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ZINNIAS ON THE MOON

LOOK FOR A BIG YELLOW patch," Warren's eleven-year-old grandson, Trevor, instructs. "In the Ocean of Trankillity. That's where the astronauts are gonna land. Only it's not really an ocean."

"Tranquillity," Warren corrects, unable to recall a moment's peace in the last six months, since his daughter went to jail.

"Whatever," Trevor says.

Warren steps up to the telescope, touches the tube with one arthritiscrimped hand. He squints at the gray moon floating above the feathered leaves of the locust tree, then lowers his head to the eyepiece.

The moon shivers. Warren refuses to believe the zinnias are real. They are an illusion. A trick of light.

Warren steadies the white-painted tube of the reflector. The garagedirty mount consists of a wooden felt-lined cradle, metal support straps with wing nuts, steel piping, and the round base of a restaurant table, painted black. The counterweight is lead that has been poured into a tin can and then drilled out in the center. On a breezy night, the telescope trembles as much as Warren does when the air is cold.

"Can you see the zinnias?" Trevor asks, his voice taut, filled with excitement.

Warren makes a dubious face. "They aren't really flowers," he says, uncertain what they are.

"Mom says Grandma's keeping them alive," Trevor says. "If it wasn't for her, they'd die."

Margery calls Trevor once a week. The only phone call she's allowed. Warren and Trevor have been to visit her once, two days after the zinnias were first discovered by an amateur astronomer in Flagstaff, Arizona.

"Cool," Trevor had said, walking down the hall to the visitation room where the inmates sat behind glass partitions.

As far as Warren is concerned, the only thing cool about prison is the dank air and hard concrete floors, mopped clean with liquid bleach.

"Mom says Grandma's keeping them alive with her tears," Trevor continues. "That's how she waters them. The moon is dry. It doesn't rain up there like it does down here."

Warren turns from the eyepiece. He knows why Emma's crying. Because she can't come home. It's too far, and she's too tired to walk. Or she's become lost, and forgotten the way.

Warren rubs the side of his face. It is craggy as papier maché, laced with veins that give his skin a bluish cast. His hair is silver, the same color as the metal frames of his glasses.

"No one knows how they got there," Trevor says. "One idea is that the seeds hitched a ride on the first moon-walk. They been up there for years, waiting for the right conditions. Mom says Grandma just couldn't sit around and watch seeds go to waste."

The night air is chill. A bat flits overhead, wings scraping the sky. Warren gazes at the tiny blemish on the face of the moon. He blinks. The moon blurs, then hardens, becoming dull and scuffed as a tire-flattened dime.

"What I want to know is how come it took them so long to grow?" Trevor says. "Grandma's been dead forever."

Warren thinks of Emma. Impossible not to. Hands dusted white with flour. Skin soft and sweet as baking bread. One of many memories, suspended like leaves in two-year thick ice that numbs him to the bones.

Warren lays a heavy hand on the top of his grandson's head. He looks down at Trevor. His fingers smooth a cowlick, and for a moment it is Emma's hair, soft as cornsilk, that he feels.

Warren leads Trevor into the house, a red brick cottage Warren built with his own hands. The house sits at the top of a hill, on twenty acres of Pennsylvania woodland. The past seeps out of the soil, and lies in a thick fog across the land, as if covering it with a down quilt.

Warren goes into the living room while Trevor dishes out a bowl of Ben & Jerry's Double Chocolate Fudge Swirl ice cream. A piano stands next to the TV. White drapes veil the windows. They remind Warren of Emma's wedding gown. The carpet is a green and pink flower print laid down on hardwood. Ceramic figurines line the built-in shelves behind the couch. Miniature children cast in various poses and clothes.

Warren cannot see Trevor's mother in any of the figurines. Not in the Little Bo Peepish five-year-old, the overall-clad tomboy, or the plaid-skirted young woman with blonde curls. Margery refused to be molded -shaped in any way other than her own. Warren's daughter hasn't conformed to any vision fired and painted by Emma.

Warren sits on the sofa, pulls a photo album from underneath the coffee table and rests it on his lap.

"What's that?" Trevor asks, sitting down next to him.

"Your ole Grandma was something different," Warren begins. He opens the book. "Let's see what kind of music we can get this old album to play."

In one picture, Emma stands next to the wishing well Warren built for her, surrounded by marigolds. She is short, barely coming to the middle of Warren's chest. Her hair, normally tied back in a bun, has come undone. Her hands are caked with dirt. Her arms are sturdy. Her ankles thick. Her face is cherubic, with the fleshy, rose-colored cheeks of a sixth-grader. At age eighty, she looked only a few years older than Trevor when the stroke took her. Another picture shows her with an enormous dahlia cupped in her hands. The photo is old, sepia-edged. Small bumps pimple the dahlia's feather-long petals, as if grains of sand had been pressed into the back of the paper at one time.

"Ole Grandma was the best gardener in Upper Burrel," Warren says. "I remember one year she was growin' dahlias for a show at the county fair. There was quite a bit of prize money at stake. Now, dahlias come in more varieties than you can imagine. In all shapes and sizes. But the breed of dahlias your ole Grandma was growin' that year took after big dandelion puffs"

Emma had hustled out to the flower garden first thing every morning, carrying a dibble, hose, and pruning shears. She worked until sunset, weeding, watering, pruning, and fertilizing. The dahlias became kind of like children to her. A second family, of sorts.

"Alice shot up an inch last night," she would tell Warren. Or, "John's got the biggest leaves of them all," like the leaves were feet or ears.

She wouldn't let Warren near. "Scat!" she scolded him if he came too close.

"No harm in lookin'," Warren said.

"You keep your brown thumb to yourself. Don't you even lay eyes on them. Like as not, the minute you do they'll shrivel up and die.

"Then, playful, she sprayed him with water from the hose.

Pretty soon, Emma put up a fence made of slats and chicken wire.

"How come you're doin' that?" Warren hollered from a distance, afraid he'd get sprayed again, or worse. Emma kept her pruning shears sharp.

"Just makin' sure I keep the deer, rabbit, and other varmints out," Emma called back.

At night, Emma set a mirror along the top of the fence to reflect the light of the moon onto the dahlias.

"Moonlight coming off a mirror is magic," she explained.

"How so?" Warren said.

"Because it's touched by silver."

The morning of the fair, Emma rolled her red wheelbarrow out of the tool shed.

"What's that for?" Warren asked, real casual.

"Never you mind," Emma said. "You'll find out the same time as everyone else."

Emma tied a tarp over the bed of their white Ford pickup, so Warren couldn't look in the wheelbarrow. When they got to the fairgrounds she scampered out of the truck faster than a cat out of a grain sack.

"You take a short walk," she told Warren, "while I get this here wheelbarrow unloaded."

Warren meandered about the booths, his hands stuffed in his pockets, kicking up dust with his heels.

"You should see what that woman done," a man said, hurrying up to a bunch of people standing around one of the sow pens.

"It's a dahlia, sure enough," someone else said. "I thought it was a cabbage, at first."

A kind of ruckus poured through the crowd. People bumped into Warren, jostling him out of the way in their hurry to get to the flower show. Warren followed along. It was either that, or get trampled. Not that he wasn't burning with curiosity himself.

When Warren finally got to the flower booth he stopped dead in his tracks, despite the shoving of people behind him. Emma had grown the biggest dahlia he'd ever laid eyes on. It was yellow, with spiky, red-tipped petals, and as big as a full-grown pumpkin. Once word got out, folks started coming from miles around to see the moonflower, as people called it

Warren sighs. His chest and shoulders sag forward. "Your ole Grandma had a certain magic about her," he concludes. "She could make things come to life that no one else could. Including your ole Grandpa."

THE PHONE RINGS. Warren sets the photo album down, stands, and walks into the kitchen to answer the call.

"Dad?" Margery's voice is loud, combating the clamor of the Women's Federal Correctional Facility where she's served her time. Mail fraud. Repackaging regular powdered milk and selling it as breast milk. A neighbor phoned the police when he noticed forty boxes of Carnation Instant in the Tuesday morning trash pick up.

Warren sags wearily into a chair. He welcomes these calls and dreads them in the same breath. His daughter is reaching out. That's good. But the conversations inevitably leave him feeling helpless. Inadequate. He hasn't done as much as he could. He did too many of the wrong things. Warren doesn't want Trevor to walk down the same road as his morn. He wants Emma to help steer him in the right direction.

"How are you?" he asks.

"Glad that my time's almost up. Another week, and I'll be free to start my life over."

A new beginning. Warren has heard this resolution before, more times than he can recall. It means nothing.

"How's Trevor?" she asks. "Is he okay?"

"Fine."

"Can I talk to him?"

"He's asleep." The lie leaves a brackish taste in Warren's mouth...makes him no better than his daughter. But Warren has the boy's attention and doesn't want to lose it.

There is a quivering intake of breath on the other end of the line. A tremulous pause. Warren imagines Margery gathering in frayed pieces of herself, as if trying to piece together loose bits of yarn that have come unwoven over the years.

"I'm sorry you got stuck with him," Margery says. "But there was no one else to turn to."

"It was a blessing," Warren says.

"It won't happen again. Things'll be different this time," she says. "Better. I promise. I've learned my lesson. Paid my dues."

"You sound better," Warren says.

Some of the tension in the line eases. That's all she wanted to hear, Warren realizes. Some small word of encouragement.

"I don't know how long I'll need to stay with you. Until I get my feet again."

Warren's breath pinches. "We can talk about it when you get here," he says, noncommittal.

"They let us look at the zinnias tonight," she says. "With binoculars. I can't

believe there are really flowers growing on the moon. Without any water, or even air. It's a miracle."

Warren wonders if she's found religion.

"They look a lot like Moro's flowers," Margery says. "I heard that one of the big seed companies wants to buy the seeds the astronauts bring back. A company representative said that if the seeds can grow on the moon, they could soon produce the world's first waterless flower. They'd grow in the winter, too, since there's no place on earth as cold as it is on the moon. We'd have zinnias year round."

Incredible. Warren snorts in disgust.

There is a an awkward silence. Warren is uncertain how to fill it. He doesn't know what his daughter wants. Needs.

"Tell Trevor I love him," Margery finally says. "Give him a big hug for me in the morning, okay?"

"I will," Warren promises.

He holds the receiver in his hand for a moment, listening to the dead air on the other end. Perhaps if he leaves the phone off the hook long enough, Emma will come on the line and tell him whether the zinnias are real or not.

Instead, it is Margery's voice that haunts him. Why? If he throws open the door for her, what person will he be letting back into his life? Or, more importantly, Trevor's life? Try as he might, all Warren can see is her face behind wire reinforced glass, as if the mesh gridding her off from the rest of the world is an extension of some inner prison she has yet to free herself from.

When Warren walks back into the living room, Trevor is watching TV. The news. An anchorman sits in a newsroom. Next to him, a television monitor shows a static-filled view from a NASA lunar module. The LM has just landed in the Sea of Tranquillity, not far from where Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin first walked on the moon.

A hand-held vidcam relays the view through the LM's window. The image is jerky. When it steadies, Warren can see a sprinkling of flowers in the distance.

"They didn't want to land too close," Trevor explains. "They were afraid they might burn the flowers."

The zinnias stand in stark contrast to the gray landscape, amber daubs of paint on dull primer.

"They're getting ready to go outside," Trevor announces, scooting forward on the sofa.

Soon, the image shifts to an astronaut climbing slowly down a ladder. It takes a while in the low gravity and cumbersome suit. Like moving under water, Warren thinks. The scene bounces, a kind of slow-motion bobbing that brings them closer to the zinnias.

At the edge of the field, the astronaut bends down with the vidcam.

Up close the lettuce-head blossoms seem incredibly vibrant. Everything about them is vivid, larger than life. The flowers are taller than normal. They easily come to the astronaut's chest. She steps close, reaches out one gloved hand to touch a flower. The flower trembles, then breaks. A petal tinkles to the ground, like crystal from a chandelier.

Or ceramic, brittle as old bones.

A few meters distant, not quite hidden by flowers, the camera pans to reveal a footprint. Ridged. A zinnia grows out of the heel.

"There's that one small step, Neil," the anchorman quips.

After a while the station cuts to a panel of scientists to discuss what they have just seen. They argue about the possibility of genetic mutation, the result of constant exposure to hard radiation. The unusual height could be due to the moon's lower gravity. They discuss the possibility of an extraterrestrial seed, carried to the moon on stellar winds. The seeds made it to the surface of the moon because there is no atmosphere to burn them up. That's why no seeds have shown up on Earth.

Another possibility is alien gardeners. Perhaps the flowers are a sign. An attempt at communication.

Everyone on the panel agrees that more will be known once the astronauts bring home samples for analysis.

Trevor watches a while longer then changes station. A horticulturist stands inside a greenhouse, surrounded by rows of flowers in plastic trays.

"Zinnias are probably the hardiest member of the dahlia family," the horticulturist tells the interviewer. "They can tolerate large temperature extremes. They're good in dry climates and don't require a lot of maintenance. If I were going to plant a flower on the moon, my first choice would be a zinnia."

"Boring," Trevor says. He switches off the TV.

Warren reaches back and pulls a fiddle from the book shelf behind the couch. There is an age-curved black & white photo tucked behind the strings. "Did I ever tell you about the time your Grandma turned vinegar into apple juice?"

Trevor frowns, licks a dribble of ice cream from the front of his sweat shirt.

In the picture, Emma is gripping the wooden handle of what looks like a big washtub. She wears an apron, stained gray down the front. Next to her, big apples bob in a steel tub filled with water.

"Your ole Grandma and me were pressin' cider for your great aunt Thelma's wedding," Warren says. "It was the summer of nineteen-thirty, right in the middle of the Depression. All folks were havin' a hard time gettin' by. Not just workers but us farmer types, too. We couldn't afford to buy the sulfur and other fertilizers to make apples grow proper. Because of that we had a bad crop that year. Sour enough to pucker your bottom.

"It was the night before the wedding, and we were in a pickle. We couldn't take sour-tasting cider to a wedding, and there was no sugar at all in the house. That's when your ole Grandma got the idea to sweeten it up a mite by playing the fiddle."

She could play the fiddle like no one else. Real sugary, like. When she played, the music sounded like honey dripping off the strings. Warren could almost taste the notes in the air.

"You're crazy," Warren said, when he heard what she planned to do.

"You could use a little craziness," Emma retorted. "Craziness is what makes miracles happen." She had a stubborn streak in her a mile wide.

"More like bullheadedness," Warren said.

"Well, folks always say the Lord works in mysterious ways."

Emma carried a chair out to the yard, set it down next to the jars of apple juice, and began to play. Warren wanted to go to sleep, but couldn't. The music kept him awake like an itch.

"My eyelids are dancin' on their own!" Warren yelled out the bedroom window.

"Good for them," Emma yelled back, not missing a beat.

"You'll keep everyone in these parts awake," Warren shouted a few minutes later.

"You're the one makin' all the noise," Emma shouted back.

Warren lay in bed for another couple of songs. After that he got up, pulled on his clothes, and went to grab up his banjo. If he wasn't going to get a wink of sleep, he figured he might as well enjoy it.

The two of them sat out in the yard all night. They played fast, lively songs like "Shady Grove," "Old Joe Clark," and "Whiskey Before Breakfast." They played sweet tunes, too. "Over the Waterfall," "Midnight on the Waters," and "St. Anne's Reel."

By the time they were done it was morning, and both of them were smiling. Emma set her fiddle down and poured each of them a cup of apple juice. Warren took a sip, expecting vinegar, but it was the sweetest cider he ever had

Warren moistens his lips. After fifty years he can still taste the apples. His fingers scrape along the strings, ghosting the notes. He checks the cuckoo clock on the wall. After eleven.

Warren sighs, pats Trevor's leg. "What say you and me pay your ole Grandma a visit? I have a feelin' she might be gettin' ready to do some gardening."

Trevor blinks in surprise. It's past his bedtime. "How do you know?"

"Your Grandma and me was married for sixty-two years. After that long, you kinda get a sense for what another person's got on their mind." Warren pushes himself out of the sofa. "I figure the lake is as good a place as any to watch her."

"Cool." Gone is the uncertainty.

Trevor hurries into the kitchen. Warren pulls Trevor's San Francisco Giant jacket from a pegby the door and hands it to him. He tugs on his own jacket. Trevor opens the kitchen door. Chill air slithers in from the back porch, laden with the damp scent of flowers from Emma's wishing well. A cricket chirps once, then falls silent.

The moon is high, wrapped in a thin gauze of clouds that softens its bleak countenance. Warren follows Trevor down the cement steps to the gravel driveway. Tiny stones skitter and crunch under Warren's feet as he makes his way down the steep grade. Trevor scampers ahead.

The driveway levels out at the road. They walk down the road, past hunched, introspective houses glowing from within, lit by the bluish flicker of late-night TV. All eyes are tuned to the moon.

A peacock wails in a nearby yard. The eerie, forlorn sound tickles the nape of Warren's neck.

Beside him, Trevor kicks a rock. The rock skitters across the road. Trevor's hands are stuffed in his pockets, his head is down. He gnaws one side of his lower lip.

"What I'm wondering," Trevor says, "is what my morn was like before I was born?"

The question catches Warren by surprise. His mouth works, his jaw muscles bunching and unbunching. He doesn't know what to say. It isn't something he's thought a lot about. He thinks back to Margery's childhood. It's a blank. Complete and total. Nothing comes to mind. Sure, she went to school. Rode a bicycle. Had birthday parties. That's all he can remember. Things every kid does. But nothing out of the ordinary. What she was has been obliterated by what

she's become.

"Well..." Warren stammers, uncertain what to say. An image rises, like a fish surfacing from murky depths. Margery, nine years old, standing on the back porch. It's a dream image, blurred around the edges. Hard to know if it really happened, or if it's wish fulfillment.

"Your mom was always good with small animals," Warren says. "I recollect one summer a wayward hummingbird kind of adopted her. It was dipping into the hyacinth we had out back, when it up and took a liking to your morn. She was a couple years younger than you are now, and sweet as any flower. I guess that poor hummingbird got a mite confused. Before your morn knew it, that bird was followin' her wherever she went. Inside, outside. It didn't make any difference. Of course the hummingbird didn't know that flowers don't walk. It was just following its nose.

"Well, that hummer became like a pet to her. At night, it curled up in her hair and made a nest of sorts. Your mom had soft hair, thick enough to keep a tiny bird warm on a chill night. During the day, when it got to be hot, the hummingbird kept your mom cool by fanning her with its wings. A hummer can beat its wings a hundred times a second;and hover in one place for a spell.

"It wasn't long before folks started calling your more Honeysuckle, Magnolia, and Jasmine. This was right before the start of the Sixties. I spose you could argue that your morn was one of the very first flower children."

"Like Grandma," Trevor says.

"I reckon so," Warren admits. Not as much as he would have liked. But perhaps he's been asking too much.

The gate to the parking lot is closed. They walk around it, past empty parking spaces to one of the soccer fields. The grass is damp. Barbecue pits rise like massive headstones in a graveyard. Just down the hill, waves lap rhythmically to the tireless croaking of frogs.

Warren stops at the crest of the hill. "This looks like a good spot."

He lies down on the grass, folding his arms across his chest. Tufts of lumpy grass press into his shoulder blades and the back of his head. A mosquito whines in one ear. Cattails swish in the night breeze exhaled by the sky.

The sky is huge -- so close it seems he can reach out and touch it. The stars are a blanket of light. Warren can feel the universe embracing the world, pulling it close with infinite arms.

"That constellation is called Perseus," Warren says, pointing.

Trevor's gaze follows Warren's outstretched arm. A flash of red light streaks between the stars.

"One of God's fireflies," Warren says, quoting Emma. "They come only once a year. You have to watch close, else you'll miss 'em. If you do see one, you have to hold onto it as long as you can, 'cause there's no tellin' when another one'll happen by."

"I bet that's how the zinnias made it onto the moon," Trevor speculates. "Do you think that was Grandma's footprint?"

Warren doesn't know what to think. He wants to be young again like Trevor, open to every possibility, no matter how far-fetched. He wants Margery's faith, however blind, that things will get better. He wants the present to be as alive as the past.

"Did Grandma ever wear boots?" Trevor persists. "Maybe it shows in one of the pictures."

More than anything, though, Warren wants to believe that Emma is out there somewhere, watching over him, tending him the way she did her garden. He wants to believe that it is still possible to grow; that life takes root in the most desolate places, regardless of how dry, cold, or barren.

He wants to believe in life after death. Not just for the dead, but for the living they leave behind.

The moon silvers the birch trees lining the edge of the lake. It is brighter than ever. A wisp of cloud, white with hairlines of gray, arches above the moon, like one of Emma's inquisitive eyebrows.

Caught in her gaze, Warren feels he can reach out and touch everything. The child that he was. The old man that he is.

"I wonder if these are the same seeds that're on the moon?" Trevor asks. He's holding up a photograph, looking at it in the moonlight -- not the front but the back, where tiny seeds freckle the paper, held in place with transparent tape.

Warren reaches up, touches the seeds with the tip of his finger. Even though he can't see the front of the photograph, he knows it's the picture of Emma holding her prize-winning dahlia. He never thought to check the back of it.

"I bet they are," Trevor says. "A few of them could have made it to the Earth. They might not have burned up."

"Warren shakes his head. Crazy.

Emma's lacy handwriting filigrees the upper right hand corner of the photo. "For Margy and Trevor," he reads. "A small gift from Heaven. May it last a lifetime. Love always, Emma." The date is three days before her death, as if she had known what lay ahead.

"Can we plant them?" Trevor says.

Warren swallows. He fumbles for Trevor's hand, finds it, squeezes hard, and finds his voice. Husky. "I reckon we ought to find out what your ole Grandma had in mind."

"Cool!" Trevor says, his eyes bright. "When?"

"As soon as your more gets here."

"But that's a whole week!" Trevor complains. "Can't we plant them in the morning?"

"They won't grow without both of you watchin' over `em," Warren says after a short pause. "That's why your ole Grandma put down both your names. You got to have the right conditions."

"Like on the moon," Trevor says.

Warren nods. He stares up at the moon, to the Sea of Tranquillity, where the zinnias are slowly spreading, banishing the gray.

He notes that this story was inspired by his grandfather, who recently passed away ... but not without imparting some lessons on