Smoke and Mirrors

The Minneapolis Sculpture Garden. A gray sky hangs warm and heavy overhead. Crushed gravel paths lined with tall evergreen hedges on a cross-hatched grid create galleries for large installations. Mosquitoes and day-campers circulate, but the air doesn’t.

I think of Eddie, channel-surfing in the hotel rather than tagging along with his dad. Then I picture myself, at twelve, walking with Dad through the San Fernando Mission grounds on a Sunday afternoon, holding his hand as Eddie still holds mine when nobody’s watching. I spot a bench tucked away a bit, and take a seat so as not to make a scene, for I know what’s coming.

“Oh, Dad,” I mumble into my chest, as the shudder that always starts it all runs through me. “I’d give anything.” For half an hour with him on the Mission grounds, or the shopping aisles at Food Giant. To be at his side again, just once.

 It’s not the first time I’ve felt this way.

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New Year’s Day. The whole clan was in town. Nearly a week since Dad’s heart attack, the mood as we hung around the hospital all but festive—nine brothers and sisters, assorted spouses and little ones, all jammed into the fifth-floor lobby of the ICU, college football games going on three televisions. I drove out to Santa Monica to see an old friend, dialed the pay phone in the fifth-floor lobby to check in.

“Hey, Paul,” I said. “How’s the game?”

 “You’d better come quick, Matthew. He’s had another one.”

I raced back to the Valley, the freeways clearer than my head. When the elevator doors opened, the lobby felt deserted; nobody had left, but they all seemed shrunken, turned inward. Mom’s eyes lifted to mine with worry. I rubbed her cold hands, gave them back over to Anne and hurried down the hall.

The orange light of a smoggy sunset waned behind curtains the color of nothing. A heart monitor beeped and graphed green, a respirator hummed and heaved. Face full of tubes, skin pale and still, eyes closed and distant.

He hung on through the night. We milled around aimlessly all the next day. Anne took Mom home to rest.

“Let’s go out on the balcony,” Peter said when night fell.

The lights of the Valley stretched out into the distance. The crowd on the deck eventually circled inward.

“We have to let him go,” Pete said, shoulders hunched against a chill that wasn’t in the air. He lit another cigarette, shuddered a bit as he exhaled.

And I shuddered with him.

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Sitting in this garden, it’s like I’m standing on that balcony still. I don’t need to talk to him; I did that as the ball fell on New Year’s Eve. What I want is all those years back. All those times I stayed home, at twelve, to pitch to the garage door or watch *The Million Dollar Movie*, instead of going with him on his business stops, or wherever else he invited me to tag along. All those times I drove home from work, at thirty, passing his off-ramp without pulling off to say hello.

I never knew it would be like this now.

Or what it was like for him then.

I check my watch—two hours to Eddie’s baseball game. I rise, and pass through tall hedges into another outdoor gallery.

 Across the lawn before me, panes of two-way mirror glass stand head-high at random right angles, some to one another, others to panels of punched stainless steel or lines of slender evergreens. Vision through the maze is clear in some places but limited in others, confused by shadowy reflections bouncing around the labyrinth. As I stride onto the gravel border, my image appears in a distant panel, standing solo, surveying a landscape of smoky glass and mirrors. Closer on my right, mirror images of me appear in the intersection of two glass panels, hovering like conjoined twins.

I so often feel alone now, like both my Eddies have moved on. Like we watch each other from a distance. I walked for a time with each, but we never got to walk together: No sitting him on Dad’s knee, no three-generation threesomes to the ballpark, no drawing on the wisdom of a trusted veteran while getting through my parenting days.

 Another shot of Minnesota summer settles me. Two steps on, I spot the twins out of the corner of my eye—they’re turning, too, walking together, and back toward me. Another step on, my solo image walks out of the distant panel on the left . . . and into the foreground panel with the twins.

I stop, looking, the three of us together now in the same frame.

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