

PASSAGES NORTH

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DEMENTIA

My mother talks to plants. I've heard her coo to dinner plate-sized peony blossoms, thanking them, as if they put on the show just for her. Walking the garden path towards the assisted living facility where she now lives, I imagine what she would say to the landscaping. Most likely it would be "you poor, poor thing," her hand gently caressing a juniper ruthlessly clipped into a soldier's-at-attention cone. I pass under a lollipop-shaped birch tree, its boughs tortured into an immobile sphere, and recall her once staring in awe at her own garden, pointing to the branches of a Japanese maple swaying in the breeze, asking me to stand beside her and see how the light flickered through its crimson leaves.

"Another time," I had answered, slipping away. I was a teenager then, embarrassed by her mud-caked shoes, dirty fingernails, and of her greeting my friends by brushing lavender flowers under their noses and asking, "Doesn't that just smell divine?" I had better things to do than watch shadows dance across the cobblestone walkway with my mother.

As I wend my way past pedestrian red roses and overused Boston ferns to the facility's double doors, I decide how long I will stay: one hour. Any less and the nurses won't think I'm a caring daughter. Any more, and my clamped-down feelings of helplessness, my inability to set Mother aright, will burst free, incapacitating me like boll weevils devouring a cotton field.

I open the door and am assaulted with the funk of puréed carrots, bleach, urine, inertia, unwashed hair, and bland beef stew. In the hallway, I quickly walk by pasty-faced women with translucent hair and balding scalps lying on rolling beds. They stare into nothingness, their colorless lips move soundlessly.

As I turn the corner, Mother greets me with her siren smile, a grin that charmed the socks off everyone she met. And while nearly blind, her eyes flash. She calls me by my name and motions me to sit beside her. After I flop into the chair, she pats my knee with her left hand. "What a co-inky-dink. You're on the *U.S.S. America*, too," she says, sweeping a manicured hand over the speckled dark blue Linoleum floor. "Aren't the moonlit waters lovely?"

My eyes follow her fingers. They are perfect, her nails—with rounded ends and no dirt underneath. I've never known Mother's hands to look this way. Unsure of how to react to her nails or the waters, I study the photographs of the residents tacked on the wall, six women and one man. Their names are written in black Magic Marker next to their pictures.

Mother's is on the second row, two in from the corner. She's wearing a navy-blue sweatshirt I bought at Target. The same one she has on today.

Mother giggles, a giggle from her girlhood, and tosses back her dyed-auburn hair. "We're sailing down the Pacific Coast, you know. Down California."

"Where's our next port of call?" I probe, trying to figure out how her mind is working.

"Monterey. To see Daddy."

While I wrack my brain for stories of Mother sailing, a nurse places a plastic water pitcher on a nearby table. She pours a glass and holds it to the mouth of a woman wearing a red padded helmet, like those worn by high school wrestlers. The woman drinks slowly. The plastic tumbler clinks against the table top each time the nurse picks it up or puts it down.

Mother pats my leg. "They're setting dinner."

"What are we having?"

"Something fancy. It is the *U.S.S. America*, you know." She smiles and rolls her eyes in a dreamy way. "Beef. Parsleyed potatoes. Lemon chiffon pie."

That was her favorite: lemon chiffon pie.

My stomach rumbles. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a ship steward in full dress whites carrying a china plate, most likely Limoges or Royal Worcester, piled with beef Wellington, potatoes au gratin, and sautéed green beans. I turn towards the steaming platter and see he's an aide in baggy white pants and matching top carrying a tray of grownup-sized bibs.

From the hallway a woman babbles, and a man, who communicates only in jingles, sings "Good afternoon" in an operatic baritone. A woman's voice from somewhere down the hall demands something to drink, her voice sharp and insistent.

Mother leans towards me and whispers, "They've been drinking too much. I hope they don't come out here." She throws up her hands, kicks her legs, and shouts, "What a party!" She waves her hands over the dark blue linoleum floor, over the shimmering Pacific Ocean. "Isn't it amazing?"

A glass spills. Water flows across the table top where the helmet-wearing woman sits.

"Oh, honey, here, let me sop that up," a nurse wearing pink Crocks says.

"The water's rising," Mother comments.

"It is?" I ask.

"See," Mother says, reaching over the lounge chair and pointing to the floor. "It's almost to the top of the deck."

I pick up my feet.

The opera singer enters, spreads his arms wide and belts out, "Good afternoooooon," his eyes spirited behind gray steel-framed glasses.

Turning her head towards him, Mother says, "The water's rising."
"It's flooding," he sings, stretching out the "o's" and ending on a high note.

"He's crazy," Mother says, in a voice I'm sure carries across the room.

"Shish," I whisper into her ear, watching the opera singer exit left to serenade the nurses in the hall. Next to the door hangs a picture of maples ablaze in fall patina under a full moon in the morning sky.

Mother yanks my attention away by asking, "Isn't it amazing?" and points steadfastly to the floor.

"What's amazing?"

"The water," she says, with an irritated tone suggesting she doesn't understand why I haven't been tracking the conversation. "It's silvery. Shimmering. Must be the ship's lights." She points up, at the room's fluorescent bulbs. They flicker oh so slightly, like stars twinkling in the night.

The pink-Crooked nurse sets a parfait with vanilla pudding on the table. "Here you go, Sweetheart, a little something before dinner."

Mother opens her mouth, making a perfect "O" with her lips. I feed her a spoonful.

She closes her eyes and swallows. "Lemon chiffon," she says, licking her lips. "Isn't it amazing?"

Several bites later, the nurse returns with a small bottle of ginger ale and two tumblers.

I hold a glass to Mother's lips.

"Good bub...bub...bub," she says, searching for the word.

"Good bubbly?"

Mother nods. "Yes. Champagne."

I scrape the parfait cup, finding the last spoonful. I hold it out.

Mother shakes her head. "You haven't had any." She reaches, finds me, and enfolds her fingers over mine. I can't remember the last time we held hands. Mother was always busy nurturing the earth—clipping, mulching, transplanting, coddling seedlings.

She squeezes my hand.

I expect her to withdraw. But she continues to hold me, rubbing my fingers with china-smooth skin, her familiar calluses, hangnails, and rough spots erased. Her heat radiates through my body, cascading outwards in widening bands until my toes flush. Her touch reminds me of my oft-times-washed childhood blanket, warm and soothing, the yellowed wool enveloping me in its dainty nap as Mother tilled her garden—misaid once, now found.

An aide plunges a stringy mop into a bucket of water and stirs it around, clanging the pole against the bucket's metal side, like a lanyard clanks on a mast in the breeze. She cleans the floor, swishing water. The mop sways rhythmically, first to the right, then to the left, like waves softly lapping. The mop glides over the dark blue floor, back and forth,

back and forth. The air smells damp.

The ship sways as it slices through starlit seas, the water smooth and glistening. Bounding each crest, the wooden hull creaks like a carillon singing. Ting. Ping. Kling. We run dead on down the coast, our white canvas sails outstretched like eagles taking flight. A harvest moon slides north in the sky, its buttery orb casting a shimmering path over the midnight waters. It turns its face and winks at me.

Meeting me in reverie, Mother laughs and brings her glass to mine. "To long life," she says. The crystal tinkles like raindrops plinking lightly. Mother pats my knee. I hope it rests there forever.

My eye catches the clock. The hands have run past my hour.

I take the last bite of pudding, smooth and creamy with just the right citrus zing. Sipping champagne, the fizz caresses my mouth, bathing me in effervescence. I glance at the picture of blazing maples, the branches frolicking on the breeze. Leaning into the deep cushions of the *U.S.S. America's* deck chair, I watch the light flicker through their crimson leaves.

"Yes. It is amazing," I tell Mother.