

Four days after my uncle was born, he was buried. A nurse said he died of cardiac arrest, a defect in his heart. The news of my uncle's death spread in the town and my grandparents quickly became known as the couple with the dead kid. Some said that he was born a monster, a freak, and that's why he died. When Grandma Rosie was discharged, she and my Grandpa Kenny buried my uncle in the middle of the night. Alone together, they lowered my uncle's small grave eight feet deep in their backyard. The private service was my grandparent's best kept secret for decade, an easy one to keep because the truth was—no one wanted to talk about a dead baby.

It took a decade Rosie and Kenny to feel confident enough to adopt my Dad, confident that a child could be in their care. It took decades more for Rosie say my uncle's name again, *Mason*. A slip during a Thanksgiving dinner, a subtle hint for what was to come.

For the past five years Rosie has confused me for Mason. It's a role I've accepted, accepted enough that in our family I don't answer to "Helena," I answer to "Mason." When I'm sweaty it's not because of the shitty nursing home A/C, it's because I got home from rough day at Little League practice. Today I tried fixing Rosie's old clock (brought over as a comfort item). She remarked that Kenny taught me well.

"If only your father was just on top of chores as you are!"

Grandpa Kenny died before I was born.

The nursing home staff praises that I'm brave for taking the role of my dead uncle, how *mature* I've been about the whole thing, which I guess makes me feel *okay*. Just okay enough. As uncomfortable embodying my dead uncle can feel, it pales in comparison to the real shit. The flashbacks, the paranoia, the confusion. Everything else that comes with Alzheimer's.

Grandma Rosie will wake up in the middle of the night, *screaming* that no matter what we say or do she absolutely will not leave her home. During those nights our family becomes the monsters that's plagued her nightmares—they're the only times I've seen my Dad cry. The only times I feel the burden of the role, when my grandmother's pain makes itself known in full force. I knew it was hard for her and Kenny to leave their town—to leave Mason behind.

In my whole life I never grasped how *brutal* that day was—the day Grandma Rosie left Gilman.

I was ten when Grandma Rosie started calling me "Mason." Where my parents were horrified at the implications, I was thrilled. My ten-year old self dreamt of being an actress so getting to play a role sounded fun enough, like good practice—even if it was the role of a dead infant uncle.

My older brother Jessie theorized Rosie confuses me with Mason because of my dark hair which, supposedly Mason was born with curly dark hair (distant Romanian relatives on Kenny's side). Jessie has blonde hair and Dad's hair turned gray a while ago.

"Ten is like, the perfect age to be androgynous," sixteen-year old Jessie told me then (probably a little stoned), "young enough before puberty kicks in, old enough to look how you want to." No more dresses, no more Mary Janes. Much to our Mom's horror, hair hasn't grown past my ears in five years.

Since I started seeing Rosie on my own I've been doing more research on Gilman, or maybe it's because I'm older and I'm more curious. I ask the right questions now. The first search result: *This Town In Colorado Was One Of The Most Dangerous Places In The Nation In The 1980s*. I cringed at the article then, *yikes*. Thirteen million tons of mined zinc, lead, and copper had been continuously poured into the town's groundwater for years. The evacuation was simply a formality.

My grandparents were given seventy-two hours to pack and leave. I learned from my Mom that Rosie insisted on waiting until the last minute, certain that this was some hoax, or if it wasn't a hoax she'd find a way to live in the town. She could boil the water, or stock up on bottled water if she was too tired to boil. She and Kenny didn't pack anything, I think the idea was that to show the EPA they could make it work, living there. When they were finally forced to leave the most my grandparents packed were enough to last them a couple weeks at a hotel. At the very least they believed they were coming back once they cleaned Gilman up.

Believing they'd be coming back if they had to leave, Kenny spent those seventy-two hours quietly stashing his and Rosie's most precious belongings in his "lock boxes," these vaults he installed behind the walls and cupboards for his guns (which before Mason's birth he had *a lot* of them). I have a feeling he would've been pissed to see the state Gilman fell in—the vandalism I mean. I spotted Kenny and Rosie's home on an urban ex blog marked with a spray painted penis, written beside it, *GILMAN WENT TO THE SUCKKK*.

I think he'd be proud to know that Rosie is still called "Mom," even if it's not from their own son. You can tell there's a certain light in her eyes that returns when she's addressed as a mother, rather than a grandmother or patient, a light that I know a man who loved Rosie as much as Kenny did would've been delighted to see. Being a mother was Rosie's biggest dream.

In the beginning she'd ask me things like—how her daffodils were doing? Did I have a good time with her father—Mason's grandfather—if I caught any good fish with him? We used to celebrate my birthday—Mason's birthday—every May the 14th. Since her disease progressed in the last year or so most of our conversations are in grunts, at times these barely audible mumbles. She'll say "Mason," I'll say "Mom?" She'll ask "when your father will be home?" And I answer "soon," and the conversation ends there.

Today when I enter Rosie's room, she gives me the most curious look. I don't know how to react so I blurt, "killing me with kindness today, Mom?"

Her heart monitor sounds slower than normal. Rosie blinks, her eyes reflecting her lamp light, and I know what it is. I can feel my shoulders slack. I meet her eyes—*really* meet her eyes. I'm more deliberate with this one, "Grandma?"

Rosie smiles with an expression that says, *it is you*. "Helena." When she holds her arms out, I don't hesitate to run and hug her. She struggles to form the words, "How have you been?"

"I've been well." Today is a good day, I recognize. Crying will spoil it. "You?"

"Oh," she says with her former sass, "well I've certainly been better." She looks around the room, angles at the hallway. "Is your father here?"

"No." I shake my head. "He's at work."

"I see." Rosie takes in my age, like an old friend who's been away for a while. "You're a working girl, I understand." Rosie holds her hand out and I take it, just sort of soothing it with my thumb. She grins so wide—a smile only the past Rosie could've mustered.

The last lucid moment was a little over a year. Jessie was there, then left to get my father. It only lasted a couple minutes, ended before my father could get to her room in time. That marked the end of my Dad's frequent visits, then my Mom's, and marked the beginning of Rosie and I's time alone. "Our sessions," a nurse has taken to calling them, like I'm Rosie's psychologist or something.

It's not like I'm completely alone. The nurses gives me tips on how to deal with this on my own. As I understand this stage of Alzheimer's, even a couple of lucid words is precious, because they only last a couple minutes.

Rosie puts her hand on top of my hand, patting it. The light shifts in her eyes again. My shoulders tense again.

She says, "Helena?" She says my name in a way that makes me wonder if I should call the nurse. "Yeah?"

It takes a long second for Rosie to articulate her thoughts. "Do a favor for me?"

My first instinct is to say yes, but I second guess it. "What would you like me to do?"

Rosie's gaze is piercing. Serious. "Take me back to Gilman."

"Take you back to Gilman?"

"There is something I have to do there, then we can come back here." Rosie leans in, confides quietly, "your uncle is still there. I have to let him know where we are."

I wish my Mom was here, or my Dad. Jessie. A nurse? *What do I say, what do I say?* "Grandma, I don't think I can do that." Big mistake.

Rosie frowns, her grip on my hand becomes tighter. "Your father would do it for me—I'll wear a respirator, we'll pack water. I can do it if you let me."

"I don't think it's possible right now. But I've been thinking, I could go back sometime and ge—"

"If you can't make that happen then why are you even here?" Rosie lets go of my hand, disgusted with the sight of me. "Well? Why are you here?"

I think about what my Mom would say. "Because I care about you."

"But *how?*"

I sit back in the chair, understanding whatever I say will just make it worse. Rosie mirrors me, her head being swallowed by the stiff hospital pillow. Her glare stays on me, determined to observe my every move. Studying.

"What do you want me to do? Where did you take me?" Her eyes cautiously scans the whole room. When Rosie looks back at me her glare softens to concern, then concern contorts to fear. *Guilt*. She whispers, "*Who* are you?"

The doctor and a team of nurses comes in shortly after to sedate Rosie, protocol.

Rosie doesn't speak or move for weeks after that.

The bitch about Alzheimer's is that it's fast in the better parts and slow in the worse parts. On the Internet's suggestion, a couple months ago Jessie and I listened to The Caretaker's *Everywhere At The End Of Time* so we could emphasize with Rosie better. We were speechless for days, Jessie said he'd probably listen to it again but he needed to think about it for a while. I still listen to the album, I think I've needed its message lately.

The doctor said Rosie doesn't have much time left, which means the worse is almost over. Our house is in that strange limbo period where we feel sad, but almost relieved at the same time. We want to talk about it, but it's the last thing we want to talk about. My Mom feels the best about it—knowing that her daughter will never have the burden of pretending to be her dead uncle and her husband can truly rest, like death is the best closure between him and his parents. Not like he's indicated otherwise.

I can hear Jessie going wild downstairs about the new *Game of Thrones* episodes. Rosie was diagnosed when he was in eighth grade, committed to the nursing home during his junior year in high

school, then has been dampening his college experience since. No one blames him for feeling a little relieved that it's going to end soon.

I realize Rosie's death would mark the end of my childhood. I realize at least I could start growing my hair out before high school starts.

My Dad knocks on my door in the middle of "C2 - Misplaced in Time."

"Hey toots."

I look up from my phone. "Hey."

He leans against the door frame. My Dad's got that face, the face that he makes when he isn't sure how to approach something, let alone as complicated as his teenage daughter. "We're having dinner. Your favorite, actually." *I'm not leaving without you*—that's the expression he's making.

"Sweet." I wonder if Mason would've liked cheese pizza. He would've grown up in the 80's—I'm pretty certain cheese pizza existed then. He's only ten years older than my Dad, he could've been waiting downstairs, sitting at our dinner table. Maybe helping my Mom out setting the table. Or I guess it means I should be helping my Mom set the table.

I stand up. "I'm starving."

I leave my phone hooked to its charger, the screen on.

Alzheimer's disease causation by copper toxicity and treatment with zinc

[...]The fact that zinc levels are elevated in the AD brain led to early speculation that zinc excess and zinc toxicity was a factor in AD.

[Bookmarks](#) > [Gilman](#) > [G. Rosie](#)

A Fatal Zinc Overdose in a Neonate

[...]The chelation therapy was unsuccessful, and the infant died. The coroner listed cardiac failure caused by zinc intoxication as the cause of death.

[Bookmarks](#) > [Gilman](#) > [U. Mason](#)

GILMAN, COLORADO: A Ghost Town in History and Photography

TODAY, FISH CAN ACTUALLY LIVE IN THE RIVER

[Bookmarks](#) > [Gilman](#) > [Gilman Trip?](#)

I'm pleased to report that the situation in Chernobyl is stable, the kitchen TV droned, *in terms of radiation, I'm told it's the equivalent of a chest x-ray...*

"Please don't let the leaks be true," Jessie groaned, stuffing a slice of pizza in his mouth. "The fact this episode's called 'The Bells' isn't comforting."

"I told you reading those forums would only make it worse," my Mom says to Jessie. She adds some toppings to her pizza slice. "You wouldn't have survived the 90's—zero Internet, zero spoilers, zero expectations."

What will happen to our boys? I take a bite out of the pizza. It tastes stale even though it's warm. It tastes old. *The pain is... imaginable. In three days to three weeks—they're dead.* I can feel my Dad eyeing me from across the table.

"It's not even about the theories though it's about the writing. The point of Jaime's character is that he grows apart from Cersei, why would he go back to King's Landing to 'go comfort Cersei,' then get killed by a bunch of rocks? Rocks that fall because Daenerys gets triggered by bells? Why bells?"

Vnimanaye, Vnimanaye. The TV sounds louder, somehow it does.

My Mom passes the ketchup to my Dad. "Maybe you're misinterpreting some stuff you read online. Or maybe it's made-up."

Vnimanaye, Vnimanaye. My throat feels awful.

"Then why is it called 'The Bells?'"

Vnimanaye, Vnimanaye. My Dad sits up straighter. "Helena?"

As soon as the table gets quiet, I start bawling. I've never cried like this before—Mason surely never had, or surely he never had the chance to. The whole table rushes to me. My Mom soothes my back, Jessie's going on about things being "okay," my Dad stands unsure what he could say or do. I look right at him, trying to regain some composure, just enough to tell him, "we have to go."

He knows what I mean.

"Her stuff is still there," I say through my teeth. *Vnimanaye, Vnimanaye,* there's no other way around it—"We have to go."

My Dad takes work off that Friday.

Two hours and four minutes—Golden, Idaho Springs, Silverthorne, then Vail—retracing the path Rosie and Kenny once took down the mountains. My Dad has Colorado NPR on, which is barely managing to play clearly (poor signals in the mountains). He didn't grow up in the mountains and he never had a desire to ever be in them, or at least this deep into them. I think I know more about Gilman and the surrounding area more than him.

Even so, when we drive through Vail my Dad drives a little slower. He might not know too much about the mountains but he knows the some that Rosie told him after her diagnosis, when the censors came down, then the some that my eager ten-year old self would've told him when researching Gilman and Mason. It takes a second for me to understand why we're going 20mph on a 40 road.

"There it is." His finger taps the window. *Vail Health Hospital.* The hospital where Mason was born, and the hospital where he died. He spent his entire life confined to Rosie's room, which makes me realize that he never got to see Gilman either.

"Dad?"

"Hm?"

"Do you know if Rosie or Kenny ever went back to Gilman?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well—for their stuff. They mean so much to Rosie, I can't imagine her just—not ever going back for them at any point in the last couple decades."

My Dad takes a second to think. "I think Kenny talked about it once in passing. There were some times he'd look around the house for something—sentimental items—then realized he left it back at their Gilman home."

"In the lock boxes?"

"In the lock boxes." My Dad smiles. "To be honest, I think Kenny and Rosie were so busy all the time with raising me, with work, that there was never any time to go back. By the time there was, it was health that held them back."

He taps the steering wheel, punching the accelerator after passing the hospital. About ten minutes after my Dad makes a U-turn on the highway and shoots straight for Gilman. Although visible, he parks in front of the gates. When we get out of the car he goes to the back for his tool box. A rusted NO TRESPASSING sign has been nailed hastily to the gates.

"What if we get caught?"

My Dad closes the trunk. "What if we get lost?" He walks over and ruffles my short hair. "We'll be alright, toots." He slips through the gate like it's nothing, like he belongs here.

In a way, I feel like I do too. I think it's like, the weight of the years of Internet articles and urban ex blogs that's getting to me, sprinkled in with Rosie's stories about her life with Kenny—then the life that didn't happen with Mason. In theory, a fourteen-year old Mason would've walked this same path thirty-some years ago with his friends, with Rosie and Kenny. The more my Dad and I walks through Gilman the more I can see how idyllic it would've been, to be able to walk everywhere, the intimacy of neighbors in an isolated mountain town. At the same time it's so isolated, I'm confused how several generations before Rosie and Ken would've wanted to stay.

Eventually the smell of the decay hits me. I put on the heavy mask my Dad gave me for the black mold. My Dad looks around the road, studies all of the abandoned homes. There's not a single home that hasn't been vandalized. The spray painted skull is creeping my Dad out.

"Which paint color did you say the penis was?"

I check the photo I saved on my phone. "It's green. It has 'GILMAN WENT TO THE SUCK' written on the side in the same color." When I show my Dad the photo he cringes.

"Great." He walks on, the map memorized in his head.

GILMAN WENT TO THE SUCKKK finds us eventually, Rosie and Kenny's house submerged underneath some overgrown trees. The windows have been broken through and some pipes have been splayed across the lawn. The door, gone.

I grip the handles of my backpack. "Are you sure anything's still in there?"

My Dad looks in the best he can from the doorway. He steps inside entrance, getting a feel for the floorboards. Not the most sturdy, but sturdy enough. "You stay behind me and you don't wander around without me." He puts his mask on and walks in.

Rosie and Kenny's house looks bigger on the inside—I think it's the lack of walls, it makes the space look more open. I can't imagine living here in the winter, but I think it'd get too hot in the summer. Or it's just the decay. The floorboards creak with every step, it'll be very easy to hear if someone else comes in. I keep my hand in my pocket, on my pepper spray, just in case. I'm half-expecting to step on a needle at any given point.

If Rosie and Kenny left anything outside of those lock boxes, they're gone.

"This is the bedroom." My Dad knocks on the walls. Rosie and Kenny's little-than-larger-than-a-twin-bed is still there, the mattress rotted out with mold. It reeks. One of my Dad's knocks ring hollow. "The moment of truth," he says. He grabs a loose edge of the wallpaper and rips it.

The smell of rust is so strong that I walk away. From the corner my eye lies a small, baby blue room. *Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born I set you apart*, someone spray painted. A vine of flowers webs out across the ceiling.

"Jackpot." My Dad is pinching his mask from the rust fumes—I don't know why it surprises me that there's *actual* lock boxes, nor do I know what I was really expecting.

But after years of hearing about these lock boxes from my Mom and Dad, there isn't actually that much inside? Most of it's polaroids, fancy silverware, even some gun magazines. It's not like, blocks of gold or anything. I guess it surprises me how much Rosie and Kenny had actually took with them during the evacuation.

In a way, I think my Dad's relieved to find out that there isn't that much to take down with us.

"This should be quick," he says, and starts stuffing some of the belongings in his duffle bag. "Make sure you take everything."

From the rightmost lock box I take the folded baby blue baby blanket in my hands—*M A S O N*, sewed in white thread, like those L.L. Bean bags. I've never seen "Mason" written anywhere outside of our home. Holding the blanket feels like a bad out of body experience. My Dad nudges my arm.

"Don't leave anything behind, okay?" He's almost done packing everything.

In the back of the lock box, folded in between the cracks—a yellowed note. On the outside Rosie's delicate cursive reads, *to my son*. It looks as if Kenny shoved it back there on purpose—positioned in a way that if a vandal did find the lock boxes they still wouldn't be able to find the note, as if to maintain its secrecy. A message only a mother's child was meant to find.

The note is so fragile, I tuck it in my windbreaker's chest pocket and zip it in.

My Dad and I hurries out of Rosie and Kenny's home before dark. We go through the backyard—my Dad said the grass would be infinitely safer than the sinking front porch. Through the trees you can see the Eagle River, flowing. *Today, fish can actually live in the river*.

In the corner of Rosie and Kenny's backyard, several white daffodils blooms, facing me. *Mason can you tell me how my daffodils are? Do they look alright? Do you like them?* I meet their eyes, and I understand why they're here.

Down the mountain my Dad doesn't turn NPR on. I think the mountains have made their point that radio's futile here. Around the U-turn a police patrol car passes our car.

"Do you think that he's going 'to the suckkk?'" My Dad kind of laughs (but not really, because he's tired).

"I don't know," I say. I just want to sleep. Or think. Or anything other than talk. I think my Dad knows it, which is why he keeps talking. It's like, a parental instinct to cheer your kid up.

My Dad pops some gum in his mouth. "Do you want to put your bag down, toots?"

I haven't put my bag down since getting in the car. All of Mason's—the real Mason's—stuff is in there. I don't know if it's the adrenaline from sneaking in and out of Gilman but I feel like if I set Mason's stuff on the floor something bad will happen to it. Not like I'm any safer. I want to ask my Dad if he's

okay, but I know that's a loaded question. I want to ask him what he thought Rosie wanted so badly in Gilman, but I know that's a loaded question too. I sink in the car seat, I feel like I can't win.

My next thought just kind of rolls off my tongue, "If you're a ghost, do you think you're limit to haunting just one place, or can you go anywhere in the world?"

"Hm... you know," my Dad glances at me, "I like to think that you have free reign if you're a ghost. The old-timey ghosts you see on ghost hunting shows just want to stay in one place—are kind of like... I don't know. Guarding their homes, or something?"

"So you think they're a thing?"

My Dad laughs. "Yes, I think they're a 'thing.'"

I can see Mason's baby blanket through the little slip in my backpack where I didn't zip it all the way. I try to remember the breathing exercises I saw on an Instagram post. I can't think about this alone.

"I don't know what I'm going to say to Rosie."

"What do you mean 'what you're going to say to Rosie?'"

"Ok: what is *Mason* going to say to Rosie."

"I dunno." My Dad shrugs. "Whatever... we decide."

"We?"

My Dad takes it in, nods. "It'd be your final scene, right? You gotta have more than one writer for that." He glances at me again, *we're going to do this together*, he's trying to say, and I understand, even if it is hard for me to express it right now. Maybe for life.

Our car passes by the Vail Health Hospital. This time we're on the lane closest to it, the parking lot just feet away from my window. It makes me nervous to imagine Rosie and Kenny—twenty-five, looking out, looking forward to the day they'd get to carry baby Mason back to their car, back home.

"For some source material," my Dad says, glancing at the Vail Health Hospital, "we can start with the letter. What does it say?"

I take the letter from my windbreaker and open it. The handwriting's so light that the pencil graphite has begun to fade. I reach up and turn a light on, minding the packet of tissues in the cup holder.

August 19th/1972

Mason,

In my childhood, your grandparents would take me down to the Eagle River. Fly Fishing was your grandfather's most dearest passion—it was important for him that his daughter should learn too. Then, after every fishing, your grandmother would teach me how to cook the fish, prepare them.

"Someday," she told me many times, "when we are old, and your children are born, we can eat them together at your dinner table."

In that sense, I feel as if I've been preparing a life with you for my entire life. Every meal I cook, every skill I learn, every story I'm told I remember and practice—all so one day they can be passed down to you.

When children go missing in our modern age, it has become customary for their parents will remain in their homes, remain connected to the world with their same phone numbers. To freeze their world the way it was when their children left them so that at any given point in time, their children can find their their way back to them.

Your father and I have decided to remain in our home, in Gilman, 'til death do us part—as our vows dictates. So at any given point in time you maybe able to find your ways back to us, from whatever life you found after the brief time we spent together in mine.

We will wait for you until the time comes. When it does, your father and I will have so many stories to tell you, so many things we want to teach you—even if you only come for a brief time, you can take a piece of us with you wherever you go.

In your time,
Mom

On Sunday Rosie had been moved to a quieter part of the facility. It's an open secret amongst the staff—it's the last room patients will ever be moved to.

Rosie laid in her bed face-up, staring at the ceiling above her—neutral. The nurse who led my family and I, takes my hand, whispers to be softly, “you got this.” My Dad takes my other hand and we walk together to Rosie's bedside.

I don't know if Rosie can feel it, but I take her hand in case she can.

“Mom?” No response. I look at my Dad who nods. “It's me, Mason.”

Rosie's heart monitor sounded steady. There were some finches chirping outside Rosie's window but the world was otherwise silent, like fate dictated the world to be on mute for a few precious minutes, even if those minutes are only occupied by a few words.

I pressed on, “What I wanted to let you know that I got to see the river the other day—the one you, Dad, and grandma and grandpa wanted to take me. There were fish there—I saw the biggest cod there, you wouldn't believe it. Dad told me it was because the land cleared out, so the wildlife's coming back. I think grandpa would've been very proud of me for spotting it.

“I'm sorry it took me so long to find you, but I'm glad I did. I'm so proud of you for taking Rus in, for watching over his family, for the life you've built so far away from home. So far from me. I'm so proud to be your son, Rosie, it makes me so happy.”

I wipe my eyes. My Dad rubs my back, *we're here for you*.

I take a deep breath. “I forgive you, Mom.”

We hear Rosie breathe, something like a sigh. Just the edge of her lips pulled up. Just barely.

Outside, a mama finch feeds worms to her growing babies, and perches on top of her nest where the sun hits her. Somehow I manage a smile too. I want to believe Mason is saying everything he'd want me to say, or will say.

“I'll see you soon,” I say, “we'll see each other soon.”

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