

Silver Linings

“They’re going to need to perform reconstructive surgery on my anus.” I yanked my parking brake into place, turned off the music, turned off the car, took off my seatbelt, and turned my whole body to look at my 85 year old father sitting in the passenger seat. “WHAT?” I bellowed, mostly because he was basically deaf and partially because I was stunned. Without changing his tone or volume to provide any more clarity, he said, “I’ve been sitting for so long.” We both had. It had been an 8 hour slog from my mom’s place in Michigan and we’d only stopped three times for teeth-clattering gas fills or to scurry inside to use the restroom. I was relieved the trip had gone as smoothly as it had, as my father could barely sit through even a movie these days without having to get up and stretch his wobbly legs or rip poorly timed farts during quiet emotional scenes. It was Godzilla Minus One, and the theater was packed. If it weren’t for the fart, you could have heard a pin drop. But we’d made it to the land of lovers fartless and safe, a place littered with childhood memories and apparently home to the only audiologist on the planet my dad trusted to correct his hearing.

His fancy custom hearing aids had crossed their finish line some months prior and he’d been a bit detached from reality since. The shelf bought hearing aids from the pharmacy weren’t cutting it, and despite being lodged deep into his ear canals, created a high pitched feedback loop that could be heard by everyone except for him. He was a smoke detector in need of new batteries, a giant truck driving around in perpetual reverse. At our recent Christmas get-together I observed him sitting in a room looking sadly around at the animated conversation being held by all of the extended family. Everyone had said their obligatory hellos to him and promptly checked him off their to-do list for the rest of the evening because talking to the old man required just too much effort. I’d be more angry with them if I wasn’t sometimes guilty of doing the same. His somber smile of resignation was a little knife in my stomach and so when he asked if I would drive him to Virginia for new hearing aids, the answer was simple: no. How incredibly stupid. I looked into various audiologists local to him, college medical programs he could visit, physical shop locations of his hearing aid brand he could visit, literally anything within a 50 mile radius of him, and this man told me he’d rather remain deaf. It was really hard to even argue with him, because if you wanted to eloquently express your well thought out and logical point to him, you’d have to repeat yourself over the phone quite a few times, each time less eloquent and more flustered. For a man in a position of needing all this help, he somehow held all the cards. But god damn it, sitting across the table from him at a small cafe right after his appointment, the beaming smile on his face could have disintegrated solar eclipse glasses. He’d got his hearing back and it had only cost us some extra time.

We didn't know when we'd be back in the DC area together again, if ever, so we wanted to go to an art gallery like he and I used to when I was just a kid. We'd occasionally go to a gallery called the Torpedo Factory, an old World War 2 munitions facility that made, I don't know, swords or something and was perched on the edge of the Potomac river. In the years since it had been converted into studios and working spaces for local artists, and it was a place we both found magic because it had both ends of the spectrum; intellectual fine art with complicated subject matter and expert execution that my dad could hmm and haww over, and also funny little metal figurines made by an artist who would put them in goofy situations like falling out of a plane or something that I could hmm and haww over. Miraculously, however, there was an artist in the building who captured both of our interests. On the top floor, located in a nondescript studio, was an artist who made what he called reticulated dioramas. Magnificent ceramic vases, sometimes three-feet tall, with organic swirling features and decorative holes and gaps on the outside. Works of art on their own, and to most just passing by that's all they'd see, but take a moment to peer into one of the holes in the facade, and you'd see little scenes frozen in time. Our favorite was the vase where peeking through one of the ports revealed a sculpture of a father and a son holding hands atop a hill. The back of the vase had all these little holes poked through so it appeared as if the pair were looking up at a star filled night sky. It was a mainstay in both of our memories, so this is the artist we decided to see.

We got to the factory and followed the path to his studio as memorized by my childhood brain, and found it to be occupied by a young jeweler with tiny little bracelets and tiny little earrings next to huge QR code stamps and links to her online shops. I felt a bile boil in my throat as I stampeded up and down the hallways in search of his relocated studio with my dad meandering behind to appreciate the works I was now beginning to see as an affront to the institution. The more I remapped its studios in my brain, the clearer it became: the artist had retired. He'd carefully wrapped his statues and vases in crinkly brown paper and loaded them into moving boxes, taped them up with packing tape, methodically placed them along with my childhood memories in the trunk of his van, and held them hostage from me ever seeing them again. The torpedo had left the factory.

On the ground floor my dad approached the information desk for, I don't know, water or something, as I began a minor existential spiral over impermanence and only having a mind's image to remember certain things by. I stared through some images by a local photographer, waiting for what felt like an appropriate time before moving on to the next one so as not to offend him as he looked on from behind his desk. A piece of paper entered my field of vision stage right. Information from the information desk. Scrawled on the paper was the name *Robert Rosselle*. "That was his name," my dad

said. "He died ten years ago." The stars begin to blink out from the sky. I hadn't even realized that I had been gone for so long. There were no sands of time slipping between my fingers, my palms were just already empty.

On the drive back to the hotel I thought about how Robert had been dead for ten years and yet a child returned as an adult and sought out his work. We hadn't even known his name. Twisting and turning along the DC streets, my dad pointed out a church his parents used to go to, and a high school he spent a year at in his youth.

Someday, inevitably, the child atop that hill will be standing there alone, but the sky will be just as full of stars.