

FISTFUL OF MERCY

*You say you feel life, down
Always down
Against the grave
We are*

—“Fistful of Mercy” by Ben Harper, Joseph Arthur, and Dhani Harrison

I discovered the mouse the Saturday my father died. I’d seen telltale signs of it before—droppings and tufts of insulation by an air vent, a gnawed box of cereal in the cupboard—but until then, the mouse had been a phantom, a figment of my dulled senses, an opioid-induced illusion. It darted into the hall closet while a hospital social worker delivered the news of my father’s passing from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

He’d died alone at my childhood home in eastern North Carolina, the victim of vertigo and a recently waxed floor. The cleaning lady I’d hired after I moved to London following my divorce the previous year had found him sprawled by the kitchen counter, his hand gripping the leg of a wrought iron barstool that had crashed on top of him, finishing the job the Italian tile had not.

I’ll call you back, I said impassively to the social worker. *There’s a mouse in my house.*

I attributed my apathy to shock—that and the fact that my father and I had been estranged since our last conversation a few months ago. I barely remembered the argument, the details awash in a cocktail of bourbon and Coke. I could have called him back and pled innocent on the grounds of temporary intoxication, but we both knew there was nothing temporary about it, which was the subtext of most of our disagreements. A few

weeks later, I received a note from him, scrawled in his palsied cursive: *Aren't you going to ask for forgiveness?* I'd thought of Joan Didion when I'd read it: *What makes Iago evil? some people ask. I never ask.*

May God have mercy on your soul, my father used to say while he drowned the squirrels he caught pilfering nuts from the pecan trees in our backyard, submerging wire cages he'd borrowed from Animal Control into a tub of water on the patio, desperate rodents thrashing against the bars, water surging over the sides of the tub like the parting of the Red Sea.

My mother and I called him Mercy behind his back. *I'm cooking spaghetti for Mercy*, she'd crack. *There's a man on the phone, Mama; he asked for Mercy.*

I understood the irony, even at six.

She had not asked for Mercy while she lay dying on my parents' white iron bed, empty pill bottle in her hand, "My Sweet Lord" by George Harrison playing on the stereo.

It's Providence, my father had said at her funeral. *Providence and Fate.*

I didn't think so, even at fourteen.

She was an unnatural disaster, sundered not by the will of God but Valium and Jack Daniels. She'd made her choice. Providence and Fate be damned.

There would be no funeral for my father. I was an only child. Most of his friends were dead, victims of old age and ennui. My ex-husband had absconded to somewhere out west with the woman who'd replaced me. *You were gone long before I was*, he'd said to me. *In fact, I don't think you were ever really here.* He was right. I lived in liminal spaces, the caesura between here and there.

My father once said he wanted to be cremated. *What about the Rapture?* I'd scoffed. *Aren't you supposed to be buried with your body intact? We're Methodists,* he'd said. *We don't believe in the Rapture.* I'd gazed soberly at my purse—through the leather and lining—at the flask swaddled in the lace handkerchief with my mother's initials embroidered on the front. *Doesn't matter,* I'd said to him. He'd nodded blankly. *Then you needn't be intact.*

After his mother's passing barely a year ago, he'd witnessed the unearthing of his own father's body. My grandmother had instructed him to move her husband next to her upon her death, which had come suddenly. The wooden coffin had disintegrated, he'd told me. Only bones remained. *Which ones,* I'd wondered—a femur, ribcage, skull? Relics of a Depression-era death, before embalming became the norm.

I'd read that George Harrison's ashes had been scattered in the Ganges. I wondered if his son, Dhani, had held his father's remains in his hand, sifted the ashes through his fingers, let the wind claim him, a zephyr committing dust-to-dust to flowing water, like music, the middle eight—the art of dying. First the fire, then the water.

I hadn't asked my father what he wanted done with his ashes. Scatter them in the river near the town of my birth and, now, his death, like an Old Testament prophet, a sainted sinner from the book of Exodus? Hold him in my hand—a fistful of Mercy—and say a prayer for all our souls?

Maybe he had written down his wishes, left a note in a box in his bedroom closet with my mother's empty pill bottle and other evidence of our lives, intersecting like crossroads—my first tooth, sacrificed for the nickel underneath my pillow while I slept; a lock of my mother's feral hair; a mold of my palm I'd made in grade school. I doubted it. He would have left the decision to Providence.

I phoned the social worker and listened to her repeat the details of my father's passing, tell me what to do before I arrive, ask me where to store the shell that remains in the interim. I stared at the mousetraps I'd placed by the air vent—kill-and-contain and catch-and-release. I'd let the mouse decide its own fate.

I drained my glass of bourbon and Coke. Now, I thought, what to do for Mercy?