

ANGEL OAK

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On a Sunday under a dusk rust, I buried my father. I was the last to leave, not out of an intrinsic obligation to mourning. No. I was too tired to go. Preparations for a burial are more taxing than the grief of the loss. I still cried during the snippets of speeches caught between drifting. Phrases you expect to hear at a funeral take a tragic tone when they're about your own father. It doesn't matter the nature of death; my dad was an alcoholic smoker that miraculously made it to eighty-nine. Staring at a descending coffin was unnerving. I watched reels of us pass before my memory in the waning minutes of the box being lowered. The tears were streaming then. Maybe they were the same from the service, I couldn't be sure. Then the slow shuffle and snuffles with customary sorrys. There weren't many paying our respects, my dad preferred it that way, so it was quick. I was alone gazing into a void of loose dirt. A breeze crept by, breaking the silence. Time took a reprieve from its persistence and left me alone. I was there for a while, but nothing changed, just a deeper fatigue. The grass seemed comfortable enough. There was a passing concern about the decorum of resting. It didn't mean anything, so I sat down and leaned back, propped up on my elbows.

Adjacent to us was an angel oak with a wide trunk, worn from decades gone. Its mangled limbs spanned across the grass and air reaching for something beyond its grasp. The tree was outside the fence surrounding the cemetery. I wished it were against my back; it would make for a serene resting place. I closed my eyes imagining the leaves shrouding me, keeping me tucked away in their mystery until I was ready to look. The languor was creeping throughout me. I've heard that anguish can manifest as sleepiness, a pain so profound a body's instinct was to escape to slumber. That wasn't it. My sentiment was far from sorrow; it should've been at least sadness. I was tired.

The largest branch of the oak had taken its own journey. It lay partly on the ground with extending boughs reaching for glimmers of light. The branch must've been one of the first sprouted. Its grooves, twists, and divots looked etched on

with a pencil. I wanted to slowly pace beside it, tracing my finger through its patterns formed over the years. But I didn't have the energy to stand up.

It should've been natural, an overwhelming, or at least numbing, sensation of pain. There, incapable of listening, holding a conversation, lay my dad. Despite the merits of the man, my dad was gone. I didn't need to pose the question because I had the answer. I had no will to feel devastated for a man who lacked remorse. The debilitating fatigue that bore into me was familiar. It had weighed me down since I was a child, expecting more from a father that had nothing to offer. The evenings gone waiting by doors that never opened. The routine phone calls of lines I'd heard before. The stories with holes the size of oceans. The everything he was, made and kept me drained. I rubbed my eyes.

The leaves on the oak blended together into a weave of green and formed a brilliant awning of foliage. I was aware that each leaf was unique, but the distinctions were impossible to discern from afar. I mustered the strength to stand up, and walk toward the oak. It was a relief to be away from his plot.

My dad used that word, relief, when his father passed. I never knew him beyond the vague tales of violence. My dad struggled to share those moments, and on the edge of a reveal, he left me at the cliffhanger. The one consistent theme in his recollections remained the same: he would never be his father. He never was. No. My dad didn't raise his hand in a blind rage, no matter how intoxicated. Even if he was born from it, that wasn't him. The experiences of us were painted in opaque hues, but beneath the shade was brightness. Despite the lack of visibility, it was there. I just grew weary straining my eyes looking for those experiences. It was just that. No relief because he had his demons, some of which became mine. No relief because I can't say the it's alright he longed to hear with his waning breaths.

By the time I reached the angel oak, I needed to sit. I situated myself close to the trunk, but with enough distance to appreciate its expanse. Every inch was its own, yet the infinite details were unified in creating the one tree. It was the most beautiful object I'd ever seen. I lied down and gazed transfixed at the newest leaves, hanging from the tallest branches, connected to the weathered trunk.

