

Backyard Eulogy

“I don’t know why
I thought this love could be pure. It’s enough
that it’s infinite. I kiss your cheek when you sleep
and wonder if you feel it.”
-*Twelve*, Lynn Melnick

“But Mommy,” Milo cries, crocodile tears rolling down ruddy cheeks, “What if Radar can’t breathe underground!”

A distant part of Greta's brain holds a keen appreciation for the fact that one day, Milo will grow into a kind and sensitive boy. Despite this, the mid-December ground is frozen solid, and it’s taken nearly twenty minutes to dig a hole big enough to fit the Converse box that now holds half the Sunday paper and a guinea pig.

“Radar’s gonna be okay, honey. He's going to that nice big farm, just like I told you.” Greta pauses in her digging and stretches out the cramp in her hand.

“But they don’t have guinea pigs on farms!”

“Sure they do. Guinea pigs live anywhere.”

“But he’s not just a guinea pig! He’s my best friend!”

A fresh wave of tears is unleashed, and Greta takes a deep breath while sitting back on her heels and rubbing her hands together. She knows that this isn't an unfounded tantrum, that Milo has every reason to be crying right now, but her empathy is running dry and her patience is likely to follow soon.

“I’ll be your best friend.”

“You can’t! You’re Josie’s best friend!”

This brings an amused smile to Greta’s face, even if it’s slightly self-deprecating. “Trust me, I’m not Josie’s best friend right now.”

“Why not?”

“No fourteen-year-old wants to say that their mother is their best friend.”

The hole is finished, and Greta takes a few steps back. Milo places the box in the shallow grave and pats the top a few times once it's wedged in.

"I love you, Radar," Greta hears him whisper as she blows into clasped hands to try and bring feeling back into her fingertips. Milo backs away, and Greta kicks the pile of dirt on top of the box, wishing she'd had the forethought to dig a grave that was in a less visible spot. She knows Milo will tear up every time he sees the mound of dirt in the middle of the backyard.

She turns to head back inside, but in an instant he's running across the yard, a blur of purple in his hand-me-down winter coat.

"What are you doing?" Greta calls out, wiggling her toes in her work boots to make sure she can still feel them.

"Flowers! Radar wants flowers!"

"There are no flowers, Milo," Greta calls back as Milo starts picking up dried leaves and sticks, "it's December."

She considers telling him to head back inside before he gets frostbite, but then she remembers that the more she can prolong this, the longer she can wait before making tonight's phone call. Soon enough, she falls into step behind Milo as he picks up and inspects twigs and rocks off the ground.

His blonde curls blow gently in the winter breeze, and Greta is reminded that while Josie looks like a natural blend of Tucker and herself, Milo is Isaac's baby through and through.

The boy stumbles back a few steps and Greta captures him by the shoulders, grabbing him and hoisting him to her hip.

"It looks good, baby. Radar would love it."

"He likes rocks a lot."

Considering the rodent had never seen a rock in his whole life, Greta has no idea how he collected this bit of insight. She doesn't say anything, however, letting Milo wave at the mound as she struggles with the weird jam in the sliding backdoor. The kitchen is warm when the door opens, the smell of pizza bagels still hanging in the air.

"How about you go pick out some pajamas, and I'll get the bath filled, okay?"

Milo seems to be feeling a bit better, judging by the way he tears off his winter coat like a cloak and races to his room to find a t-shirt and pants suitable to sleep in.

By all logical reasoning, her son is perfectly normal levels of sensitive for a four-year-old. Every parenting book that she and Tucker had been able to get their hands on when Greta was pregnant with Josie had detailed, with no sugar coating, that toddlers have massive feelings and no way to express them. Yelling and crying are unfortunately expectable at Milo's age. In fact, it's probably Greta's lack of patience or experience with emotionally delicate children that is causing more of an issue.

The truth is that Greta had been spoiled by Josie. Beyond hunger or sleepiness, it was rare that the baby would cry at all. Instead, she would blink her wide, brown eyes at Greta as though she could sense Greta's ineptitude as a new mother. Maybe it was here, with this unspoken understanding of Greta's own uncertainty, that Josie had learned her first lesson in self-reliance. Maybe it was here that the radical mutuality of their relationship began.

"You know," Tucker had whispered on that first terrifying night in the hospital, with Josie's tiny head in his palm and the rest of her body sprawled on his forearm, "she and you have the same face. The 'screw you, I'd rather die than ask for your help' look. Lookin' at her is a freaky amount like lookin' at you."

Greta had laughed, but sometimes she wonders if when she gave birth, her spitfire self-assuredness had broken off and taken root within her daughter. Josie's been fiercely independent since she was old enough to have such a trait, and it's been a long time since Greta's days weren't greyed by the all-consuming exhaustion that weighed her down near-constantly.

When the last dinner plate in the sink is dried and put away, Greta bites the bullet and approaches Josie's door. Three quick knocks and a call of acknowledgment have her entering, eyes drawn from her daughter to the empty cage in the corner of the room.

Greta knows fourteen is old enough to be home alone, but she doesn't want to think about how Josie might've reacted when she came home to find Radar belly up in his cage. As much as Milo was attached to the brown puff of fur, Radar was technically Josie's pet. She could've screamed and cried, but if Josie's a crier, it's never been around Greta.

"How was school?" Greta asks, sitting heavily on Josie's bed and leaning back on dishwasher-wet palms. The girl in question is looking at Greta from the desk chair, which she's spinning back and forth slowly with her foot.

"Fine. I have a party next week in French that I have to bake a cake for. How was the funeral?"

“The ground is frozen solid, and your brother cried.”

“Sounds about right.”

“We could’ve used your unnerving indifference out there, kid.”

“I have to finish notes on a chapter for biology.”

“I’m sure you could’ve spared twenty minutes,” Greta jokes, her smiling falling when Josie doesn’t return it and instead looks back at the worn biology textbook open on her desk.

“How’s Milo handling it?”

“He’s four. By tomorrow he’ll be running around in his underwear and making firetruck noises.”

“Good. He shouldn’t be sad about it.”

Greta lets Josie's words sit in the air for a moment. She occasionally wonders if all fourteen-year-olds are supposed to worry about how sad their baby brothers are. She thinks that maybe Josie isn't the way she is because the two of them spent so long alone against the world, but because she spent so long with a mother who wasn't entirely ready to be a mother, hardly more than a child herself.

“Are you... sad about it?” Greta asks. Josie doesn’t respond immediately, even though Greta knows she heard the question, jotting down some chicken-scratch notes in her composition book.

“Milo always liked him more.”

“He was your guinea pig.”

“On paper, maybe.”

Greta smiles before remembering that this is the kind of time when she needs to be a parent, uncharmed by her daughter’s dry comedic sensibility.

“You can be sad, you know. If you want to cry... or talk about it.”

Josie just side-eyes her, and Greta knows the words leaving her mouth sound just as unnatural as they feel.

“Do you remember the day Isaac gave him to you?”

“I was ten, so... not well.”

“You took the box, looked at it without smiling, and said to Isaac, 'I'm going to name him Radar, after the guy from M.A.S.H. It's my dad and I's favorite show.'” Josie smiles, and Greta knows she remembers the day and just wants to hear the words again. She can see the traces of

pride in Josie's eye when she hears just *how* snide she was able to get while meeting Mom's new boyfriend.

"I thought I was gonna crap myself. I was torn between laughing and doing damage control," Greta admits.

"I seem to remember you chose laughter."

"Not a good choice."

"I'd argue marrying him was a worse one."

Greta kicks Josie's foot lightly, chuckling to cover the stab of pain that the words drive through her. Even if she got Milo out of it, marrying Isaac was never a good idea. Josie's apparently deemed it a reasonable time to start making told-you-so jokes, with the divorce freshly finalized.

"Did you— were you upset? When you found him?" Greta doesn't know if this is the wrong thing to ask, if it seems insensitive, but she knows Josie like the back of her hand; she won't be phased.

"Mom," Josie responds flatly, spinning to face Greta and look her in the eye, "I'm fine. He was probably sick or something. I'm upset, but not upset enough to stand outside for a half-hour and watch you dig a hole to put my old shoe box in."

Greta stands when she hears Milo pad into the bathroom, pulling Josie in by the shoulders and kissing her on the top of the head. "Well, still, I'm here for you. Pets dying sucks. I love you."

"Love you too. Night."

She leaves the room, closing the door silently behind her. Milo's standing in the bathroom doorway, holding a power ranger t-shirt and briefs.

"Come on, baby," Greta says, flipping the light switch in the bathroom and trying not to show Milo how much she talks with Josie has upset her, "let's get you clean."

The bath goes quickly, Greta washing Milo's body while he doodles on the walls of the tub with his bath crayons. She makes a distant note to contact the landlord about how the caulk is peeling away from the wall before realizing she probably shouldn't be asking for him to come over until grass grows over the conspicuous lump of dirt in the backyard. He doesn't seem the superstitious type, but she doubts burying small animals in the backyard reflects well on her as a tenant.

“Can I have a new pet now?”

“We’ll see, Milo. What would you want?”

“I want a pony.”

Greta smiles, too tired to laugh like she usually might. “Yeah? You think nobody’s going to notice if we have a pony in the backyard?”

“No. We should get a lizard.”

“Aren’t you scared of lizards?”

“No!” Milo insists, turning to look Greta in the eye with a laughably severe look in his eyes, “but Josie wants a lizard.”

“When did she tell you that?”

“Yesterday, when she was reading me a book about lizards, she showed me one and said, ‘I want one of these when Radar dies.’”

Greta doesn't want to be offended that Josie never mentioned this to her, but she's failing miserably.

“Do you want a lizard?”

“Can we get one?”

“We’ll see about it.”

Greta has no plans of getting any more pets until her kids are actually old enough to care for them. If she had known how much feeding and cage cleaning she'd get stuck with, she never would've told Isaac that a guinea pig would be an excellent way to win Josie over.

The rest of the bath passes in silence, and Greta pulls Milo into a yellow towel as the last bubbles swirl down the drain. He’s falling asleep in her arms as she wrestles limp limbs into pajamas, and under the comforter that sits tangled on his twin-sized bed.

Walking back out to the living room, Greta pulls a pack of Parliaments out of her purse and lights one on the stove, collapsing backward on the couch. She tosses her cellphone on the coffee table and turns the TV to a random reality show, if only to have some background noise while she builds up the nerve to call Isaac.

She and Tucker are finally on good enough terms, talking semi-regularly even if it’s just to coordinate when and where they’re going to meet to drop off Josie. They’ve settled into a routine of alternating weekends, and Josie seems content with it. While Greta doesn’t like the

idea of her baby going somewhere else for three nights in a row, she trusts Tucker to take care of her. He'd even made sure Greta met his new girlfriend before introducing Josie to her.

Isaac, on the other hand, is more of a problem. Interactions are acidic still, months after they split. For now, Milo is hers and hers alone and she doesn't plan on changing that anytime soon. Unfortunately, she still needs to talk to Isaac about the child support payments that he's three months behind on. She's been forgiving so far, but the rent's coming up next week, and the bill from Milo's last doctor's appointment has been eyeing her from the kitchen table for two weeks now. This conversation has to happen. She just needs to buck up and dial the number.

When the cigarette is burned down to the filter, her hands aren't any less shaky. It's not that she's scared of Isaac, but she's also not naïve enough to think this will go well. Sitting up straight, she grabs her phone and scrolls through her contacts, her leg bouncing ceaselessly.

Her finger hesitates over his name before remembering that Josie has a class trip in a few weeks, and the toilet's been flushing weirdly recently.

The phone rings four times before he answers.

"I'm busy. What do you want?" Isaac answers, no introductions or pleasantries to start the conversation. When her father first met Isaac, he'd said he didn't like him. Greta wonders what blinded her to Isaac's flaws when it seems they were crystal clear to everyone around her.

"Child support, Isaac. It's not optional."

He sighs, and she can practically see the way he drags his hand down his face as he does so. Even eight months after she kicked him out, all his little noises and mannerisms remain wedged into the crevices of her memory. He was the one who helped her carry this couch into the living room, and it's the same couch she had been sitting on when she told him to leave and not come back unless he wanted her to get the police involved.

"Christ, Greta, I'm gonna get it to you."

"You've been saying that for two and a half months. The longer you go without paying it, the more you have to pay, you know."

"The more you fuckin' nag me about it, the less likely I am to pay you."

"You have to pay," Greta bluffs, covering the stab of worry. Was that an option for him?
"Otherwise, I'm going to the court."

"It should be illegal that I have to give you money. You still have a job, don't you?"

“Yeah, I do,” Greta hisses into the receiver, “I have a full-time job, *and* I’m also raising your fucking child, in case you forgot.”

“What, you want me to take him?”

“I want you nowhere near him. I just want you to take responsibility for your own fucking decisions and support the child that you left!”

“You kicked me out! What the hell did you want me to do!?”

“I wanted you not to put a hole in my goddamn drywall!” Greta yells before clenching her jaw and pulling the phone away to check if the noise woke anyone. The rest of the house is silent, and she holds the phone back to her ear.

“Look, I’ll get you the money at some point, okay? You’re gonna have to get off my dick about it.”

“You have a week, Isaac. After that, I contact the judge. Should have done that in the first fuckin’ place.”

She hangs up and leans back into the cushions of the couch. Her eyes are drawn to Milo’s framed drawing, hanging in an awkward position on the wall. The kids were both asleep when it happened, and she could only hope they hadn’t been woken. Her and Isaac’s voices had only raised once during the fight, but when his fist went through the wall ice had flooded Greta’s veins. He’d seemed regretful immediately, hands up in remorse as he took a step toward Greta.

“You have five minutes,” Greta had whispered, stepping back as her voice cracked, “To pack and get the fuck out of my house.”

The framed picture went up that night, and if Josie had heard or noticed anything, she hadn't mentioned it.

“Isaac’s not coming back,” Greta had told her over breakfast the following day.

Josie had nodded, not asking about it. Milo asked a few times, but three-year old's have blessedly imperfect object permanence, so it didn't take long for him to stop asking where Daddy went.

Greta pulls her attention from the drawing when she hears hesitant, socked footsteps behind her. It’s nearly eleven and she's exhausted after a nine-hour shift at the hardware store, so she can only hope that this will be quick.

“Milo, what do you—”

She stops quickly when it's not Milo standing at the entrance, but Josie. She's got her quilt wrapped around her shoulders, and her eyes look reddened with tears.

"Hi baby," Greta whispers, beckoning Josie over to the couch, "what's going on? Are you okay?"

"Was that Isaac?"

Something deep in Greta's stomach sours as she briefly questions if it's normal for fourteen-year-olds to be this aware of what's happening in their family.

"You don't have to worry about it."

Josie sits a foot away, leaning over so her feet are kicked over the arm of the sofa and her head drops in Greta's lap. Greta's fingernails scratch against the girl's scalp mindlessly, and Josie rubs her eyes with the corner of her comforter.

"I'm just wondering. I'm worried about Milo."

"Why?"

"He doesn't understand what's going on. He keeps asking me about him."

Greta bites down the emotions crawling up her throat.

"He's not... coming back."

"I know."

Greta considers her following words carefully, because she isn't sure whether she's supposed to be showing her children that their mother isn't the steady, reliable force that she hopes they think she is. Although, in all fairness, it's probably been a while since Josie saw her like that.

"Do you—" Greta asks quietly, "do you ever wish I stayed with your father?"

"I mean, sure, sometimes. It was better than..." —*than Isaac*, Josie leaves out of her statement, but Greta hears it between the lines anyway. "I think I'm good where I am. Dad and Kara there, you and Milo here. I like everyone in that equation."

"Okay. You know, if you were ever unhappy with something in that... equation, you could tell me, right? You and Milo are the most important things in my life. More than your father and more than Isaac."

"Yeah," Josie says quietly, but the fresh round of tears that well up in her eyes tell a different story.

“You can’t fool me,” Greta whispers with a sad smile, “I know something’s still bothering you.”

“It’s stupid,” Josie mutters wetly. Greta sighs, switching from scratching her scalp to running her fingers over her dark curls. Josie turns to look her in the eye for a moment.

“It’s not stupid if it’s making you cry.”

Josie's quiet for a moment before looking at the TV.

“I miss Radar.”

Greta exhales softly out of her nose. The soft blue glow of the television casts long shadows on Josie’s face, and Greta runs the pad of her thumb over one on the girl’s cheek.

"I'm so sorry, Josie. I'm sorry he's gone, and I'm sorry you had to be the one to see it."

“I knew it was coming. It isn’t like he was gonna be around forever.”

Greta considers how to respond when Josie has unknowingly made it crystal clear that they aren't talking about the guinea pig anymore.

“Radar was a good guinea pig.”

“Then why’d he have to go?”

Tears spill over Josie’s cheeks, and Greta thinks back to when she and Tucker brought Josie home from the hospital. Laurie, Tucker’s mother, had driven them and helped them settle in once they were back.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Greta had cried, slumped over the kitchen table. Tucker was in the other room with the baby, and Greta was glad he wasn’t there considering her emotions were still haywire after giving birth. "I thought that when she was born, I'd have some sort of immediate instinct to know what she needs all the time, but she won’t stop crying and I have no clue what to do about it. Does— does that make me a bad mom? Does it mean I don’t love her enough?"

Laurie went to the table with two cups of tea, pushing one toward a teary Greta. Since Greta had known her, there was a part of her brain that thought of Laurie as her own mother. While she tried to never let it show how attached she was to the woman, right then she was too distraught to care.

“If any woman tells you she knew and loved her baby when they were born, she’s lying.”

Greta had looked up, confused. Laurie gave her a warm look and continued.

"Your kids aren't an extension of you. It will take time to get to know them, just like anyone else. As Josie grows, you'll grow with her, and everything that's a learning experience for her will be a learning experience for you too."

"What if you're wrong? What if she stays this much of a mystery?"

"Kids are always a mystery," Laurie smiled, "and it can be a lot of pressure to feel like you're supposed to have some monstrous maternal love right away. You'll love them soon, but the best you can do in the meantime is promise to yourself that you *want* to figure them out."

Greta likes to think she's figured out Josie pretty well by now, but there are still moments that surprise her—right here right now, for example. Josie wears her heart on her cheek, so the sight of her with bloodshot teary eyes is rare enough that it still comes as a shock to Greta.

"I won't say everything happens for a reason," Greta whispers, "because that's a shitty sentiment. I will, however, say that you are the strongest kid I've ever met, and even if you weren't, you've got me, your father, Kara, and Milo. And a mysterious lizard that you've failed to mention to me."

Josie snorts, her face red and snotty. "I mostly said it because Milo wouldn't stop asking me about pets."

"I don't want you to think you can't ask me for stuff."

"A lizard isn't stuff. It's an animal."

"Got me there. There will be further discussion of this lizard business."

The TV drones on as silence stretches. Josie's stopped crying by now, but her eyes are wide open and fixed on the infomercial playing.

"I'm sorry I keep bringing people into your life who end up leaving," Greta says, quiet enough that she wonders if Josie heard her. When the girl takes a minute before responding, she's almost sure she didn't.

"It's okay. I didn't really want Isaac there to begin with."

"Stability is crucial in developmental years."

"Reciting parenting books isn't an argument."

"I don't think this is much of an argument anyway. It's more of a well-known fact."

"Whatever. I'm sure they thought humans would live in the sea forever until one got out and walked on land."

"Now *that's* not an argument. That's barely even coherent."

“Shut up,” Josie grins sluggishly, “my point is yeah, things are *supposed* to be one way, but sometimes they aren’t. Adaptation is key.”

“Poetic. I just hope your father and I aren’t screwing you up too badly.”

“I guess we’ll have to wait and see,” Josie yawns, her eyelids drooping, “I’ve got six years ‘til being a teen mom’s out of the cards.”

Greta smiles, and Josie buries her face in the blanket in Greta’s lap. Her work jeans are digging into her stomach uncomfortably, and the TV remote is just out of reach from where she's sitting. However, dealing with either of these things would mean jostling the sleeping teenager in her lap, and she's going to do everything possible to avoid that.

Greta curls inward, pressing a final kiss against Josie’s cheek. The colorful glow of the TV paints watercolors across Josie’s closed eyelids, her steady breath blowing one curl back and forth in front of her face. Greta’s eyes burn with exhaustion and she doesn’t fight it, deciding not to think about how sore her neck will be tomorrow morning. She tips her head back, all thoughts of Isaac, bills, and lizards slipping like sand through her fingers as she allows the monotonous hum of the television to drag her into a thankfully dreamless sleep.