

We have been driving for almost fifteen hours and the scenery has begun to blur into bands of red and green and Espanola is a distant memory. The car is a silver pocket of New Mexican air, but soon we will have to break the seal to refill the tank and our stomachs. But my father has not spoken in three hours and I know it is because last Thursday was his mother's birthday and he forgot to call.

I grind into fourth gear and climb the hill, feeling gravity tug at us. Solder Summit. Because it is July, there is not snow, unlike the last time I came this way, but there is rain and I am a skittish driver in the best of weather, so I am reciting Keats to myself and staring straight ahead. Down into the valley again and we catch sight of the tracks and the coal line puffing along and my father is watching it, un-building and rebuilding it with his engineer's brain. This is not a time to think about destinations, or nervous daughters in drivers' seats, it is a time to perform a soothing repetitive movement. And wheels and steam and rotors and iron hinges, unpeeling and fitting back together is as numbing as it gets for a government-issued bomb-builder.

My grandmother has died. It is interesting to me to watch a family descend into uproar when they should come together, it is interesting to see a house crumble when a single beam is removed.

But what I'm thinking about is the counters, sticky with jam and the carpets that have not be vacuumed and the sinks that have not been scrubbed. But mostly I am thinking of the list taped to the phone in my grandmother's even, miniscule cursive.

*When dead, please notify children in descending order, Charlie Christensen, grandchildren in descending order, if necessary.*

And so my father is silent, because we have lived for so many years so many miles away that he cannot name his nieces and nephews. And because he had to be paged in the middle of a meeting and was the last of all to know.

I am silent because the last time I was in that house, she held my hand and kissed me and said she loved me. And my grandfather, riddled with dementia, leaned down to straighten the cuff of my pants. And then he kissed me and told me I had my grandmother's slim fingers and wide palms, which now seems more of a curse than a blessing. And I left to drive home from university for the first time, all by myself, with a kind of fervor and bravery that three months later, I do not understand.

Because Los Alamos has become barren and I spend my nights reading and building the nations inside my head. I should not have gone home. I should have stayed in Idaho forever and forgotten the flavor and scent of the dust that raised me. Or else run off to the big city and forgotten that there ever was dust at all.

But all and all, accounting for everything, I would say we are surviving. Almost.

"Can we stop?"

I push in the clutch and shift all the way out, pull on the brake.

But he doesn't say anything. He just stares at the train. Counting cars, calculating gears.

"Dad."

When the smoke fades away, he says, "Okay, let's go."

"Dad?"

"Why don't you ever date?"

"Okay..."

The car shudders into first gear and we're off again, Salt Lake looming in the distance.

"I'm serious, Emma, why?"

Now I don't want to talk about anything, and I go back inside to find what little Keats I have memorized still from high school. None of it seems appropriate to recite to my father just now. *When I have fears that I may cease to be/Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain.* No Shelley, no Byron. No Wolff, no O'Brien. The repercussions of even alluding to Dickenson are unimaginable. And so my scholastic training has come to naught.

"I love you, Emma, I hope you know that. And I'm proud of you."

This is because I spent the first nineteen years of my life wondering those very things. Masons do not study literature, Emma. Masons become doctors, accountants, engineers, lawyers. Writing is a fine hobby, but not something you want to do for the rest of your life, right?

Always given the answers in the questions.

I have never lost a parent. And watching my father lose one purges any dark, lingering desire for personal tragedy from my bones. But he is his mother's son, through and through. Our blood goes quiet when everyone else's descends into tears.

Out of Price canyon and Salt Lake lays ahead in a cloud of evening smog. Rain all day. Rain all day tomorrow, rain all day Saturday. Rain to make the earth soft for Grandmother and her casket.