death, for death is the spark that creates," she says. Her position as a religious leader in the community is not lost on me.

I had told myself this many times in the last few months. I told myself that I do not fear death, I do think I believe it. But I have since learned that it is not death that I fear. I fear pain.

I feared a slow, agonizing death, trapped in a cold sterile hospital. I no longer believe in miracles. Now I fear that it didn't make a difference, this constant aching deep in my bones, leaving me weary and empty. I fear that Sunny will only hold on to these last days of misery.

I feared false hope, the idea of trading a moment now for a moment later. A later that might never come. Now that it is later, I fear the anticipation, the pin bound to drop. Death at my doorstep, his hand hovering but not knocking.

I feared for my legacy, friend, or foe, what would they say? I worked hard to make amends; I watched the characters from my past clash with the present. I can't quite remember why their words held any weight at all. Now all I want now is peace and quiet.

I feared for my family, my sweet granddaughter. No longer a child but always my darling in my heart. I wanted to make sure that she would be well when I'm gone. Now I wonder if she will be worse off had I gone without her assistance.

The abbess clutches her prayer beads in a rather combative matter. Like she is readying herself for a street brawl.

I wanted everyone to celebrate life before I die. I wanted to see it, experience it. It would have made for a good ending. I see the mistake I made now. What is it that they say about hindsight? I tried too hard to orchestrate my demise. But I do not determine my ending, do I? Like the abbess said, I am in the hands of a higher power. I should lean into their embrace.

For their sake and mine. It's time to go. I reach out to hold the abbess' hands for a prayer. I pray for a gentle departure. I pray for a deep sleep.

Sunny

I can hear the kettle whistling in the kitchen, but I need to change Grandma's sheets. I freeze with indecision for a second before dropping the laundry basket and running to turn off the kettle first. Just as I pick the laundry basket

I am thinking of the expression “It takes a village to raise a child”. I think the same idea can be applied here. That it takes a village to care for the aged. Angela the hospice nurse is hired specifically for this task, but she is nevertheless an important part of this village.

Her grandmother very explicitly chose to spend the end of life in her community. There is this trust that her community would come through at the end. The abbess and Aunt Mai are an important part of that, but they are not necessarily trained for this. Unfortunately, it does leave Sunny overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted.

This is meant to be a very sudden transition from how the story began, where Sunny is tired but quite aware of her surroundings. She is conscious of how she is being perceived. Now, without describing the space explicitly, I hope it's clear that it's all fallen apart. This is a house in crisis.

back up, a knock at the door stops me. At least I was expecting someone. I set aside my mountain of laundry to open the door. Thank goodness, the hospice nurse is here.

“Hello Sunny. How have you been?” Angela asks with a kind smile.

“Keeping it together.” I gestured for her to come in.

“And how about Pearl?”

I hesitate, but there is no point in lying. “Not great. I think the new pain meds are giving her nightmares. She calls out sometimes. And she’s losing control of her body. She’s having a lot of trouble rolling over. It’s been getting more difficult each time I had to change the bed sheets. There’s more but-” I try to take a deep breath, but air can’t seem to go in.

“Slow down Sunny,” her voice sounds serene, her hand on my shoulder is solid and comforting. “I’ll start with helping you with the bedsheets,” Angela nods toward the laundry, “I can check to see if her issues with rolling over might be causing her discomfort.” She’s strong for a tiny woman, Angela’s

firm hand guides me to the wayward dining room chair that now resides in the entryway “You take a moment to breathe first. Then I’ll review the medications Pearl is on and make any adjustments,” she clasped my hands in hers and gave them a squeeze, “Afterwards, we sit down and talk about anything else that’s happening. Okay?”

I nod.

I spend an unknown amount of time just sitting there, a very strange panic floating around me. I’ve been moving so fast, trying to do everything that I haven’t had time to come to terms with the reality right in front of me. I was afraid to stop, afraid to think, afraid to face what I already knew.

Grandma has gone from bad to worse. Everyday. She’s dying.

Pearl

There are some dreams so beautiful, so vivid, so intense that it seems that it cannot possibly be anything by reality. Some dreams so lucid that waking up feels like the dream. Where

I’ve heard a lot of stories from palliative care professionals, and there is a common trope.¹ Nearing death, many patients have a recurring dream of a journey. It is a journey to the other side. Many patients dream of their already passed loved one waiting for them. Many patients dream of something missing, some luggage maybe, holding them back. This is what that dream looks like for Pearl.

the world passes by in a muddy blur and you await for night so the dreams sweep you back into its picturesque landscapes.

I have been dreaming those dreams. I have been dreaming the same dream.

There are mountains, off in the distance. They have rugged stone faces, capped with lush greenery. They are imposing, yet so alluring. Their massiveness softened by the wispy clouds dancing playfully.

There are reeds, swaying in the gentle breeze. They brush against my clothes, my skin. Like a tender, loving hand, beaconing me forward.

There is a river, reflecting light so bright that it is painful to stare too long. But the colours sway along the surface, too mesmerizing to turn away.

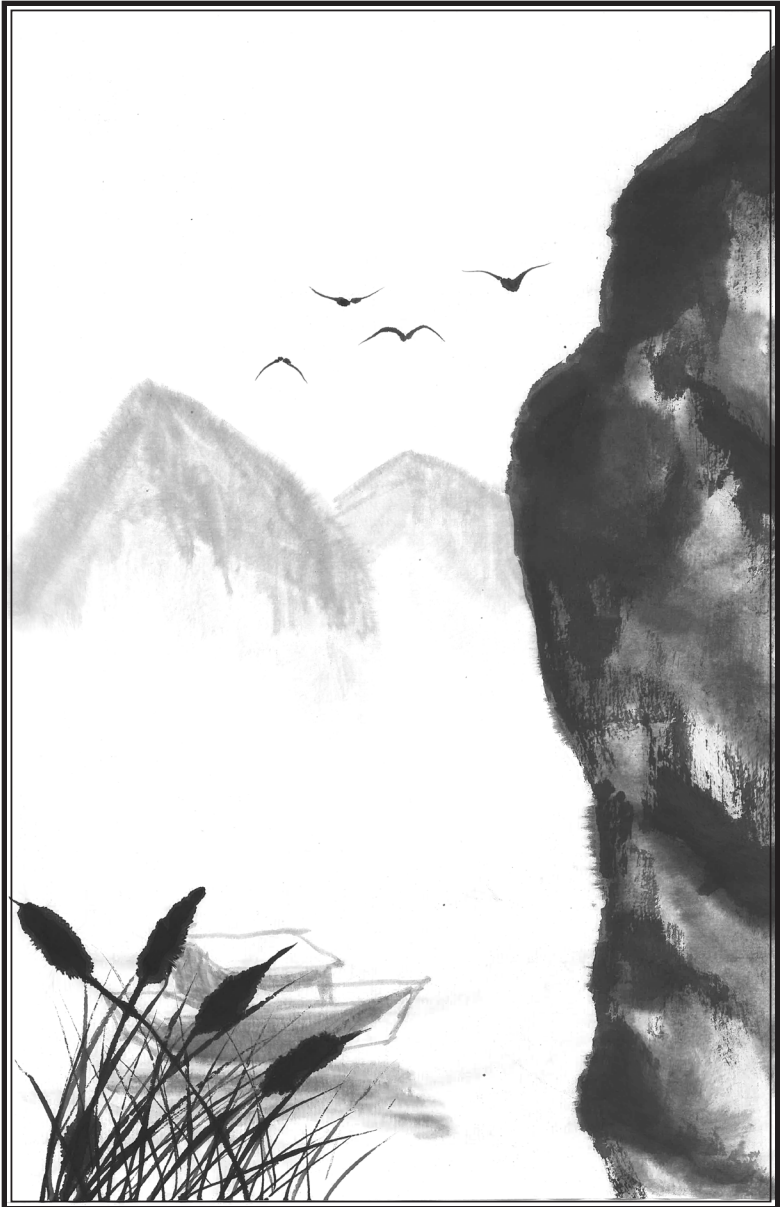
There is a boat, a little sampan bobbing calming at the shore. This is my boat. I do not know how I know, but I know, nevertheless.

There is a boatman, snoozing peacefully with his arms curled around the oar. All I need to do is to wake him. A light tap on the shoulder will do.

There are songbirds, a flock flying synchronously. They sing their song seductively; it is a melancholy tune. A song about going home.

But I am not ready. I tell the birds. I am not ready to get on the boat, to wake the boatman, to go on this journey. I am not ready to go home.

You will be. The birds sing back.



7 – Dreamscape

Sunny

“You know” Angela the hospice nurse interrupts my endlessly dark thoughts, “Some people in my profession swears that even in a coma, they can hear you.”

“Do you think it would help her?” I feel weary. I don’t think anything can help her now.

Angela looks thoughtful for a moment, “Maybe. Maybe not. But I think it’ll help you.” She jots a few more things down on her clipboard. “I’ll be back tomorrow at 4. Try to get some rest.”

Rest. It feels wrong to rest. Grandma may have her eyes closed, but how can she rest wired up to all these machines. And if she can’t rest, why should I?

I rub my eyes, thinking back to Angela’s suggestion. If Grandma could hear me, I think it would bring her comfort. But I struggle to find the words to say.

“I don’t think I ever told you how much I appreciate the work you put in.” I start tentatively, the words feel heavy on my tongue, “I know exactly what you would say. That you took me in because my parents were too busy to take care of me. And then, they were just gone before I knew it.” These were words I’ve never said before, but they need to be said. “I know it was what you had to do. It was nothing special.” I start crying now. Again. “I don’t think I ever expressed how grateful I am that it was you who raised me.” I find myself launching into a full speech, a veritable monologue.

“But it was special. I learned so much from you. I learned about compassion, about hard work. I learned

about resilience and about loyalty. I remember the time I broke one of the porcelain vases in the living room. One of the kids in the neighbourhood just got a new book and there was a fight scene. I was playacting the moves in the drawings because it looked so cool. I wasn't paying attention. I swung my arms back and forth and hit the shelf in the process. I hid away the pieces, trying to pretend it never happened. You caught me immediately. I thought you would yell at me. You should have. But you didn't. You weren't angry at all. You just looked so sad. I was determined to be more careful after that. I never wanted to make you sad again.

“I remember the night before my big exam. You were more worried than I was. You sat by my bed, stroking my head. I did not sleep well that night. But I couldn't bear to tell you to leave. I was afraid too and I wanted you near me. And I was much too old to ask to crawl into bed with you.

“I remember the stray puppy I found on my way home from school. I must have been 7 or 8 years old. It was hiding behind a pot of water. It looked so sad. I named it Buddy and begged you to let me keep it. I brought out the waterworks and everything. I'm so glad you said yes. I knew you didn't want to worry about another mouth to feed. Buddy lived up to his name. He used to walk me to school every morning and pick me up in the afternoons. And we would play along the way. He was a good dog. I'm so glad you said yes.

“I remember learning how to harvest bamboo shoots with you. I hated it so much. I was being eaten alive by the mosquitoes! The trek up those hills was hard and I would much rather do pretty much anything else. I never told you of course, but I think you knew. You didn’t make me go with you all that often, even though you could always use that second pair of hands. It would take so long to fill our baskets too. Weaving through the forests, looking for the young shoots that just popped out of the ground. But my favourite part came right after. When we would sit on the porch and peel the shoots. When you would tell stories as we worked. I miss listening to your stories.”

I pause, waiting for a response maybe? There was none of course, but I kept going.

“Remember how I used to read all night? You used to say how I was so wasteful. How I need to sleep properly. But I loved it so much. I did my homework faster just so I could read more before you forced me to bed. And when I ran out of books to read, you went and paid Mr. Huang to let me borrow his. He had so many more books than we did. I loved going over and picking out a new book. The characters were always doing something or going somewhere. I wanted to be just like them.

“I love taking my kids to the public library. We’ll have to wait and see with Mikey, but Andy is a big reader already. I’ve caught him under the bed sheet with a flashlight reading. It was one of those adventure books, I picked it up and read it later. I get it! It’s very addictive.

“I want to give them what I didn’t have. I know that there is so much that I miss out on by being so far from home. I nearly missed these last days with you. But I cannot regret leaving. I would never have met Chris. We wouldn’t have our kids now. They’re really hard work! But it’s all worth it. And I do think that there are so many more opportunities abroad for them. It pains me that it’s true. There really was never a choice.”

I try to back tears, imagining this future that simply does not make sense. Regretting a past that cannot be changed.

“I’m so sorry for not bringing them home more often. I’m sorry you won’t see them fully grown.”

Pearl

Everything has faded away slowly.

The walls are blurry swatches. The windows, a radiant glow.

But Sunny, sitting beside me,
She is still here. She is in focus.

I can feel the warmth of her hand on mine. I can feel the weariness she bears.

It’s time to go.

I know I am being contradictory. I was lonely. I’ve wanted Sunny home with me for so long. But now, I want her to leave.

When she is near, I want to clutch tighter. I want to be with her.

Another interesting story from palliative care, some people wish to die alone.² There are people who are not conscious, completely unresponsive and are physically holding on with nothing but willpower. These people are sometimes surrounded by a very devoted group of family and friends who do not want them to die alone. Yet, no matter what people say while they are alive, some people wait until they are alone to die.

I can't tell what my point was in including it, but I do think given Pearl's personality and how she very much did orchestrate much of the end of her life, she would be somewhat surprised by her own body's reaction at this moment of death.

But when she is here, I can feel the life drain from her. I can feel her sinking into darkness.

It's time to go.

But not yet. Not while she is here.

I know I said I didn't want to die alone. But I did not know my own mind. How could I? It's not like I've died before.

I am no longer lonely. What is the point? This is a journey I must take by myself. So yes. I suppose I do want to die alone.

A muffled sound, another presence.

A squeeze of my hand, a kiss on the forehead.

Finally, I am alone.

It's time to go.

Endnotes

- 1 Bell, *Living at the End of Life*.
- 2 Dugdale, *The Lost Art of Dying*.

Chapter 8

The Funeral

Just Sunny

The abess handed me a bouquet of flowers when I first walked in. She said something about Grandma tending the garden with her, something about a great friendship, I can't quite remember. She rushed away soon after.

She's the master of ceremony for the funeral. She speaks with a soft and even tone, very appropriately solemn. She calls me up to deliver the eulogy. I set down the bouquet on my seat when I stood.

The six or so meters could very well be miles. It feels like I am walking through molasses, each step is a monumental effort. An eternity later, when I was finally at the podium, I stared out at the crowd before me. I stare at the bouquet in my seat.

The flowers Sunny is hyper focusing on throughout her eulogy is inspired by a real story. This is what happened. One of my best friends works at a flower shop. We met studying architecture together in undergrad and while she decided this isn't the field for her, there must be a little something residual about that experience she still holds on to. A week or so ago, someone sent a bouquet for Raymond Moriyama's widow from this flower shop and my friend was the one to make that bouquet.

I doubt Raymond Moriyama needs much introduction, given that this is an architectural thesis, but Raymond Moriyama was a prominent Japanese Canadian architect that designed several beautiful and thoughtful buildings like the Toronto Reference Library and the Canadian War Museum.¹

Back to the story. I remember talking to my friend the day she made this bouquet, how she realized who the bouquet is going to when she picked up the call, how

“I was told this will be hard, to speak up here, to talk about my grandmother. Some of you asked me if I was sure.” I fumble with the notes I prepared, trying, and failing to make out the marks on the page. “You were worried that it would make the pain worse. As if that was possible.” I give up on my written speech and say what I remember. “While I know you were just looking out for me, I think you're flat out wrong.”

I stare at the crowd of now familiar faces, I stare at the bouquet at my seat, a rough assemblage of wildflowers and even some herbs. I remember what it was the abbess said earlier. *From the monastery gardens*, she said. *Pearl planted these*. “This. Standing here. Talking to you about the amazing and wonderful person my grandmother was. This is easy.” A simple homemade bouquet represents her so perfectly. These are people that know her, that understand her. There is no need to explain myself, to explain what I have lost, not when they have lost the same.

“What’s not easy is all the things she did. The years of love and devotion to her family and her community. It’s not easy to wake up every morning with a smile as a debilitating disease eats away your body. It’s not easy to smile with grace and good humour no matter how bad the day was.” I take a shaky breath, I shiver in the breeze, “And there were so so many bad days at the end.”

I look around, comparing the abbess’ hand-picked arrangement with the flowers I don’t remember choosing all around the service. I recall some of the words over the phone. Simple. Graceful. Elegant. Those words did not make sense. I should have done better. She deserved better. But are they not a product of my bad days too?

“But I don’t want to focus on the bad days. There were too many good days to remember her by. A long and full lifetime of good days. I remember the day I graduated; she had travelled quite a distance to be there. I remember the pride in her eyes. She had a dream that was not available to

she told the customer that this shop doesn’t normally do the type of flower arrangements they are ideally looking for. They placed the order anyway and my friend made the bouquet, changing the shop’s usual style through some minor adjustments. Mrs. Moriyama, his widow, received the small bouquet that my friend had made, and she loved it a lot more than anyone could have anticipated. She felt that it perfectly captured the essence of her late husband.

The widow specifically requested the same designer to do the arrangements for the memorial service that’s being held this week. My friend could not, she was never trained to make such a large arrangement. The shop, being a rather small boutique, also lacked the materials that week to really make the ideal arrangement for the memorial service. The arrangements were made by someone more senior, and my friend knows that it was not what the widow was hoping for. She called me yesterday, telling

me about the weight of expectation and her own disappointment.

It did end up alright. It was not too busy in the shop and my friend was able to recruit the help of another, more senior co-worker to help her adjust the arrangements for the memorial service before they were delivered. The final product, she said, won't likely capture the essence of Raymond Moriyama perfectly as his widow would have hoped, but it also is likely not too far off. I suppose that is the benefit of being a former architecture student in this situation, you can bring yourself to step away.

I think there is a freedom in not knowing, in anonymity. With every design, whether it is floral or architectural, there is an interpretation of the request. When we are distanced, when it is fully reduced to a few adjectives in an email, all we can do is try our best with what we have. When we know more, as we all do with someone prominent and admired like Raymond Moriyama,

her, and she did all she could to give me the opportunity to achieve it." I recall the years of constant stress, the need to do better. "I would be lying if I said there wasn't a great pressure to succeed, but I knew it was all from love, all from hope for the future." I look around at the ceremony being held today. I should have done better. Somehow, made everything more... her.

"I remember the very first time she bought me a book. I don't know how long she was pinching pennies for to afford such a luxury for me. How happy she was as I gasped in wonder, taking in the smell of the bookstore." I bask in the warmth of the sun, choosing this moment to come out. Like the warmth of the memory held the force to part the clouds. Like forgiveness.

"And a few short months ago, I remember our trip to the zoo. She was too weak to walk but she made sure it was a fun and memorable experience, nevertheless. She had my young children on her lap, zipping down hills at speeds I was



8 – Floral Arrangements

even if it is not knowing personally, doing our best no longer feels like enough.

So often with design, we simply do not have the time, energy, resources, or skills to meet the expectations of 'enough'. But then the stakes are so high, being anywhere short of the impossible standard of 'enough' is terribly and soul-crushingly heartbreaking.

Sunny delivers a beautiful speech; everyone there says so. But to her, every aspect of the funeral, even after she has tried her best, is simply not enough.

uncomfortable with to say the least." I laugh but have to stop before it turns into a cry.

"She lived a long, full, joyful life. I do not think she would want us to feel sad about her departure. But I will admit to being lost. It is going to be so very hard is to know that from now on, I will have to figure out how I'm supposed to live life without her."

I gather my useless papers and step down from the podium and back to my seat. I gingerly cradle the bouquet, I let the tears fall.

I let my watering eyes blind me and I simply accept this lack of sight. It's the smoke from the burning paper. The wind is blowing smoke right in my face. It feels vital that I can logic my way through these physical sensations I am experiencing right now. It reminds me that I am here.

Burning paper money. To send to the dead. I wonder if they appreciate it. I wonder if the monetary value increases when it's soaked in my tears. Do the dead really have a use for this money on the other side? Would Grandma want me to burn

something else? Would she know it's from me? Would she know how much I miss her?

The abbess is chanting a prayer. Grandma would find comfort in her presence here. I try my best to focus. To meditate as the abbess chants. I try to be still. I try to be serene. Like Grandma in her open casket. I tried, but I know I have failed. There is not supposed to be anger and depression in serenity.

I take a deep breath. And another one.

I breathe in the scent of burning paper. Paper money does not smell so different from paper books. It reminds me of another fire. When I was preparing to leave for the first time.

Burning books. It's a horrid act, but it's different because they were mine to burn. My thoughts. My feelings. My words. They were for my eyes alone.

For years I wrote. Every day. Filling these pages with my most private ponderings. I cannot take them with me. I cannot leave them

This chapter is strung together by smell and the act of breathing. I wanted the transitions to be a bit reminiscent of the prologue, where Pearl is praying and the scene changes very suddenly. I want it to feel like Sunny is taking a deep breath, trying to calm herself and suddenly, hours have gone by, she's in a different place, doing different things. They are experiencing the same type of shock response where they slip out of focus.

Burning paper money is a visual that I most clearly recall through TV. I know I have participated in that activity before, but the memory is simply not quite as vivid as what I've seen on screens. And while I know that this is likely a problem exclusive to me, I felt the need to solve the problem. My problem is that I have a very clear recollection of funeral scenes on TV where the families are faking their grief. When the crying widow is burning paper money, but she is the one who secretly ordered for her husband to be killed. The act of burning paper money accidentally became very disingenuous in my mind. That is not at all what Sunny should be feeling as she is burning paper money.

My solution was to tie the act to something that I feel has the correct atmosphere.

I don't know how this came up, but my mom once told me about burning her diaries. She

here. So, I burn them. Page by page. Tears retched out of me. I cried for the piece of me that I lost. Those tears cannot compare to the loss I feel now.

A hand on my shoulder reminds me that I am here. The abbess smiles kindly down at me. *You go first* she gestures, handing me three sticks of incense.

I stand. I bow. I place the incense in front of what would be the newest addition to the altar. And I step aside.

As the other mourners light their incense, the air begins to change. Somewhere high up in the sky, a shifting cloud is blown away, revealing what feels like the first rays of sunlight in centuries. From the overwhelming sadness of burning paper, I begin to feel, just in the slightest bit, the tranquility of burning incense.

It's a comforting scent, one closely associated with home and Grandma praying at the altar at home. I try to focus on it. I take a slow, measured breath.

I remember wanting to hold the wake here at home, but now that it's happening, I feel increasingly claustrophobic. There are so many people milling around. The somber chatter is an unknown language to me. I can't remember why I wanted this.

I look around the living room, it looks foreign to me. The hospital bed Grandma slept in was moved out and the furnishings restored back to their supposedly rightful places. Almost.

Aunt Mai had arrived with an army of teens from the neighbourhood to prepare the house for the wake. It had completely slipped my mind that that was a task that needed to be done. In fact, if not for Aunt Mai, there may not have been a wake at all. She arranged for food to be made and delivered, she had sent out the notices, she ushered everyone here from the funeral.

I'm grateful, how could I not be? But I wasn't prepared for the change. I'm still shocked each time I enter a room.

was moving away, I'm not sure to where at this point, but it would be impractical to take all the diaries with her and she did not trust it to be safe to leave them all behind. So, she spent a day crying as she burned those diaries. And I do feel that burning your own diaries is a heart wrenching act that perfectly fits the atmosphere of this moment in the story. It is likely not personally relatable; I've never had to do it. What I find profound about the act is that it is about not just burning paper but burning away time and thoughts and memories.

A common practice with many grieving family members is the maintenance of a specific place. Where family would leave a space, often a bedroom, exactly as it was when their loved ones passed as some sort of shrine.² Others might not be allowed in, items scattered on a desk are purposely left untouched, as if the loved one would be back at any moment. To me, this preservation of physical space makes the most sense in the case of sudden loss. But in this situation, where Pearl's failing health has been known for months and the physical space changes in that time, what version of the space is preserved? Sunny's discomfort in the restoration of the furnishings in the living room is twofold. She is neither ready for the hospital bed to be moved away, proof that Pearl no longer needs it, nor is she comfortable with the mistakes made in the restoration, inaccurately presenting life from 'before'.

I am reminded of a restoration project

I'm just noticing now that the coffee table is not symmetrical and has been placed in the wrong direction. The Persian rug, at least a foot off from where it used to be. And the porcelain display is off too. I can't tell if the items are in the wrong place or if something is missing. Grandma would have known immediately.

And of course, there are all the people in the living room. That's certainly different. And they're all saying the same thing. "I'm sorry for your loss." "Your grandmother was a great person." "She will be dearly missed."

And I get it. I don't want to be ungrateful to all these people and their support. But it's just reminding me that she's gone forever.

"I knew a very different Pearl than you did."

"Pardon me?" I'm surprised to find a very old man standing to my right.

"Your grandmother. Pearl. I knew her when she was young." The old man gestured for me to sit down as he painstakingly lowered himself

down on one of Grandma's antique chairs.

I don't want to engage in another conversation, but he seems happy to just talk, whether or not I respond.

"Pearl was always getting herself in trouble. Normally accidental. She would get distracted and wander off. Once, she went out looking for clams by the seaside. She wandered off too far and before you know it, the tide started to rise. She found herself trapped on a little rock island. Silly girl. She didn't even know how to swim. Not that it would have helped with the waves rolling in that day. It took three hours and half the village to get Pearl back to shore."

"How old was she?" I ask. I've never imaged Grandma as young before.

"Six? Maybe Seven? It was back when you could find clams just out by the shore. She was young enough that people didn't chastise her too much. But there was another time, Pearl was probably eleven or twelve then. She got herself stuck in a tree! And this time, she really should have

mentioned in the 99% Invisible Podcast and the subsequent book.³ It is the Great Hall of Sterling Castle in Scotland. When the restorations were complete, people were quite upset to find it to be bright yellow.⁴ Extensive research shows that the Great Hall was originally this brilliant yellow colour at the peak of its glory in the 1500s. But it was a conscious decision to restore the Great Hall to its 16th century self, and not to any other particular time period. Many would have preferred a different time period to have been chosen, maybe one where the seemingly more dignified stone walls are exhibited, something more similar to how the Great Hall looked before its restoration.

Here, Sunny is looking at the results of a decision made. She is not happy with it. But the work has been done, there is no going back.

known better. Some stray cat she saw stuck on a tree. Pearl climbed up to save it, she said. Turns out, the cat doesn't need saving. Hopped right off and left Pearl stuck up on the tree with no way down. Her father got very mad that day."

The old man keeps talking for a long time. He talks about growing up together with my grandmother. There were times when she was charming or brave or curious. All these things I never knew about her. He talked about her meeting my grandfather, moving away. He talked about her infrequent visits. How she might not have been around, but she was never forgotten.

And I can't help but cry. I cry as this old man holds my hand. As he tells me all about this bright and caring and adventurous woman he once knew. I cry as I wonder if I ever knew her at all.

Endnotes

- 1 Florian, "Canadian Architect Raymond Moriyama Passes Away at the Age of 93."
- 2 Pausch, *Dream New Dreams*, 170-179.
- 3 Mars and Kohlstedt, *The 99% Invisible City*, 217-238.
- 4 Mars, "The Great Restoration."

Chapter 9

Cleaning

I open a cabinet door and slam it shut almost immediately. I can see my hands shake, fear for the task ahead.

I planned today to go through Grandma's kitchen. I've painstakingly gone through much of the house already, but this is another one that I am avoiding. But I'm too behind on the cleaning to put it off any longer. To toss any of Grandma's things has been a painful process, but kitchen in particular inspires a horror in me that is especially hard to overcome. Grandma spent so much time here. In my childhood, even in the last few months as her health declined, Grandma lived in the kitchen.

I pace around the room, starting and stopping. Trying to find the ability to do something. But I can't do this, not right now. So, I stalled. Again.

This scene is meant to contrast an earlier moment, where Sunny and Pearl and cooking together in the kitchen. This is the difference atmosphere makes, the four walls that define a room can only do so much because the people within the room make the biggest difference.

An analogy for life and architecture, both an important lesson to learn, is the way death makes space for life. Hopefully, in a gentle and subtle manner, the reader sees Sunny's attitude toward her husband change. In the face of death, she becomes more grateful for the people in her life that are still alive.

I look at the time and realize it's past bedtime for the kids. I should have called earlier. I find myself sinking to the floor.

But I can still call, just to talk to my husband. Anyone would do really. I don't want to be alone right now.

The phone rings for a tad longer than usual, and I can feel myself spiraling into anxiety. Am I being too much of a burden? Am I annoying? Am I disruptive?

But he picks up. "Hey Sunny. Are you doing alright?"

I guess I never call when I'm not doing alright these days. "I'm lying on the floor in the kitchen." I laugh at the absurdity, even as tears fill my eyes.

"Um. What?" Chris is confused. I am too.

"I feel insane. I thought I might be able to feel her presence here." I'm grasping at words that don't exist. "You know. The idea of being grounded."

"Do you feel grounded?"

I think hard, trying to focus. "No. It just feels wrong." I suppose that

means I should get off the floor, but I can't find the energy to do it now either.

"What were you expecting?" Chris prods.

What was I expecting? I stoke the stale stone floor, smooth from decades of footsteps. "I don't know." My fingernails dig into the grout, trying to grip onto something. "Maybe a warm cozy feeling? Maybe if all the pots and pans were scattered about, I can fool myself into thinking that she will walk in at any moment and start the next meal?" I can no longer hold back the tears. I am fully sobbing now. "It's too dark. It's too cold." I pound my fists down, as if my knuckles stand a chance against stone. "It doesn't smell right." I know that I sound like a toddler throwing a tantrum, but I can't bring myself to care.

"I'm sorry." Chris whispers gently.

I burst into another bout of wails. "I don't know what to do" I feel my tears wet on the slate tiles.

He lets me cry for quite some more time. "You don't have to do anything." He says kindly.

I sniffle, trying to compose myself. I don't want to be putting this much onto Chris. He has been so patient with me. But I don't know how to tell him that. "Thank you for listening." Listening was the least of it, and I appreciate him more than a simple thank you can embody. But I don't know how.

"Anytime."

We say our 'I love you's and end the call. I think I'll have to leave the cleaning for another day.

But another day comes, barely different from the last one. There is just so much to clear out.

I should probably find a curated playlist instead of letting the songs play in shuffle. The jump from a Beethoven symphony to a pop dance tune is shocking to say the least. I tolerate it. I worry if I stop what I'm doing, I won't have it in me to restart again. Plus, it's still a fast tempo, which brings an energy into the room I need right now, I might actually get a few things done.

I am finally going through Grandma's bedroom. There is a fine layer of dust, she hasn't slept here in quite some time. I distract myself by cleaning up first, arguing that I cannot donate the dresser if it's dirty. I'm stalling of course. Unfortunately for me, I couldn't stall for long. It's not a large room and the furnishings are very simple. For someone who's been here for so many decades, Grandma has not accumulated much, at least not in her bedroom.

Now it's time to do the work. What to toss, what to keep, what to donate. I start with the closet. I'll start easy. Grandma and I didn't do videocalls often, plus she never showed off her outfits to me. She didn't have a love for fashion or anything of that sort. There should be many articles of clothing that I have no real associations with. Clothing that won't break my heart to let go of. I didn't take me long to realize I was wrong.

Grandma hasn't purchased much in terms of clothing in the last 15 years. There were a few things that looked very distinctively new. A pair of running shoes, an unopened pack of undergarments. But the vast majority

of her clothes were things I remember her wearing a million times. The heavy black wool coat she wore every winter. The cream linen pants, the floral blouse, the handknit sweater. Like time stood still, each article of clothing just as they were. But they weren't. A couple of pieces have a few patched knees or embroidery mending snags. The rough cotton worn so thin it's now more delicate than the finest silks. I know it's no use keeping them, but I don't know how I can let them go.

I need to switch tasks; I move to her bedside table. A book, tissues, hand cream, I toss each into the appropriate pile. And in a basket just under the bed is yarn and some sort of crochet project. It's not very large, maybe a trivet or an unfinished hand towel. I crawl under the bed to check for any other items. I try not to breathe in too much dust as I pull out a large plastic bag of more knitted squares, this time stitched together. It was maybe two meters across and a meter and a half tall. A throw blanket, I think.

This is a setup I did have not figured out how to conclude. Or maybe it does not need to be concluded. The idea is that Pearl was making a blanket, maybe similar to the one she made for Sunny that is now Mikey's favourite blanket. It is now an unfinished crafting project and Sunny cannot let go of. The conclusion would be for Sunny to learn the craft in order to complete the project. She would be closer to her grandmother through both the physical object of the blanket and the act of making.

The reason I have not written such a conclusion is that I feel that the current conclusion I have ties up the stories very well, and as it should be for an architectural thesis, it is focused on space and the way we occupy space. This conclusion is focused more on the act of creation. It is essentially a different thesis.

Why I still want to keep this scene despite it creating loose ends is more focused on the combination of space, time and material. Sunny

as she exists in this room, time though the ephemeral artform of music, and material in the crafting project Sunny finds under the bed.

I struggled to smooth the transition between these scenes. While I could have a hard stop and simply allow the different fragments to exist as separate entities, I do like this bleeding of the fragments into each other, it feels right for the atmosphere of this moment.

The moment is the weeks immediate to Pearl's death, where grief is more outwardly heavy but there are practical and legal aspects tasks such as clearing out the house for sale that needs to be done.

The physical space is holding her back.

The song changes again. A breakup song with some jazz inspired melodies. I like the tune but never focused on the lyrics before. Lamenting the loss of a great love. Dreaming of what could have been. I never noticed how haunting, how grief filled the song was.

I hug the unfinished blanket in a death grip, I give up trying to hold back the tears.

I cry till I run out of tears, my body weary and tired. I long for sleep and rest, but I can't.

I wish it was the light keeping me up tonight, there's a full moon out not a cloud in the sky. The moonlight casts an eerie glow in my bedroom. Open from an unseasonably warm afternoon, the window lets in a frosty breeze. The sheer curtains parting, like a spirit dropping in just to say goodbye.

I know better than to lie to myself. I can easily ignore the light; I can ignore the chill in the air too. It's my thoughts keeping me awake. Thoughts of loneliness. Thoughts of

emptiness. Thoughts of abandonment. She abandoned me and now I am lost.

She told me wherever I go, whatever I do, I can always come back home. If I ever feel scared. If I find myself led astray. If I fail again and again and fear I may never be successful again. I can always come home.

Home where I am safe. Secure, like an infant wrapped in a tight blanket. Home is the lullaby crooning me to sleep. Home is warmth, home is kind, home is unconditional love. Home is a haven; home is where I am at peace. Where I can just *be*.

I wonder if she can see how bright the moon is tonight, I wonder if we get to gaze up at the same moon. I wonder if she knows how cold it is, to be here all alone.

I want to go home.

These may be the same walls, or maybe they're not. The moonlit shadows dance a dance I do not know, to a song I cannot hear. They are nothing but strangers to me. I want to scream, run, hide. I want to escape this place.

When she said to come home more what she meant was come home to me.

This place here is not home. This is a counterfeit, an imitation. This is mocking me and the place I called home. I can feel the frost creeping across every surface. I can feel agony seeping in as warmth leaves my body. I desperately grasp for an answer, even as I surrender to exhaustion. The question lingering still in the brisk autumn night.

If this isn't home, what is?



9 – Moonlight

This was not my original intention for the section, but now that I see the potential, I wish to bring it to its full potential. There is this extremely famous poem taught to all children in China, one of the first poems you might learn in kindergarten. The English translation is Quiet Night Thought. This is the direct translation pulled from Wikipedia:

Before my bed lies a pool of moon bright
I could imagine that it's frost on the ground
I look up and see the bright shining moon
Bowing my head I am thinking of home ¹

The poem speaks of missing home in these quiet moments. This is the feeling I want to capture for Sunny, but in her words. Then expand into the question, 'What is home?', because it is not necessarily a place you are dreaming of returning to.

I personally have this recollection of learning this poem as a child. This poem is also associated with the Mid-Autumn festival when the moon is at its fullest. The act of looking up and admiring the moon is a very common activity. I remember talking about how there is a moment of comfort when the author looks up at the moon, because he knows his loved ones who are far away are looking up at the same moon. This is a comfort knows Sunny cannot experience. I also wanted to subtly explore the milestones of 'the First Year', the first of each holiday or celebration without this important person who recently passed.

The answer is obvious, so much so that I question its validity. Home is where my husband and children are. I am needed at home, so I am going home. However, leaving this non-home is a different pain that I want to rip off like a band-aid. But fate will not grant me that small mercy.

I tap my foot anxiously. Checking my watch every few minutes.

The taxi is late. It's not that big of a deal, I made sure to have contingencies upon contingencies. It just unsettles me to be here waiting.

I decided to take another lap around, quadruple check each room. It's not good for me to be sitting on the baggage, they still need to last an international flight. I would only be more miserable if I broke a wheel now.

I start from the top and I go to my bedroom first. If I was to leave something behind, it would be here. But I've checked so many times it seems impossible. I open and close closet doors with little enthusiasm. I found a singular hair elastic on the window sill.

I dislike this transition from questioning home to leaving home because there feels to be a different voice that says these words. As Sunny is contemplating home, she is quietly thoughtful, the sadness is mellow and maybe dreamy. In leaving this home, Sunny is a little stressed, much more irritated and overall, more present. It's a hard transition to make and I do not know if I can do any better. But this transition contains a third voice of Sunny's that speaking from the future, one where she is bitter about the past. I don't mind bitterness, but if there is bitterness, I want to explore it in the depths of its flavour. I don't like this type of toe-dipping.

I linger at the doorway, really looking at the room. This is where I grew up. This is my childhood bedroom. I feel like I'm supposed to be taking this in, this last look. I will be nostalgic for this place in the future. Maybe. I don't find it hard to walk away. Maybe because this hasn't been my childhood bedroom for quite some time now.

I move on to the next room. Grandma's bedroom. Even now, with all her furniture gone, it is her room. There is the lingering essence here. I think it's the smell. It's not a perfume or a manufactured fragrance, but her person. A blend of spices, burnt essence and something uniquely her. It's very comforting to be here and it saddens me to leave. The room is empty. No drawers to open, no beds to peek under. Nothing for me to double check, nothing for me to stay for.

The remaining bedrooms I decided to skip entirely. No one's been there since Chris and the kids were here. I don't think they have been properly occupied since before I was born.

I do need to check the bathroom. The intensely patterned tiles don't bother me anymore. It's a shame it won't stay, I can't imagine anyone buying this house and choosing not to remodel this bathroom. I think of my own house and the design decisions we made there. Neutral paint tones everywhere, so as not to hurt the resale value. Grandma never thought like that. Her home, this home, was just hers. She didn't let the resale value stop her from choosing the tile she wanted.

As I was about to head down, I remembered to check the linen closet in the hall. I wasn't the one to empty its contents, someone in Aunt Mai's army of volunteers did that for me. I don't mind, there was nothing in there I cared for. But looking at the empty shelves now, I recall how this was my favourite hideout. For hide and seek, for when I am avoiding chores. *Try to squeeze in.* I laugh at the thought. Who am I playing hide and seek with here? Now? I push the intrusive thought away and move on.

I made my way down the stairs and turned into the dining room from habit alone. It's been my makeshift home office, I wanted to be within earshot of Grandma as I work. It has been the site of so many disagreements over the years. Ranging from my choice of after school activities to the most recent argument about Grandma's illness. The stillness now irks me.

I make my way to the living room; it has transformed yet again. Completely empty now, it does not look like someone died here a few short weeks ago. The traumatic events have been swept from the room like cobwebs. Gone, like it was never here.

I make my way to the kitchen, a great relic still. It will likely not remain like this. To cook in this kitchen is a true labour of love. No one wishes to tend to a hearth to eat a simple meal at the end of a long workday. It is a space that is destined to die, but how I wish I could freeze it in time.

But for what? My nostalgia? I chastise my own foolish desires, but quietly question why my desires, my

The cobwebs are my attempt at imagery, it likely isn't great but I do think it's worth trying. I like the idea of the cobwebs from Chapter 1 returning here. It was a sign of her grandmother's decline Sunny was stubbornly ignoring, now its absence is another reminder of emptiness.

memories, my love are not worth preserving in stone. *Because it's simply not.*

I storm outside, as I have done so many times before. Out in the garden, the neat rows of fruits, vegetables, flowers, and herbs still thrive. The winter melons I helped Grandma sow are not quite ready yet. I can trust Aunt Mai to make sure this year's harvest still goes to good use.

As I wander the rows, I see different weeds mixed in, at least the ones I think are weeds. It will be a matter of time before the garden is reclaimed by nature. Our continuous gardening efforts were ever only a stall tactic.

I chose to end my walkthrough at the altar, the ancestral shrine. Most of the artifacts have been taken down, stowed away until some undetermined time. But the bench, the table, the delicately carved wooden structure is still here. Built into the house itself, the altar will have to stay. I don't know how long this particular structure has been here for. Decades at least, a century

possibly. It might not be here for much longer.

I found a half-broken incense forgotten in the corner. I haven't had the habit of praying since I was a child, but now feels like a particularly important time to do so. I light the incense, kneel on the worn wood floorboards, and pray. I pray for forgiveness; I pray for peace of mind.

I do wish I could keep the house, put it to good use somehow. But I don't have the heart to tear down the walls in my grandmother's house. It would have to be left to someone else.

This is the final scene in the home, at least Sunny's childhood home. Architecturally, this fragment is as close as it gets to a full set of floor plans. At the same time, Sunny is seeing each space in the past, present, and sometimes the future. This is a particularly important passage for arguing this thesis, how the inhabitants and their personal experiences shape the form and function of physical space.

Endnotes

- 1 "Quiet Night Thought."

Chapter 10

Grief

Some Tuesday, 12:37pm

I speedwalk through the cubicles. Everyone looks at me strangely. *Because they pity me.*

They're probably wondering how I still have a job after so many months away. I sometimes wonder that myself. I owe a lot to Julia. We always got on well together, she is definitely my favourite coworker. But she really went above and beyond to help me not fall too behind in the final months of my trip.

I wanted to get her flowers earlier, I know she loves to receive flowers. I feel bad for pushing it off for so long, but the laundry list just kept growing. I am determined to squeeze in this stop at the florists in my lunch break. There's a small boutique only two blocks away and the reviews online look great.

This chapter shows Sunny going through the 5 stages of grief. This chapter needs to be understood as vignettes of her life, specifically, the more remarkable yet brief moments that we happen to see. As she is in denial, Sunny is mostly successfully pretending that she has moved on, that she is no longer grieving. When Sunny is angry, she is very angry. But she has been angry frequently recently, this vignette is an especially angry moment among that more general anger she feels all the time. And so on.

I weave through the lunch crowd with an expertise that only comes from years spent in the city. I get to my destination in no time.

“Hello!” A cheery shop assistant greets me as I enter, “I’ll be over here if you need me!”

“Thanks.” I prefer to explore on my own.

The shop is small but is filled to the brim with all sorts of plants. A section of roses and tulips look nice but would be too typical for Julia. She prefers a more unique beauty. There’s a section of potted plants that Julia would likely enjoy but would be a lot to bring back to the office now. I can always send a potted plant to her home another day, save it for a birthday or a holiday. I’ll just stick to an arrangement for today. On the far wall is the section I’m looking for; I know because it’s the flowers I don’t know the names to.

I wave over the shop assistant, “What are these called?” I hold up a brilliant purple flower.

“Lupines. Those are locally grown.”

“And these?” Pointing at a set of tight bulbs.

“Peonies. They’re in season right now. They’ll bloom in the vase.”

Peonies might be a good option. I like that they’re very large blooms, but their scent is quite strong. “What about these?”

“Mock oranges. Those blooms in late spring. Smells incredible.”

I lean in. The light sweet-smelling blossoms transport me back to a different time and place.

Back to the days when my grandmother would spend her days tending her garden. Humming as she worked. Days where I spent reading in the shade of a shrub that smelled just like this one. She used to set up a little workstation for me there. She wanted to supervise my studying but also wanted to do chores. She was more stressed about my exams than I was.

I also remember the games played once the school year ended. I remember how the bright afternoon sun would beam down at us. I was the puppet casting shadows onto the

This is the stage of denial. Sunny hopes that her regular, pre-death routine will return her to a time before Pearl died. An unexpected trigger breaks down that façade.

Scent in this context is important in defining the atmosphere. Sunny is not surrounded by the scent of mock oranges in the flower shop. That scent blends with the rest of the florals to create a completely different atmosphere. But by leaning in and isolating this one scent it is much more like her memory. She is a child sitting by a shrub of these blossoms, completely surrounded by the scent.

The boundaries of space can be thought of as the few inches from the blossoms in the flower shop is the few feet from the shrub in her grandmother’s garden. For this one person, those spaces are the same.

stone walls. Playing out the scenes from the stories that inspired me. My friends and I would run around the garden for hours, laughing. Grandma would be laughing too.

And for the first time in weeks, I can't hold back the tears.

Mock oranges. I didn't know the name of the shrub that lined grandmother's gardens. Like so much that I don't know. So much I never bothered to learn.

This fragment is about anger. Technically Sunny is reflecting on her angry episode. Sunny is mad about a great many things, but that anger is being funneled into her kids being kids and accidentally breaking a plate. The idea is that the plate, being once Pearl's, is broken, gone just like her person. The difference is that Sunny found a human target to direct her rage at.

Mess and clutter can come in many forms. Physically, a broken plate is a mess that needs to be cleaned up but is simple one to take care of. There is also physical clutter, like the unwanted gifts in the display case. It is all analogous to Sunny's inability to control her anger with her children, a sign of a cluttered mind.

April Showers, 5:49pm

I am very lucky to have children as great as these. I know it is true. I know that they are not complete menaces, but it doesn't feel like it right now. I am just so very angry.

I shouldn't have yelled as I did. Even Chris said so. I know I should apologize. I should be calm and gracious and loving. *But I can't.* I am just so angry and frustrated.

The boys were chasing each other around as they do. They have extra energy to burn with the week of rain we're having. They stumbled into the glass display case; a bunch of

things fell over. Only one thing broke, my grandmother's decorative plate. I wonder if I would be quite this mad if it was that ugly glass figurine gifted to me by my mother-in-law. Or the handmade frame Andy made in kindergarten. Maybe. Maybe not.

I sent the kids up to their room without dinner for now. I know it was harsh of me to do so. They probably know too. I don't want to be so unfair. My husband's gone out for a walk. He's mad at me as well, but he's determined to maintain a united front. He won't undermine my authority. He's leaving it up to me to correct my mistakes here.

I should apologize. Go. Right now. I know that I'm too emotional to make such an emotion at this moment. I've never actually been quite so mad at my children before. I pace around my home office, wishing that Chris could be here. I wish he wasn't angry too. I wish he could soften my rage the way he does. I wish I could talk to him, anyone really. I wish I could get some advice. I wish I didn't feel so alone.

I see a manila envelope from the corner of my eye, and I remember Grandma's letters. One comes to mind right now. *For when you feel particularly stressed over your children.* I go upstairs to find it, safely tucked away in a shoebox of memorabilia. I shuffle through the holiday cards and postcards to find the letter I'm looking for.

I hesitate. I'm not sure it's the right time to be doing this. But I leap forth, nevertheless.

Dear Sunny,

I want to tell you a story. You were likely much too young to remember this, maybe five or six years old. But there used to be a little girl you would play with. She was about the same age as you, a tad younger. She was such a bright little girl. She had a fondness for yellow ribbons in her hair. You two used to play by the river under the old willow tree, you used to come home with your pockets full of rocks.

One day, she wasn't there anymore, and her parents moved away not long after too. I told you she couldn't play with you anymore and you were very sad for some time. And then, you made more friends, you moved on, and it was all okay.

I never told you why she couldn't play with you anymore. We suspect she went to the river after dark to look for her lost doll. We suspect she fell in and that's how she drowned. I didn't let you play near the river after that.

In the days that followed, I spent a lot of time trying to console the grieving parents. I knew it would be a lost cause, but I had to try. I remember the feeling of losing a child. But the mother said something that stuck with me, and I would like to pass that on to

you now. She said that the last time she had to clean up after her daughter, she didn't realize it would be the last time. How much she regrets her feeling of disdain picking up scattered toys or wiping up spilled food. Because her clean house is just another sign that her child is gone.

We've had a great many conversations over the years. You are often so frustrated with the messiness of everyday life, and I understand. With luck, that will continue. I hope you realize how precious your messy life is. I hope you don't get caught up wishing for a less messy life. I want to remind you to not disregard messiness for any reason, because it is a sign of life.

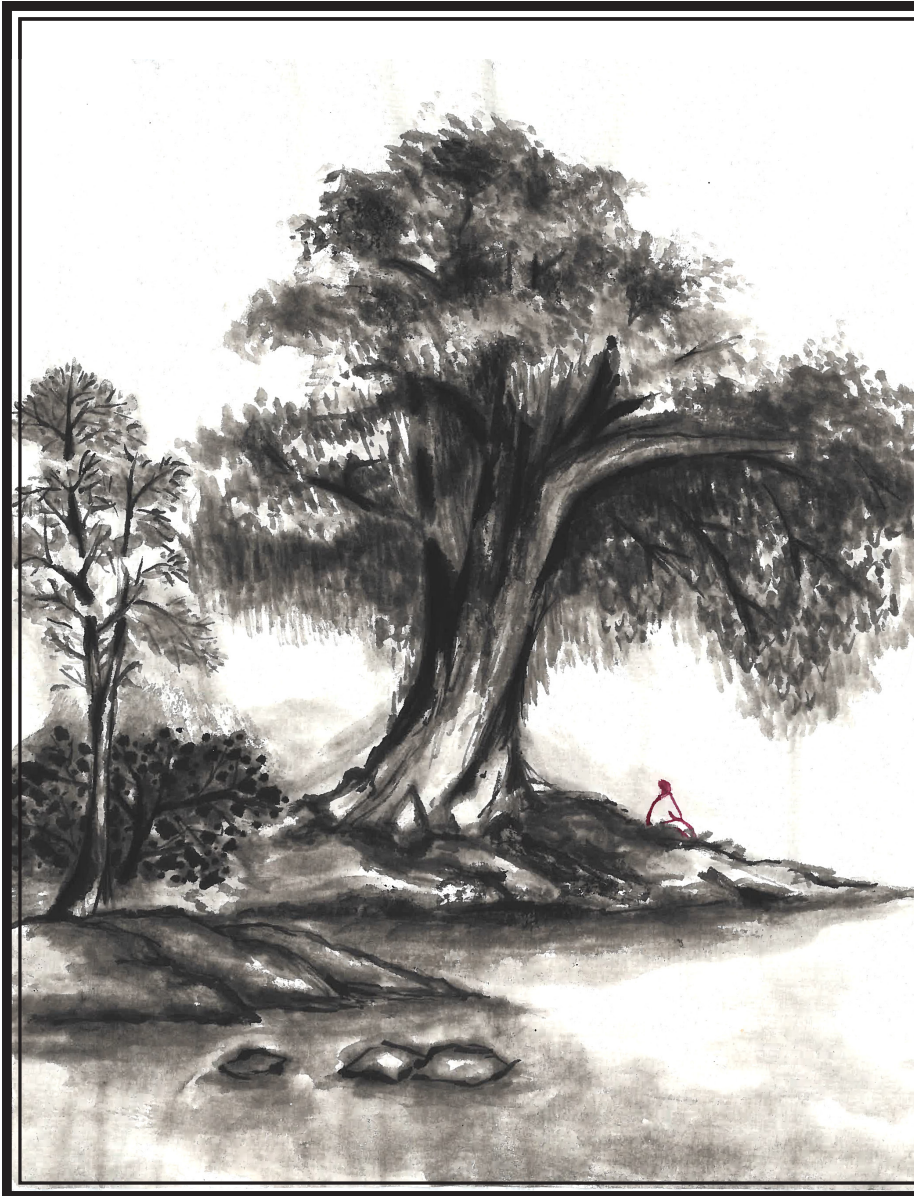
Love, Grandma

I pace the room. I read the letter again. And again. I pace the room some more.

I know what Grandma is telling me, and I believe it too.

I neatly fold the letter again, slipping it back into the envelope it came in. Tucking the letter back into the box and safely into the closet. It's not like they broke anything that is truly important.

I headed over to the kids' room to have a chat.



10 – Willow by the River



Happy Birthday, 8:13am

I'm normally not too fond of my birthday, I've long past the age where I feel that I am growing up and now I'm just growing old. Not that that was the reason why. It always felt rather narcissistic to make a big deal out of it. Chris likes to make a celebration out of everything, having come from a large family that's very fond of gatherings. I normally smile through it all; the event is normally a good enough time. But this year, I asked Chris to skip the celebrations. I want to pretend that it is just another day, but I can't lie.

I've been staring at the envelope in my hand for the last half hour. *To be opened on your birthday.*

Grandma didn't technically make a big deal out of birthdays, but it was recognized as an occasion. She would make my favourite foods when I was younger. We would always make sure to call once I moved away. She always had some special prayers. Small and simple.

None of that would be happening this year. And if it doesn't happen,

One thing I noticed in reading self-help books on grief is the mention of the first year. The first of each holiday or get-together without this all-important person.¹ In this fragment, which is on bargaining, Sunny is trying to negotiate a deal with herself by forgoing the celebrations. I chose a birthday to be the celebration, not wanting to tie the occurrence to any region or religion. Birthdays (and maybe also new years) are the best occasion to make the point I am trying to make; whether or not you blow out the candles, another year has passed. Material permanence is impossible, time cannot be frozen. The past, in life and in architecture, can only be remembered, not preserved. So, you might as well blow out some candles.

none of the usual fanfare should happen either. Then. Maybe. Hopefully. I would miss her just a little less.

But this letter... I can't ignore it. I want to open it, *then open it*, but then I would need to admit that it is my birthday. I would need to admit that for the first time since forever, I won't be calling my grandmother on my birthday.

It may be my birthday, but it is also a random Tuesday. I don't need to do 8 hours of work each day to get 8 hours of work done, but I can't spend the day staring at an envelope. I break the seal before I overthink it anymore and start reading.

Dear Sunny,

Happy birthday my sunshine. It has been a great joy to raise you, to see you grow into the person you are today. I am sorry to leave you, but that is simply the great injustice of time.

My time has come, and you have so much more life to live.

Another great injustice is the pain of raising a child. I did the best I could, with your parents gone. I think I did a pretty good job, and I hope you think so too. Just look at you, there is so much to be proud of. But the pain comes when you're all grown up and you are ready for the next stages of your life. A life that doesn't include me. Each time you visited, it pained me greatly to watch you leave. But it's the right thing to do, you couldn't stay forever, and neither could I.

I know you feel unsure of yourself right now, but I have so much confidence in you. I've watched you learn and grow and spread your wings so many times already. You may not believe me now, but it's simply the truth. You don't need me. You haven't needed me for a long time now.

In fact, I didn't really need you either. I like to believe us both to be strong independent women. I called you home not because I needed you here, it was because I wanted you here. Forgive your old grandma's selfish acts. It has been so many years since you've been home, and I could not bear the thought of leaving without a proper goodbye.

That was in life, and now in death, I stand by my word. You need me less than you know, and I need you less than you feel. So please, don't be compelled to visit me too often. I will always be happy to see you. But there is no need to dedicate too much of your life to me. I know you won't forget about me because I will never forget about you.

Don't let my lack of attendance hold you back. You're still growing, day by day, year by year. Happy birthday. Today and every other birthday.

Lots of Love,
Grandma Pearl

I scan the page quickly, tuck the letter back into its envelope and away into my drawer. It wasn't until hours later do I pulled it back out again. Reading the words in greater detail, allowing myself to immerse myself in her writing. But still, I try to get back to work.

I know I am doing exactly what she tells me not to do, I am putting life on pause. In solidarity? I know I shouldn't. I should cut a birthday cake, blow out some candles, or something. But I can't stand the thought of it. I'll save the celebrations for another day.

Sunday Brunch, 10:42pm

People keep telling me to write stuff down, try journaling, they say. I don't agree. *What am I? A 13-year-old girl with a crush?* They tell me to let out my emotions, but I'm not sure I have any. I don't see much of a point. I normally ignore them, but Ellen said it too. *I don't know that to write.* Write about us spending the day together, she said.

I agreed to try. Just to say I did it.

Dear Diary,

I had a good day today. I met up with Ellen for lunch. I was really looking forward to this all week. I don't know why I nearly didn't go. I woke up exhausted and just wished I never agreed to the plans. But I went and I'm glad I did. It was nice talking to her in person. I'd forgotten just how comforting her presence was. She's always so kind,

This fragment is about depression. Sunny had what is objectively, a good day, but she cannot really see that. Sunny says that she had fun, the implication is that she doesn't know for sure. The act of writing it down is what makes her see that today was a good day, otherwise, it would have been easily forgotten too. This is hopefully a bit reminiscent of Sunny at the very beginning, where she is letting things pass her by, not looking out the window at the beautiful scenery. But instead of looking away, being busy, she is looking without seeing, clouded by this heavy numbness.

I have burned soup before. My brother, whom I was cooking for and still forced to eat the meal with me, likes to remind me of that incident at every opportunity. I tell people about my burnt soup to get a laugh, a conversation starter. And everyone asks the same thing, which is how? The how is very simple. You forget to stir. It does take a certain amount of skill to be that inattentive. I got distracted, but in Sunny's case, a depression that takes her out of the here and now. She has forgotten what gives her joy, she also forgets the basics of human function.

so understanding, so gentle. I'd forgotten how much I miss her.

After our lunch, she suggested we go for a walk. It was like the walks we used to go on. We used to stroll in parks just chatting endlessly. We used to stop at any bench or ledge or just patch of grass and hours would go by without notice. I don't know how I had forgotten those too. I was really quite nice. I had fun.

I went home and made dinner. The kids wanted soup. It was fine, it didn't burn this time. It was a good day, what more is there to say.

I think I'm supposed to feel better after writing it down. Feel less sad perhaps? And maybe I do. But I'm not holding out hope.

I suppose I should try again tomorrow. Fill a whole book of these stupid thoughts, recording my meaningless days. Worse than a blank page. At least a blank page holds potential.

Must every scrap of writing be a literary masterpiece?

I suppose not. I suppose I will try again tomorrow.

Some Tuesday, 10:34am

The VP of Finance drones on about quarterly projections. I appreciate the transparency, but frankly, this should not be a mandatory meeting for my department. I unmute myself for the curtesy one-liner, make sure my attendance is noted, before muting myself again. I pick up a makeshift paperweight from my desk to fiddle with, a weak attempt to keep up the appearance of attentive listening.

The river stone is cool to the touch. It's quite a bit heftier than it looks and I somehow forget that every time I pick it up. Makes for a nice ball to toss around with one hand. I focus on the stone in my hand, turning it about, gripping it in different orientations. Flat on one side, curved on the other. It jabs in my hand this way but tucks between my fingers rather nicely that way.

A new voice enters the virtual meeting, the finance presentation has concluded. It's now moved on to the monthly shoutouts. I cringe at the little speeches. Corporate loves to show appreciation in every way except a raise. Thankfully, the meeting finally ends, and I can get back to actually getting some things done.

An ordinary rock turned paperweight, a constant reminder on her desk. This I took from the book *Fifth Business* by Robertson Davies.² This book that follows the life of the narrator, Dunstan Ramsey, also includes a scene near the end with this stone that sits on his desk as a paperweight. That rock we discovered had set off a whole series of events and is the beginning of this trilogy.

I did not want this rock on Sunny's desk to hold that much weight in this story, but I want it to feel that maybe there is a story to tell but we simply don't know it. I did not want Sunny to be holding on to this rock over this sense of guilt that Dunstan had, but more as a gentle reminder of her childhood home, something more hopeful.

I return the stone to its place on top of my paper stack. It's funny far this little rock has travelled. How many years did it spend in that river? Might it have been home for a fish or two? And then one day, some person picked it up and said *This will look nice in my garden*. And then it did. For decades, it sat in Grandma's Garden, holding the very important position of divider between the pebble path and the garden soil. And then I picked it up. And just decided I wanted it. Here. On the desk of my home office. And it does a great job as a paperweight! And a fidget toy. Made for a great souvenir to bring home, not that I planned for this when I first picked it up and stuck it in my pocket.

Beside my paper stack, I see more small knickknacks I carried with me. My assortment of pens now sits in a dented tin cup. It used to hold Grandma's toothbrush. Most days, I barely register its existence. Bit today... I can look at it objectively. It is very old and honestly, a bit ugly. It certainly does not suit the sleek,

modern, minimalist aesthetic I wanted for my home office.

In fact, there have been many out of place additions to this space that just... don't quite fit. A set of three ink paintings, dramatic landscapes of mountains and rivers. They were wedding presents from a locally renowned artist Grandpa befriended, Grandma had said. They look out of place next to the plaques of my professional achievements. I made a note to move the plaques over to another wall this weekend. I'd rather look up and see the paintings.

I turn behind me and see Grandma's prayer beads. Not the ones she always kept with her, she was buried with those. These ones are a bit more ornate, brought out for ceremonies and such. Their gold detailing glistens very prettily. I can't remember when or how, but I tossed it onto the lampshade one day and it's been there ever since. Not a very conventional place to store such an item but it's quite nice there. It can stay.

Some items, like the tin cup were mentioned previously. When Sunny first arrived home, she was snooping in the bathroom and knocked over this tin cup. So, this item that for Sunny, existed forever into the past will now exist forever into the future too.

Pearl was a very devout, very religious person, but not one to aggressively push her religion onto someone else. The implication is that Sunny was raised in this environment but did not choose to bring it into her life as she started a family of her own. So, Pearl's prayer beads are serving as decor but by keeping them close and safe Sunny has options. She is not currently throwing herself in faith as a way to feel closer to her grandmother now that she passed. But Sunny always has the option to turn back to it in the future.

This fragment is about acceptance. Where the reminders of loss are all around her but are not necessarily weighing her down anymore, there can even be bits of joy. The contrast is from before Pearl grew ill. Sunny's person and surroundings have changed, this is her acknowledging those changes and settling in and becoming more comfortable with this new self.

At this point, I just know I won't be getting any work done, at least not in this next hour. So, a good time to stretch, grab a drink and maybe go for a walk. I do a double take as I bypass the front entrance. There right by the coat rack is the largest vase in Grandma's porcelain collection. Four feet tall and much too heavy. I can't quite remember how I managed to lug that monstrosity home, but I do remember that it was a pain. It was a very last-minute decision. I sold the majority of Grandma's porcelain to a collector from the city. I remember this greed flashing across his eye. It didn't sit well with me. I still sold him most of the items, but I ended up keeping a lot more than I originally intended. I probably should have let this one go. It looks just a bit silly, sitting in my entry way, holding the umbrellas. Someone else likely would have styled it much more sophisticatedly. But it's not like we host all that often. I'll find a proper place to display it some other time.

I finally make my way to the kitchen. I seriously debate making

a cup of coffee. On the one hand, I am feeling rather sluggish, and I do need to get things done. On the other hand, I am very clearly addicted to caffeine, and this would go against my current progress of easing off. It was a hard choice, but no coffee today.

I take my cup of warm water, *for digestion*, I can hear Grandma's voice saying. It is indeed great for digestion. Funny how I finally listen to her little pearls of wisdom now. *Better late than never*.

As I sit back at my desk and sip my water, I realize what cup I'm drinking from. What cup I've been drinking from for months now. It was a teacup from Grandma's favourite set. The one that is said to have some real economic value. I wonder if the Abbess would still be shocked that I don't use it for tea. But I know Grandma would be happy if it's being used at all.

Endnotes

- 1 Pausch, *Dream New Dreams*, 150-160.
- 2 Davies, *Fifth Business*, 233-235.

Epilogue

The Cemetery Playground

“I’ll leave you here for a bit” Chris stood up and left.

“Thanks.”

It’s nice to be alone here. I haven’t had the chance to do that yet. I was here for the funeral of course. But there were too many people who wanted to say a word or two. And I was so caught up in cleaning up Grandma’s house that I didn’t get the chance to come back to the cemetery before I left.

I still miss her of course, but it’s no longer an overwhelming emotion. I sometimes even forget that she’s gone. I rarely get to purposely remember her like I am doing now.

It took quite some time, but I can now appreciate the choices Grandma made about her final resting place.

“You were right about needing a place to sit. This is quite nice.”

I wanted to take a stab at answering the question what makes a place home. Currently, I believe it is the heart put in, the act of making a place yours. I feel that people often feel too aware of their house being an asset, but it is an asset that only has value once it is sold. I see people I know change their behaviour in anticipation of this need to sale years down the road. So, we are sacrificing the small joy that might come with painting the walls a vibrant colour to earn that imaginary slightly higher price at the time of the sale. I think a house becomes more of a home when we decide to decorate to our own tastes, when we grow roots.

I normally feel weird talking out loud like this, but here, it feels natural.

“You were right about a lot of things. It just took some time for me to admit that. You were right about bangs. Doesn’t suit my face. I did it myself too, in the bathroom with some kitchen shears. I just wanted a change. I wore a lot of hats and headbands for a time.

“You were right about selling the house. I keep meaning to come but there’s never time. Plus, I have no reason to visit. Well, no reason but to visit you here. I really should have known. I didn’t visit you often enough in life, I don’t know why I thought I would have had a better track record in death.”

I’m interrupted by a drooping branch of the willow tree I’m under. This low hanging branch has been weighed down even more by the recent rain. I think it’s asking to hold my hand here on this bench. I accept, tugging gently as I keep talking.

“We’re finally settling into the house. We might still have to move

some day, but it's nice even if it's just for now. I know, I know. Several years too late. You were right, once again. And I am taking your advice now. I'm dedicating more time and energy to making the place a home. It's really hard work you know! You're probably laughing at me now. I made it far in life without realizing how hard it was to make a place feel like home.

"You were right that I worked too much. I wasn't spending enough time with my kids. And they're growing up so fast. They want me to play video games with them. And I try. But those things are hard! And their little fingers move so fast! It's embarrassing how often I lose to them, but at least they're having fun.

"And I did need a little more play in my life. I still do."

I really take in the view, the hill I'm on gives me a great vantage point. The fields are thick with tall grasses flowing in the wind. The headstones stand strong in contrast. I can see the different sections of forest on either side of me, deep, green, and full of life. Far in the distance, if I squint hard, I can see the glittering pond. "This is a nice place to sit," I say to Grandma, "I hope I'm not the only one that enjoys it."

"Get down!" I heard Chris yell from a distance.

"It's been a nice chat Grandma." I laugh as I pull myself up, "I think the kids may be up to something. I'm sure I'll be back."

And I head toward the sound of my children giggling. As the woods open to a clearing, I see my two kids

I saw some news articles during the beginning of covid in the spring of 2020 that talked about how people were using cemeteries as a recreational space.¹ Those articles are generally reprimanding those using the space for leisure. I do not agree with this extremely black and white view of what this space can and should be used for. While I do think that it would be unpleasant to be attending a funeral and having children playing in earshot, I also believe that is a design problem. I think that out of sight, out of mind is a good approach to the problem and this one space can and should be available for use recreationally and specifically for mourning.

I would like to think that if there are ghosts hanging around in cemeteries, they would be happier seeing children playing rather than only people deep in grief.

jumping from rock to rock and my husband chasing after them.

“What seems to be the problem here?”

“Daddy won’t let us jump on rocks. I think we should be able to jump on rocks.” My eldest argues with much conviction.

“They’re not rocks. They’re headstones. You should not be jumping on headstones.” Chris huffs.

“They look like rocks to me! Catch me if you can!!!” And they were off once again.

I stop Chris before he starts chasing again. “You know... If no one is looking, they can’t get offended.”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean. They do look like normal rocks.”

“They’re headstones!” Chris is very exasperated with me.

“And the kids are only hopping all over them because you’re chasing them. Just let them be, they’ll get bored eventually and they’ll find something else to do. The cemetery

looks quiet today. It only becomes a problem when the living says it's a problem.”

Chris shakes his head and leans back against a tree. “I can't believe you.”

I laugh. “It does make for a decent playground. Lots of things to climb. Things to jump on and off of. Places to hide.”

“This feels wrong.”

“They're having a good time. Let them.” I leaned back and watched my two kids play tag in the cemetery.

Endnotes

- 1 Daflos, “Vancouver Cemetery Asks ‘oblivious’ Recreational Visitors to Respect Mourners.”

Author's Note

In Hindsight

The journey this thesis took was not a straightforward one. I would like to tell one last story: the story of developing this thesis, and share the lessons I had learnt through its process.

I had started this thesis with a curiosity about time. It was simply something that bothered me. If things are not built to last, what decides their ultimate lifespan? I was thinking about the extremes of time and architecture, very temporary structures, very permanent structures. Temporary structures made sense to an extent, it was about maximum flexibility, disposable almost. It is the culture we are in now. But permanent didn't truly exist in my mind. Even structures from antiquity are not what it used to be. The Parthenon we can visit in Athens today is not the same Parthenon the ancient Athenians worshipped in.¹ It is not a matter of material degradation;

the Parthenon were not built to be white, artful ruins. It did not take me long to realize that we do not care for an accurate recreation; we are very satisfied in our assumptions of the past.

My thesis in its current form started as an exercise, to pick a site and to imagine an attempt at permanent architecture. That is how I found myself in the cemetery; there is nothing quite as permanent as death. One of the main reasons I had noticed in why permanent architecture does not exist is simply because our everchanging needs as humans are not suited for the relative stability of architecture; we do not want architecture to remain the same. I had concluded that the needs of the dead would remain the same and an architecture created for them would *deserve* to be permanent. The site being the cemetery is important, as anywhere else would be, quite frankly, inappropriate and a burden on future generations.

As I continued to dive into this rabbit hole, I found out how wrong I was. There is a desire for permanency, but desires and needs are two different things. There is a fleeting nature to human memory, thus it is not in the financial interest of cemeteries to allow for permanence.² I was very conflicted. Historical evidence says the cemeteries could be a very creative place that is not reserved for the dead and grieving, yet there is a current narrowly defined cultural significance to the attitude towards death, and consequently the role of the cemetery.

It took reading *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* by Atul Gawande to reach an understanding on the issue.³ Up until this point, I had noticed hesitation in those I was having discussions with when talking about death. It was Gawande that had made me realized that the process of dying is inherently and unconditionally linked to the act of death, and it was dying that had made people uncomfortable. I was trying to focus on the site of the cemetery and therefore the state of death, when in reality, reimagining the cemetery can only be achieved while also reimagining dying.

My belief then was that if our experiences with death and the cemetery was treated to be natural and very simply the way of life instead of a tragedy, the cemetery would be allowed to exist as a place that is not solely reserved for grieving the dead. It had moved beyond the scope of design and architecture. The question therefore pivoted to how to capture those ideas, and more specifically, how I came to the decision to write.

The decision was inspired by a number of different books and movies, all forms of storytelling. There are two in particular I want to mention here. The Disney Pixar film *Coco* was very inspirational in that it made me believe that architecture does not need to be presented in the form of drawings, models and renders.⁴ It is an animated film where a boy finds himself in the Land of the Dead and must make his way home before the sunrise. More than the actual architecture shown in the movie, it was the wonderstruck feeling I had while watching the

architecture within the movie. The architecture became so much more meaningful, significant, noteworthy because it was part of an engaging story. The film helped me look for ways where storytelling enhances the architecture it is set in, and vice versa.

However, the question of writing a narrative still remained unresolved in large part due to the fact that this was not something I had done before. I had then come across *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman, which helped resolve the questions I had about the writing process.

⁵ Not only was Gaiman's storytelling engaging, the way he had structured the book had greatly enhanced the narrative being told. Each chapter delivered an individual story centered around the same protagonist, however despite the self-contained narratives, a larger story was being throughout. This had given me inspiration to pursue this method of delivering my ideas. Writing a novella (a full novel felt completely out of reach) is daunting, but I did believe I could write a short story. And if I could write one short story, I could write two or three or four. Whatever it would take to string together a full story.

Now, that was not really what I did. The act of writing turned out differently than what I had anticipated. In hindsight, I realized that it was a very ideal architectural medium for me to work with. I learned that I am a maker, I take great joy in the process of creating, more than the final work itself. With every other project I engaged in throughout my undergraduate career, the product was

drawings and models of a building that would never be built. I am very happy and proud to have created something, something complete in and of itself.

In learning to write, I was also learning to learn for the sake of learning. I feel pressured by this societal expectation for maximum efficiency. It was a risk to dedicating myself to learning a skill that looks unrelated to the field I wish to enter, especially not at a moment when it feels like I should be trying to master all the architecture software known to man. I do not wish to live in such strict confines and this experience of learning to write is part of breaking those presumptions. I hope the skills I learned here prove to be useful and important, maybe even career defining when I reflect back in a few decades.

What I am fully convinced of now is that as an architect, I would only benefit from telling stories. More specifically, selling stories. We need to communicate the potential and importance of a design in order to transition from drawings to buildings. While our work as architects is mainly on paper, I believe our thoughts need to be realized in order to have an impact. The sort of commitment we see when we consume fictional stories is greatly beneficial if the goal of building.

Though it was not my intention, I found that empathy is a muscle I learned to exercise frequently and vigorously in this writing process. I believe that as contributors to the built environment, something that influences so many people, we all need to be more empathic. I am imagining

how people notice their surroundings and noticing my surroundings differently because of it. I am trying to experience as someone different from me might, and letting those experiences guide my understanding. This all circles back to how I create, very specifically, how I will create for others.

With this thought pattern, I now truly believe in the power of architecture. Not that I did not before, it was simply that the influence felt looser and vaguer. Now, I can more clearly imagine how a space is comforting while another is hostile. It gives me more conviction to take this role seriously. But at the same time, how limited our powers are. Atmosphere changes the same four walls significantly, and we can only provide a base layer. Atmosphere is ultimately determined by the inhabitants, their experiences and how they choose to occupy a space.

Endnotes

- 1 Franck, "Designing with Time in Mind."
- 2 Eggener, *Cemeteries*, 14-15.
- 3 Gawande, *Being Mortal*.
- 4 *Coco*.
- 5 Gaiman and McKean, *The Graveyard Book*.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Evoking and Illustrating

I would like to provide a bit of context to the illustrations in the story and the choices I made regarding them. First off, all illustrations are painted by hand by me using Chinese ink painting techniques and materials. Similarly to the craft of writing, I also did not know how to how to paint using Chinese ink and was mainly learning on the spot. I have of course explored a number of analog illustration methods in the past that helped to guide my learning, techniques from watercolour painting in particular. But I had felt that I may as well lean into this exploration of new techniques, writing and painting, and accept the mediocrity that will come with a first attempt.

To explain why I chose this medium of Chinese ink painting, I felt that this medium was very well suited to the story I was writing. There is a purposeful vagueness I wished to maintain in the writing, to allow

readers to project their own visualizations onto. I felt the accompanying illustrations should do the same, maintaining a certain looseness that communicated atmosphere without overwhelming the worldbuilding we each uniquely do in our own minds.

Of the illustrations, there are two scales I mainly worked at; the scale of the landscape and the scale of the object. Each drawing was either attempting to evoke or attempting to illustrate.

Chapter One: The Tin Cup

So going in order, there is a tin cup. There is a very similar tin cup my mom uses that holds no particular importance. More than anything, I like the drama of this item accidentally dropping to the floor and the racket it makes. It is an object Sunny hyper fixates in a moment of clarity and felt to be an ideal object to illustrate. I like how the techniques of dry brushing translate the worn metal texture I imagined.

Chapter Two: Fish

Next is a pair of koi fish. I think they are perfect for readers to project their own meaning onto. They do represent the two main characters, but that is me observing it afterwards. I just thought it was a very elegant illustration.

Chapter Three: Hanging Laundry

The focus is the air, the cloth is only there for emphasis. This image is inaccurate since the scene specifically



13a – Balcony Room by Adolph Menzel, 1845

mentions heavy duvets being hung but there were a few image references I was thinking off. The first being the Curtain Wall House by Shigeru Ban.¹ The project has an ephemeral quality of wind interacting with fabric that I absolutely adore. Atmosphere, of that very particular moment, is very clearly shown. Somewhat similarly is The Balcony Room by Adolph Menzel.² But with this painting, it was the room as a whole more than the open window and the moving curtain.

Chapter Four: The Chair

The importance of the chair is not in the object itself but in its arrangement. A dining room chair at the dining room table is normalcy in the household. But in this chapter, with the chairs being moved around as needed for Pearl's mobility, the chair is the harbinger of decline.

Referring back to The Balcony Room, the slightly haphazard chairs are also in part the image I had in mind for Chapter Four, as furniture is rearranged. But more importantly, as a stylistic reference for the chair pictured in chapter is an image I have no way of showing and no way of actually referencing except in my mind.

I had an art teacher as a kid, she was an architect back in China but is not licensed here. She made some of her own artwork and would show us at times. There is a painting of a chair, black and white, somewhat abstract but very well composed. It was bold. As a kid, I did not like it very much, but now I appreciate its artistry a lot more. I

am trying to capture the idea of the chair with the chair I painted. I don't think I did great.

Chapter Five: The Outcrop

The next image is a favourite, the outcrop is a variation on the painting Wanderer above the Sea of Fog by Caspar David Friedrich.³ That painting's interpretations regarding self-reflection and contemplation of one's life path is also my intentions with the drawing I made here. Although, I did not want that 'top of the world' feeling as with Friedrich's painting. I much prefer this composition, where the landscape comes first. It pairs very well with the conversations the characters have, a reflection on death and memory.

Chapter Six: The Songbird

While unrelated to the illustration itself, I want to mention Mendel's The Balcony Room once more. It is the image in my mind as I wrote the whole of the sixth chapter with Pearl sitting by the window while writing.

Chapter Six is entirely set in the living room/converted bedroom, with much of it with Pearl stuck in a chair beside the window. While Pearl is staring out into her garden, longing to be outside, it's not the garden as a place that she longs for. It is the freedom to do as she pleases and be where she wishes to be, which is why the drawing is of a bird and not of a garden. But also, I wanted to bring in the sensory experience that she is losing as time goes on. She can see the bird, she knows that the



13b – Wanderer above the Sea of Fog by Caspar David Friedrich, 1818

bird is singing, but she cannot hear it. The world is closing in in more than one way.

I am particularly happy with the delicate brushstrokes I managed to achieve in this image.

Chapter Seven: Dreamscape

I am personally not satisfied with this image. There is meant to be this fuzziness, dream like aspect to the image, but since all the images have a bit of that already, it is hard to differentiate this one. And this image is meant to reference in part the Outcrop seen in Chapter Five, but this referencing feels a bit too similar. I want them to be more distantly related than they are now.

Chapter Eight: Flowers

Next are a few flowers, representative of the floral arrangements at Pearl's funeral. Irises are decently common as a funeral flower; I did like the aesthetics of the petals better than lilies. Mostly, I had a hard time finding a full floral arrangement that I thought would fit the scene, but I do like this isolation of the flowers in this composition. There is a feeling of loneliness.

Chapter Nine: Moonlight

This is the illustration that is most likely to change in the final edits of the book. As it stands now, Chapter Nine is a somewhat classic composition of the moon with cherry blossoms. This is to pair with the very classical poem being referenced in the scene. The poem is Quiet Night

Thought by Li Bai.⁴ Painting the moon was an unexpected challenge. There are simply too many options for moon paintings to reference, each with a different connotation. I was looking for something that feels wistful. One of the other paintings I made to try out different compositions for the moonlight image is now the cover page for the story.

Chapter Ten: Willow by the Water

Where most images are derived from scenes in the story, this image, the first draft of it at least, came before the associated text. The painting of this scene inspired in part the story told in the letter. I did want a message to Sunny, telling her to embrace clutter and loosen her grip on perfection. Painting this painting helped to ground that message, I think this is a good medium to convey sorrow. The act of painting this painting also inspired many of the other scenes in the story where Sunny is under a willow tree.

In turn, this is the image that inspired the story's title.

Appendix B

Animating and Experiencing

The exploration of different media is a recurring theme in this thesis. As the medium of communication changed from a written, printed book, to a slideshow presentations, I felt that there was potential for the same storyline to be better presented in a way that leaned into this 4 dimensional, more experiential medium. I had also assumed, rather naively that creating animations and immersive projection experience could not possibly be that difficult.

My goal was to have an immersive experience. I felt it was well suited for one of the underlying messages of the thesis; the experience of architecture is unique to the individual. I wanted to create an architectural experience of the architectural spaces I wrote about. I wanted the audience surrounded by the sights, sounds and smells of this place, as if the words I am reading

brought those sensations into existence. There were several compromises I had to make; I spent several hours wrestling with technology. What I have created as a result fell short of my grand ambitions, but I do feel that the result is more engaging and more interesting than what would have simply been a reading.

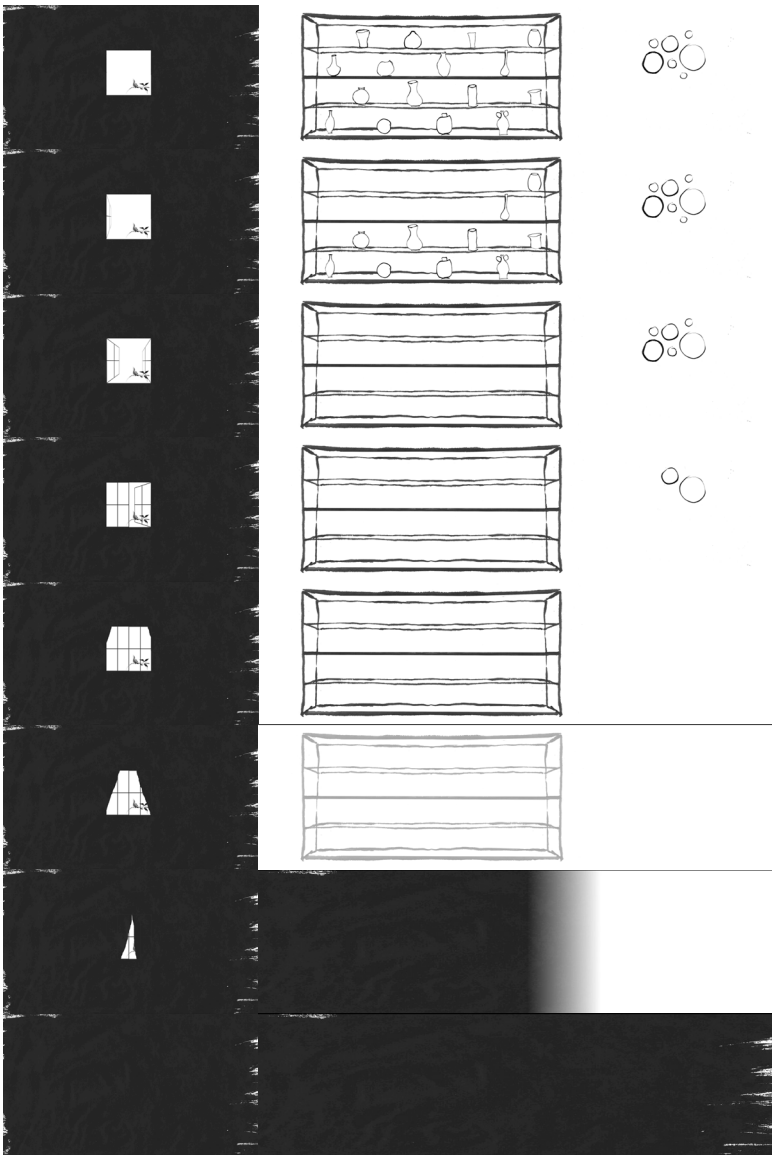
The following is each slide from the readings and my commentary on each.

Chapter 4: Room

I feel that this is the scene where I had to compromise the most. The limitations being the physical restrictions on the projectors being used and the size and shape of the photo studio. I feel that the immersive experience I was trying to create could not be achieved here.

Initially, I had wanted the window on the long side of the room, what I considered the front, and a shelf on the left and a table, chair and teaset on the right. Items on the left and right would have been taken away one by one and eventually fades to black. The scene concludes with the window closing and the curtains drawn to a completely blackened room. I had wanted this bit of confusion, the audience turning left and right, not able to see everything at once, not knowing exactly where to look. This is Pearl's experience at this moment in the book, her home being disassembled so fast she does not have the chance to stop it.

Back Matter



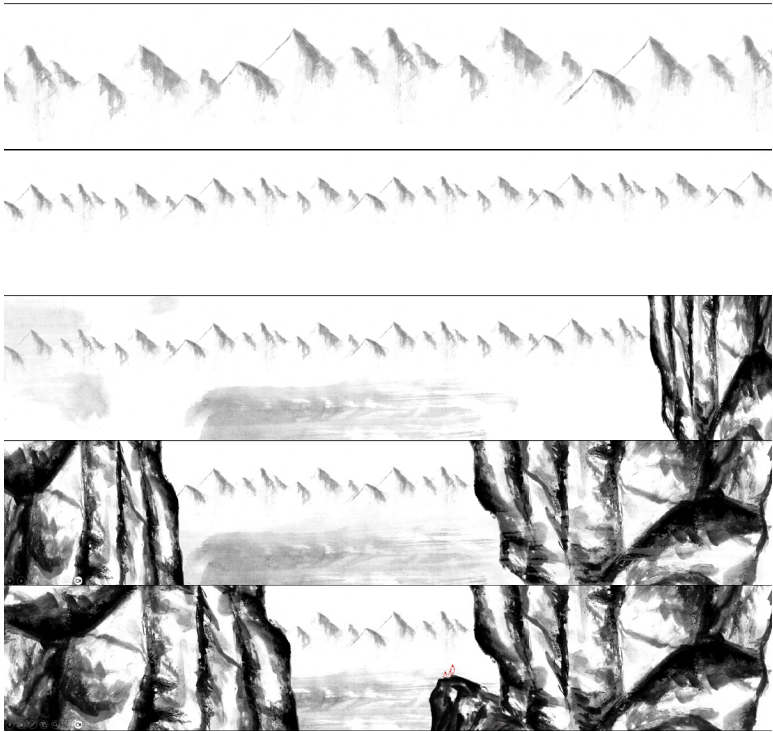
13c – Room Animation Stills



13d – Forest Walk Stills

Chapter 5: Forest Walk

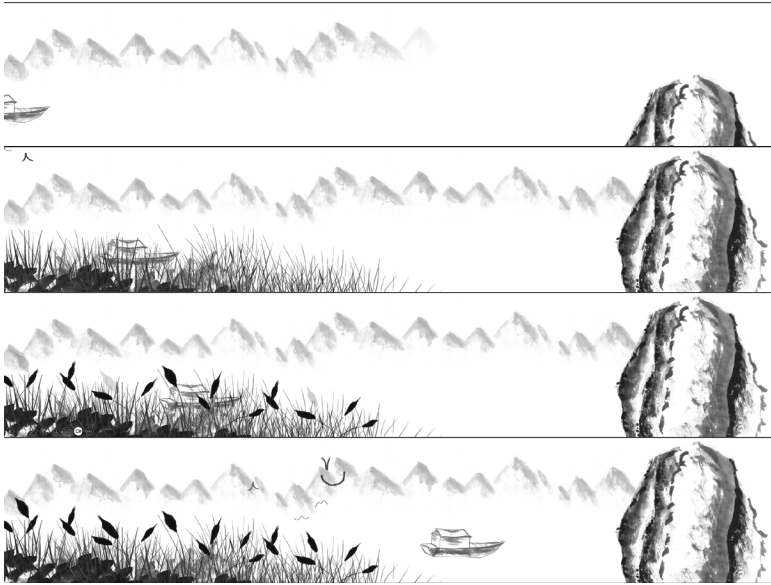
My intention was a slow transition in the forested landscape as Sunny and Pearl journey to the older and older sections of the cemetery. I wanted an impression that they are walking through time, going deeper and deeper into the past. Again, I wanted this forested scene on the left and right, walking toward the mountains in the distance. This scene felt like less of a compromise, possibly because the reality of a mountain path is often the mountain on one side and the scenery on the other.



13e – Outcrop Stills

Outcrop

The motion of the ‘camera’ here is moving backwards. The world you are on top of is zooming out into the distance. I would animate the Wanderer the same way, starting with the distant scenery, moving through a layer of fog, then finally the Wanderer himself comes into view. I wanted to capture some of the rugged discomfort that is involved in trekking through the great outdoors.



13f – Dreamscape Stills

Chapter 7: Dreamscape

This is the same image I drew for this scene in the book, all that is added is timing and layering. This is the most complex, singular image I created. I do suspect that the timing for my reading will be off, but the impression I wanted to give was in this dream state, as each item is being described, it comes into existence.

What I especially enjoyed about the creation of this scene is the combination of technics used. The only element that is properly, digitally animated is the birds. Every other element is hand drawn to be layered and appear in layers.

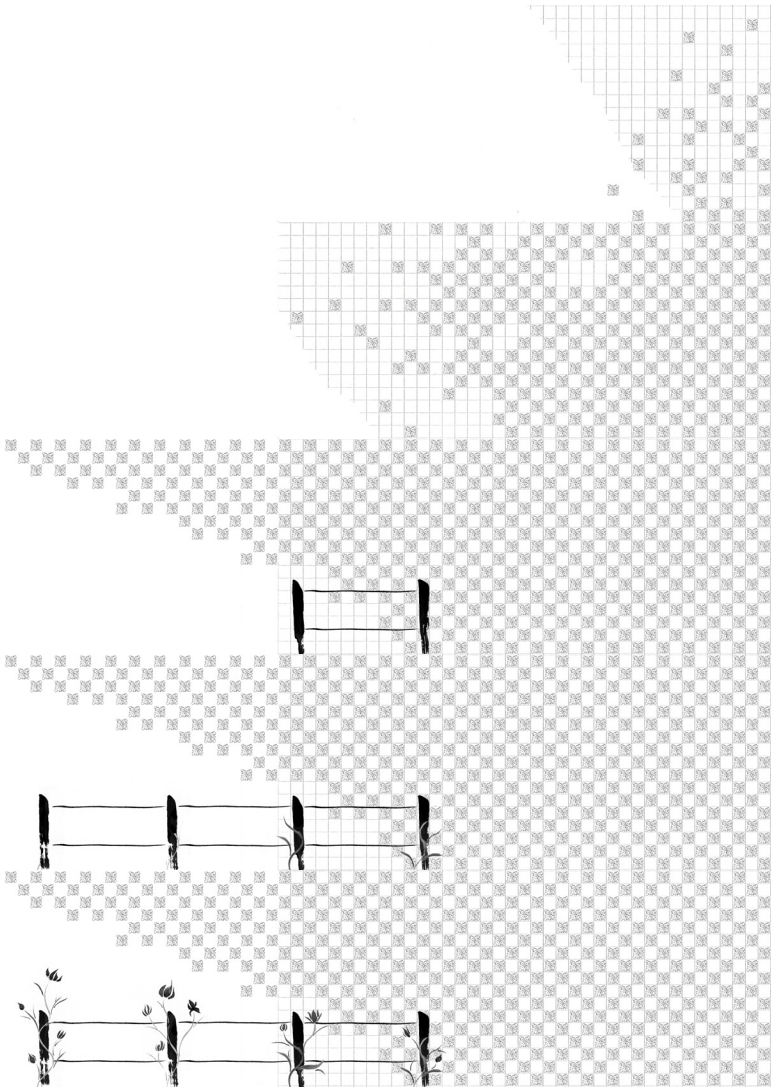
Chapter 9: House Tour

I wanted to give a visualization for growth. Whenever I visit cemeteries, I see overgrown topiary used to frame headstones. So what I wanted to visualize is something that is too young still, perfect if it can be frozen in time, then overgrown. I don't feel that I properly captured the wilderness I wanted in the vines in the garden, but I do think the tile pattern achieves the feeling of 'too much'.

As this is an immersive experience I wish to create, I wanted to bring in every sense I can. The idea to light an incense is absolutely genius and fits perfectly with the thesis and the presentation. To have an element of the presentation transcend the projected screen into the physical room is exactly what I wanted.

I am rather unhappy with the results of this animation mostly because this is the longest fragment I read. I should have animated a small scene for every room Sunny transverses, but I felt that would be beyond my abilities. The reduced scene simply lacks action.

Under a Willow Tree



13g – House Tour Stills



13h – Willow Tree Stills

Epilogue: Willow Tree

This was the first animation I made. I do think this is the worst and most primitive of my animations, though at the same time, I do not think I have the skills and technology necessary to achieve the graceful, flowing scene I am trying to create. This is also the animation that underwent the least change from the original still image, this was the cover image for the book portion of the thesis. Where the Dreamscape and the Outcrop are also featured in the printed book, much of those images were redrawn to imitate the original but separated to along the different components to move independently. This tree in the wind was created using a similar process but only isolating specific branches and having those isolated branches manipulated in photoshop to give the illusion of movement.

This is also the only animation that was entirely created in photoshop (after hand drawing the still image).



13i – Hopping Children Stills

Hopping Children

The motion of the children hopping from rock to rock is by far the most complex animation I created. The mistake I made though is in the spacing of the rocks. The trees were spaced first, with a rock under each. The distance means the children are essentially flying as they leap from one rock to the next. I wanted to give the impression that the audience is in the middle of a circle of rocks and the children and hopping around us.

Appendix C

The Muses

As part of the creative writing process, there are a great number of things that I borrowed from life that are not worth mentioning often, but worth mentioning here.

Pearl and Sunny

The first being the names of the two main characters. Pearl was rather perfect as a name in so many ways. It sounds like someone's grandmother, but also, it is a name that can be translated. The direct translation of my mother's name would be 'bundle of pearls'. She was born in a rural village in the southeast of China, she was raised by her grandmother who also gave her that name. 'Pearl' was a very common name in the village, to indicate that the child is a mean precious treasure. My great-grandmother, being uneducated and simple in her logic, named my mom 'bundle of pearls' with the belief that

more pearls would mean the child is more valuable and treasured. I like how the name 'Pearl' also speaks to her background as someone who did not get a chance to be properly educated, lived in a rural village and through her decisions, chooses to live a simpler life.

For the name Sunny, I wanted a similar ability for the name to be translated as well as be an endearment that hold some meaning. Sunny became this alternative reality where I got my name in a more thoughtful way. 'Selina' traces its etymology to the Greek Titaness of the Moon. I was given the name because when I was around four, I looked like a popular Taiwanese singer named Selina. But the use of 'Yue' or moon in Chinese is very often used in female names, just not mine. Over the years, I have found myself more attached to Selina than to my Chinese name, so in this alternative universe, my Chinese name would include 'Yue'. But I chose to name Sunny not after the moon but after the sun. The moon brought up Romeo waxing poetic climbing the trellis, I think Romeo and Juliet is a cautionary tale of the reckless and destructive nature of young love. The sun brought up the 'You are my Sunshine' song, which I think is much more suited for a loving familial relationship.

Borrowing from People

Next is the characters and their inspirations from life. The story is not at all autobiographical, but borrowing from life has been highly beneficial for me as a jumping off point. The big things are Sunny and Pearl's personalities

or biographies. Sunny is inspired by my mother, who spends a vast majority of her time away from the village she was born in. My mom was the first in her family to finish her schooling, her academic success was key to the trajectory of the rest of her life. I would also criticize that my mother is not very focused, like Sunny, her priorities are askew, and she misses out on the present while stressing about the future.

Pearl can be summarized very similarly to my maternal grandmother, who resides in a rural village, did not receive any formal education past third grade and is very religious. My grandmother is Buddhist and her reaction to a great many situations is to pray. In many ways, I do not know her well. There is a dual language barrier, my Mandarin is basic at best as is hers since her mother tongue is a local dialect. In China, as in the story, there is a discrimination against the south in particular which is riddled with these types of local dialects, ranging from county to county. I was never taught the dialect, arguably because of self-discrimination. My grandmother, seeking medical treatment in China, especially in a larger city, would be talked down to like a child. Pearl's initial interactions in the hospital are entirely theorized, but I believe, fairly realistic.

The situation itself, this rush for Sunny to come home after years away is also very loosely based off real life events. When I was maybe twelve, my maternal grandmother had to go through a heart surgery. My mom left for China, leaving behind my dad and I for around two

or three months. There was a risk that my grandmother would not survive the surgery, and even if she did, there was a need for her to have a caregiver for the time following. My grandmother survived, my mom came back, and life returned as is.

Furthermore, I want to mention of few minor characters that are also, in part, based on life. The Abbess, whom I could not bring myself to give her a name, is based on a particular side of my maternal grandmother, the same person Pearl if based off. My grandmother has always been very religious, but she grew up in a time of turmoil in China, a time when religion was banned. She once told me she saw a monk executed on the streets, that if it wasn't for those rules, she would have never married and had children. She is now the proprietor of her own temple, up in the mountains, some ways off from the village. I'm not sure what the best translation for her title would be, a nun, or a priestess or an abbess. It felt like too much to directly take that part of her life and include it into the character of Pearl, but it served as a useful base to build the community in Pearl's life.

This might be a good time to mention my own thoughts on religion, which strangely enough, is fairly non-existent. My mother tries but fails to adopt her mother's devotion to Buddhism, but there is enough loyalty to the religion that my family would never attend church as a way of searching for community. It is even more diluted with me, everything I know is from observation, veiled heavily by time, distance and a

language barrier. I hope my mentions of religion do not step on any toes. I think it is a semi universal experience where a housewife devotes herself to her local religious congregation as a way of socializing. That is the image I am trying to bring up, but with Pearl, there is a strong, unshakable faith.

The other friend of Pearl's that is inspired by people I know is Aunt Mai. She is very loosely based off my paternal grandmother, it is more than anything, the essence of my grandmother that shape Mai. My paternal grandmother was the head nurse at a city hospital back when women did not hold many positions of power. She truly exemplifies to me the saying 'A force to be reckon with'. My grandmother is also, nosy, partially in that she believes knowledge is power, partially because she likes to gossip. She is extremely observant, likely aided by her medical knowledge. My grandmother would pre-emptively evaluate the state of my health within seconds of a video call, just as Mai did with Sunny. My grandmother does a lot of people favours, but she does not believe in a debt uncollected, she is calculating in the favours she does. But to me, she is very loving, caring, and supportive. Aunt Mai is meant to be like that, a not particularly likable person, but is the most giving person in times of need.

Lastly, I need to mention my great friend Melina. She contributed to this story in a very different way than my family members. While there are many moments where I think *Without this, I would not be making this*

thesis, Melina's influence on me still feels very significant. To start, Melina is a great storyteller. She makes the mundane daily interactions into tall tales and grand adventures. I believe that it is because of her that I see stories worth telling around me. So often as we chat about our days, I think *That would make a great book*. I have been a reader for a very long time, but I truly believe my friendship with Melina was the spark that made me wish to write. It was a rather seismic shift from consuming stories to creating them.

Melina also directly inspired certain aspects of this thesis. I mentioned her in my side notes, though not by name. She is the florist making bouquets that so perfectly capture someone's spirit. She is the one smelling mock oranges, telling me how it reminds her of her grandmother who's now passed. She is the one beside me as we learned about Stumbling Blocks in the Jewish Quarters of Rome. She is also my favourite collaborator from all these years of architectural education. Back in the summer between second and third year, we worked on a few competitions, one of which was named Dying: Alternative Designs for Cemeteries.⁵ What I have here do not feel at all related to what I did all those years ago. Yet given the topic, it is undeniable that a seed was planted.

Appendix D

Meandering through Architecture

As I was meandering around, trying to find the topic of my thesis, there were a few notable, thought-provoking architectural works. On the idea of death, permanency, and renewal. There is no clear relationship between the works other than the exploration of each was a natural extension of my thesis.

The Catacombs in Paris I found to be an extremely intriguing take on death. First, it is the opposite of what I chose to do. The dead in the Catacombs are entirely anonymous, to the point that it is somewhat disrespectful for the individual. Imagine your own body decaying haphazardly in a pile with others in a mass grave and then later your bones are aesthetically rearranged for a tourist attraction. But as a living person visiting the Catacombs, it is much more impactful and memorable than visiting a stranger's grave.

This was an issue I struggled with early on in this process, where there is a balance between respect for someone who has passed and resisting this egotistical urge to seek immortality in death. The Catacombs felt like the perfect example for one extreme where the collective trumps the individual.

Arguably, the Catacombs are still not a great example of collective impact because of the history of how it came to be.⁶ The Catacombs were an engineering solution to both reinforce Paris' underground and find a place to move the massive number of dead bodies as old cemeteries are redeveloped. What came out of it was a memento mori people willingly engage in, a display for tourists to gawk at. Those individuals whose bones are on display never wanted to be there.

Veering from the topic of death, I wish to talk about permanence. The Grand Shrine of Ise was built the same way, using the same materials and the same techniques every twenty years.⁷ It brings to mind the Theseus' paradox. If Theseus' ship, slowly had each component replaced, eventually having no components that were in existence when Theseus himself sailed the ship, would it still be Theseus' ship? And if someone else was to collect every discarded component and put it together, would that be more reasonably considered Theseus' ship?

In the case of the Ise Shrine, energy is used to prevent the degradation of the form, craftsmanship and rituals over time. Energy is used to conserve the architectural form in a state of near perfection. While the shrine is not

made of the same timber piece used a millennium ago, it is in nearly the same physical form made using trees from the same cypress forests.

What I think is the most noteworthy part of this renewal process is that preservation of craftsmanship. Twenty years makes for a very ideal frequency for each generation to train the next in the arts that create this shrine. Especially considering the very traditional building methods, using no power tools, nails, or screws. It is an artform that could easily be lost. Had the Grand Shrine of Ise maintained the original materiality of the building, as each repair that is performed, as techniques and materials developed, the shrine would become less and less like its original form. But with the ceremony of renewing the shrine every 20 years, there are still people today who knows how to make this shrine. According to the logic of the Ise Shrine, despite not having the original components, the first ship would be the ship of Theseus. Because Theseus' ship does not have rotting floorboards.

As a completely unrelated side note, if the British Museum was less focused on possessing physical objects and collecting treasure, and more focused on learning the art of making those treasures, they would not fight so hard about returning stolen artworks. But rather unfortunately, art becomes more valuable when the only person who can create the works dies.

The last architectural work I want to mention is the Notre Dame de Paris. First, to mention Victor Hugo and the novel that saved the beautiful Gothic

building at a time when Parisians were very against this architecture.⁸ It is a solid example of how literature impacts architecture. Had I written a different story, there would have been analogies of characters to architecture, our ideas of how people and places should exist. But that would have been a very different thesis, not just a different story.

Now, there can be no mention of Notre Dame without mentioning the 2019 fire that burned down much of the roof and spire. Some might call it insensitive, but I do think the proposals that came out of that tragedy are very thought provoking.⁹ It is a blank slate of sorts, the opportunity to do something truly revolutionary. I can't say I'm surprised but I am deeply disappointed that they decided to simply restore what was there before the fire. It is the stereotypical stance against change, this idea of what I, an individual with my limited knowledge, known to have 'always' existed should be what will always exist in the future. Permanence has little to do with history and the vision of the creator. Permanence is then about forcing your perception of the past and present onto the future.

In general, people seem to struggle with scales of time. Have you ever seen those shocking facts floating about online, like how Cleopatra was born closer to the moon landing than the construction of the Great Pyramids. Or how dinosaurs were around for so long that there were fossils of dinosaurs while there were still dinosaurs roaming the earth. I think of how we make fun

of teenagers, the ones who so boldly state that they'll be with a person forever. They don't know how long forever is, but we don't either.

I believe each of these works could have inspired an entirely different and very interesting thesis. The influences these architectural works had on my thesis are hard to trace directly, but I have no doubt influenced something. More than anything, I find these works intriguing to think about as we ponder upon big topics like life and death.

Endnotes

- 1 Shigeru Ban Architects, "Curtain Wall House."
- 2 Menzel, *Balcony Room*.
- 3 Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*.
- 4 "Quiet Night Thought."
- 5 "DYING."
- 6 "Site History | Catacombes de Paris."
- 7 Tange, *Ise, Prototype of Japanese Architecture*.
- 8 Glowczewska, "Notre Dame Cathedral Will Never Be the Same—and That's Ok."
- 9 Voien, "These 7 Proposals to Redesign Notre-Dame de Paris Are Meant to Start a Debate."