

Methuselah's Last

"All the days of Methuselah were nine hundred sixty and nine years: and he died."

Genesis 5:27

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

2 Corinthians 12:9

Methuselah looks in the mirror and counts the new wrinkles on his face before adding to the chalkboard. At age forty five, they had begun to spread in different directions like tiny tree roots, cracking his flesh as if his tears needed new chasms to spread from eyeball to earlobe. The chalk number now reads two hundred and fifty two, which includes the three tiny crevices he noticed yesterday. These days, his features resemble an oak tree, with hollowed friendly eyes, and a bulbous knot for a nose. His youngest descendants like to pull on the skin above his sharp cheek bones as if they expect it to snap back into place and he wishes it were so. However, despite the way the decades have mercilessly ravaged his body, he still has his smile. It comes slower these days, like a sailboat raising its sail to the wind, the round corners slowly rise to form a curve that lights up the room like an old light bulb.

God promised Methuselah that he could live on this land until Noah came to cleanse it.

Today is Methuselah's birthday. He is nine hundred and sixty nine years old.

Each day he waits for the woman. Each night he prays for the flood.

After the morning count, he shuffles his way over to the kitchen and smiles at the satisfactory 'ding' the new bread machine makes, another present from a distant family member to help him to feel modern (despite his age). He loves the creation of each loaf so much that he plays 'master

chef', testing new ingredients and pronouncing them as either 'distasteful, 1 star' or 'the best thing since sliced bread; five stars', laughing at the pun. Today's is a brown loaf with parmesan and anchovies. Definitely a one star, but he eats it anyway. After all, the pantry is bare.

At five o'clock in the evening, Methuselah begins his daily routine. He irons his beige trousers and ties an old red handkerchief into a half Windsor. He tucks in his shirt behind a belt slung low around his hips. He looks himself up and down in the mirror and debates with himself.

"Braces, no braces, braces, no braces."

It has become the order of things. Every day he positions himself on the stoop outside the apartment building. He crooks up one leg like he's seen the younger ones do and leans the old curve of his spine against the stone wall. He scans the faces and waits for the redhead to pass. And every day she passes, dressed within a predictable set. A pantsuit or a skirt. Always a white blouse. A flower behind one ear; blue to compliment her auburn curls. Every day, he watches her pass, his eyes following her intently as if he might at any point have to recall in detail the intricate ruffles her collar forms in the peak hour breeze. She, in her twilight daze, would subconsciously scan the stoop and catalogue its contents. Stray cat, uncollected newspaper, an old man in a badly pressed suit. She has not yet seen the peaks in his smile, the adoration in his eyes.

But today, Methuselah is convinced it will all change, he will find his way back to his youthful exuberance. For today is Methuselah's birthday. So before he leaves the apartment, he looks at himself in the mirror and smiles, wipes the chalkboard clean to smudged curves of white and draws a new figure. Three; one for each of the dimples which accompany his smile and one for the fold in his forehead from a slyly raised eyebrow. He takes the service elevator to the ground level and sets himself up on the stoop. For the first time in over nine hundred years, he feels young again.

The after-work buzz begins like a honey flow, slow and viscous at first then building momentum until it traverses the sidewalk thick and steady, tinted amber in the evening sunlight. In the middle of it all is a blue flower which bobs in rhythm, tucked behind the ear of a beautiful girl named Grace. His heart feels like it is jumping in time with the rise and fall of the tiny flower and, as fate would have it, it falls. Methuselah watches it fall from her ear, suspended momentarily in the air like a heart floating on a whim. Poetry comes to his mind, each phrase more melodramatic than the last, until the flower finishes its descent, coming to a soft landing on the step right in front of him. Grace continued, bobbing and flowerless down the street with the crowd, until Methuselah was alone in the gap between peak hour trains. Methuselah weeps as the small blue flower begins to wilt in his calloused hand. He turns and walks towards the front door of the building, trying his best not to crush the tiny petals. When he reaches the door, he fumbles in his pocket and finds nothing but lint. In the rush and excitement he had left his keys upstairs on the kitchen table. Defeated, he sits back on the stair to wait for another resident.

At that very moment, there is a unique rhythm of footsteps on the path to his right and when he looks up he sees Grace, studying the concrete underneath her feet, looking for something. Behind him, Methuselah hears the service elevator come to a stop and a neighbour steps out, pacing towards the front door. In Methuselah's hand, the softness of petal. He is flustered, he must return the flower but if he misses the front door opening he may be stranded outside for hours. He does what men have been known to do in a fluster... act on the impulse and deal with logic later.

He steps up and inside the door just as the neighbour is leaving and it clicks shut as Grace reaches the stoop outside, bending and twirling like a shy ballerina in search of blue. Methuselah taps on the window to get attention and smiles at the way she arches her back to return upright. He holds the blue flower against the window and she skips up the step to look closely at it through the glass, then to his smiling face. She remembers his soft eyes, and indicates with her own towards

the door. He blushes because he had not realised that, now inside, he had complete control over entry.

Without question, Grace enters the building and follows him to the service elevator; she is guided by something greater than herself, feeling the warmth of Methuselah's palm as they rise to the fourth floor. As they sit together on the old couch, eating leftover bread from yesterday (a plain brown bread: three stars, "acceptable"), she strokes the edges of his knees and hooks her index finger into the crook of his elbow.

She kisses Methuselah's forehead, and the dimples in his smile. She kisses the tracks that lead from eyeball to earlobe; she kisses the folds of skin around his neck. She smiles genuinely at the hollow way he looks at her, as if she were a mere apparition and, as he leans his head into the slender curve of her neck, the water upstairs begins to flow; old Mr. Whittaker's bath left overflowing from a bad case of Alzheimer's and a death wish. Grace sees the walls glossing over in the periphery, the plaster traversed by smooth sheets of liquid while Methuselah's childhood home opens itself to receive the death of the flood, taking antique photo frames and the soft scent of dry skin. The carpet begins to go soggy around its edges as they kiss. And still they kiss.

The ceiling began to arc as it filled with water. Drip. Drip. Drip. Heavy droplets pool and fall to Methuselah's face, mixing with his tears.

"Don't be scared, Grace. This is how it's meant to be." Methuselah whispers in a low tone, the water cascading the curve of his earlobes.

All that passes her lips are two simple words: "I know."

He laughs a hollow laugh (which would sound like the mere clearing of his throat if it weren't for his subtle smile and the shaking of his old belly) and collapses into the soft wet furniture with a smile. It takes all of Grace's strength to let him pass first but she remains faithful. From the bathroom comes a bright light, and she follows it to a blackboard, wiped clean by the falling water. Twenty-five minutes has passed when she calls 911. The siren sound melts around her as she sits

cross legged on the floor.

They find her clutching the stem of a blue flower, drying her eyes, breathing deeply.