**Tipperary**

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My mother makes me promise to pluck her chin hairs when she is old and can’t remember. “Swear you’ll do it!” She seizes my arm. It’s a matter of utmost importance. She notices the white hairs on my grandmother’s chin and sees herself there, sitting in a recliner with eyes closed, eyebrows knitted, mouth opening like a baby bird’s for the nurse’s spoon. My mother and I sit on the bed in my grandmother’s room and I agree with a shrug.

When I was fourteen, my grandmother started singing, “It’s a long way to Tipperary,” that old soldiers’ song from World War I. In any moment of silence, she would start up again; just the first few lines, never more. “It’s a long way to Tipperary, it’s a long way to go.” My brother and I would look at each other, unsure whether to laugh—seconds before we had been discussing his most recent book report at school. The song became a kind of soundtrack to my grandmother’s life, one with a single tune played maddeningly on repeat, padding the space behind her thoughts even when no one else could hear.

When I was eighteen, we once tried to help her into our house over our front steps. “Nana, pick up your foot!” we urged. “Pick up your foot!” “Eh, I’ll pick it up on the way out,” she replied, the phrase a reflex of her past fluency, the disdain a remnant of her old self. I remembered how she used to sneer at coiffed blondes on TV who were animatedly selling blenders; “Oh, go to hell,” she’d say, dismissing them with a wave of her hand.

*I’ll pick it up on the way out*. Even then she knew her foot could be forgotten, left on the stoop without her, picked up by her or anyone else. It was public property, after all, and the rest of her soon followed. Once, she couldn’t get out of the bathtub and lay there like a beached whale, unashamed and grinning, while firemen heaved at her slippery body. Once I walked into her room at the wrong moment and found her in her armchair with her nightgown hiked up, legs open, exposed, eyes closed to the world.

By then “Tipperary” was a distant memory, no longer rising from her throat unannounced. Her tongue had become dormant, lay in her mouth like a slug, recovering after years of chaos. It had forgotten Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, old favorite lines it used to recite for me from volumes with scratchy red covers. It had stopped trying to remember her three daughters’ names, had stopped trying to form any word at all.

I knew “Tipperary” was still there, though, hidden somewhere deep inside. Songs like that don’t just disappear, don’t simply fade away after so long. At one point it must have planted its seed inside her, taken root and waited. I imagine her as a chubby girl in D.C. first hearing the voice peel from her father’s radio, or from a jukebox in a diner. Or maybe she never remarked at the song; maybe it seeped into her ears slowly, imperceptibly staking its claim, biding its time. Either way, it crouched inside her for decades, through bars and boyfriends, years as an English teacher, three babies. When it finally spilled from her crinkled lips it was a time capsule from the 1930s, wrapped and perfectly preserved. A small raisin deep behind her eyes.

My mother always reminds me about her future chin hairs. We both try to forget her own stumbles—when she asked for “Nuremberg lettuce” instead of “iceberg,” when she told me to “save the third floor!” instead of “save three seats.” We try to forget even as we giggle, grasping each other’s hands and gasping for air. Then again, it’s only words that she trips over, expressions that come out hilariously jumbled. Sometimes names lodge in my own mouth, get lost in that place behind my throat, in the very base of my head, that dark cellar where words are packed and stored before use. Then again, sometimes my mother’s words never untangle.

When we visit my grandmother, I don’t go inside her room. I stand in the doorway and watch her. Eyes closed as always, blanket in her lap, compression socks squeezing her ankles. I wonder if the poetry she memorized still exists somewhere. I tried singing “Tipperary” to her once and thought I saw her eyeballs stir beneath her lids.

I tell my mother to try harder to remember. She never forgets the chin hairs.