

The Nightingale Cries

I. Danny

My gum is worn out. It tastes like my friend Stevie's arm pits smell, and I get ready to sneak it under my chair. I'm staring at Grandpa's empty chair across the table, working the gum to the front of my mouth, when the front door smashes open and a flood of leaves busts in. My spelling homework flies all over the table.

"You said you were going to get that door fixed," Mom says to Dad. The look she's giving him should turn him into a rock. She snags my spelling homework and sorts it for me.

Dad tightens his fist around his spoon, then gets up and walks to the door. It's been broken for almost a month now, and about four times a week Mom asks him to get his tools from the garage and take care of it. For some reason, though, he just slams the door shut and moves the red rock in front of it. It never works for long. After thudding for a few hours the door throws the rock back and hits the wall like a bomb hitting the Hoover damn.

"I gave you those tools for Father's Day for a reason, John." Then that little alert goes off in her head as she turns to look at me. She caught me mid sin. "Oh, my God, Danny!"

Poop, I say to myself. Don't look under the chair. *Please* don't look under the chair. She still hasn't noticed my collection of gum growing under my seat at the kitchen table.

"Danny, that's disgusting! Why would you do that?" As she talks she walks over to me and looks underneath my chair. "Oh, my God! Danny!"

Aw, man! This gum habit is her fault. When I was littler we used to go to my Grandma's grave after church, my mom, dad, grandpa, and me. Those days I sat in the back seat next to my grandpa. We had a game we'd always play. I swore that I wouldn't swallow chewing gum if he gave me some and then everyone laughed to tears when I did. Then my

grandpa would muss up my hair. That was in the good old days of kindergarten. I'm bigger now; I just started the third grade.

Since Grandpa went out of town a few weeks ago Mom has been having screaming fits left and right. She didn't used to be a yeller. One time Grandpa and I put finger-paints on my feet and then he walked me along the ceiling. When Mom walked into the room she laughed so hard she started crying. But she never laughs before she cries anymore. She just cries. She cries for longer each day. I wish Dad would just fix that door. No matter how many towels he stuffs in the windows, drafts keep getting in.

It's not her fault that the wind is making her sad. Everything seems to be messed up for her lately. She can't get anything done. Yesterday, her tower of papers collapsed and blew all over the kitchen. She doesn't have any of my friend's moms over like she used to. And, the other day, she had some man over and they talked for a long, long time about Grandpa's friend, Will. The phone rings from when I sit down and eat my breakfast in the morning until I go to bed at night. On top of everything else, the other day she told me that the contact solution she needs isn't at the store anymore; without it her eyes are red and runny all the time.

"What were you thinking? How long have you been putting gum under here?" She squints her eyes at me until I can't even tell they're red.

"Mom, leave the blue one! Mom! That's the last piece Grandpa gave me before he left!" She stops pulling my collection apart and puts a handful of dried gum on the table.

I'm sad for Mom, but I miss Grandpa more; I think about him being away more than anything else. I've tried to ask Mom and Dad why he hasn't come home yet, but then they just ask me questions. Is your homework done? Have you had breakfast? Did you clean up your toys in the living room yet? Then I just go watch T.V. My collection of broken crayons and

gum wrappers is growing all over the floor. When Grandpa comes home we'll make candles out of them. If I make a yellow one for Mom maybe she won't be sad anymore.

II. Grace

My hair was a bird's nest that day. I had woken up late and hadn't brushed it and even worse, it had the itchy feeling of being unwashed. After changing into my scrubs and brushing through my hair at my locker, I went to pick up my schedule for the day.

"This is a joke right?" I was scheduled to cover more rooms than any of the other nurse's aides, and I had to take dinner to the memory residents. The day I had slept in and needed to be at the auto shop to pick up my car. The shop closed at six and unless I flew I wouldn't leave until seven thirty.

After a day of smelling old people's shit and wrinkled skin I was nearly finished. Only Mr. Jones was left. Luckily, he wasn't one of the patients that wanted to gossip or discuss the bible or the finer points of chess playing. He never remembered me even though I brought him his dinner and checked his vitals multiple times a week. When I started working at that retirement home, I learned in a matter of days that there are a lot of different types of patients out there. There are bitchy patients, sweet ones, the classic "I'm not sick" patients, and the most upsetting: terminal patients. I had a routine for taking care of *those* patients; focus on one small idea for the encounter and get out of the room as quickly as possible. When I was caring for Mr. Jones I had no choice but to focus on not throwing up. That's why I always fought with my manager when I had to take care of the memory patients. They always smelled like a

combination of baby powder and dried urine, and they wore death on their sleeves. At least the younger patients wanted to keep living.

His room seemed brighter than the others that day. The routine began with me setting his dinner tray down in front of him. I so, so hated being the one to take him his meals. Being a nurse's aide has its drawbacks, and having to float around the hospital for a few years and to do the dirty jobs until you earn enough experience to settle down is one of them.

"Is that you, Ann?" he asked. He always asked. Even though he asked about Ann every time I saw him, I never had been able to figure out who she was.

"No, Mr. Jones, I'm here to bring you dinner. I'm Grace." Luckily he was nearly blind. I would hate for him to realize how bad he smelled from the look on my face.

"Oh. Well, it's a pleasure to meet you, Grace," he said. "I haven't seen many angels around here lately." He paused and his eyes scanned the room. "You don't know where Ann is, do you?" He smiled at me, toothlessly.

He was different that day. His odd statement and smile was more than I was used to. Normally after asking for Ann he just pecked at his dinner.

"Mr. Jones, I haven't seen Ann today." I never wanted to tell him that today wasn't the only day that I hadn't seen Ann. "What did you say, about angels?"

"Angels have gold hair, just like yours, Grace." He paused again, and the only noise was the steady pace of his heart monitor. "Just like Ann's." I didn't know what to think, I wasn't used to hearing that many words from him. I hated the way he said my name at the end of every sentence.

“Now dear, if Ann were here I wouldn’t need to ask you, but would you be so kind and do a favor for me, Grace?” He used his arms to sit himself up as high as he could, which wasn’t very far.

I looked over and grimaced. For the first time I saw how badly he was being taken care of. His plume of hair was frayed and in desperate need of washing. There were bits of egg in his beard and bread crumbs sprinkled around his bed sheets. His frame was light, as if a gust of wind might be able to blow him out of the bed. A copy of Mark Twain’s *Personal Collection of Joan of Arc* was poking out from behind his pillow, the spine frayed and half of the pages hanging out. A red candle with a wick of bubble gum wrappers sat unused, planted on his night stand. For the first time I really saw him. I looked at the clock, I needed to leave then. “What do you need?”

“Would you open the window for me, Grace? As wide as you can? I want to see the hills. They’re covered in snow this time of year, but I can remember.”

“Mr. Jones, it’s winter. Why would you want the snow blowing in here? And the hills are very far, I’m not sure you’ll be able to see them.” I was trying to persuade him, but having spent most of my teenage years working at a nursing home, I knew arguing with one of the residents once they made up their mind was pointless.

“Outside the nightingale is singing.” The mist over his eyes faded a little and he started humming to himself.

I walked across the room and looked out the window. Snow had accumulated over the distant hills, and on a nearby tree there was indeed a nightingale, sitting and watching. You might have mistaken him for a knot on the branch if you weren’t looking for him. The bird was humming, but I couldn’t make out the tune. Mr. Jones’ humming picked up pace, and I forced

open the window. I heard a soft breath, one that sounded more like a song than a gasp. Rust fell from the window; it had been sealed for so many years.

The wind swirled through the room. I turned and looked at the old man. Mr. Jones seemed to have grown when the fresh blast hit him. The smell of death was lightened, and a new scent filled the room. I have tried to describe it since, but there has never been anything like it. A light smell, dusty almost, like feathers floating on a breeze.

“Oh, there she is,” he said.

III. The Old Man

My singing days are over.

A fine snow gathers on the sill,

and the window is open wide.

Outside, the hills grow older

and gasp beneath covers

of deepening snow. What do you mean

like a Friday in Eden?

You are clear as the moon.

Wove clovers through our screen door,

wiped my window sills clear of snow.

I do not know why you wrote novels for me

on the bathroom wallpaper

in lipstick. Why you wore my ring on a thread
around your neck.

I can make my own Jell-O.

I can turn off the television
without a remote.

We never thought about being poor.

We just were. Groceries once a month.

Lettuce once a week.

I can't lift my arms anymore.