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Flying Sand, a Screaming Wind

by MARSHALL PIOTROWSKI

The car's clock struck midnight as we entered the state park, intentionally neglecting the highly visible 'DAY USE ONLY' and 'NO CAMPING' signage, and my grandmother beamed at that parking lot like she might a dear friend or spouse or favorite child, her eyes bright and lips taut in a broad, bubbling grin. Her relationship with that place was clearly loaded, and in our silence she rapidly, silently recounted dozens and maybe hundreds of memories. I know she was recounting because I watched her eyes flutter back and forth, quickly, like she was dreaming awake. It reminded me of when my mom would parse through her old college photo albums.

My grandma and I giggled, pleased to break such a mundane law, to assert our raw human will over the futility of the stupid state. Or that's how I saw it. More importantly, I was thrilled to finally spend time with this woman I'd spent my life pondering, sometimes denying her existence—thrilled even though this was only possible through tragedy. At least it wasn't

entirely bad is what I'm saying. The tragedy. That night I felt tired, sunned, dried out from a full day on the sand, and soon as we'd assembled our tent, set out our pillows and sleeping pads and bags, and despite her bright booklight and sporadic page turning—which reminded me of failing to sleep in hotel rooms with my voracious reader of a mother—the steady predictability of the tide lulled me into deep unconsciousness, a truly restorative sort of rest I hadn't felt in over a month, the sort my stubborn, grieving body and mind had fought so hard against but now gladly allowed, and so I sank.

#

I first met her the day of my mother's funeral. They had some sort of falling out—that much I knew. But I never knew what precisely drove them apart. Growing up I'd say I only had one grandmother: the other didn't exist. It was easier to explain away like that, and if anyone probed further, I'd make them look rude; easy enough. But at the funeral I recognized her immediately—saw myself in her, my mom in her, especially our walk and our stance (our feet all tended to pendulum forward with all our gravity impossibly centered in the tips of our toes, and our heels sometimes never touched the ground for miles)—which was special and welcome but a bit bittersweet, considering the day. She instantly recognized me too of course. Our eyes locked and I stood in place and she walked towards me—this was before the ceremony, and we stood in a drab, musty, yellow room with an empty fireplace and surely many ghosts—and with big wet eyes she pleadingly said, “Hi honey,” maybe full of some expected response, which I quietly guessed at, and then, “I haven't seen you since you were born!” to which I smiled, and then immediately cried. I think that startled her a bit, my sudden bursting, but no one was surprised, considering the day.

My mother was wonderful, my favorite person. I won't here get into the many millions of selfless things she did for me and our general relationship and rapport, which was intense and open and lovely, in the interest of brevity. I just want you to know that her eyes gleamed brightly at every moment and that she really was my favorite person in the world by a good couple of uphill, snowy, no, icy, horrible miles. That feels important for you to know. She died suddenly and without warning. It involved a car but it was not a classic car crash, but I don't want to get into here. When she died I was already lonely, despite her best efforts. I had just graduated from college at Tulane, in New Orleans, and while all my friends had either moved to L.A., Seattle, France even, or stayed in Louisiana, I had a job offer I felt I couldn't refuse in Salt Lake City, where I knew exactly no one.

The job's main duties entailed writing product descriptions for the outdoor gear and clothing manufacturer Pointy Rock, Inc.

I didn't know what I wanted to do for work in the long term, as a career. I had majored in English but didn't want to be a writer or editor or even a teacher. Even so, this felt like a good enough first step in the general direction of adult-level stability and responsibility, and they came to *me*, recruited me two months *before* graduation; easy enough. I was still writing my senior thesis and had no time to apply to other jobs, so I accepted, and as it turned out, I rarely enjoyed writing product descriptions. Or reading them. Or editing them. It all seemed the most pointless, disappointing work in the world, so boring, so exceptionally dull I felt like boredom had grabbed ahold of my ears and shook with delight while with two other hands (boredom has more arms than we like to believe) drove sharp Japanese knives through my fucking eye sockets while I attempted to assemble a sequence of words ordained with the manipulative power to convince regular and irregular people alike that *our* jackets were better than another company's jackets, to

convey *exactly* how good this product was, and to push it a bit, but without giving too high an expectation. No promises we couldn't keep. It was a hard line to walk, considering some of our rain shells sell at \$800.

And there was the problem of the people I worked with. Pointy Rock Inc. is of course a complete fucking cult, the most smotheringly self-congratulatory space I have ever entered. Large, expensive signs in long hallways reminded us that we were DOING GREAT WORK and that WORKING HERE IS PLAY, the vapid words set against grand scenes, photos, clearly snapped from helicopters, of our sponsored athletes skiing and climbing in the most beautiful places on Earth, like fully decked out in that season's most expensive P.R. gear. All my new co-workers also exclusively wore Pointy Rock, every day, weekends included from what I could tell, and they loved working there. They all still work there. I felt they were all far too into this work, embarrassingly too loyal to this company, this brand, of themselves *as* a part of the company, their identities forever branded with that stupid logo of an isosceles triangle with, ironically, no bottom line. In their stupid, glazed denial of self-loss (I swear you can see the dullness of their lives in their glassy eyes), they performed a sad, totalized corporate personhood. Their haunted, possessed righteousness anchored from Pointy Rock's famous, routine practice of giving a bit of money to environmental groups and other progressive causes, anchored from their many recycled and organic products, from their policy of fixing any old Pointy Rock product for free, their altruistic assault against throwaway culture. Which I'm not saying is all a farce or bad or anything. Overall, it's a good thing, I suppose. I just like to point out that if you peek just a few steps into their supply chain you'll still find severe labor exploitation and slavery, you'll find that Pointy Rock, like every other large American corporation ever, turns precious natural

resources and human bodies, misery, life, time and death into cold hard cash. Maybe that's a little harsh?

Nah. Fuck 'em.

I tried not to engage with the cult's expectations and self-aggrandizements. Sometimes I wore another brand's clothing, a North Face hoodie or Patagonia jacket, to stir the pot of side-talk among the cubicles. I've always enjoyed subtle rebellion. But after my third time committing apparel treason, talk sprang of whether it should be allowed, of whether to impose a ban impeded on our right to self-expression, whether it would feel too cult-like, or if instead some type of 'blatancy clause' would work in this situation regarding our direct competitors, but they never followed through. Even an expensive and charismatic conflict management consultant, flown in from Connecticut, deemed the issue too complex, too controversial for us to possibly reach consensus on. I hadn't meant to make such a situation, and I decided it better not to rebel at the first job I'd taken since graduating college. People always say that thing about that first big job being so important to not get fired from.

And there was the problem of not knowing anyone in Salt Lake outside of my cult. It's an objectively beautiful place: the rising hills, Temple Square, the trails leading right out of town that run up into the Wasatch Range, and there's the Lake itself, and of course if I traveled a few hours south the red desert canyonlands awaited. There was plenty of hiking and running and biking and skiing and reading to do on my own if I wanted to, outside my 40 hours of working a week, 40 hours sleeping, however many hours eating and however many simply maintaining my hygiene, just carrying out the acts of inhabiting a body. But I'm a social person, and love sharing experiences with friends, and going out, and getting drunk with hot people, who are hopefully

my friends, and I hadn't really made any yet so I was already miserable, in an unfamiliar place, with nobody close to support me when my mom died. Only 49 years old. Such fucking *bullshit*.

When the call came confirming her death, I left Salt Lake, flew to Chicago, took a cab to my hometown of Naperville, Illinois, and a longtime neighbor let me into my mom's small house. I had sobbed when I first heard, and then not at all the whole flight over, held it together again on the ride from the airport, but at the house I fell apart. It broke a part of me forever, opening her door, knowing she wouldn't be there. I looked through her pictures, albums full of her childhood, and her teenage years and early twenties alone took up three thick, four-inch albums, and a few of my own childhood, birthday parties and trips to the mountains, my dad still there in the early years, smiling in baggy black corduroy pants, Chuck Taylors and big white tees with graphics of this art museum and that national park, dark, curly, big hair, big glasses and a long, lanky body. A musician and a cook, sometimes a server or dishwasher, he changed jobs a lot, not able to hold them down for getting too drunk on shift, and for being intolerant to bullshit. He'd walk out when the owners started yelling. He really didn't like that, being yelled at, so he'd quietly stare them in the eyes, put down his knife or spatula or hot pan or steel-wool scrubby or pen and pad or plate full of food or tray of drinks and without contributing to any scene whatsoever would walk out the back with the restaurant's apron still on. He'd reassure us, saying, "this town is full of restaurants. They need people fast when they do, so don't worry I'll find another," and he was right, he always would. He'd throw his apron in the dirty rag pile we contained in a milk-crate in a corner of the kitchen and then he'd walk back into the living room, pick up his guitar, always sitting on its stand, and play soft and fun and fast and sad tunes, making up lyrics as he went. He was brilliant at this, and my mom and I were both deeply in love with him. He was especially dreamy and perfect, radiating and clever while playing us music.

Eventually he left without a word, letter, hint, trace, or apology. We filed the missing persons report, talked to everyone we knew, the local stations put his picture on the news, and we kept at it for years, but never heard from him again. It nearly killed us, the first three years, and that time still weighs in on my stomach. I try not to think about it. I was eight when he disappeared. Third grade. We had our theories, ranging from the unspoked Other Woman Hypothesis to the Got in Trouble with the Mob or a Bad Drug Dealer or Something Theorem. Maybe he went psychotic and fled his reality. Or maybe a horrible depression confronted him, and he fled for his life. Or maybe he was killed... I still don't know. There was nothing to go on. And nothing showed up.

That's when I got into running, in the post-disappearance. I needed some way of exerting myself until I could hardly move, some reason to be out of the house for hours, to push everything out of me like a big wet sneeze. And especially when you're young and relatively fast, competitive long-distance running is a mental sport, and it's often the kids who've faced the worst who can truly outspend their bodies, who can tolerate the most discomfort. But in a big metropolitan area, you do eventually have to be naturally gifted, endowed with durable legs and tough tendons, to reach the top of your local running scene, and I was not, so it didn't last, but I had a few years there when I'd consistently run with the lead pack of my school, sometimes place seventh or eighth at the big races.

It took one surgery to knock me out of that sport for good, but it would have happened sooner or later. I'd picked up a nice little hernia from lifting weights, and the surgeon put a mesh over the hole in my abdominal tissue. I was bed-ridden for almost two weeks after that. It was months before the doc let me run again, and when I finally got the go-ahead, I of course overdid it. Two miles my first run back, five the second. Immediate tendonitis.

I eventually got back into running, but only after years of easing in, assisted by hiking and yoga and several rounds of physical therapy, and never again near the same level. I'm grateful I had running in those younger years though. It was my best outlet for overpowering and exhausting, through sheer force of my inner will, the feeling of not being whole.

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After most of the others had left, I sought out my grandma. She had consoled me earlier when I first broke into tears until I asked her to stop and went in another room by myself for good measure. Too overwhelming. I didn't even know her. But maybe twenty minutes later I found her and started up a real conversation. She was extremely pleasant and funny. I revealed my ignorance about her and my mom's falling out, probing for an explanation, but she didn't want to speak on it right then. She offered to buy us some nice coffee to drink back at the house, and to get to know each other, and I accepted.

At my mom's house we traded our thoroughly abridged life stories, and at some point late in the evening she offered to tell me about my mom's last straw. It actually happened the month after I was born. She was still staying with my parents, helping them out with me how she could, until one night they got a call from the local police department. My grandma had tagged a huge letter A with a circle around it, the famous international symbol of anarchy, in red spray paint on the ground-level wall of a Wells Fargo skyscraper, which put her in prison for three years.

"This was in response to the Chicago heatwave of '95," she explained with a young, excited twinkle in her eye, clearly indicating this was all the justification she could have needed. A lifelong anarchist, troublemaker, and union organizer, she spent decades trying to hide her exact political beliefs in a country obsessed with scraping communism and its attendant commie scum from the face of the Earth. She made it through the Fifties without it getting out, which she

explained was the scariest part of it all. McCarthyism had driven her and her comrades underground, but she was still heavily involved in the anti-war movement and the civil rights movement. At the time of my birth and the vandalism, my mother was a political moderate, sometimes red sometimes blue, a dedicated fan of good products, booming stock markets, law and order, and a lack of surprises, but her conservatism only grew as I got older. I myself rebelled against this, and so too wound up a lefty, a socialist at the time of listening to my grandmother's story. While I beamed at her every word, I also understood how the infamous 'A' would have so shocked and disrupted my mom, how deeply embarrassed she must have been. Of course it devolved into an argument they never got past. There was more context: mall security caught my grandma shoplifting a sweater from a J. Crew store a few years before that and missed my mom's college graduation because of it. She studied accounting. My mom's dad, my grandma's husband, the granddad I never knew, had died while my mom was in college. I never heard much about him. It never felt that important to ask.

As I listened to her tales of herself and her late husband—battles with the police, hallucinogenic trips with friends in forests and deserts—I couldn't help but feel jealous of my mom for having known these two rebellious souls as she grew up, despite all the disappointment it probably caused, and I grew jealous of all the people who hadn't had such petty-seeming family drama get in the way of having more family in their life. I loved meeting her, but I felt angry, mad specifically at my mom, which felt wrong, considering the day, so I let it all go and tried not to pass judgement, tried to focus instead on the future.

Then, in a lower tone, inquisitive and cautious, she asked if I'd come stay with her for a week (or maybe two?) in Portland, Oregon. Or however long I'd like. You see she had a guest room and cooked better for two than for one, and it was a pretty place with plenty to do. Lots of

young leftists. “We could even go to the coast and stay in a yurt or maybe rough-it and camp or something, look at the ocean,” she’d said, clearly excited by the idea.

I didn’t know how to respond. I spewed off about work being stressful, too busy to get away, yada yada, until I looked more deeply into her face, her lonely, steady face, a face hoping for new friendship, and I realized, relation aside, my face looked the same. I dropped my isolative, indecisive bullshit and gladly accepted her kind offer, smile hug and all.

A few of my childhood friends and I cleaned out the house, parsed through what had to be saved and what had to be sold and what else had to be thrown away, parsed through what had been promised to others in the will (which wasn’t much), parsed through old letters; I stopped my reading when it started feeling too personal, which I judged as when I learned something new. I wasn’t sure why I was still giving my mother her privacy, but I wasn’t ready to accept that she wasn’t there anymore. With some help from mom’s lawyer I put the house on the market, and it sold within a few days. As per the will, twenty percent of the house sale was donated to the Methodist church she’d attended her whole adult life (grandma and grandpa fluctuated between spiritualism, Zen-Buddhism-influenced agnosticism, and true atheism) and I put the rest, given to me, in a savings account. All in all I was there for a week and a half.

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The handsome forty-something sitting next to me smiled while reading a hardcover book about trout. It was actually titled *Trout: An Illustrated History*, written and illustrated by James Prosek. Roughly half the pages displayed beautiful paintings of similarly shaped, differently colorful fish, greens and reds and yellows, oranges, slashes and dots and ovals, with backdrops of orange, blue, and purple river rocks and flowing verdurous vegetation—the other pages a brief description of each specific species. The book looked neither new nor well cared for. When he

caught me peering over to his seatback tray for about the twentieth time in as many minutes he asked if I wanted to read it myself. *It's a long flight* he remarked, with what I judged to be a genuine smile, and then: *I have another book to read, and I've read this more than a few times.* I accepted the offer and he smiled again as he gave it to me, then reached into his backpack and produced a paperback sci-fi novel.

Trout held my undivided attention for about forty minutes. We chatted about the gorgeous paintings, of how he, the man next to me, was a fly fisher, how he was addicted to walking into rivers and finding these captivating animals, how even if he didn't find any trout, walking in a river was among the serenest ways to spend life. He almost always let them go, catch and release he called it, and it was the only activity on this planet which truly calmed him down on a fundamental level, deep down to his gut, as he said.

He asked if I'd ever flyfished. I hadn't. Once deep-sea-fishing in Florida with a huge, heavy pole attached to the ship's gunwale, but never a fly rod, never for these little river fish. He wore a grey Pointy Rock fleece and a gold ring on his ring finger, but I didn't sense any sexuality in his talking about all this to me. He seemed entirely in another place, on a river somewhere.

Then, he offered me *Trout*, said it was his favorite book to get people interested in flyfishing, that if you liked just looking at and learning about them, you'd love searching for them a whole lot more, this message his own bona fide missionary gospel, and the gesture touched me deeply, such an exacting kindness at that sharply dark hour of my life. Told me he had a friend in town, in Salt Lake, a flyfishing guide, and that he could hook me up with a reduced rate if I ever wanted to learn from an expert teacher. I felt I'd never seen someone so honest and earnest, and I took his business card and carefully tucked it in my purse.

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After a few miserable weeks of deciphering and scribing the exact functionalities and specifications of nylon shorts and woolen socks and warm coats, I flew into PDX International Airport on a sunny day. My grandma picked me up despite my repeated protests, in which I insisted on paying for my own cab, but her tenacity won out. Once out of the terminal the greenness and vibrance of that city, its booming plants and thick, wet air, gave me life, and we both agreed I was lucky to arrive in the notoriously rainy Pacific Northwest on such a lovely day. It rained soon enough. The next few days we spent a lot of time staying in. My grandmother had a part-time gig as an editor for a local food magazine, and when she worked I tried to read, and I journaled, and I read Prosek's *Trout* from cover to cover, again, a few times actually, enamored with these fish he painted so beautifully, reading articles and short stories on the internet about flyfishing and trout and one entry in my journal from that week surprised me, even as I wrote it. I've returned to it many times over the years:

April 6th, 2018. 3:20pm, Grandma's Living Room, Portland: Large trout often become so by eating small trout. Steelhead can grow to forty inches long and thirty pounds full, or more. They are born in mountain streams and—like their cousins, salmon—travel to the ocean to spend years eating as much seafood as they can—sounds half decent right? —and then travel back to the exact spot they were born, to themselves spawn, give birth. I'm in pain and I think it's time to leave again, Salt Lake I mean. Living is painful, getting to know others and getting let down or letting them down is painful. Trout sort of look like small mountain sharks; I think they are striking. Sometimes a song or a chord in a song or a smell in the air or the way something tastes or the way a leaf rolls on the ground in a short wind like a dog on wet grass will remind me of some time passed, of my life years before, often of mom, and an overwhelming sense of sadness and sweetness smothers me and my system suddenly floods with ice cold water and it stings, you

know? My inner child still sits down there in the pit of my stomach, screaming her head off, waiting for somebody (probably Dad) to make her sure, really sure, that life will be alright. I am warm and cold and wet and parched all at the same time. It's like I'm looking for my stream, but it's been dammed.

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A week into my stay, we ate dinner at her favorite restaurant, a Thai place in downtown Portland, and the wide rice noodles with tofu and basil and vegetables I ordered was delicious and held a fair amount of heat. My mouth melted and my head rushed. She was right about Portland being a food town. Everywhere she took me to eat I left with a satisfied stomach and confusion about my career choices. Good meals do that to me. After our noodles and a few cocktails, we rode the bus back to her turn of the century house with one floor, two bedrooms, a half-finished basement and a pink-tile kitchen—and there she started her electric kettle to make the liquid staple of her life, fresh ginger-lemon tea. I took a tired seat on her blue felt sofa, smiling to myself, fairly tipsy and still high on food-induced endorphins.

A minute later my grandma sobbed. I heard the somber, exasperated whimpers, the loud, damp, windy inhales and exhailes emanating from the kitchen, and I joined her, took her into my arms, and while I wanted to cry too I couldn't. I tried to make myself, but my tears wouldn't budge, despite all I had to break down for. We rocked together for a time, and she thanked me dear, and finished making tea. I remember watching her slice the skin off a two-inch chunk of ginger root, which she'd grabbed from a bowl on the counter with great care, transported to the cutting board in weathered hands. She sliced it confidently with the far end of a long chef's knife. She looked up at me, wiped the corners of her eyes with the loose orange ends of her shirt's long sleeves, and said, "I've never ever in my life understood what was really happening,

and I'd never be surprised if one day a great wind appeared and just blew us all out to space." I wrote down her exact words.

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We shared countless stories of my mother, who herself never talked of her childhood in great detail. My grandmother described a girl full of smarts and attitude and looks, a girl much more a fan of rules than her parents. Rules could give her more structure than Pothead No. 1 and Pothead No. 2 ever could,¹ and she learned to live by them. There was a clear way towards a stable life—good grades, the right extracurriculars (orchestra, not band, student newspaper, not student radio), good college, reliable degree, don't do anything to get fired—and my mother followed that path her whole life as if it were the yellow brick road. I shared my stories of her as a truly attentive, kind mother, a mother who cared for me with exceptional grace, even as her husband disappeared. We were quite close, despite my constant need to rebel, my chronic desire to branch out of her bland security-is-everything lifestyle, and while she stepped over my drawn lines of privacy, I stepped over the lines of acceptable behavior she drew as well. A dance of wills, we both secretly enjoyed our improvisations even when it felt like the world was falling apart around us, leaving us behind in our own brains and feelings.

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One evening, my grandmother instructed me to pack for three days of camping. We would leave the next morning for the coast, or more specifically, to a parking lot off the coastal highway, a place where she knew how to illegally camp without getting caught. "It's all about getting there after dark and packing up and getting gone before the sun rises. And a little bit of luck." she told me with a wink. I offered to rent us a condo, but it wasn't about the money for

¹ I learned she referred to them this way right before I stopped reading an old unsent letter I found in her house.

her—this was about the experience, about reliving some other memory, about performing a ritual.

The next morning, she woke me with gentle door knocks and a soft singsong call of my name. I put on my clothes and met her in the kitchen. She'd already made coffee and put a warm mug in my hands as we exchanged morning greetings. I sat down at the dining table and faced the window and the world. The sky drizzled slowly. What little light managed to meet our irises reached through the windows pallid, without hue or true shine, and I figured it must normally look like that in Portland, that you'd really have to love those grey days to love that place.

I drank my coffee, a delicious, bold brew extracted from expensive beans in a French press, and she sat down beside me and drank her own. We stayed silent, saving up for the intimate days ahead. After coffee and toast we loaded the car with umphs and grunts, giggling for the loudness and timbre of them, and my grandmother sat behind the wheel. It only took ten minutes to get away from Portland and into the wet, rural, hilly green landscape between the coastal mountain range and the Willamette River. Population density thinned quickly. In the mountains we passed a Dairy Queen and at least two weed dispensaries. The forest fought for our attention; clear-cut occasionally showed face to the two-lane highway. The rain gained momentum. My eyes opened wide; my jaw dropped. We both oooooed and ahhed at the lusciousness, the three-inch-thick live green moss dominating every surface, the world cast in a dark, verdant tint. I felt that dinosaurs must lurk in those woods. It wouldn't surprise me.

She pulled over at a mountain spring pouring cold, delicious, potable substance from a metal tube jammed in the hillside, like sap falling from a spile. We waited while the car that arrived before us filled six or seven water tanks—the stupid, bulbous blue jugs you see in stupid, boring office buildings like my own. They covered the open ends in a lot of saranwrap clamped

with rubber bands, carefully arranged them in the trunk of their sedan, and drove off east. We brought out our water bottles—both Nalgens with assorted stickers—and filled them with the mountain liquid, gulped half the bottles down and refilled before getting back in the car.

We were still high above the water, on the side of a mountain, when I first glimpsed the ocean. The steep grade of our descent, a long nosedive into the sea, dramatically affected our perspective, so that the marine horizon extended not only outward but upward, into the sky itself, somehow above us, and I experienced a mild vertigo, glad not to be the one driving. I suddenly grasped my puniness. Within minutes our road found U.S. 101 and we turned south, the forest and mountains to our left, the hydrosphere opposite. We whistled, jigged, sang with the radio, to classics from James Brown, The Rolling Stones, and Aretha Franklin. It was a good station. My brain lit up about the beauty of that coast, the boundary between states of matter, the place where they mix and meet on a grand scale, reckoning with each other. The highway climbed above the water and fell again to the sand, pulled away into the forests and pitched back into infinity, connecting town to town. Around 1:00pm, we came to Manzanita, a town named after a poisonous tree she told me, and she exited the highway and parked in a public lot by the beach. The afternoon sun cooked off the morning clouds and left a great mist floating with sparkling iridescence. We laid out a blanket on the sand, opened our books and drank the fresh spring water. Crabs crawled about, avoiding the seagulls who hunted them down, who stabbed sharp beaks through the middle of their shells, eating insides and leaving gruesome trails of dead crustacean trailing up and down the beach.

We spent those lovely hours reading, sun-soaking, occasionally running down to the water, wading in, up to our thighs first and then jumping the rest of the way into a wave, our breaths taken by the water's chill, running and screaming and laughing our way back to the

towels and warmth. For dinner we ordered overpriced food and beer at a local brewery. I told her about the man on the plane who had given me *Trout*, told of flyfishing and of how I could take guided trips for cheap in Salt Lake, and we both agreed she'd visit me next, and then we could learn to catch those beautiful, mysterious little mountain sharks together, just for the sake of doing it, to see them up close.

I fell in love with the Oregon coast: the pine forests running down to the beach and the cliffs above the water; the oddly shaped trees, blown back east from a life of fighting wind and storm, like a skydiver's hairdo; the mountains rising up behind the whole scene; the colossal ferns in their prehistoric proportions. After dinner we acquired some firewood and built warmth on the beach, us and about a hundred others at their own fires. We mostly held our tongues, took in the scene, read our books, allowed our bodies to release, our minds to wander where they would. Breaking what felt like two hours of silence, my grandmother, with some emotional difficulty evident by the subtle tremor in her voice, and without looking at me, unexpectedly said, "Honey, I'm so sorry I messed up so bad with your mom, I really wish we weren't just now getting to do this. I've been so lonely these past years, and you're as good a granddaughter as I could have ever asked for." I cried, rubbing her back in small circles. After a while of this she declared that it was time to go find our illegal campsite.

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The next morning she woke me early. It was dark still, and she had already made apple-cinnamon flavored instant oatmeal and hot coffee, and all I had to do was sit up in my sleeping bag and consume. We quickly packed our tent, sleeping bags, and the small backpacking cook-set she made breakfast on, and got back in the car. We left before the sun had even thought to rise.

She pulled back onto US 101, heading further south. She told me we were going to one of her favorite places on the entire coast. “I have something important to teach you,” she ominously revealed. We remained silent for the rest of the drive, the hour too early to engage one another. After what felt like forty minutes on the wet, winding road, we made it to Pacific City, and I saw the silhouette of a singular, tall, round, orange sand dune rising from the beach, towering above the water, the sun barely revealing, peeping the faintest light into the world. She found public parking just south of the dune, and we got out of the car and walked towards it. “They call this place Cape Kiwanda,” she said. I remember feeling I’d heard the name before. “We’re going up there!”

And she pointed.

The hill was steep, and the wind picked up. Sand blew all around and jabbed our eyes. We continued up. We took breaks every ten steps or so, our own winds having picked up. Only halfway to the top, we were suddenly a hundred feet above the ocean, and the sky gleaned and hovered its morning pink, then the wind died back down, for which we both were grateful. The workout energized me, woke me more than the coffee had, and I could see why this was her favorite place along a whole coast of impossible beauty. The oxidized redness of the dune, the lonesomeness of it, the challenge of the climb, it all felt as practiced and sacred and ritualistic as our camping site had.

Gravity kicked both our asses, and near the top we needed a longer break.² We plopped our asses in the sand, gazed down on where we’d come up, and studied the curvature of the coast. Across the mile or more I could see, only a few people were out—two running, another walking their dog. I felt lucky to be there so early in the day, clear of the hordes of tourists surely

² My grandma was in remarkable shape and easily kept pace with me, which personally made me feel like shit, and reminded me that I should take up running again.

due in a few hours. Once finally at the top, we could see up the coast to the north as well, from where we had driven, and we took a few moments soaking it all in, the sun and the waves pulsing towards us, the water lapping up and pulling back into itself, wetting the beach, saturating sand. Abruptly, the wind roared again and blew a fresh spat of grit in our eyes. We took cover under our unzipped jackets, holding the sides above our heads. The wind did not break and threatened to knock us down, howling its formidable fury. We crouched for solid gravity. I worried we'd fly off the mountain, that this was all a huge mistake doomed to catastrophe, in the last family member I had getting hurt, or swept out to the cosmos, or something somehow worse than that.

My stomach dropped, and fear and sadness rushed into the vacuum. I suddenly realized I had hardly processed my mother's death. I realized the worst of the grieving, the searing hot pain of it all, still laid out bare in front of me, like a surgery I was being forced to perform despite my only academic degree being in English, and knowing that scared me down to the deepest compartments of my gut, 'that' being the foresight of having such horrific, abysmal lows still ahead of me. That moment, my grandmother and I locked eyes, and she announced with those big brown orbs, streaming tears again, maybe from the flying sand or the screaming wind, but maybe from her own grief, guilt, or fear, that it was time for her to teach me that lesson she had planned, and so we huddled close, combined our jackets and connected the tops of our foreheads, sheltering from the raging sand, and over the wind's howl and with a force like the ocean³ she edified me: "There are times, hun, when you've lost everything you could imagine, when we're so numb and in shock from all that's happened, when all that's gonna help is to scream, to go

³ In hindsight, her voice in these moments was so powerful and uncharacteristically deep—not as if a brutish man spoke but like many people spoke all at once—that I often wonder whether the Pacific channeled through her that day, which might explain the rise and fall of her tone synchronizing with the waves, or maybe she learned all this from the Pacific long before and gave a kickass impersonation. I find it unlikely that neither is true.

somewhere sacred and beautiful to scream into, unbothered by others, spill your whole soul into the open air, let the world and god itself—that *fucker!*—know you exist, to prove your power, to scream as loud and long as your lungs can last, scream so big you lose your voice, until you're not sure you're still on this planet, and then until you're sure you are again, until you feel fundamentally, absolutely, undeniably, essentially, *different* than before, and if the weather is extremely fucking chaotic like this, well that's even better. This is the stuff of survival hun, of getting to the next day. Ready?"

We pulled our heads slightly apart, tilted our eyes to meet each other, and she smiled at me with grooved cheeks lifting heavy streams of sandy tears, and I believed her, everything she'd said, I still do really, so I nodded, and smiled back, and we filled our chests, broke our fort, turned to the water, thrust our heads upright and upward, two trout jumping for flies, mouths agape, our faces proudly out and into that open, hurling, tempestuous sky, right into the line of fire, sand pelting our eyes, and briefly, with a sonic boom, we met space.

[THE END]