For Two

Grandma likes it scalding, with honey. A teaspoon exactly. She's very particular. She likes the floral types, the ones that taste like perfume. Half tea, half whole milk. Stirred in a cup with its matching porcelain teaspoon, the same set she's had since she was a girl. I make up a teapot for her, place the bags of dried lemon, elderflower and rose petals in and pour the hot - never boiled - water atop.

She sits by the window now, prim in all her skirts and lace. Her hand curls beneath her chin to rest beneath; her elbow leans against the white painted frame as she gazes.

This tea is picked from her garden, the one my grandfather used to tend with her. It's a special blend. She grows it, picks it, dries it, ties it up in cheesecloth pouches for steeping. I think she loves that garden more than my mother. I'd love it like that too.

Her name is Grace. She calls me over with a finger, yet her eyes keep watching the window. They're not so focused when she looks at me. I come slowly, deliberation in my toes, and watch the whites of her oculars glint smartly with the window's reflection upon their surface. She *is* grace, as far as I know it. She is prim like a primrose, her fingers set feathery on her cheek and arranged in a manner practiced and poised. The old tend to hunch with the weight of their life on their shoulders, but she still stubbornly holds onto her straight-backed spine unweathered. Her woes ate at her sides instead, thinned her willow bones to boughs of wavering hollow. She is a slip dress, tiny on a hanger.

The nearest chair is the one I pull forward, and it scrapes horribly on the linoleum floor as I position it to sit beside her. She remodeled this kitchen in the seventies and it hasn't changed since. She's still stuck there, in the throes of the late environmentalism movement, in romance and dancing to wine-vintage crooners with my grandfather.

I hand her the saucer, and the liquid inside traps a reflection of her in milky amber. "Hasn't he been out to water the flowers today? It's nearly noon," she says, swirling the teacup and taking a gentile sip. By God, I think she nearly smiles. Grandpa hasn't watered those flowers in four years, although he would if he was still able to choose. Now he fertilizes his own little patch of daisies down in the community cemetery. Some commercial lawn employee comes by instead; his unsatisfactory work has damaged my grandmother's opinion of her late husband quite substantially.

"He'll be out soon," I say. "When he gets back home."

"I can't recall where he's gone," she says, turning back to that garden. I watch it too for a while, until she calls, "Lazybones, would you mind getting the mail? I'm waiting on something from Juney."

I haven't had a single slacking bone in my body since middle school, so I go fetch the bills and retirement home advertisements and certainly not anything from Aunt June who chooses to forget. She's the only one that can.

When I come back, I'm my mother Margret. I'm greeted with pleasant surprise and a good pat on the hand. I hadn't told her I was visiting today. But what good fortune, because she'd made up a good pot of home-brewed tea and she couldn't possibly drink it by herself. She likes it scalding, so my cup is too hot to hold, but I let the steam warm the tip of my nose and rub off the little remnants of a grimace pressed into my lips. I sit by her in the same chair as before and look at the windowsill instead of the garden, which is a hundred years old, which was still young when my grandmother first slid her hands across its surface. By now it should be stained with years of her ghosting fingerprints, lingering like a memory. The wood is crackled now with puckering paint and greying wood, but it remembers. And it continues to hold Grace's elbow

aloft, like it always has, like it serves no other purpose, and if she were gone then it would finally collapse and give way but not one second before. Finishing the work that Grandpa began.

"He's not coming back."

Grace's face, so poised, curls upon itself in a girlish expression of grief. But she doesn't sob. Young tears drop simply down, carving rivers in the creases in her cheeks as anguish creates its newest, proudest fissures. "I'd forgotten," she whispers, maybe to me, maybe to the window. "I'd planted that trumpet vine on his funeral. They've grown so big- ah, he'd love their color. I can't recall the day." She turns to me, her eyes sharp despite the clouds inside, knowing who I am, knowing where we've been. "I'm falling asleep," she says, warbling, clumsy with grief. Her old voice crackles and splinters and snaps unbandaged.

Knowing, we sit together. I weep with her, my knees keeping my elbows up as they cradle my face and catch salty rivulets. We weep for the same thing. For all the days I can remember, and all the ones she can't, and for the roots that drink my grandfather's body and for the ones his hands will never cradle as they recall. I don't want to see them, those hungry petals and the gossamer glass and the sagging windowsill, but I can taste it all in my mouth, sunny lemon, elderflower, rose perfume, dead and dried and sawdust. It's scalding. It's a white-hot brand. It's a roaring fireplace.

Grace doesn't make a sound, so I don't know when she forgets to cry. But she scolds me: "Oh dear, what are those tears for? What has you so caught in a twist, Marge? Poor morning?" And my face lifts, and Grace turns back to her garden, and muses. "Hasn't he watered the flowers today?"