

## Walnut Liqueur

When a baby emerges into this world, the plates of her skull are not yet fused. They don't float around per se, but are moldable like the mind they're meant to protect. This moldability, an evolutionary trait passed down over many generations as mother and child both seemed to benefit from this ability, is made clear while emerging from the birth canal. The plates come together like a miniature Pangea and scrunch the skin so that the first thing one would see if they were so lucky as to obtain that intimate perspective is a little purple walnut being pushed out of the vagina. The rest of the baby follows, and while the doctor or midwife transfers the new life to the mother's chest, the head can come out terrifyingly cone-shaped before, like magic, the plates spread out, returning the skull to a familiar round shape.

In Hinduism, there is a God called Indra. He controls the rain and the storms, a powerful God in a land consumed by monsoons for a third of every year. Indra is often depicted riding a ghostly white elephant named Airavata. This elephant also guards Indra's palace, where an infinitely large net is located. At each node where the net threads come together, there is a jewel. This jewel reflects the infinite number of other jewels stationed at each node. Like two mirrors reflecting one another, the manifestations of this reflection are infinite. Imagine that each person is one of these jewels, reflecting and changing every jewel in the vast net of humanity. The stories we tell follow this same logic. Look at the story of Indra, for instance. Does he not resemble the Norse God Thor or the Greek God Zeus, both of whom wield the power of lightning and storm? Reflections upon reflections.

My Charlotte was purple until the gas that evolved from harsh chemicals to breathable air filled her lungs. Then she turned a shade of rose, lying on my wife's chest like a bouquet after a well-earned performance.

All I could do was stare.

At this little being. At this incredible woman. At the umbilical cord, an unnatural shade of white like the trunk of a mystical elephant or a cord connecting the two jewels in front of me to that infinite net all around me.

My grandfather gardened, maintaining both edible plants and aesthetic ones, favoring roses above all. Pruning and spoiling, entering contests when they were perfectly bloomed. I remember their bright colors, the velvet texture of their petals, and the smell dripping from each dozen that he would painstakingly tie with red ribbon before delivering to people he cared about. In his garage, sat an old boat named *Bell Boy*. We would take her out when the months got cold and throw our crab pots in the bay. We would talk about everything or enjoy long silences. But silence is never truly silent. There was the gulls' call and the never-ending, rhythmic lapping against the side of the boat. Tiny waves resembled every other tiny wave that followed.

It was hypnotic.

The trick to pulling a crab pot is to move quickly. The nets on the side only stay up when under tension. So as the boat approaches the brightly colored buoy, attached to the pot by a long cord, the puller reaches out with a gaff hook to retrieve this connection to another world. The buoy clangs into the boat like a starter pistol, and the race is on. Hand over hand, the shuttle is lifted towards the surface. If the puller were to slow down or, God forbid, stop completely, then the net would fall and the crabs would escape, returning to their homes at the bottom of the bay. This seems to be the function of all nets: to contain. A new kind of hypnosis sets in. The repetition of movement, the salty water of the bay sprinkling off the rope, their muscles burning, the cold air filling their lungs, and the inkling question of how much longer becomes more ever-present when he sees it beneath the surface: a circle containing creatures approaching the boat

like a mirage. The pot emerges from the surface with a bubble and a gush before being pulled, dripping and sodden, onto the deck of the boat.

Only around 15% of women's water breaks when labor starts, and yet this is a near-universal symbol of a baby on the way. The depictions of pregnancy in film and books, in all stories, necessitate drama. There is nothing more dramatic than water breaking. A great flood that precedes birth or rebirth. Tsunamis make the headlines, not the coastal erosion by the relentless onslaught of tiny waves. That's how it started with Vanessa. Waves of pain that occurred infrequently, then they grew in frequency and intensity, lapping against the boat. I remember where we were when she felt the first one.

For our honeymoon, we went to Bulgaria and were introduced by a rotund chef to a liqueur made from green walnuts. We swore we would make it when we got home, but these promises made abroad tend to fade into obscurity when returned to routine. This is why I was surprised when I came home nine months, three weeks, and five days into pregnancy, and there was a package on the counter, containing ten pounds of green walnuts held by a large mesh bag. This net contained one of the chapters of our love story. I held it up and admired the green oblong orbs speckled with brown. Vanessa was giddy. She made me drive to the liquor store right away, where we bought a half-gallon of Bulgarian vodka and received some very disapproving glances from the person at the counter. It was on the way home that the first contraction happened. I pulled over. She squeezed my hand, and I brought out the little app on my phone designed to track such things. When it was over, she told me to hurry up. We got home, and she refused to lie down. Instead, we stood at the sink and scrubbed each green walnut before placing it in a large glass jar with sugar and spice. Occasionally, we stopped so she could power through another contraction while I tracked it and supported her. After drowning the entire substance in

clear liquor, I placed the jar in the cupboard above the fridge, where it would gestate for six weeks, finally ready when my wife would be able to safely drink again. With the task complete, Vanessa was willing to go to our bedroom, where we waited for the contractions to become close enough to go to the hospital.

Pancreatic cancer doesn't have many symptoms that indicate its presence until it's too late. There are no earthquakes that foretell this tsunami, only the tide slowly receding to the horizon and returning with violent force. Grandpa's diagnosis came a month before we found out that my wife was pregnant. He and I looked up all of the things that were supposed to fight cancer: saunas, blueberries, green tea, quinoa, cold plunges, lentils, sweet potatoes, olive oil, and walnuts. The list was never-ending. We went to the store the weekend after his diagnosis and bought everything from the list we could find on the shelves. After stocking the fridge, we made a pot of green tea and went out to sit in the garden with some blueberries, a bowl of walnuts, and a nutcracker. It was early spring. Everything was growing, reaching for the sky, and consuming nutrients. Even the unnatural collection of cells inside Grandpa's pancreas was growing with the natural world. It's the only time Grandpa ever told me he was scared. He said it with the earnestness of a child being tucked in at night. I was scared, too, but I didn't want to show it. I told him he would beat it, and I didn't care if I was lying. I cracked a walnut and passed him its flesh, hoping that it would have the healing power of a sacrament.

I often wonder what I will pass down to Charlotte. What traits of mine will she pick up, what part of her genetic code will be transcribed from my own, and what interests will she inherit? I was excited to give her my grandfather. To watch him spoil her the way he spoiled me, her first dozen roses, crabbing in the bay. He was always moving, always working on some project, but as the cancer spread, he started to slow down, spending more time on the couch and

then in bed. As my wife grew, he shrank and shrank. His skin clung to the bones as if there had never been any fat or muscle. How quickly vitality leaves us, until all that is left is the frame devoid of all substance. By the last week, he stopped talking, but his eyes remained open and he stared at me. Whatever was pulling his pot had stopped, and now he was returning to his home in the depths of the unknown. He was drifting. He stared at me, and his hands would start fidgeting. He would clench and unclench his jaw as if there was something he wanted to tell me. Some secret he could see hovering on the border between life and death. It was a look not dissimilar to the way my daughter looked at me while lying on my chest those first few weeks.

And then he was gone, but she was here.

I can't pass down my grandfather, but I planted roses in the backyard and sprinkled the roots with his ashes. As Charlotte has gotten older, she likes to smell the flowers and helps me pick the best ones for bouquets that we deliver to mom, to friends, and to neighbors. *Bell Boy* is in my garage, and when the months get cold, we take her out, tossing pots into the bay. My daughter loves watching them sink into the depths while Vanessa and I take sips from a small flask containing walnut liqueur. When I return the pot to the boat, filled with red creatures, water has collected at each of the nodes where the threads of the net meet. Little drops that reflect and refract the world around them, changing from rubies to emeralds to diamonds, depending on what catches their gaze. She is fascinated by the crabs crawling over each other, smiling and shrieking when I hold them up for her to see. I love seeing the unmitigated joy on her face while we bob on the water, exploring this strange yet familiar world. And maybe, if I'm lucky, she can still catch a glimpse of his reflection whenever she looks at me.