

Contracting Roots

It's the silence of this place that presses down on me the most. That and I feel like I'm too close to the sky. Something about its shade of blue in the middle of the day is suffocating. The blue is clogging up my nostrils, like pieces of wet blue gas station paper towels, put over my face, layer after layer, like an ethereal Paper Mache of troposphere and ozone. I want so badly to be sucked into the Exosphere, to be shattered into a million molecules and drift beautifully and gracefully out into space, to be mistaken through the lens of someone's telescope for glitter or pixie dust.

We arrived at this cabin yesterday in the kind of light that blurs the edges and meanings of things. I wondered as we pulled into the dirt drive, if a rock is really a rock, or if in the softness of twilight it begins to lose its shape, to blur into its atmosphere like a pencil line that has been erased. I wondered if it disappears completely into darkness as it loses all illumination from the sun. Tonight, I may venture out at midnight to test my theory. To see if I can find anything solid to put my hands around.

I have been uprooted. Both literally and figuratively. My parents are divorcing, and even though I'm twenty, at college, fully grown, they seem to have settled on some kind of joint custody. This weekend is my dad's weekend. His idea of a fun way to spend time together is to take me to this cabin in the most remote area he can think of so we can not speak.

Most of the kitchen table and part of our bedroom is taken up with camera equipment. Pictures have been his hobby as long as I can remember. Our house filled with the frozen smiles of me as a newborn, at one, at two, at dance recitals, tee-ball games, school plays. Animals in various states of activity, some preserved mid-howl or a hawk on the wing - all caught and released by a 35 millimeter. And flowers. Mostly flowers. Flowers of every shape, size, color. Flowers on the cusp of bloom, fields of flowers, zoomed in on a single dew-dropped petal, everyday and exotics, and even a few as their edges browned and their blossoms sagged and hung on their stems like broken necks.

It's been stuttered and awkward dialogue since we've been here. Jammed f-stops and shutter speeds, making us blurry and double exposed. Without my mom here to translate, it seems like everything we say has gotten lost in translation. So we have started to keep our distances, keep our sentences short, simple, much of the time with large hand gestures to articulate meaning, almost to the point of pantomime.

I'm on the sun porch in an old rocking chair as the sun is setting on our second day. It's dirty and there are mouse turds in the corner. I breathe through the collar of my shirt in hopes I won't get hantavirus. The second day of any stay is much more anticlimactic than the first. Day one is full of arrival, of exploration, of unpacking, finding places for things, trying to find things we need. It's the first date, the getting to know you, the anticipation of what's to come. Day two is like the morning after. Waking up somewhere weird, feeling not quite at home.

I've been alone a good portion of the afternoon. I'm used to being alone, but not this isolated. It's weird to think I could scream until my throat and lungs burn and my voice would never reach a single person. It's like the plateaus and sand and sage brush are hungry for sound and take the words from my lips as I speak them.

I walked a lot today, up and down the same stretch of road. I'm not quite sure what might live out here. Birds, snakes, coyotes perhaps. The terrain is so silent, my footsteps muffled by soft pale sand, that I can't count on my footfalls to warn anything of my approach. So I cleared my voice often hoping to scare off anything that might cross my path.

About a half mile out there's an old abandoned piece of farm equipment. Two metal wheels with a crossbar in the middle, rusted to a dark mahogany, surrounded by a tangle of barbed wire. It looks like an old sprinkler, and I wondered who dared to live out here, who tried to make something grow in this God forsaken place. The only thing left of the effort rusting in pile of sand twined with morning glory.

But now I'm tired of walking. Even the methodical plodding of my feet couldn't keep my brain from screaming. Boredom has settled in, like a stubborn rheumatism, nagging at me, making me itch somewhere I can't reach. I'm sitting still, clutching the arms of the rocking chair, because I'm afraid if I move, my insanity will take over and send me running into walls or rocks, or send me plummeting naked into the adjacent stream. Just to bleed, or hurt, or feel a cold so deep I ache. Just as I think I can't take another moment of oppressive silence, I see my father's figure on the horizon.

He's a small speck in the distance, growing only gradually larger and closer. It would be imperceptible to most, but I've been sitting here, still and watching long enough to make out subtleties. At one point he disappears behind a rolling hill, only to lumber into view again, closer this time. I have a flash of a John Wayne western, and feel an urge to run to the kitchen to get supper on for my Pa. But instead I stay rooted to my chair, rhythmically rocking until he struggles through the screen door with his tripod and case full of camera equipment. I know I should help him, but it is my way of punishing him for leaving me alone for so long.

My dad smiles at me and I realize how much his smile is indicative of the way he expresses emotion. It's a half smile, tamped down by years of being tired and disappointed. He carries the same disappointment in his shoulders. If he stood straight, he'd almost be hulking, but his bowed spine loses him a good three inches. His face is covered with a silver mist from two days off from his razor. I remember sitting in his lap as a little girl, running the palm of my hand over and over his cheek. In the morning his face was as smooth and cold as an ice covered pond. At night, the resistance of the day making stiff bristles against my hand that itched, scratched and tickled all at the same time. But his eyes carry his smile. Eyes the blue of faded jeans with a hole in the knee. It's his eyes that propel me out of my chair, and orders my hand to take his heavy camera case.

"How was your day?" I ask. My voice feels funny in my throat, like I'm talking around seaweed. I cough to make it right.

"Not half bad. Some good shots. The lighting sent me back. Getting dark. You?"

I shrug and pull open the front door.

“You hungry?” he asks, setting his tripod in the corner. I put the camera case down on the table. I shrug again.

“I’m gonna start a fire out back. Get those cans of soup, we’ll toss ‘em in the fire.”

I nod and rummage through our box of food to find cans of soup. I pick a bean with bacon for my dad and a loaded baked potato for myself, grab the can opener and head out back.

In the short time he’s been at it, my dad has managed to coax a small fire into being. He wheezes it to life with several puffy cheeked breaths and some well-placed dry twigs while I work on the soup cans.

“I’ve got something for you,” he says and points to the camping chair next to his. I take a gentle seat – always afraid that I’m going to fall over in my chair with one leg that has been broken and repaired with duct tape. I look at my dad who is still standing, right in front of me. He opens the side of his vest and pulls a soft white bloom from his inside pocket. “Afraid it might be a little worse for wear. I took pictures of it before I picked it. But I wanted you to see it.”

The edges are already browning, but I take the flower and twirl its stem between my forefinger and thumb. Large petals, creamy with purple. “What is it?” I asked.

“A Segoe Lily.” He takes the soups from the rock where I’d left them and puts them carefully into the fire so as not to disturb the ash.

“It’s illegal to pick these you know. State flower and all.”

“You going to turn me in?” he asks with a glint in his eye. I give a laugh through my nose and shake my head.

“Thanks,” I mutter. I don’t want to thank my dad for anything, but it’s not lost on me that this is the first flower from my father not printed on glossy paper encased in an oak frame.

We eat our soup and watch as the darkness overtakes the solid objects like spilled ink spreading over dark paper.

#

My dad snores. Not the commonly perceived cartoon snore, with snorts and rumbles. His is more like rasping breathes sucked through a tube that’s too small for air. When I was little, I used to lie in bed and think Darth Vader was sleeping in my house. Both intriguing and terrifying to a seven-year-old girl. To my surprise, my mother never complained about it. I guess she just accepted it, just like she accepted cleaning the toilets is part of housework. Or how she accepted getting wrinkles. Or how she accepted that my dad was in love with someone else.

The cabin only has one set of bunk beds and since I still have the agility of youth, I’ve been relegated to the top bunk. I’ve been awake for hours, tossing and sweating in my bed, with no air flowing through the open window. I decide to get up for a while since even the pillow now feels hard and itchy under my head. The ladder squeaks, but I take my chances, using Darth Exhales as my guide to my dad’s wakefulness. I make it out of the bedroom and slide the curtain that acts as a

makeshift door aside, slipping through the kitchen onto the porch. I fumble for the flashlight I saw earlier on the side table next to the rocking chair and hope it has batteries. I'm rewarded with a weak stream of light. After stubbing my toe on the chair and stifling a string of expletives, I make my way back into the main room of the cabin and shine it on the kitchen table where my Segoe Lily hangs to one side of a red plastic cup full of water. Somehow it looks rejuvenated, more alive than when my dad pulled it from his vest. I swerve my light to the bookshelf. This is my Aunt Linda's cabin. She's a botanist, so mixed in with Scrabble, Trivial Pursuit and Yahtzee, are books on the local vegetation. I pull one and flip to the index with the flashlight under my chin. I find the Segoe Lily on page 359.

Some interesting things about the Segoe Lily: The Segoe Lily is Utah's state flower. It uses its contracting roots to bury itself deeper into the soil. It grows on open grass and sage lands. It's finicky and hard to cultivate. Native Americans showed Mormons who migrated to Utah in the mid-1800s how to cook and eat its bulb. It saved the Mormons in a time of starvation.

I dog ear the page and put it back on the shelf.

The ladder creaks again as I make my way back up to bed and lay on top of the covers and let Darth Vader lull me to sleep.

#

The next morning, my dad is up, breakfasted, and out to capture nature on film before I have even finished a REM cycle. But he left the coffee on for me. Even

though I'm angry with him, it's things like this, the leaving things on – coffee, porch lights – that make it impossible for me to hate my dad. It's his fault I'm out here in the middle of nowhere bored off my rocker while he takes pictures. His fault I have nowhere to call home. My mother lives in an apartment now and when I visit we eat Lean Cuisines in front of the TV. It's his fault I'm missing my old life. The life of pork chops and tuna casserole. The life where we were all together.

I eat breakfast with the Sego Lily. I've decided we are close enough now that I can call her just Lily. Lily sits tilted in her cup and watches me eat a mini box of Fruit Loops. We stare at each other as I chew.

After I finish my breakfast and wash my bowl quickly and leave it to dry on a towel, I take the book from the shelf again and find my dog eared page. There's a picture of a Sego Lily, and I compare my Lily to the book.

My Lily has more purple than the one in the book. The one in the book looks like the garden of Wonderland, like it will open it's mouth and sing, then kick me out of the garden on suspect of being a weed. Lily is more like a white chalice, streaked with purple, filled with pale gold. Lily is prettier. The real thing is always better.

Abandoning the book, I take Lily with me to the porch where I find a CD player. My Aunt Linda apparently likes oldies and I put in Frankie Vali and the Four Seasons. Lily and I listen to Big Girls Don't Cry six times before I pause it to get a refill on my coffee. I don't realize until halfway to the kitchen that I've been crying. I'm sure if Lily had hands, she would give me a tissue. If she could she would put her leafy arm around me and pat my back soothingly. She would understand when I tell her that homes sometimes crumble away from you like arid dirt.

At lunchtime, Lily and I go to the back by the fire pit and stare at the blackened logs that cooked last night's dinner. I eat a bologna sandwich with mustard with Lily in the cup holder of my camping chair. I tell her about the time when my parents took me to the Grand Canyon to ride a mule named Willie Nelson. Willie was a renegade and decided to take a roll in the dirt, barely allowing me time to hop off his saddle. After that, Willie and I got hitched up to the tour guide. We laughed about that for a long time. I think about all our trips, to Jackson Hole, to Disneyland, to Mount Rushmore. I tell Lily how sad I am that we will never have those trips again.

I tell Lily about Christmas. About Valentine's Day. About their anniversary. About the time my dad surprised my mom a new minivan and put a big red bow on it. How my parents gave each other expensive gifts, always without cards. I never saw my parents hold hands. Just a quick tight-lipped kiss goodbye each morning when my dad went off to work. It was all like a chronic illness, something that took years to progress and manifest. And even though you know it's painful and a daily struggle, you still don't want it to end. You don't want to say goodbye.

#

Lily and I wait for dad on a rock in the driveway. I watch for his hat to come over the hill, which it does right around 6:30. I stand up, holding Lily in her little plastic cup ready to greet my father, not with a hello or a cold glass of iced tea, but with, "So, was *she* the Lily?"

My dad stops short just a few feet away, his brow furrowed. "What?"

"Her, was *she* the Segó Lily? Is that what you were trying to tell me. This, other woman. The one who saved you from starvation? The one who colored your sage lands? The real thing as opposed to a houseful of pictures?"

I don't wait for an answer. Not from his lips and not from his eyes. I turn away, my face hot with angry tears, splashing Lily's water into the dirt as I half-run down the road. What surprises me more than my own histrionics is that he doesn't run or call after me. He just lets me go.

I let my tears fall into the sand as I walk up to the old farm equipment. I stop in the dusk, watching the last golden rays slowly sink below the plateaus. I rub Lily's petals against my cheek, hoping to soothe the ache inside my chest. As darkness falls, I find a rock large enough to sit on. I look at the zillions of stars that pepper the sky, like salt spilled on a piece of black construction paper. I look at my hands as they blur into darkness and feel myself sink into the atmosphere.

#

I see him coming. The cylinder of light from his flashlight sways back and forth with his pace. I wonder what he'll say to me. I wonder if he knows what he's going to say. But his footsteps come silently up the hill, his presence announced only by his shortness of breath.

"You going to sit out here all night? Coyotes you know. Not a lot of meat on your bones, but they'll make due."

I don't laugh. I know he wants me to.

"I know you're mad. I guess I deserve it."

I feel Lily's cup bend in my hand.

"Just so you know, *she* is not the Segó Lily. You are. You're the one who kept me from starving all those years. You're the one who colored my sage lands. You're the real thing, the one I tried to keep from growing up, from leaving, doing the best I could to make time stand still in picture frames."

I wipe my nose on my sleeve and dig my sneakers into the sand. I feel something radiating from my toes. Something like roots, pulsating and contracting, pushing me further and further into the earth.

In the dark, I reach up to find something to hold on to. Something that doesn't disappear in the dark, but something strong and solid, something for me to wrap my hands around.

I take my father's hand and hold on.