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A Temporary Vessel

Casie Cook

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A TEMPORARY VESSEL

Everything disappears, everything's brief.

—Mark Doty

A dozen urns, made of brass and steel and lumber and clay, rest on rows of shelves in this small room, spotlights highlighting each of them like fine vases on museum display. You must pick one. Which one? How do you choose? You could go with the most ordinary, brushed pewter with two black stripes around the mouth. You could select a wooden one. Wood is natural and warm, but this one looks cheap, a box for a leafy houseplant, the resilient type that live and live no matter how often you fail to water them. That is not the kind of container you're after. You need a temporary vessel for your dead father.

You remember picking out a flannel for him at a department store two months ago. And here you are, dressing his ashes. Not you alone, you and your little brother, who is beside you staring at the funeral home lineup, scanning the objects left to right and left again. The two of you stand unmoving, looking without feeling. You do not speak. What is there to say?

For months now you've been washing downriver, the rapids pulling you repeatedly under. You surrender at times to the deep waters, allow them to swallow you, hold you, numb you. You watched as your dad drowned, not by watery submergence, but drowning seems an appropriate appellation for the final weeks and days. You survived—and that means you must come to the cold surface and make a few final decisions.

"That one," you say, and your brother agrees because what does it matter, the ashes won't be inside it for long.

In the morning hours the day before he died, my father got up from the sofa and walked to the bathroom down the hall. Every few careful steps, he paused to rest on the walker, adjust the oxygen tube that ran from

behind his ears and looped down around his nose. I saw him thinking hard about the motions necessary for movement, his eyes darting from his hands clenched around aluminum bars, to the bathroom door, to his stocking feet peeking out of pajama pants. This was the man who could be found dancing through the house just a year before, Eric Clapton on guitar raging from stereo speakers.

After making it to the bathroom that Friday morning, he shuffled toward a plush chair in the living room, lowered himself onto the cushion and sat, hands gripping the walker, eyes fixed on his swollen feet. The flannel he wore overwhelmed his bony frame. During the last few months, his body aged quickly, fifty-two years of life disappearing by the day.

I sat on the sofa nearest the chair waiting for Marie, the hospice nurse. Marie was maybe five years older than I, not much taller, and she also had blonde hair. Her first name was my middle name. She treated my dad like an adult after he'd been treated like a child for months in the hospital.

Marie arrived mid-morning, sat next to Dad's chair, and withdrew a blood pressure monitor from her nylon bag along with a child-sized cuff to fit around his arm. After several pumps, she unwrapped the cuff and walked over to me. His blood pressure was so low she said his heart could stop any minute. She couldn't believe he was awake and sitting upright and suggested we try getting him into bed. For weeks, he had been sleeping on the sofa to avoid the bedroom. He knew once he was in there that would be it. That is where he would die.

My brother Danny watched quietly as Marie and I moved toward Dad. She asked if he would be more comfortable in his bed. His eyebrows came together, creating wrinkles like waves across his forehead. I have Dad's tall forehead, along with its finest feature: rows of wrinkles with any rush of anxiety. He used to tell me to wear sunglasses because squinting made the wrinkles worse over time. He said I didn't want to end up with a forehead like his. I figured it was inevitable considering I already had his curls and the same freckles dotted across my nose.

With a firm nod, Dad told Marie he was fine in the chair.

I grabbed Danny and we gathered around our father, kneeling. I held his hands, which had become small and delicate in his final months, nothing like the solid, callused hands I'd known since I was a kid. His face was almost unrecognizable, gaunt and pale.

I looked into his eyes, kind and wondering and blue, and told him I loved him.

His words came softly, “I love you too, Kid.”

I needed to say the words, needed to hear them back. Told Danny to do the same. It would be the last time.

The next evening, Dad lay tucked beneath layers of sheets and a thick throw he had since before I was born. Printed on the oversized indigo blanket were three geese flying toward a tangerine sun. I had been sitting at his bedside for several hours, talking to him as he slept and holding his hand as tears drenched my face and neck, reading and writing in a notebook. As I scrawled my pen across the page, I listened for each deep breath in and out, lifting my gaze to see his chest rise and fall until in time it stopped and a final breath escaped from between his lips and I was alone.

The last time I remember seeing him smile was Valentine’s Day, twelve days before he died. I brought him a petite rose bush with twists of smooth, red petals atop delicate, leafy stems. I chose a potted plant over freshly cut roses. Fresh flowers die, and we weren’t speaking of death.

We didn’t exchange a lifetime of memories. I didn’t tell him how I would miss him. Maybe I was waiting for a miracle. Maybe I felt I had already lost him. Maybe he felt he had lost me too—lost everything, been cheated. I wonder if he cried into pillowcases like I did and woke up questioning, before reaching full consciousness, whether the cancer had been only a dream.

I helped him take his medications several times a day, hooked up the feeding tube machine at night, and poured endless glasses of ice water. For months he was taking more than twenty different medications, and I made a list of which ones had to be taken when. Most were liquid on account of the feeding tube. The pills I crushed and stirred with the liquids, sucking the mixture into a large syringe to push it through the tube in his abdomen.

One afternoon I removed the syringe too quickly, not realizing there was still medication inside. When I pulled it from the tube, the orange liquid sprayed into my face and spilled all over Dad’s lap.

He looked down at his soaked pants and up at me. “It’s fine,” he shrugged.

I laughed, hysterically. I don't know why but I couldn't stop. It wasn't funny. The whole scene was pathetic. And there I was, giggling, my father looking up at me in confusion and surrender.

I guess I was surrendering too. It was not something I understood. How does a person give up? What happens in that moment? It does happen in a moment, a startling awareness sneaks in front of you. At least that's what happened to me. It wasn't a matter of letting go, but of being consumed fully and relentlessly by my own powerlessness.

After I cleaned up the mess, Dad said I shouldn't have to take care of him. It was only fair, I told him, since he'd taken care of my brother and me, and on his own after our mother left twelve years earlier. He mumbled something about not knowing whether he was any good at it.

The urn we chose was a traditional vase shape, silvery with a gold band of carved leaves and flowers around its wide middle. Danny and I knew before discussing it that we would spread Dad's ashes near the Lake Superior shoreline in the northern Minnesota town of Grand Marais. The town rests at the edge of the Boundary Waters, more than a million acres of woodlands, lakes and streams near the Canadian border. Dad took yearly trips to the North Shore, usually alone. It was the one place he could simply be.

After he died, I flipped through the photos on his digital camera, the one I'd given him a few years earlier to replace an old 35mm. On the memory card was a series of shots taken during his last trip to the Boundary Waters. A moose had come upon his campsite. Moose are massive, solitary animals—aggressive if threatened. This one was without antlers, a female. Dad had followed her, camera in hand, snapping away in the gloaming of the day. The photos are dark, amplifying the yellow glow of the animal's eyes.

In the first photo, she's walking away from the camera through a grassy clearing between tall pines and aspen. The next several photos show her turning to look at my dad, who I have no doubt sought the attention of this grand cow. I wonder how long they stood there, quietly observing one another as the wind whistled through leaves and dusk turned to dark.

I bet he had the time of his life pursuing that moose. I imagine he returned to his camp, heart beating wildly, a smile across his face as he

cooked canned chili on the portable propane stove and prepared his gear for the next day's fly-fishing.

Danny and I waited to head north until the trees began to bud, the grass came out from beneath its white blanket, and the lakes shed their icy crusts. We made the trip in June—Father's Day weekend.

When the day came, I went to pull the urn from inside the old wooden chest where I kept it. The chest, which belonged to my dad, holds thousands of our childhood photos. There among the musty three-by-fives was the urn, shrouded in its emerald cloth pouch. I grabbed it with both hands near the base and lifted it from the sea of images. I had forgotten how heavy it was, at least 25 pounds, a quarter of my own weight. I placed it in a small cardboard box for stability.

I pulled into Danny's driveway, and he slipped into the passenger seat. Eyes half open, he glanced over his shoulder.

"You buckled him in?"

I had belted the boxed urn into the backseat of my Volkswagen. "I don't want ashes spilling all over the car," I said to my brother.

He chuckled quietly and shook his head.

We drove five hours north to Grand Marais. The last half of the route on Highway 61 hugs the Lake Superior shoreline. Every so often, the tall trees separating the road from the shore parted and I looked out over the lake, a great blue expanse that winked when the light hit waves just right. Danny slept with his seat tilted back, the lid of his baseball cap covering his face. We passed roadside gift shops, inns with paint peeling from the siding, and signs pointing to hiking trails and landmarks.

Trees like sky-high fences on either side of the two-lane highway retreated and the road opened as we descended downhill upon the harbor town. I could see the roofs of small buildings huddled together in rows on either side of the main street that appears to end in the lake. If I hadn't known it was Lake Superior in the distance, I'd have sworn we found a third coast, the ocean of the Midwest.

Our old hotel was steps from the water. The windows in our room had been left open, welcoming the cool lake air, the screeching of seagulls. We dropped our bags on the beds and headed across the street to Sven and Ole's, the town's beloved pizza place. A sheet of paper posted on the door announced their Father's Day special: a free ice cream sun-

dae for all dads, all weekend long. Danny and I ordered a pepperoni and sausage pizza to share and sat at a table near the window.

The nets of mozzarella hanging from our mouths after each bite reminded me of homemade pizza nights with Dad. We'd dust the kitchen table with flour, roll out sticky dough, and paint it with tomato sauce and toppings. We were young then. We were young still. I was twenty-five and my brother almost twenty-two. We devoured four slices each, guzzled our Cokes, and discussed quietly where we should spread Dad's ashes—the most serious conversation I've had over pizza.

"Obviously near the water," Danny said.

"That could be anywhere."

"Well, yeah, I guess." He shoved the last of a slice in his mouth and chewed slowly.

"Should we walk out there maybe?" I pointed out the window past our hotel to a span of rocks and trees reaching into the lake.

Danny nodded and we finished eating.

We walked along a dirt path to a stretch of gray and iron-red basalt rock that vanished into the water. A rocky path south from where we stood led to a lighthouse jutting out into the harbor. To the north, the rugged shoreline curved around a small forest at the center of the peninsula and appeared to go on for miles toward what a wooden sign off the path told us was Artists' Point.

The two of us moved across rocky terrain toward the point, stopping every few minutes to watch shelves of water crash over jagged rocks and rain down the sides. Between the mainland and the point are several small ravines with shallow rivers ten feet or more below. We bounded over the narrow openings like we'd done as kids roaming the shores of Minnesota's lakes and rivers with Dad.

I brought a backpack to conceal the urn. I didn't want anyone to know what we were doing. Since it was too heavy to wear comfortably on my back, I hugged it close to my chest.

We stopped at the outermost point and stood close. It was quiet except for the crashing of waves. We noticed a spot not far from us that looked as if a giant hand had reached out of the largest freshwater lake in the world and taken a scoop. The tiny cove held a shallow pool of calm water that flowed through a passage into the lake. Without hesitation and without many words, we decided that was it.

I stepped down onto the rock ledge surrounding the pool and my brother followed. The walls of the cove were six feet tall, just high

enough to hide us. I crouched close to the water, pulled the urn from the backpack and removed the lid for the first time.

The ashes inside were in a plastic bag with a twist tie around it. Just a plain old twist tie, the kind you find on a loaf of bread, with a small square tag hanging from it. A few numbers were scribbled across the tag. No name.

I assumed ashes would be charcoal in color like cinders left from a campfire. I'd been wrong. Ashes are the color of flesh. I undid the twist tie. Danny helped me hold the heavy urn as we tipped it toward the water. I thought ashes would be grainy like sand and pour easily. Wrong again. Ashes are delicate, soft as baking flour. As soon as we started pouring a few inches from the water's surface, the wind took the ashes and whirled them around us. I stopped. I didn't want to be covered in his ashes. I didn't want them filling my lungs. I didn't want any of it.

"I didn't think it would be like this," I said to Danny. I thought it would be a peaceable gesture. I thought maybe we'd speak tearful good-byes and I don't know what else. Not this.

Danny still held the body of the urn with both hands. I dipped the opening of the plastic bag into the water. We poured together. We poured quickly. We said nothing. The ashes released into the pool, filling the clear water like clouds rushing into open sky until finally the bag was empty and the entire pool was the color of skin.

That was my father. That's what was left. That and whatever of him is part of me, part of Danny.

I stood up and thoughtlessly tossed the urn as far as I could into the waves. It landed with a thick splash and together we watched the vessel sink among the whitecaps.

The second I let go I wished it back into my hands.

I wished it all back—Dad; our lives before death; the day I graduated from college and thoughtlessly denied his request for a photo together; the evening he brought homemade soup to my apartment when I was in bed with a flu; the times he invited me over for dinner and I declined, thinking there'd be plenty more ahead; the afternoon we spent at the driving range after he gave me a set of clubs, a final birthday gift; the night the two of us climbed a ladder to the roof and sat atop shingles watching mid-summer fireworks burst against a darkened sky; the time I was fourteen and kicked my foot through a closet door as we screamed at each other, over what I can't remember; the sound of his voice calling me Kid even into my twenties; the hours we spent on his sunlit patio

listening to bluesy rock on the old radio, smiling between stories and roaring with laughter until breathless.

Sometimes I wonder if the lake might offer him back up. I catch myself looking for him on sidewalks and in stores and near any lake-shore, as if he's bound to come running toward me, scoop me up like he did when I was little, tell me he's been looking all over for me, ask where I've been.