

Before We Forget

Kayla McVeigh

Gravel crunched and popped as he rolled from the cul-de-sac onto Cedar Bend Court. Peter made this trip daily now. His “a little bit each day” attitude kept him optimistic about moving his dad out as that time grew closer. His dad wasn’t the typical hoarder though. Peter’s childhood home was housing his dad’s great archive. It wasn’t as straightforward as medicine, but Peter understood his dad’s work helped people. Growing up his dad always talked about the responsibility of collecting ethnographies. There was always his dad’s anxiety that if the archive disappeared, those voices might disappear. The curation of such an archive was just as sensitive.

“Don’t let those bastards pick apart-” It had been over six months since his dad had last talked with him like that. Since then, Norman’s worsening health had progressed. Their lives moved more quickly. In that disorienting movement, things that were once focused were now blurred. Many things were forgotten.

Climbing the porch steps, Peter kept his arms tucked against his sides. He knew better than to grab onto the shaky railing. It had always been more of a hazard than a help. He still had a scar etched lightly on his chin to prove it. Work from earlier that morning was still cutting away at him. Replaying the morning wasn’t helping much to smooth out those edges. He needed a distraction to get his mind off it. His keys rattled. This gently called for his attention as he snaked them out of his pocket.

When he stepped into the mudroom the house overtook him. Visually the clutter was always overwhelming, but it also smelled intensely of patchouli. Smoke pooled in the mudroom from incense burning somewhere deeper in the home. Peter went to sit down, but the entryway bench was no longer visible under the immense piles. He stepped off his shoes, scuffing the backs in the process. Small shavings of faux leather fell to the floor. Then he carefully moved around the stacks of papers. The piles were stacked so high they leaned like Jenga blocks. Pages hung down sweeping the floor—the newest addition to Norm’s creeping archive.

He followed the spread back to its source in the sitting room. Peter could see his dad had been pulling box after box of his old research from the attic. Calling out to him, Peter said, “Damn it, Dad. What did I say about the stairs?” Despite Peter’s voice, the lap-sided house with green walls and a forgotten carpet held great silence. The patchouli seemed to fill the space when sound didn’t. It made Peter’s eyes water. Norman was resting in the well-lit sitting room in one of the two burnt orange armchairs just below the skylight. Everything was incredibly still. This made the rhythmic rising and sinking of their chests seem pronounced and unnatural. Only the soft hissing of air sneaking in and out of their lungs could be heard.

Across the sitting room and up the wall stood the mounds of clip-bound manuscripts. They ascended in a multi-tiered formation from several years of stacking and useless sorting. Peter thought if he could only take a few days off work, he could get the house under control. He looked at the deep lines that ran vertically from the corners of Norman's mouth. Time was only ever going to work against them. He put this thought down to focus on sorting. The forever creeping archive was a beast that pulled and crawled its spiral-bound body across the floor.

Heading for the light switch, Peter hopped around the wandering branches of root-bound pathos plants. They exploded out of their ceramic planters and their vines wandered over old piles of once-sorted papers. Peter's face scrunched up at the sight of his lost progress. He had hours of work at his feet, at least half that work would be redoing everything he had accomplished yesterday. Norman wheezed from across the room while trying to shift his weight onto his left side in the cushioned chair. Peter continued to sift through the piles of papers until a strange article fixed his attention. "Crows?" he mumbled. The article was titled, *The Curious Crow Funerals: A Murder in Mourning*.

Peter's mom had loved birds. He thought about how his dad would annoy him by talking about the significance of birds in other cultures. His mom always held a warm smile to remind Peter to listen.

"Dad just doesn't understand what I want to do. He thinks all doctors are unethical or something." Peter had said over the phone once. He had been in his twenties and was still in school. His mom called to invite him over for dinner. Even while in college, all his life he had never lived more than fifteen minutes from them. "Besides I don't know about culture and religion. What am I supposed to say when he talks about that?"

"Just listen to him, Peanut. That's all you have to do."

It wasn't that Peter and Norman fought, but from the time he moved out for college and went into medicine, he and his dad had grown apart. His mom was always good at bridging that.

Earlier that morning, before arriving at his dad's, Peter had scheduled a few hours to work in the lab. He could then head over to the house for a few hours and make it back to the hospital for a one-on-one with one of his patients. He worked these shifts more often given his dad's needs. Peter had arrived at the lab at 8:15. His thoughts were ahead of him. He was already planning out what he could get done at the house. He was still unaware of the disaster at work. The sharp point he would soon find himself stuck on all day.

His desk had always been near the tanks of rats in the control group so he could tune out the soft clicking from their glass water bottles. The rodents guzzled down droplets of water for hours on end. A very distinctive clatter. This and the humming of fluorescent lights were so constant they were practically inaudible to him. Inaudible most days, but not this morning.

His colleagues were quiet. The research assistant seemed nervous. Their eyes dropped to the floor. The flick of a tongue nervously wetting a tensed lower lip, queued him in on the news. For the first time in years, he could hear the chatter of the lab again. It was practically deafening. It seemed cruel that his longest and most promising trial was ruined, but the lab could be unchanged. His desk was just as he had left it. A mug with an assortment of pens and his notebook sat in the right-hand corner. Above them clung a few pink post-it notes with the contact information for assisted living facilities. These were peeling off the wall. In the middle of his desk sat two sample designs for the experimental drug's potential packaging. A game changer for families battling alongside a loved one with an aggressive and often terminal form of leukemia.

When he finally approached the tank, he lowered his hand into the cage as though needing to touch what his sight struggled to make sense of. "What happened, Star?" Peter said as his fingers met with the stiff body. Last week the whole team celebrated this rodent with hard nips of respectably aged scotch. Like the other lab rats, Star had white fur with standard ears and amber eyes. Some of the rats had their tails marked with a black sharpie to make identifying them easier, but Star could be easily recognized by his one bad eye. It was an old injury, but a miraculous recovery.

An overlooked wire from the mesh covering on the tank had stabbed into his left eye socket. For a while, the blackened eye oozed an unpromising amount of puss. It was surprising when the eye crusted over, and the swelling went down. That was Star though, a fighter. He showed all the signs of a medical breakthrough. Peter even decided that after this trial he would retire the rat into the care of his youngest. She was a senior in high school with a 17-year-old grudge built up from never having had a pet. Peter thought about what this meant for his patients, and he thought about what this meant for their families. He'd watched mothers throw themselves to the floor and patients fade away. Don't forget them, he thought.

Running the water and the bathroom fan, Peter tried to hide for a moment before going back out to face the team. His face was red, and his eyes were puffy. He had never cried over any of the rats before, but he had never named any of them before. Nichole, one of the research assistants removed Star from the other rats who had been grooming the body. She popped the small corpse into the freezer and said something about an article she had seen. Something about how the pack will bury their dead within 48 hours. The team knew from experience that the other rats would produce unreliable data for the next few days. Their behavior already masking any meaningful response to the drug in development. The experimental group would likely refuse food, move slower, and sleep for much longer than usual. None of this behavior would be useable.

"What do you want for dinner, Dad?" Peter called out from the kitchen. Norman's face abruptly twisted up in distress and his eyes searched around the room as if looking for something familiar he could ground himself in. Peter kept his distance waiting under the arched doorway so he wouldn't add to this stress. Nor-

man looked at Peter occasionally, but it was clear he wasn't finding the security that he needed. Peter lightly tapped his thumb against his thigh five times before responding. "What's wrong, Dad?" he asked gently.

Norman gasped as he tried to speak. Even his words thrashed about wildly like something feral backed into a corner. "I just don't know why you keep calling me that. Who are you to call me that?" His speech was rapid, and his wheezing grew louder.

Peter tensed. He cleared his throat as it had choked up slightly. Taking his time, he carefully said, "That's all right, Norman. You're okay. You're safe with me. You're safe, you know that. I'll call you Norm. Is that better?" It was something Peter had read and now it was something he practiced. There was a chickadee whistling near the window by the armchairs. This must have been enough because Norman trailed off repeating to himself softly,

"That would be better, that would be better, that would be better."

A sufficient mantra for a slipping mind. Norman repeated things to himself more often over the past few months. Sometimes verbally, it started with dates, then names which he told himself not to forget, and eventually just an utterance

don't forget,

don't forget,

don't forget

He repeated these reminders until the syllables seemed to come loose and the entire string of words ultimately lost meaning. Eventually, they became hand-printed on notepads only to fade from him as soon as the words hit the paper. Norman would ask Peter to decipher his notes, but Peter noticed they had become less legible. Norman reached to his left side for some photographs that were stacked on the round side table. This calmed him. He began flipping through the stack. Norman looked up at Peter and their eyes met for a moment as Norman flashed Peter a lighthearted smile. Following this small grin, he said, "This was me."

Peter caught himself searching for his dad in those brief seconds of eye contact and thought to himself that he should know better by now. The two armchairs were angled toward each other. Norman always sat in his chair and Peter found himself sitting in the one that had been his mom's. She would spend hours watching the cardinals and chickadees that flitted around the feeder that hung in the window. Peter sunk into her neighboring armchair and tilted his head over to quickly reference which of the washed-out pictures Norman was talking about today.

"What's that M?" Norman asked.

“University of Michigan,” Peter said.

“I went there?”

“No, you taught there. Anthropology.”

Looking at the mess of papers and books Peter was already prepared for what Norman would say next. “We can’t let the knowledge be forgotten. We can’t.” Norman cried out with a weakness in his voice that reflected the helplessness in his situation.

Peter thought about the comfort his dad had given him at his mom’s funeral. Norman’s words still echoed. Peter had tried to study his mom’s many details—the things he could collect her in. Things like a few of her illustrations or her guide to the Birds of the North. He looked for her in some of his own features. The small things like her widow’s peak. It dipped down from her dark hair and framed her forehead. It reflected the one shaping Peter’s own hairline. He hadn’t always noticed this. Peter collected these details and his dad burned incense. He thought about this when he had stood over his mom a few years back. She was several feet under, somewhere closer to the bedrock than the topsoil. He remembered how Norman had taken him by the shoulder, softly reassured him, and in a steady voice said,

“It’s okay to feel hopeless. This is hopeless. Just don’t confuse it for being pointless.”

“I know, Dad. No, Norman, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I know.” Peter said pulling himself to his feet. He needed to head home but would try to come back earlier tomorrow for a better start on the archive.

When Peter got to work, he was at least fifteen minutes late. It wasn’t like Peter, he was almost always on time, but he was finding it harder to go through the motions of his day. His body felt heavier, and his thoughts moved slower. Dr. Khan had been waiting for him at his desk. He wasn’t exactly a supervisor, but he was someone Peter reported to and someone he owed an explanation to. “Look, Dr. Weber,” Dr. Khan said meeting Peter’s eyes with concern. “We were all thrown off by yesterday, but you dipped out of here and missed an appointment with one of your patients.”

“I know.” The space between Peter’s eyebrows matted up and the tensing of his jaw was straining his neck.

Dr. Khan looked at the post-it notes and the pamphlets on Peter’s desk titled, Pivot Test, Preventing the Next Fall Ages 80 and Older, and a flyer titled Memory Care: Three Ways to Help When They Forget.

“Does he know who you are still?”

Peter looked up and said, “Not exactly. Some days yes, but more like, familiar.”

“So, what are you going to do?” It came off as abrupt, but Peter knew Khan was just trying to help. People were always trying to help.

“What I can, I guess. What more can I do?” He said more out of habit like a call-and-response sort of exchange. Peter had gotten used to these conversations but as his own words reached his ears he paused for a moment. With a deep breath, he held that thought, Then, following his exhale he said, “I’ve got to put that rat in the ground.”

At the end of his shift, he packed up Star in a brown paper lunch sack. He had a quiet drive over to the house on Cedar Bend Court. Norman stopped him at the front door refusing to let him. He wouldn’t budge until Peter felt familiar again. Peter was someone safe. Peter always helped with the archive. Regaining Norman’s trust, he was able to help him into the backyard one unsteady step at a time. Peter got Norman settled in. Sitting in a metal folding chair, Norman was calm in the warm sun. Spring had worked hard to melt away the lingering chills of winter. Peter shoveled heaps of earth from the unkept flower bed making a hole. He placed Star about two feet into the ground just below the thickets of thorn-laced stems and full bunches of pink petals. Newly bloomed petals with deep red creases in their folds.

“Your mom loved those roses,” Norman said looking right at Peter.

Peter’s eyes met his dad’s. They held that silence for a lingering minute or two. The drifting clouds exposed beams of light shifting warm rays onto Peter’s face. It felt good. The warmth of the sun pressed his skin as the glow accentuated the amber tones in his dark brown hair. Norman was smiling and Peter noticed that his dad looked radiant. With folded skin and an inward collapsing frame, his lungs held air and his skin caught sunlight. He was radiant.