

The Evolution of Your Goodbyes

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he day your father forgets your name doesn't come out of nowhere. You see it coming over weeks, months, and years. There's the day he orders pizza and can't remember the address of the house he's lived in for forty-five years. The morning he pours orange juice in a bowl and drinks with a spoon. The afternoon you arrive at his house to find him wearing two pairs of pants, five shirts, and two hats. With every detail that slips from his grasp you feel the moment that he will forget you approaching like a dreaded, unavoidable fate.

So you try to outrun it. You do this by cooking. You cook in large batches, lining plastic dishes on counter tops and spooning stews and slotted spoonfuls of vegetables into multi-sectioned plates. You label each container in bold blue print, and build leaning towers of stacked covered dishes in your freezer until the next trip to your parents' house, when

DREAM OF THINGS

you will carefully rebuild the towers in their freezer.

After each daily visit, your father walks you from the dining room, carrying the empty plastic dishes down the back steps and to the car. He waits for you to get in, closes the door, and hesitates at the open window. His eyes are wide and bright. You feel him holding you close with his gaze, searching for words that he can't quite find until finally they come. "I'm glad you came," he says, and you know that he's dredged the words from deep in his heart.

Suddenly you are glad that large, dark sunglasses are back in style. You slip them on and start the engine. As he heads back to the house, breaking into a jog to make sure he's at the picture window before you back down the driveway, your heart hurts knowing that you mean that much to him. Before he's out of view, your eyes fill. The tears on your face fall off your chin, and you're relieved that from the window where he's waving to you like a five-year-old, he can only see you smiling from behind movie star sunglasses.

Each day that he greets you by name is a gift to you and a triumph to him. You realize that he's using your name deliberately to test himself, or maybe to keep himself from letting you slip away.

The day comes when you gather the empty plates and head for the door, but he doesn't rise to walk you to your car. You know that there is no other reason than he has forgotten that it is what he usually does. As you climb into your car your chest is a little heavier, your brow knit a little tighter and suddenly, you wish you had hugged him and told him that you loved him. But that's not the kind of family you

SAYING GOODBYE

were. Or are. Instead you back down the driveway, look for him at the window, smile and return his exuberant wave.

The months go by and then suddenly one day you are stunned when he utters a complete sentence. It blindsides you as you realize how long it's been since he's strung words together or joined in a conversation. You wonder where the words have gone, how you could have missed them stealing away. Until you look back, reexamine the visits of a handful of months and recall the struggle in his voice as he fought to keep them from dropping off.

Finally, as you leave one day you can't help yourself. You hug him. He won't even know it's unusual, you think. You will hug him and he will think that's what you do. You wrap your arms around his frail body, feel the sharp angles of his shoulder blades, but he doesn't hug you back. Doesn't know how.

One warm spring day as you sit together in the living room listening to an Elvis CD, you suggest going for a walk. He's on his feet in an instant, following you to the coat closet, eager and excited. As you lead his arm into the sleeve of his sweatshirt he reaches out for you. A hug? you wonder. But then you realize, he is dancing. With you. And it doesn't matter that you are not that kind of family. A family that dances. Because he is smiling and holding your hand and enjoying the music. So you forget about the sweatshirt, and the walk. You take his other hand and dance.

You hold on to the days as long as you can. You serve him lunch on a tray as he sits in his recliner, but have to remind him how to pick up his fork and bring it to his mouth. He

DREAM OF THINGS

falls asleep after a few bites. It takes two of you to get him, half asleep, from the chair to his bed. Elvis is singing in the background, but today you're not dancing.

Eventually, your visits find you signing in at a reception desk, asking strangers to punch numbers into a keypad to unlock doors. Both of you are content to sit and smile at one another while Bing Crosby sings "You Are My Sunshine" and Frank Sinatra croons "Strangers in the Night." It strikes you that he hasn't called you by your name in a very long time, but he still brightens at the sight of your face. As the song ends, your father echoes Frank's "dooby dooby doo," and you both laugh. He holds your gaze and you wish you could read his mind. When you leave you hug him, tell him you will be back soon, and always, always you say, "I love you."