

Nothing Left but Things

By Christian Sager

I assumed Nanny knew better than I did about when her walker was necessary. It was tucked in the corner when she crossed the kitchen to spit that awful, viscous fluid out into the sink. While coughing it up in short feeble bursts, she crumpled suddenly, and took the whole bowl with her. Underweight, her fall was like a newspaper blown in the wind.

As the emergency technicians drove away with my ninety-five-year-old Nanny, I bent down in her kitchen, sopping up soup from the linoleum floor with a hand towel. Gray cream clotted together, laced with strings of bloody mucus. It was store bought soup, the mushrooms chopped approximately the same size, but scattered disproportionately.

I remember visiting Nanny one Christmas as a kid, spending most of the time sick in a bed in her guest room. She brought me a steaming bowl of homemade mushroom soup every afternoon, served on a silver tray she usually reserved for the holidays. Now here I was, over twenty years later, feeding her this cheap stuff out of a can.

Everything's got a pattern at Nanny's house, from the damask wallpaper to her vintage, dimpled kitchen floor. Oriental rugs accompany every room, even those already lined with wall-to-wall carpets. I assume this was a symbol of luxury in the late fifties, when her house was built and furnished. Instead of plain, flat or textured surfaces, Nanny chose repetitive, illustrated designs with blooming petals, sharp leaves and ornamental symbols resembling daggers. Even the hand towel I cleaned the soup with was decorative, with sewn toadstools bordering each folded edge.

Looking up from the mess on the floor, I noticed Ricky breathing with difficulty through his nose. Whenever my son gets congested he snuffles like a broken vacuum. But he's only five and requires a strict adherence to routine. So the incident with Nanny at the sink, the frantic 911 phone call, the

nerve-wracking thirty minute wait for the ambulance, and the commotion as the techs loaded her out on a stretcher?

All of this proved too much for him.

We couldn't go with the ambulance and my uncle was at work with the only vehicle for the house. By the time they were wheeling Nanny out through the garage, Ricky was in a full meltdown, screaming and crying. His hysterics must have dredged stuff up from his lungs into his sinuses, resulting in a wet blockage to his breathing.

He'd been ill since we arrived, but I thought the excess gunk had receded back to his lungs earlier that afternoon. All that remained was a raspy vocal effect until his own panic kicked the sticky residue back up. He had that in common with Nanny now, both of them choking on secretions, clogging their pipes instead of filtering and lubricating.

"Come on buddy," I said, standing up with the soggy towel in hand, "Let's flush you out."

Leaving Nanny's spilled soup for later, I guided Ricky through the adjoining dining room to the other side of the house. A single-level ranch built in the fifties, most of its bathroom plumbing was installed on the east side.

Passing through the hall connecting the bedrooms together, Ricky stopped me, pointing at the exterior wall between our guest room and Nanny's.

"What's that Momma?" he asked.

He'd identified a mark, roughly halfway up the wall. It was like a series of cigarette burns scorched into a two-inch "Y." Looking closer, the scar didn't seem inflicted by heat. It appeared to be a fungus, growing in dime-sized bursts. Each small, decayed crater reminded me of a thumbprint, except they were perfectly circular, growing outward in fading distress. The marks ate into the wallpaper underneath, a paisley pattern resembling what you might see under a microscope.

"Oh, that's just mold baby," I told Ricky. "Looks like Nanny has some water getting in from somewhere."

"What's mold?" he responded, scrunching his face up to indicate he found the mark repulsive.

"You know, that's a good question," I told him, trying to remember any facts retained from high school science. "Mold is kind of like... tiny plants. But instead of growing in the ground, they grow on something rotting, like old wallpaper."

He looked back quizzically, clearly struggling to digest the information.

"Mold's a fungus... like mushrooms," I said, "You know mushrooms, right buddy? Like Nanny's soup?"

He nodded. Then I realized I was connecting the dots for him to something potentially toxic.

"Except you can't eat it," I said, leading him away toward the bathroom, "Because it can make you sick. In fact, we shouldn't even be *near* it. Sometimes just breathing it in makes you sick."

"Well I'm already sick," he said with confidence, as if one illness precluded the other. Rather than fight it, I decided to play along.

"That's true. But let's leave it alone just the same."

I decided to neti myself first, to remind him there was nothing to fear. I sat him on the counter next to the sink basin and proceeded to pour water into my right nostril. Tilting my head to the left, I felt cool liquid trickle through the cavities behind my cheeks before proceeding out my other nostril. While it wasn't unpleasant, I focused my other senses

beyond the unusual feeling in my sinuses, to distract myself and appear calm for my son.

I felt the bathroom carpet's wefts, digging stiffly into my bare toes. Then I heard the electric heater clicking behind the floorboards. A vintage plastic knob mounted on the adjacent wall ticked down from sixty to zero, tracking the exhaust fan's timing in the throne room. I don't remember turning it on, but as the nasal irrigation dislodged something behind the corner of my right eye, the electric sound turned into a reverberating trill. There was a piercing, high tone, almost like amplified feedback, before the vibration dropped octaves. Deep within my ear drum I heard singing. Its melody was like a voice underwater, each note traveling from one bubble to another through sonic osmosis. This song faded as the last of the saline exited, dripping out slowly.

Wheezing replaced it. I realized it was coming from the inflamed lungs of my son. He'd waited patiently on the counter, but he's sensitive to dust particles. I wouldn't be surprised if that antiquated heating system released them into the air.

Without finishing the neti process with my other nostril, I helped Ricky tilt over the basin after I refilled the pot. His

was a much messier transaction than mine. Half the fluid escaped down the skin between his nose and lips, trickling off his chin. The rest made it inside, but only exited in discharged spurts, erupting in gobs of greenish-yellow infection that hung in threads from his face until I removed them with tissues.

When finished, Ricky blinked and squinted several times until he felt clear again, then asked, "Does it go in my brain Momma?"

"Of course not buddy," I said, though I honestly wasn't sure, "It just rinses all the nose gunk out. To make you feel better."

He smiled and ran off toward the living room. Even sick, Ricky had more glee than I ever did at his age. It's probably his father's genetics. I remember being young here as mostly allergies and winter colds keeping me laid up in bed. I followed him slowly, pausing to look over my shoulder at that blemish on the wallpaper. It reminded me of smoke, or an infection. I knew the black mold could spread, reaching out gradually until it expanded across the ceiling from room-to-room, leaving airborne spores in its wake.

I thought I felt the carpet shift, with a creak of the floorboards behind me. Instinctively, I expected to feel my grandmother's small hands on my back, reassuring me the boy would be alright. I glanced over my shoulder, but of course she wasn't there. I realized this was the first time I'd ever been in our family home without her comforting presence. I looked up to her bedroom door, expecting her to be standing there, smiling.

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Later, we were back at the kitchen table, trying to make it through a small dinner. I heard the door from the garage to the back half of the house slam shut. "Brace for impact," I remember my brother Jesse saying when we were kids whenever Uncle John entered a room. Now, like then, we could hear his heavy feet fall as he stormed across the house.

"You didn't think to call me at work?" he began, removing his leather driving gloves. "I had to hear about it from Baystate Medical?"

"The EMTs took your number from Nanny," I replied, "I thought a call would annoy you."

He slapped the gloves on the dining table between Ricky and I, staring hard down at me. We sat. He continued to stand.

"I know how busy you are this time of year," I said, staring back, trying not to show an inflection of emotion in my voice for Ricky's sake.

"Yeah, well this definitely puts a crinkle in my routine," he responded, still not sitting.

Ever since my grandfather died, John lived in the house with Nanny. He was supposedly taking care of her, but they made odd roommates. She kept to the residential side of the house, while he turned Poppie's old office space into living quarters. The only room they shared was that kitchen.

"This isn't how I want to remember her," he said, "Not in some hospital."

"What did they say?" I asked him.

"Oh, she's 'doing fine' but they want to keep her overnight for observation. They think it's something like pneumonia, filling her lungs with fluid."

"Sounds like Ricky's cold."

"Well at her age, that could kill her," he snapped back, "She shouldn't have been around him in the first place."

John's attention shifted to Ricky, but instead of the patented cold, hard stare, he gave him side eye, like the boy didn't merit the full attention of his animosity. Ricky's lower lip trembled. He probably only understood half of our discussion, but could tell John's pulsating resentment was directed his way.

"Don't take it out on him," I stated, raising my voice a notch, "If you're looking to be mad at someone, blame me."

"Oh I do. Believe me."

"We were having soup. That's all John. Mushroom soup. She was coughing it into the sink when she fell."

"And where was her walker?" he asked, nodding toward the frame still leaning against the corner wall.

"I... it's not like I told her *not* to use it," I said, betraying my shame with a crack to my voice, "You know how she gets, looking for little moments of independence."

Ricky was crying silently now. The waterworks would return his congestion and we'd be back to the bathroom to clean him up. It reminded me of my own tears during family fights. They were just like this, at the same kitchen table, usually between John and my mother.

As if he could hear my memory, John said, "This is like your mother all over again. She didn't mean to upset 'Nanny's' routine either. She just showed up. No husband, no job, no car. Toddlers strapped to her back."

"I have a husband," I spat back, "Brian's just living on the job site while we're saving."

Right then a thought welled up in me, like tears at the corner of my mind. I imagined slicing a wound into the tip of my left thumb, with a steak knife. Every tiny activity would irritate it there, reminding me of this moment and how far away from it I was in time. When the skin grew back, eventually scarred and healed, I would know that I was emotionally ready to confront John again because the scars inside would be gone too.

"While you're saving money, *our* routine is disrupted," John responded, "Me and Nanny. She's too nice to say anything and just accepts the turmoil you and your mother bring. Not me."

"You know John, you spend so much time blaming others," I said, "But you're the one who treats her like shit."

He recoiled, quickly shifting to an incredulous expression.

"Do you ever listen to yourself?" I asked, "The way you talk to her like she's not even there? You want to blame my

son's cold? How about the black mold you've got growing in the hallway? Maybe that's what put her in the hospital."

Ricky gasped when I cursed, momentarily forgetting his distressed crying. But John didn't budge. If anything his face pulled tighter into skepticism. Just as quickly it slackened, as if a sudden realization let all the air out of his anger.

"Mold?" he asked, tone lower, "Wait, have you been out behind the house?"

"No."

"I don't mean the backyard Olive. Did you go past the treeline? To Piper Farm?"

"I don't even know what that is. There's a farm back there? Like where we used to pick blackberries?"

But he was already walking away from us, through the dining room into the connecting hallway, scanning the walls. He ground to a halt when he reached the "Y" mark Ricky had discovered earlier.

I didn't want to take the bait and immediately follow him. Somehow it felt like yielding to his authority. So I took a clean cloth napkin and wiped away Ricky's tears first. Only

after reassuring him that the fight was over, did I slowly venture to that other side of the house.

John was staring at the wall, a putty knife now in hand, probably from a nearby closet.

"This wallpaper's been untouched for over fifty years," he said as I approached, "I don't want to forget an inch of it."

"Maybe you should wait," I told him, "Hire a professional or something."

"It needs to be done now," he responded, "Who knows how long that's been here."

With that, John stabbed the putty knife into the wall, digging under its paper covering, into the wood underneath. It wasn't drywall the mold had grown over, but an actual beam that held the house together. He gouged at it, over and over, crudely carving an island out around the patch.

It looked like he was going to pry out the wedge he'd hacked away with his bare hands, so I ran to the kitchen for a leftover plastic grocery bag. I returned just in time, as he prodded the knife into the cranny he'd created, wiggling it horizontally until I heard the sound of wood ripping and the wedge popped out. I caught it with the bag, one hand under the

other like a baseball mitt, turning my face into my sleeve to avoid any dislodged spores.

John quietly walked away from the pit he'd chiseled into the wall, back to his side of the house. The gaping cavity showed yellow lumber underneath, paisley wallpaper torn around the edges, evidence of unwelcome change.

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My mother's idea of a healthy, long-distance phone conversation was speculating which pieces of jewelry Nanny would leave her in the will. This struck me as insensitive, but when I mentioned it to my husband Brian he pointed out such behavior couldn't have been bred in isolation. Despite how much I loved Nanny, he was right. My mother and my uncle weren't born mean. But whether nature or nurture, they got it from somewhere. I don't remember my grandfather well enough to judge; he died when I was nine. But even if he was the culprit, Nanny let her children grow into nasty pieces of work.

I was thinking about this while taking Ricky for a walk behind the house. Maybe John was like my mother, counting out his inheritance before Nanny passed. Never once before had I

heard about this farm adjacent to her property. Was he bidding his time, just to sell some shrouded plot of land?

The New England winter was cold, but it hadn't really snowed yet. A light dusting covered an acre of dead grass before birch, pine and spruce rose into a small forest. Despite his illness, Ricky was eager to get out. John refused to allow him to visit Nanny in the hospital while ill and without a car, the closest destination on foot was the Greenwich town common over two miles away. So after John left for the day, we bundled up, setting out to explore something closer.

Ricky's congestion seemed to recede in the dry, crisp, outdoor air. But I didn't want to spend all morning away from the comfort of Nanny's home; just enough to shake the cobwebs and see what John was so agitated about.

We walked parallel to the trees, where Nanny used to take my brothers and I to pick blackberries in the summers. They grew wild along this edge of the property, so we'd take small wicker baskets out there on quiet afternoons. The berry shrubs blended in low with other bushes native to the area and I distinctly remember catching my palms on their thorns. Perhaps it was this

bramble that prevented us from ever exploring further into those woods.

Some 200 meters east of the house though, the border opened. To call it a path would be an exaggeration, as it was grown over with tall weeds, covered in years worth of fallen branches and leaves. But there was enough of a gap in the trees that I noticed the rubble of a low stone wall, blending into the forest with a moss sheath.

We followed the wall's stone remnants, Ricky skipping atop its rock slabs along his way. It couldn't have been much past nine o'clock when we entered, the morning light typically New England overcast. The trees ahead must have been felled long ago, as this passage stretched to the horizon, bordered by swaths of forest on either side. I looked for tire tracks, kicking rotting leaves away from the frozen ground, but found no trace that an industrial force ever came through there.

As we progressed further, roots from the adjacent trees perforated the earth, rising out, and diving back into its dirt. I warned Ricky to be careful, imagining him tripping over the vine-like protrusions. He simply made another game, this time dodging the roots as if they were a nest of snakes.

While he imagined adventure, I noticed an unexpected, moist, salty scent. The winter air in western Massachusetts gets so dry my knuckles crack and bleed at least twice a week. So I'm used to the outdoor pinching sensation in the back of my sinuses as nasal mucus dries into crust. But now the air hung sticky around us, like invisible mist. I tasted something bitter – like the metallic tang of blood – dripping slowly down the back of my throat.

A bulbous yellow fungus followed the coiling roots of the nearby trees to bark at their bases. Some looked like slightly burnt pancakes, halfway embedded into the stumps, while other parts reminded me of fermenting dough, bubbling outward, leaving a pattern of glossy divots behind. The further down the trail we went, the larger and more numerous these growths became. I never touched one, but imagine their consistency was like unleavened bread.

Ricky didn't touch them either, but they caught his attention and he precariously balanced on a large root, looking down with an exaggerated grimace.

"Don't eat it Mommy," he said, "It can make you sick."

"Good call buddy," I responded, "I'll try not to... in fact, how about we stay away from it altogether. In case I forget?"

He gave me a thumbs up and bounded away, back down the path. Not ten feet later, he suddenly stopped and turned, gesturing for me to join him.

"Look at that!" he exclaimed, pointing downward, "It's a hole!"

Below him sat a pit of broken, hewn stone about three feet deep. Inside, water pooled unevenly over the craggy remains. Too big for a grave, but too small for a foundation, I couldn't figure out what structure a turn-of-the-century farm might need like this. Around the small pool's edges, clear clumps of jelly held tiny black "seeds" I assumed were frog eggs. Under the stagnant water itself we caught glimpses of twitching movement, probably tadpoles or pollywogs.

Ricky's mouth hung open at the discovery. This was the kind of mystery little boys hope for around every corner. I wasn't quite as thrilled. The pit reminded me how little I actually knew about my grandmother, much less the land she'd inhabited for over half a century. I wished she wasn't at the precipice of leaving us forever, when there was still so much to

learn. At the least I hoped we could allow her a peaceful departure.

Ricky broke my spell of regret, tugging at my jacket sleeve.

"Do they have eyes?" he asked.

"You mean baby frogs?" I responded, "Not at first I don't think. But they grow them eventually."

"Okay," he said. And then matter-of-factly, "Cause it feels like they're blinking."

I looked quizzically back at my son, assuming this was one of those things five-year-olds say, the things that sound strange, but are simply misunderstandings of grammar. I didn't have a chance to ask him for clarification, because the next thing I heard was a soft, ringing peal.

The sound dropped low almost immediately, a deep background texture sustained behind the layer of crackling leaves underfoot, wind flowing through branches and bark creaking with slow growth. Then that singing returned, a chorus out of phase, sweeping in waves over me.

It felt stable and welcoming, as if the life in those woods appreciated our presence. It was refreshing to know we were

wanted, not just an inconvenience to normalcy. Visits with Nanny were like that once. Before Brian or Ricky, I could let go of everything and just be me.

The low tone faded slowly, followed by an abrupt end to the song, as if the needle had lifted from a record. Snapping back to the damp, earthy chill felt like a complete shift in attention, as if something else caught its notice.

Once I came out of my stupor over the stone pit, I realized Ricky was now out of my sight. But I could hear him playing up ahead. The untrodden trail led about 25 meters – increasingly lined with rotting trees covered in yeasty looking growths – before it opened into a wide open field.

I wanted a stable, healthy environment for my son. That's why we came out here to Massachusetts in the first place. Brian worked in oil, so he was on the job 2-3 weeks at a time before he could come home to us. Even with that paycheck, the only place we could afford was the kind of rental where landlords have to inform you of the dangers to children eating the old lead paint. Ricky deserved better than that, even if it meant being further from his father and closer to my prick of an uncle.

So when I saw him, sitting in the center of those mushrooms, something primal triggered. I don't know if you'd call it maternal instinct, but I panicked. Even though there was nothing there but that dirt field and a seven-foot ring of puffballs, I was certain of danger. Between my throat and my heart something shifted, as if I'd swallowed one of those mushroom caps whole and couldn't keep it down.

I carefully and slowly approached the ring, like he was surrounded by vipers. There couldn't have been more than twenty-five mushrooms around the circumference, but each was larger than what you might find in the grocery produce section, somewhere between the size of an egg and a soccer ball. They were smooth in texture, with occasional pock marks. But nothing indicated a possible threat, not like the colors, divots or ridges of other species.

I didn't know the term then - "fairy ring" - but I had a faint idea that folklore associated such formations with danger. A superstition yes, but there was also something vague about the repercussions from inhaling their spores. If Ricky's respiratory system was already compromised, what effect would those particles have if they drifted into his lungs like smoke?

Although silent, the field still felt aware, its song replaced by deep, slow exhalation. I pictured its breath manifesting, literally puffing through the caps of those fungal stools, surrounding my son. *Please don't*, I thought, *just let him thrive*.

I heard a creaking response, like someone yawning from the end of a tunnel made of bark, each change of pitch the quivering result of an infolding membrane. A reverberation shuddered through the ring of mushrooms and the sound left us, pulsing across the field with diminishing volume. An echo.

I understood what the exchange required, breathed in deeply and hummed in response. My teeth and lips vibrated gently against each other while I thought of ripening fruit, first from green to pink, then to glossy black, reflecting a dancing glare. The fuzz along the lobes of my ears stood straight and a tart taste seeped into my mouth, overwhelmingly acidic. Then it receded, soaked away like blood in the dirt.

We withdrew, Ricky's tiny hand in mine as we fell back to the trail. We neither hurried nor dawdled, but kept pace together until we emerged from the forest's maw near twilight.

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My mother once told me you can gauge the elderly's enthusiasm for life by the health of their appetite. That night from her hospital room phone, Nanny reported as a member of "The Clean Plate Club," having finished both her creamed spinach and apple crisp servings.

It was close to dinner, but I wasn't hungry myself. When we first arrived, Nanny sent John to buy ingredients for some of my favorite childhood meals. These were all still stored in the kitchen, but nothing appealed to me.

I was on the landline in Nanny's own bedroom. Mostly defined by a dresser bureau and a full bed, it also hosted several oil paintings of tall ships, beaches and docks. Greenwich is over two hours away from the ocean, so I wondered what prompted her fascination with marine imagery. As far back as I could remember, she'd never gone to the coast with us.

Blackout blinds were drawn, shrouding the bedroom in darkness. The phone mount ran from her bedside table and I curled up in the fetal position, facing the wall, the receiver wedged under my cheek. Ricky napped next to me, sharing a comfortable wool blanket. I saw his torso expand with each sleeping breath, but could no longer hear a rattle in his lungs.

"Nanny?" I asked, "Why do you have so many paintings of the ocean?"

"I wish I knew dear," she said, "I assume your grandfather and I used to sail together. We might have fished as well. There's that blue marlin mounted over the porch door."

I didn't know how to respond. To address her lost memories so directly seemed impolite. But she was perfectly comfortable about that void, as if it were a growing decay she'd been navigating around for some time now.

"It would be nice to get that back," she said matter-of-factly, "But... you can't return a sweater with holes in it."

I wasn't familiar with that turn-of-phrase and assumed it might be another symptom of senility.

"Besides," she paused, "Anyone who knew is gone anyway. The only people left now get to inherit the questions I'll leave behind."

"That's not true Nanny," I replied, still uncomfortable with how to handle the topic, "You're more than the things in this house to us. To Ricky and I at least."

"That's nice," she said, "But you're going to need to follow me here, where there's nothing left but things."

"Where? The hospital?"

"No dear. Into the fog. Where everything you want is exchanged for security."

She wasn't lucid anymore. I made a mental note to have John tell her doctor. I couldn't think of what to say, so I went for the first thing that sprang to mind.

"You know how I worked in a school Nanny?" I asked, "Before we came here?"

"Yes dear."

"Well it was only part-time. Just administrative stuff in the front office. The kids there would come talk to us and one of them - Sara, fourth grade - didn't want to go home at the end of the day. She wouldn't get on the bus and her parents never picked her up. So she hung out in the office with us, while we wrapped up."

I was running on with this story, filling verbal space so Nanny wouldn't say anything confusing. I didn't want to hear her muddled and disadvantaged again.

"Anyway one afternoon I offered to drive Sara home. And in the car she says she wishes she could come home with me, because her mother locked her out of the house until one in the morning. Like made her sleep outside."

"What did you do?" Nanny asked, her voice low and clear again.

"I brought it to my principal and the counselor, because I didn't feel comfortable making a report to Protective Services. As far as I know, they did nothing."

I got off the bed, walking across the room with the phone cord trailing behind. Nanny's dresser was fitted with a plate of glass over its surface, underneath which she kept dozens of photographs. A version of me at ten was under there. There were other pictures of Ricky, my brothers, Mom and my uncle John. Some went back several decades, printed in black, but faded over the years to almost sepia.

"So right after we left," I continued, whispering so Ricky wouldn't hear, "I started getting messages from the gals I worked with, because Sara's mother was charged with neglect. It was on the news. Apparently their house was full of methamphetamine, used pipes, needles and stuff."

Nanny's wool-lined memory-foam slippers were tucked under the dresser, a gift from us two Christmases ago. The interior soles were worn away. A white paper bag filled with prescriptions rested on the bureau edge, covering snapshots of my grandfather in a Shriners parade. He drove one of those silly little cars with an oversized fez on. There on the glass, lay Nanny's hair brush, silver-plated, with a gilded filigree of a pixie seated atop a large mushroom. I flipped it over, looking at the natural bristles stitched into its oval face. Multiple strands of Nanny's silver hair were left in its teeth.

"At least the mother was smart enough not to let Sara or her siblings inside while she was out of it," I said, "But get this. On the local news they quoted her. She said, 'I may be high but I still take good care of the children.'"

"That's appalling," Nanny responded after a few seconds of silence, "Let's hope little Sara doesn't step into her mother's shoes."

"But that's the thing," I told her, "I can't save Sara. That's out of my hands. She's with some other family now. But Ricky? It's my job to provide a stable environment for him to grow up in. Like you tried to for me."

"It's good that you accept that. The responsibility I mean," Nanny replied, "Because the only way I know how to prevent that kind of decline, is to give up something you cherish in tribute."

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It's summer now. All those trees behind the house are in bloom and the grass is growing fast enough that I'm going to have to teach Ricky how to use the old push mower left behind in Nanny's garage. So long as he promises not to stick his hand inside, or mow past the tree line.

I haven't found any patches of mold since winter and Ricky's breathing is crystal clear. No reason to visit the doctor or call a specialist, so I figure he's ready to start outdoor chores. It's not hard to accept that this is home for the rest of our lives.

We went behind the house today and Ricky found a patch of blackberries at the edge of the property. After all these years, it's funny that I haven't noticed fruit growing back there before. They're far enough from the road that I felt comfortable letting him pick some so we can bake a pie in the afternoon. After a good wash they'll be fine.

I was absentmindedly helping Ricky, carrying a plastic bowl to put the berries in while he snapped them up deftly, one at a time. For a minute, I lost myself staring into the obscuring bramble, its interconnected leaves and branches ending in white flowers with crowns of stamens growing around each of the budding fruits.

Not thinking, I reached out for a berry, ripening from pink to black. The thorns blended in near the fruit, green vines swelling to an angry, royal purple barb that fades so the sharp tip is easy to miss. One penetrated my left thumb, slicing its flesh when I pulled away in surprised pain.

Even more thoughtless, after sucking the puncture free of blood, I then reached into the bowl for one of Ricky's fresh pickings. Pinching the berry between my thumb and forefinger, some juice burst from its pulpy seeds, staining my fingers and stinging the wound.

It'll heal, but I know how irritating it's going to be until it scars. Everytime I touch something, that slight pain will remind me of sacrifice.