

RESURRECTION MORNING

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Sometimes in the morning, I wake earlier than the others. I slip out of my room and sit down on that well-worn spot on the couch that over time has become mine—the one the boys grumble good-naturedly about having to relinquish because dad says so. Maybe I've claimed it as mine because it's where the world feels most right, where the small sense of order found in familiarity harbingers a happier and less harried time, sometime in the future when lions will lie down with lambs and the imperfect but earnest will grow like cedars in Lebanon.

They are quiet moments, those, and quietly shepherded along by markers of time that make our home both unique and cliché: The passing train in the early morning hours that reminds me we live at a transportation crossroads, linking us to north and south, east and west, but only occasionally, and at great cost, to our family; the cuckoo that peeps his reluctant head out every half hour to remind me not just what time it is but that for twenty years he lay silent in his gift-box-cum-cardboard-cage, unable to sing his little Swiss songs of joy. These are the sounds I hear in the early mornings, this morning, as I sit in silent contemplation in my spot on the couch and wait for the sun and my family to rise.

We knew when we moved to the Midwest that the physical distance between us and our families would be vast. One thousand six hundred and nine-tenths of a mile to my parents', one thousand three hundred eighty-six miles to my in-laws'. What we didn't know was that the emotional distance between us would stretch or shrink as a measure of the strength of our relationship with them, that it would ebb and flow with the local demands placed on us, on them. When you live far from

family, there is an inertia that sets in. We have noticed it with the phone calls that get less frequent; loved ones' accounts of trips to hither and yon but rarely to here; the boys' missed birthdays, followed by perfunctory and sincere apologies that we accept with a little more resignation each time.

Sunday dinners at mom and dad's become one more needle in a pin cushion of emotions that already has a few holes. Of course you're happy for everyone there, but you'd be lying if you said you didn't feel a little twinge when you call after church and hear the buzz of love in the background: The sound of your nieces and nephews playing with each other while your boys are downstairs in the basement half a country away, the snippets of your siblings' conversations with each other while your wife finds friendship in the pages of a book, sitting next to you alone on the couch.

It is one thing to comprehend the realities of life's demands, the rhythms and patterns of our responsibilities that tether us to the places where we live: we in the Midwest, they out West. It is another to taste the separation on the tongue of experience, no less bitter because its provenance is understood.

I imagine it was quite the undertaking for my parents to schlep the six of us kids up to Utah from Arizona every summer so that we could stay connected to our extended family. We'd take the US 89 north, crossing the border into Kanab, and then drive through Panguitch and Manti, where my maternal grandparents were married. Grandpa had always been punctual on their dates, so when he arrived late to the temple, grandma feared for a moment she might be jilted at the altar. We'd pass through Ephraim and Mt. Pleasant—these are the town names that stay with me—and when we'd get close to Fairview, mom and dad would tell us to keep our eager eyes peeled for the cabin. There was always a rush when we spotted it peeking through the trees. We knew we were on the final stretch when we left the pavement and crossed the cattle guard through the gate onto grandma and grandpa's property.

I was only a year old when grandpa built the cabin. Dad was in college at Washington State and would drive down from Pullman in the summer to help out. When grandpa died it went to an uncle who held onto it as long as he could. He and my aunt built a house on the adjacent lot, hoping to rent the cabin out Vrbo-style. But what it possessed in quaint charm and others' memories, our memories, it lacked in modern amenities and renovations, and the abortive venture soon came to naught. It finally passed unremarkably out of our lives when my uncle sold it. Some cousins and I talked briefly about purchasing it; surely someone could step up and keep it in the family, we argued. You're not in a position to do it? Yeah, me neither. And just like that, our wistful conversation faded away on the winds of nostalgia.

Not to overstate the metaphor, but emotionally the loss of the cabin felt something like a death. You wake up one day and this special place that was once so alive with an otherworldly magic is gone. You see the physical shell that remains, but the memories of everything that gave it life no longer reside there—instead, they live in your mind like so many disembodied spirits.

We don't bury buildings like we do people, though, not like we did my maternal grandmother. She outlived grandpa by twenty-six years. Mom used to joke that she kept putting off death because she didn't know what her reunion with grandpa would be like. Would he be there at all, or would he jilt her for real this time, not at the altar but in the afterlife? That would be awkward, even in heaven. Maybe she thought he would be with his first wife, the one who died in childbirth, off in some corner of the cosmos with the family he originally set out to create before life, or rather death, intervened. Maybe grandma was worried that heaven has wallflowers, too, and that she was one of them.

When she finally did die, she was only a couple of months shy of her one hundredth birthday. I had recently called to see how she was doing. By the time I hung up, I knew the end was nigh. She repeated herself again and again, unaware of things she had already said. The gregarious and witty woman I had lived with for a few years in college, the one who

was always excited when I brought a young lady home thinking maybe she was the one, was all but gone. What little cognitive faculty she still possessed was all that was keeping the conversation—and my composure—from collapsing in on itself. When we said goodbye, I hung up and lost it, sobbing at the realization that I'd never see her alive again, not in this life. Maybe tender mercies are tender because they arrive when your heart is weighed down by the knowledge that none is good but One, and He would have called sooner, more often.

As roommates go, grandma was the best. We used to sit next to each other on her matching gliders (the Cadillacs of rocking chairs) and watch reruns of *Cheers*. She would feign embarrassment at the mildly off-color jokes and wonder aloud whether letting her grandson watch that sort of show was such a good idea. I used to ask her what life was like when she was my age. Her eyes would light up as she relived her memories. I loved to hear them, too, even when the sound of her voice lulled me to sleep and I would come to minutes later only to find her still chatting away as gleefully and oblivious to my naps as when she started.

The last time I saw her alive was long after I'd moved out. With little ones now in tow, my wife and I had made our way west from our new home in Illinois. I asked grandma to tell me some stories and pulled out my phone to record them. The sound quality isn't great; I didn't have a microphone and her voice was fragile at that point. But every now and then, I pull up the app and hold my phone up to my ear just so I can hear her voice one more time. She hasn't been gone very long, only a couple of years now, but I'm still holding on to her like it's been forever.

Death is definitely a separation, but if you live your life right, it can also be one last chance to knit together the lives of those you leave behind. Grandma's funeral—like some but not, alas, like others—was an unplanned family reunion, full of tears but also of sweet remembrances. It's one of those tender ironies of life, I suppose, that God uses death to breathe one last bit of life into relations that so often grow cold when new grandparents take the place of old ones and the extended

family of your youth gives way to the one your children will grow to know.

It's now our parents who stand at the threshold of death. They are to our kids what our grandparents were to us. We don't want their funeral to be the next time the boys see them, so as a matter of course we bend our lives in the direction of the sun, every year or so in the summertime when the boys are out of school and I'm off contract at the university. We load up the minivan and head to Arizona and then Utah, or sometimes it's Utah first and then Arizona. It's a long trip, and there are moments when I wonder if it's worth it. I never seem to feel that way a few weeks later when we load up the van and say our goodbyes and set out on the drive home.

Somewhere along the interstate in the wide, unpopulated expanse between the Midwest and the West, the nostalgia of going home gives way to the cold realization that we're not going home. Home now lies behind us. If we're heading anywhere, it's to the past, to somewhere that will never be for my boys what it once was but will never again be for me, for my wife. The thought puts me in a melancholy mood, and with nothing else to do but drive, I get lost in the somber peripatetics of my mind. My wife sleeps next to me so she can take the evening shift. The boys put on a movie and their wireless headsets and get lost in their digital oblivion to the natural wonder that surrounds them. And for long stretches of the American Great Plains, I find myself effectively alone—alone to wonder about the wide world, the wider cosmos, and my place in them.

I think about the times when the call to adventure beckoned me far from everything I knew: the romanticism of ranch life in the rolling hills of southern Alberta; a mission to Guatemala as a nineteen-year old kid who seems almost a stranger to me now; my very own American-in-Paris summer in, well, Paris, but also Belgium and Switzerland, where I found a clock in a shop on the streets of Geneva that I sent home to say I know I'm far away, I know you worry, but I'm okay, I'm loving it here, and I wanted you to know.

We stop for gas and to stretch our legs. Everybody out. Make sure you go to the bathroom. No, I won't buy you a knife or a stuffed elk or any of the other random stuff you manage to find that's probably been there since last summer and will probably still be there next summer. Yes, I'll buy some more snacks. Yes, you can get a soda. You're going to mix different flavors, aren't you? You know how I know? You're smiling. . . . Okay, time to go. Where's your brother? The bathroom?! He's just now going?! We've been here for . . . Oh, for the love . . . My wife takes my hand and looks at me and smiles. I sigh. You're right, I say, what's five more minutes? It's all part of the adventure.

US 89 drops us into the valley out of the Tonto National Forest. We know we're getting close because the temperature keeps rising. At Gilbert Road we take a left and cross the Salt River bed through the last stretches of the Indian reservation. I ask the boys if they want to drive by the house I grew up in. Mom and dad moved away from Lehi after I left home at eighteen. They live up the hill now, in Mesa. The boys just want to get to grandma and grandpa's.

When we finally pull in and get out of the van, it feels like we step out of a cryopod. And not just because we're greeted by the stern Arizona sun after spending hours in an ice box on wheels. The trip only takes two days, but what for my parents begins with a text—Hey, just wanted you to know we're on the road—and ends with a knock at their door—Here so soon?—is, for us, like traveling to the moon and back. Travel has a way of condensing time and experience. Maybe that's why those who never step beyond their own world measure it in time and distance, while those who do measure it in hopes and dreams and memories.

Standing on the porch, I see the glint of gold on the door. I feel the warmth of the sun and of something else. Of being here, of being home, or home-not-home. My wife takes my hand and looks at me and smiles. I put my arm around my closest son and for a moment pause to remember the road that brought us here. That wound us through Iowa

and Colorado, gas station bathrooms and rest stop lunches, through marriage vows and deaths and cross-country moves, and autoimmunity and four cesareans, and depression and dark nights of the soul that finally yielded to vistas of a garden and a man and an awe for the love that He feels for His friends, that a father feels for His child. The love that wraps me in His shadowy embrace on those mornings when it's still dark outside and the others are sleeping, and I sit in my spot on the couch and wait—for the cuckoo to peek his head out the clock and for the sun and my family to rise.

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