

Stardust

My mother and I pull weeds from our garden. Slow and methodical, the action is simple. Dirt trickles between long fingers as we toss one unwanted sprout after the next into a jade bucket. Systematic eradication may erode the essence of humanity, but for our purposes, it establishes a mutual understanding. Serenity in the silence. “Did you know that your Gran and I used to do this?” my mother asked, the words enveloped by nostalgia. I didn’t. I didn’t know what toppings my Gran would sprinkle over her scoop of ice cream. I didn’t know if the air had paused its spinning to forge a still path for her laughter. I didn’t know what her mind would whisper to her on winding walks, what dreams would sparkle to her in the night, what regrets would supersede the stars of her life like light pollution. I will never know.

My Gran died too young. It’s a phrase frequently used, but her work on this planet was truly unfinished. My Gran was our family’s sun: each planet revolving around her radiance, her gravity. I never met my Gran. Her body left this Earth five years before mine entered it. Reflecting on the orbit, I now recognize that our family was broken before I could define the quality rooted in every celebration, every gathering, every hurting and heart-wrenched of my inseparable aunts and uncles. Their shared trauma was what held my mother, siblings, uncles, and grandfather together after my grandmother no longer could. Small shared victories were what gradually pierced sun through the cloud that continues to oppress. Expertly practiced laughter and warmth fill in the cracks, of unanswered questions, of each individual’s shattered security, like glue repairs a vase. My family is wonderful, stocked with storytellers and self-deprecating souls, but my family will never again be whole.

How she is described to me: radiant. Full of light and humor and potential. She once hired a naked waiter to cater my uncle and aunt's baby shower. She held her siblings like precious shells in her palm throughout tumultuous home lives. She was brilliant, but lacked the self-confidence to pursue the ability for change possessed within her. She was fierce, and would explode like a flame from a spark, but just as quickly fizzle. She was breathtaking, both in her inadequately self-acknowledged beauty, and in the light that poured from her as both a dreamer and a defender, in both headstrong independence and persistent curiosity.

My grandfather and grandmother's love was as deep and loyal as the pool that collects from a waterfall's passionate gush. Each the sole star in each other's night. After meeting through a shared friend in Washington D.C., her residing in the city to attend a secretarial school she was far overqualified for and him for medical school, my grandmother and grandfather soon realized that their connection was auspicious, one that had been carved into the earth that civilizations later walked. Their love was rare, and it was real. My grandfather is now anchored in reflection, routine, and profoundness of love that he still retains for my grandmother. Watching the waves through his window, my grandfather relayed a trip to my mother and me that he and my grandmother embarked on early in their relationship. Late one night, past ten, my grandmother had suggested to him that they drive from D.C. through the night to Cape Cod to surprise her parents. "So did you go?" my mother asked. My grandfather's immediate reply, "of course," conveyed his steadfast devotion. Devotion that continued even as my vivacious and volatile grandmother abruptly changed her mind after a ten-minute argument with her parents, and slugged back in fuming fury to our nation's capital. Like a flash: blinding but beautiful, with color that lingers long after light's release.

Gazing at galaxies one night of peeled pitch and revealed light, my uncle explained a theory. "History is far more condensed than we acknowledge," he began. "The people we have

sorted into the faded box of the past are present on this planet, only ten feet behind us. For energy is neither created nor destroyed. Souls are never dead.” Though this supposition may be dismissed as a ghost tale, it resonated deep within me. What does it mean to grieve someone you’ve never known? All I know is that each time a story is told, each time I realize I will never meet this powerhouse of a woman who would have been my glowing, guiding light, each time I concentrate on the wisps of her curled hair, the understanding of her eyes, I am taken by surprise at how quickly my own fill. Tears test the tightness of my control. Have I been trained to react with such gasping emotion? Or is grief not limited to a person’s presence on this planet? Is longing for an impossible reverse merely a human folly? Or is it the energy of a supernova, the stellar fragments it leaves as legacy, swirling in our chest and filling our heart? Perhaps it is unexpected and unexplained justification for a flame extinguished, but smoke that lingers. This is what my grief is.

I am not the authority on how to remember, how to grieve. My heartache is imperfect, but I am glad to lack the fortification. Emotion recedes at times, remaining in trenches of my mind that I often leap over, unwilling and unprepared to explore their contents. Other times it plunges into the raw air of exposure. It tilts, it teeters, it topples. And all I can do is harness the hope that one day I will find clarity in my reflection. But the key to honoring a person’s life is to not resist their memory, and the emotional currents it wraps you into. I want to love like my grandmother loved my grandfather. I want to rise in emotion-induced bravery like she did whenever one of her children was mistreated. I want to unapologetically live my potential like my grandmother was never encouraged to. For her sacrifice, for the shimmering light she implanted in every member of our family. Her influence, infused in stories and photos and people, supports and uplifts me, tangible as the transcension of time. My grandmother may not have the opportunity to shower me with affection, but her lessons withstand within others, and I feel the firm grasp of her hand on my shoulder at the crossroads. Remembrance of my

grandmother, celebration of the star that blazed so brightly in this vast and obscure galaxy,
overtakes my heart as the sound of her name overtakes my ears: a whisper at first, and then
more certain, "*Josselyn, Josselyn. Josselyn.*"