Daughter: Last House on January Road, off Route 8 · *Kristina McGrath*

TWENTY SOME YEARS AGO when I met Bode, Daddy was dead near eight years and Mama near one. Mama's death was a quiet thing and the rooms of the house on January Road filled with sun-up light and sun-down dark according to day and night that came and went with the same balanced grace as they always did, just with Adaline Back at the middle of it all, as close to me as my own heartbeat. Her death beat out the rhythms of the days; her death swept the floor; it planted the garden; it picked from the vines; it drifted through the open windows, silent as cattails; it settled into the furniture and I lived with it. It did not go away and I did not ask it to. It was my best company. It was what I had.

I sold the house in Rosanna, Ohio. Her death moved out with me. It walked in my shoes. It crated the furniture. It cradled the plates and the glasses in newspaper. We stayed at Joy Ray's up on Pine Run, planning on a train. Joy Ray was as good as a cousin but Rosanna Woods, once home, became a plain and temporary place, hazy with turned trees that sped toward winter and toward winter again. Home became a depot, a station, and on my mind was only a train. A destination like North Dakota or Pittsburgh didn't matter. On my mind was footfall and pictures of travelers in heavy coats crossing county lines and state lines toward nothing more defined than sky or wind.

In the long months of my mother's death, and I'd say it lasted years and I live with it still here in my fiftieth year, light became an evening in winter. Field light in summer, house light, or store light along Main seemed gray at the edges, the sky struck pale as a face. At least in my memory of those days it is always evening. All light softened as if a great coat were wrapped around the world, holding sound and color to their lowered voices. Mama's death snapped pictures of the earth made quiet and covered everything with its snow.

But Daddy's death was filled with noise, like the rumble of town that drifted to the porch on January Road at Rosanna's edge. It was a thing apart and overhead, a death outside our house and arms. And for that reason it lasted, like a question, like an unfinished thing. It would not

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come rest by the fire. It would not stand in the doorway, stomping its feet from the mud. It would not settle down to supper in the kitchen chairs at 5 o'clock. It would not sit but wandered.

And it wandered like the wind. What with him still whistling through the dark, undone as ever, and back to me sometimes, it was a curious thing. Any death is a crowd and one you can hear leaving, like him, something behind like me. I stood on the gray porch, I lay in bed, I hauled water, and the whistling followed like a shadow on my ears, like I was meant in this accident of hearing all his poor harmonicas and his finer ones of trees going round inside the larger sound. The wind was nothing without him. It carried him to me and called him out. He became what wind brought: he became the leaves, the town's rumble, the rain.

His Clothes

His clothes arrived by parcel post. We sorted through and packed most of them off to charity. His fancy storebought clothes escaped across state lines for free, like a pitched dream over the red shut roofs of Rosanna. Carried across the living borders of the county in shopping bags, A&P brown bags, or in the hauls of Chevy trucks, his clothes found home on the backs of strangers who did their shopping at Salvation Army, at Tom's Second Best on Main, or at fleas. A man's clothes will tell his life some. And so the colored hankies and the dotted ties, the white stiff-collared shirts, the pleated trousers, the rows of brogue-dotted shoes, told Daddy's pride of his storebought ways but not the secrets underneath, not the sorrows tucked away in the corners of the cloth, like the sour taste of purple lint in the bottom of a pocket.

His clothes kept going when he didn't. Some part of him kept happening like the wind. And for years I heard that whistling. It would come with the peepers, it would come with the storms, it would come for a reason of its own on a still afternoon, the whistling which drove him to song all his life and had no mind to stop. A child holding on to the toes of her shoes, dumbfounded in the backseat of the Plymouth, or a woman out of her mind with his bother at the black bottoms of fry pans, or scarce bread couldn't stop him from song. Not hell or high water or death either. I heard it through the wind those years. It's a rare night when I can hear it anymore.

A Rose Bush

Ida, my neighbor down the blacktop, swears that a rose bush bloomed the night of her mother's funeral, a bush that never gave a rose to Creek, Ohio, for ten years prior. Daddy signed to us through the thing that was left him, the wind, and through the coming down rain and a crash of vinegar bottles from their shelf in the yellow pantry on January Road.

What with the sign of the rose or the bottle, I figure that's how we die, handing something over, hurling some signal of passing through the earth, aiming our lives towards something plain, no matter what, there's a crash to the soul.

Remnants

I only heard about him dying. We got the news by telephone. An uncle saw to everything in Altoona, Pennsylvania, and shipped his clothes southwest to us in Rosanna, which was still home to his suitcases after all those years. I had no real proof, only the wind kept telling it to me. His life as a father, like his death as one, was something I might have overheard by mistake. And so I traveled in the remnants of something that was never whole: my large unfinished peace with him, and my life as a daughter.

Being my daddy's girl was like the end of a gesture that couldn't reach the table or just die off, midair and satisfied enough with that. In my mind I traveled to the place where he sat in a third floor room in Altoona. It was like I could almost give him something, but nothing was ever going to happen to complete the sketch of the girl with a water pitcher maybe, by a table, a blue shade of nobody particular, the white sleeve of a man supposed to be him, who talks back to somebody supposed to be me.

Sometimes life feels like a wheel on a road of little plan except to be the thing that's here, driving toward the thing that's not, and you know it all the while. There's something just ahead where you never reach. The hand never touches the earth of another hand. Most times I've wished I could trade him in for pitch darkness or a wagon wheel that got me there. But you know it's like I almost accomplish him because I can't hand him back, not because I haven't tried, but because finally I just don't want to. There comes a time, inched out over the years, you settle with it: he's mine. He was mine in a third floor room in Pennsylvania, where nothing ever happened like comfort or conversation, just him at the edge of a made bed, at

the brink of something true, in the gray inside weather of a cloudy attic room rented by the week.

I saw Altoona once from a Greyhound bus. A Greyhound bus might stop just at the edge of a place, its front wheels brake short of the tiny dot on the map, at the outskirts, on the down side, and that's straight at its heart, in its sorrow, its motor idling, its exhaust blowing smoke dead center in the middle of a town's deepest self. A town seems plain as naked where a Greyhound stops. In my minutes of Altoona, it seemed like such an ancient place, curled at the edges like old newspaper, a place that had been used in good faith. Sun hit the pale yellow-brown of buildings at the edge of town. The brick of its buildings, the three-story apartments over abandoned stores, felt true and put together by hands. And the walk of its people was slow. I felt those people bare to the bone. I was aware of that from the window of the Greyhound bus. That people walked there in Altoona, made of bone. In Altoona, it seemed, there was no hiding from things as they were. Sunlight on brick, bone-work down Main, shirt sleeves, baseball caps, and death in rented rooms.

All the years of your life you look to land and sky, to different towns, in different seasons, but sorrow has its own weather, making it all one place and time, making June into February, making a room into snow. So you look to that same sky, while overhead and coming home, or by some fence again when you shoo it off, the fear in the heart takes shape: the one crow face of our discontent, the big quarrel we have with leaving and being here. No matter what, you just can't hand it back. It's like all things, including me, was on a tilt all my life, just waiting for that, for a cloud to be a crow, for a shadow to be a face, to know I was afraid. Settled down to how it is, the open land is a palm under the house, and sorrow is a place you start from like home.

Near Winter

Sky accepts for bird a bit of cloth, water a drift of wood for boat. More patient with me than open space, she sat there listening.

I started with Bode near winter. I started too fast, and I couldn't stop talking, like death wouldn't let me. In that December-end we spent inside, we were fast to becoming the story of my life. All those months we just guessed at hers, since she was slower to tell and not much for looking

back, but just a little in her head, half asleep with her eyes shut on her journeys home. All the while we talked, like caught things, the small covered boats out back tossed the water. They had rummaged through their traps so long that traps became a form of home, and daughter, a place on maps at times more large than mountain, town or lover.

We lived in the house on Sowards Road of Mary Ford Willis, Bode's late mad aunt who left it to her in handwriting in a dearth of children and kin. The rooms were damp and left the impression in your mind of wind color and evening. Though coming back from the store or my odd jobs at Wherley's place, I'd be surprised to find a room colored white or blue. It was Mama's greatcoat thrown across the roof, it was Daddy's whistling through the gray weather of home. It was the past that colored in the house. It was Mary in her cockeyed hats, lingering by her china closet, passing by on the legs of the storm.

Beyond me too, Bode had what was hers and I lived twice when she was ready to tell. I had these dreams of nothing ever rusted. And what was gone was close, like I could touch it with my hands. Bode at twelve, looking happy at a birthday party, or serious and tiny, with Aunt Willis bent down beside her, wrapped around her like a coat, pointing down a road. Bode always shrugged at the photographs and would stuff them back quick into their drawer like they were on fire. And I wonder if Bode could ever believe at peace, or has in the twenty years since, for one minute in the past, like it was a sound she could bother with beyond the motor of her Dodge, with the road undone like a ribbon in her head, leading home, like she knew for just one minute that nothing is ever going to happen to throw anybody out of here permanent, though the details grow faint, and people lose their names, the dates of their birth, and the stories of their lives.

Bode saw Aunt Willis every three years or so when she made herself be a family. Aunt Willis told her stories of the gone Ohio towns where clear water had become the color of tea, gathering what was hers into Bode. Bode, in her travels home to Mary Ford Willis and to her mother just across the way in Westerly, had a stack of photographs of the rebuilt towns, aerial views of fast food strips against the mined hillsides, those sheer neon distances she endured from the top of everything, gathering what was hers into me, all that beauty in need of repair.

Acts are done in the doing in our present time. But any life is a crowd.

Clearing a simple garden, we built the land in the back of the house on Sowards Road by being there with shovels and hoes in a second of sunlight, in our time. But we lived by return to the earth where parts of our families once stood. Since Bode was a little of her late mad aunt and I've got my Daddy's square jaw, I figure we're all photographed in the heart of the storm, and what we're up against resembles us.

About Adaline Back

Way she lived made you think of sparrows alone in their own sky. Or rocks along their stream bed, changing the water's course, with no one to know the changing. Or wind on its own path, told nothing by no one, not where to go or how. Or made you think of snow, falling and falling, with no one to bother or embrace it. The way she lived was a natural thing, bitter hard as winter or sweet as dogwood May. Her aloneness was like the weather inside her, she breathed it in and out. All she had to do was breathe and she knew she stood on earth; and alone, she fit in, fit into the trees, into the last house on January Road, into the hills. And when she breathed, all the places where she'd been (the general store, the P.O., the garden, the road, the coop) and all her times on earth (the time of her girlhood, her time for marriage, her time for mothering, her time for clearing the lot alone) came together like the knobs of the spine toppling into place, one on top of the other, making her tall. Her aloneness was the place inside her where she prayed or remembered, where it hurt, where she loved her child, where her father lived, where her mother still walked the earth. It was the part of her that would die last, the last part that would rise from her body, leaving it a lighter thing.

The Debts of William C. Back

A tree, a child, June, a wife. Did he see those things or just the angel of liquor? What with Daddy's eyes shut down most of life, and mine against him, with the world like a driver bent to be on schedule, and him never making up his heart to be alive in the crossings, his losing became something I owed. And sometimes there's just too much to pay, like I made it up in my head, the landscape of a silver bowl, shaped by some elegant hand of justice. From them to me along a cold metal rim, there could be this

evenness to things. And this line between us that was meant to be a circle could be no other way.

It's hard to imagine how the simplest things, like rows of bowls, come into being, how a thing runs that's electric, or the grooves in a record, how a pin in perfect circles makes them sing. Let alone yourself, with all the things you're moved to say that's theirs. He died, like anybody could, across the empty snow. And what was left was the silence of some blank slate explaining what it was all for anyway.

Maybe there's a satisfaction the earth might feel like me, in the link and speed of day to night, in the run from him to me. Like a wheel on a road, a stitch on a coat, I take him up. To a better place, I take him with me, dying into green weather.

But when life gets narrowed down to that, to what's broken, owed, or absences, when stars are there to tell of what's a hole in the sky where God forgot to speak in light, then what's tossed aside is stars and things that have my own name on them. You know he was a lot of things I don't plan on taking up. To fill the time, against the hip of God, as mindless as ever, he'd play spoons he once told me, if eternity like a child were left to him. If eternity was left to Daddy, he'd do what he pleased like he always did. All bought out and shipped in a bottle of liquor, he danced with the devil on his sorrow, the last thing of value he had to give.

Sometimes in my dreams, there's a window, and a snowflake is my father. Because of time, this is only sorrow. In my dreams where the windows stare, sometimes Daddy's sorrow, not mine, like one complicated wheel of snow, will be there where light can trace it against the glass. And the picture made of snow comes out me instead. Daddy's sorrow would be my face. Something knows me. If you don't keep your eyes lit, the past will run you down.

Back Then, Feathers

There's a way of standing tall in the crowd of who you are, unowned as light. I was given lessons in this in my mother's yard. In the run of Rosanna fields, I was anywhere, yelling out to pure air and all its company, or propping up feathers in an empty coop. Nothing was ever dead to me then, it always had a use, and usually mine, to do with what I would. My mother says to me, Here, it's yours. Most things I accepted because truth was so homemade.

Back then the old dead brooms we nailed to the side of the house became guitars and our whole wired-up porch, a cello. Then all the singers, ready for song, said: This is gonna be another pleasure. At the tops of their voices they handed it over. Little did they know it would take a lifetime to receive it, long after songs were taken down, as sure as home.

Low to the ground we played the wooden floor to make the day come true. And I believed as sure as heaven in the devil then. A little while down the blacktop road, the thirteenth child of the Greenleys, he was born, then shot at with a .22, and the whole town rang. Only later do you think you might have made some big mistake, never realizing the mirage of where you are until you go away and all the singers come with you. Outside my windows, not liars or seers, they stand, clear and complicated as air.

A Windy Night

Now the wind plays the porch as I come to it through the fields. Wind trembles through the pillars and finally tells the truth of the jangle in our heads. It's a windy night, the banisters have loosened and the porch boards creak. The house is alone in its field. But the wind is all around us now, down the roads of Creek, and through the farthest stars. Like Daddy's mixed-up talk, wind flies and speaks through the teeth of light.

It's a clear night for raccoons when the yard is spread with starlight. The leaves scuttle past as if lit up by shoes. It's a true and sorry yard out here, lit by moonlight, bare of grass, holding flat with passing leaves and a blown paper. Like the wind and its leaves, sorrow breaks from the yard, from the gates, into cities and other rooms. Neighbors take shape, and all that noise I used to name "just him again" is us.

Some people talk of matter this or not, and some say it won't after a second, explaining that way the head of the chicken, the sudden mercy of dead horses or fathers, and the clean slate of the next baby. Some people talk like we live midair, apart, how whatever's done wrong dies off. But meanwhile, nothing leaves for certain. And what he died of, that remains.

A New Life at Junk Market

I go to junk markets. I go near every Sunday with pure desire to the Episcopal lot after the ten o'clock. I might not buy a thing but I have a hun-

dred wishes which spring from a red-handled egg-beater for a dime spot, a pair of two-toned shoes for fifty cents, a pitchfork for a dollar, a beaten-in bucket for an argument. This is something I inherited from my mother and from my father's clothes. It's like a fever of believing in all things being possible again.

At junk market, where everyone's milling and the sellers line up in rows too tight for all they've got, everything but company goes dirt cheap, and my mother always bought spoons from scrap. Things escape across state lines while original owners are mostly dead and caring less for their lives written down faint in some living mind, as if pencilled in by shy girls on that corn yellow paper the county gives them free, too thin for saving. Like traveling clouds hired by the undertaker or shot by the circus, sometimes you're glad to let things go because of new sun-ups, who you'd like to have for supper, or how a lady looks newborn in a dream, hanging free by her teeth in a cage of light.

Sometimes in the middle of my head all the boats glide free. For that one second I come from nowhere. But then rooms to the north of me, in Rosanna, appear, with Mama in one of them, setting out perfect those spoons she bought from scrap, expecting no one. For near twenty years she kept a few of Daddy's clothes hanging in a half empty closet, arranged with the ones we lost or gave away, in a design of keeping with letting go, and that's a kindness. Letting go is a kindness. But through the smallest things she owned, I still get ideas as sure as spoons.

What with everything traveling quick and I have to, sometimes it seems there is no larger thing than retrieving. What with silverplate spoons, a blue dotted tie, or the ghost of a winter coat, it's like what's left and what's not is saying: You are life safe, no one's going to hurt you, not because they haven't had the chance, but because no one really wants to, they like to see you well. You came from pieces that you know; you are let go like a fresh cut stem.

Adaline Again

Adaline Forester was born in a kitchen in a big hurry. There was no time for a doctor before it was Adaline's turn. Adaline Forester was born stubborn and never cared a fig for a chore. She had her ways of slipping out the door. No further than the porch steps or the field, but she made her own

time, busy with sticks or a cloud pattern. She gave a lot of thought to things like sticks or the bitterness of a rain-soaked dog. Sitting on the porch step, she felt the earth and all its belongings, its dried leaves, its frail sticks lost forever from elm trees, as a presence under the porch, under her body. And the coolness underneath, she felt that through her feet on the stairs. And above her head, the sky. She turned her ear to it. Up there nothing seemed lost or at odds but in its place and traveling: the clouds, the wind, and come night, the stars exploding. Adaline Forester lay crosswise in her half of a shared bed, head to feet on the short side, next to a brother, growing by the second too big for the arrangement, her feet dangling out the side. She trained her mind on the North Star, which felt meant for her, and slept in a place of her own choosing: one cloud over southern Ohio. At twenty-two she was married; at thirty-two, alone, but with me, Mazelle.

I picture her now like an unstopped watch. The earth moves too slow for her feet. There she is going like an unstopped watch in the fields, in the kitchen, in the coop, in all the places where the giving comes from, in charge of everything, like the glitter is of night.

She told me places just above my head, the North Star, the oak branch, the order of pantry shelves, where the mason jars were arranged according to color: beet red to squash yellow. She told me that all God's business is in the neighborhood, it's in the coop, it's in the woods, in the house next door, in the ditches needing to be cleared at the shoulders of the road. We're the owners of everything old and everything is with glitter, all that beauty in need of us.

What with her alone near twenty years, and with a gift of mules for staying there, that haunted me as much as him. It felt so out of place to be happy, and still I ramble after it, and that's about all there is to it: this rambling and not allowing, this not allowing and this rambling, and the going on from not.

Once on Sowards Road with Bode

All through our sleep, the rusted-out boats, tied to elms for winter, threatened to let go. Now light as air they aim themselves, drifting off into low water, abandoned or free, it finally makes no difference.

Sometimes when I wake in the middle of the night, the room is warm

with my own skin, rain clatters against the tin shed. I take it that's a song, and the years hit down where the wind flies, too. The storm fits through the wires of a coop, with all of us in its arms. A person becomes like thread through the eye of a needle, and I still quarrel with it, the distance we become from one doorstep or child, while patterns of light nod on the water.

History matters and changes the way we look at stars or water. What we find in the darkness was once already ours. Our arms spring like branches from yesterday's trees. The past matters but Bode's face appeared as morning, making colors real and cupboards speak in their simple lines. The woods are thinner now than when she walked them with me. The lake is free of its boats but ripples with their spirit as her clothes did in the wind of everything. Bode, who I did not imagine, but touched; the one sure gift, casual, in particular, was her weight that rooted her to this earth beside me.