

## “Donald Still Remembered”

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The moon hangs over the tree strewn tall grass like an elegant opal, almost too beautiful to be witnessing such an ugly reality below. Stretched out and sleeping noiselessly 'neath one especially bent tree is Donald Fejes, looking out of place in his peacefulness. The trees that have not yet been ripped from their leaves loom as though they hold secrets, but in a few brisk weeks all will be revealed. Bare, naked, raw, and unable to be ignored. There are few stars to brighten the shadow soaked hours of night where Donald sleeps, chest shifting calmly with his breaths. The moon stares down and feels a stranger's fondness for Donald because he brings life to the scene without giving any hint as to his reason for settling in such a place. Rhythmic rows of round and rigid stones create a pattern of darkness on the tall grass. If ever the air dares to stir the lengths of grass surrounding them, they look like mirages. Sometimes rushing water can be heard in the smooth coursing rustle of the field, though no such water exists. On this night though, the wind has left Donald to be the sole source of movement, lying amongst graves in slumber.

No, death is not what causes the scene's ugliness. Death itself is not an ugly thing. Donald sagaciously knew this as a boy when he first experienced the course of nature. He treated all things with the quiet understanding of a man who had spent much of his youth on adventures in the deep velvet green of woods, on explorations aboard rickety home-made rafts down boisterous rivers, and with warm strokes of sunlight painting sheets of freckles into his grinning boy's face. Donald's childhood had filled his mind with earth scented memories, and he still remembered the day when he had gone on the frog rescue mission. Like the river had that spring, Donald's spirit swelled whenever he recalled such times. His mother had made him swear on his pocket knife that he would stay out of

the river's pulling current all afternoon before she let him march into his woods. Rubber boots climbed up above his knobby boy's knees. Swim trunks of a faded royal blue floated around his skinny boy's hips. He didn't even bother with the formality of tugging a shirt over his downy flop of boy's hair. Adventure was calling, and he sprinted after it all the way down his trail to his riverbank with his boots burping and hiccupping all the way.

In no time at all, he was bellybutton deep into the cold waters. The roar of moving water deafened him to Mother's cautioning words, and the splashing beads blinded what little propriety a boy could be expected to have. Though, to his credit, Donald knew to yank off his rubber boots before he flew down the riverbank straight into the pulsing clear water. His forest, as he had come to think of it, included: his river, his many forts, his pond, his trails, his seasons, his climbing trees, his countless creatures, and best of all, his ideas. He got all of his best ideas in his woods. While in his overrunning river that afternoon, the idea to save his underwater friends became a mission; Donald would be the frog hero.

He ran as fast as his dripping feet would carry him, pressing footprints into the spongy shore until he reached his pond. The afternoon was endless for him. Limbs flinging every which way and hands plunging again and again, jubilation expounded from his body as he passed the sun soaked hours in bliss. Pure boyhood bliss. For what could be better than a day spent catching frogs in a pond?

Arriving home for dinner, he looked quite curious strutting down the driveway wearing only his left boot. The other was carried in his arms in a misshapen embrace. Mother knew exactly what was in the boot before he made it through the front door; a frog. After having received Mother's blessing, Donald selected the deepest shiny metal mixing bowl in their little kitchen for his new pet. She

suggested that the frog be named now that it was part of the family, making them a unique trio, and after an awful lot of forehead wrinkling Donald was ready. Rubber boot raised above his head like a proclamation to the Lord, he announced, "Malcolm the Greatest Frog in all my Woods!" and with that he tipped the boot. Malcolm came sloshing out into his new home and one thing was obvious about him immediately. 'Malcolm the Greatest Frog in all the Woods' was the deadest frog in the mixing bowl.

So out into Mother's garden their sad trio went, with Malcolm in a new tissue box home for burial. Out into the sunset of runny crimson on gold they went with tears sliding over Donald's speckled cheeks. Upheaval tore through his boy's heart watching Mother dig a plot beside her favourite Bleeding Heart flower. The drops clung to his freckles for comfort just as Donald clung to his Mother's waist as she patted loose earth over Malcolm and his frog coffin. And so his first meeting with death taught Donald the jolting arrival mortality can have, and his understanding of nature grew.

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Slipping into dreams under the tree of the cemetery, he felt a closeness to death that hadn't touched his boyhood self in burying his first pet. The names on the newer stones, the less eroded ones with fresh flowers, were names that Donald could recognize. Had he known these people? Timidly, as though trying to feel his way through the thick fog of memory, he recalled picture day at Spruce Wood P.B.S in grade 4. Like a voice reaching through the tall beams of grass, the photographer yelled out each name as Donald's eyes fumbled slowly over the headstones. His feet stepped gently between the stones and carefully around a few gaping plots. There was something he was forgetting... where were his two tiny orange pills and fat white pill? Curious, but removed from worry, he decided to be alright

without that nightly paper cup of pills. Donald pulsed with peacefulness in having found a quiet place; no part of his woods was unfamiliar to him. Here, he didn't need to agonize over faces and names. Here, he was Donald and his company didn't care whether he remembered their names or not.

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*I don't think he can remember my name*, she thought uncomfortably as she steered his Buick into the driveway early today. This was the house both she and her father had been raised in, and her brother's had thought it best that she bring him back today to gather some of his belongings. He told her every Sunday when she visited that his room at 'Tranquil Meadows' nursing home was not comfortable. So this afternoon was going to allow him to help choose what he wanted to have with him at his new home. She hoped, as she watched him make his way up to the door, that he would feel less anxious in a familiar place because the drive had been quite troublesome to her. Hearing her Father repeat the same comments about the lovely autumn colours turned upsetting after the fourth time he expressed the identical thought, and she had needed to remind him of where they were going every few minutes of the lengthy journey.

She felt her jaw tighten whenever she thought of the day she and her three brothers had told their Father that he should consider moving into a nursing home. Doctor Rhapsom had called her earlier that week to inform her that her Father's test results had come back and that it would be a responsible choice to get him extra care and assistance. It had felt so wrong sitting in the living room with her siblings across from Father, like they were taking his life away and treating him like a child. "Dad? You're doing really well here on your own here at the house, but... well Dr.Rhapsom told us that it'd be a good idea if, uhm, if you... had a bit of extra help, you know? It isn't... I mean it's not... it isn't

like we don't think you can look after yourself, but we worry sometimes about your memory. And you said you know that it is getting worse, and that sometimes you get scared too. So we all talked about it a lot, and well... here are some places you might like to think about." She leaned over and placed a few brochures onto the side table to his right. She felt like a monster. This was her Father, the man who had let her sit in the empty bathtub and listen while he brushed his teeth and hummed before swinging her into bed. This was not her place, and yet her brothers all shuffled on the couch in nervous agreement with what she had said.

Donald couldn't yet bring himself to pick up the brochures, but he had seen the pain in his children's eyes when they glanced across to him. He had kindly put them at ease by saying, "I'm sure some of those places are alright" he cleared his throat, "and I'm... not really eager to leave my home, but I know my mind isn't what it used to be." He paused for a long breath in, "So I'm lucky to have such loving children to look after me, especially since..." he pressed his eyes tight shut and his children could hear his loud swallow. All of them were flooded with emotion and heartbreak, and for however long, only the messy sounds of sleeves wiping at eyes and sniffing noses was audible.

"We're all" ragged breath heaved in, "going to visit you" heavy breath out, "all the time, Dad."

"Of course."

"At least once a week each."

"And we'll take you out-"

"For lunch or a walk."

"Anything you need, Dad"

“We want you help you, Dad. “

All of his children awakened from their human moments to reassure their Father of what they would do to help him. Parts of their declarations were to reassure themselves as well that they would not forget their Father like so many grown children seem to do. When he opened his eyes finally, he looked at his daughter; she looked so much like her Mother, and he nodded. Just once he nodded. His eyes shut again, starting a wave of tears racing along his wrinkles and onto his neck. Donald felt scared.

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Whenever he had been frightened or upset as a boy, his Mother would sit him so that he was cross legged in a mirror image of her on the linoleum kitchen floor. Their foreheads would lean comfortable against one another’s shoulder. Their same brown eyes would close to the world, making their bowed heads look like a prayer. Feeling her son’s head so weighted with the day’s trials, her head would lift from his shoulder, leaving an imprint of warmth. In a movement as natural as pushing a strand of hair behind her ear, she would kiss her eyelashes sweetly to his freckled cheeks until they lifted with the push of a grin onto his face. When he opened his eyes, she would look right back into his and press her nose against his smaller one, whispering “Time for bed, my baby giraffe,” which was the name she’d given him for the giraffe spots on his face that she refused to call freckles.

Snuggled with him in his bedroom, she would tell him about the baby giraffe whose neck stretched so far up that he couldn’t hear all of the other animals saying mean things. Donald liked to pretend her couldn’t hear the things his classmates said at school when his teacher left the room. They called him ‘weirdo’ and ‘ape-boy.’ They even were creative enough to create ‘Donald the Doofus,’ a name it took years for him to escape. It was only because he liked to catch bugs and climb high up in

the trees lining their school yard that he received such rude names, but with his Mother curled beside him after rubbing lilted figure eights onto his small boy's back, Donald let those cruel calls drift out and be lost in the night.

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*He looks so lost and confused*, his daughter thought after asking him again which of his long sleeved shirts he would like to bring back to 'Tranquil Meadows' because winter was just around the corner. Then she had a bright idea, "Why don't you go check on your garden, Dad?" This way he would be surrounded by some of his favourite things while she could finish gathering and packing up without upsetting him. His foot shuffling, hand clasping, and uncharacteristic hush had been making her worried since starting to sort through the house. After handing him a sweater from the pile atop a filled TV box, she made sure he was busy with his flowers out front before returning to her work. She left the front door unlocked to avoid confusing him like she had when he had tried to let them in upon arrival earlier in the afternoon, only to realize his key was not in his chest pocket as it had been for decades but rather inside her purse.

Amongst his collection of colourful friends in his garden, Donald knelt down to greet his green children. The garden had once belonged to his Mother, and she had taught him almost all of the plants that decorated the front wall of their quaint home. His anxiety evaporated into happiness as he identified each of his garden's contents with complete ease: daffodils, hostas, sun flowers, hydrangeas, tiger lilies, delphiniums, poppies, lupines, day lilies and moon flowers. Of course, many of them were shying away from the changed season, but they were old friends of his and bobbed hello when his arm brushed past them in reach of a damaged and bud-less Bleeding Heart plant he'd tended to as a boy on

one of the fortunate days he had been allowed into the garden. Donald still remembered how to prop up a broken stem with a few well-placed sticks, but as he rose to find a few, he forgot why he was out in the garden at all. Thinking that he must be heading out for a walk in his woods due to the glorious weather, Donald brushed the dirt from his beige slacks and set across the lawn in the direction of the trail that starts where the street ends.

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*Ellen won't mind my going out for a few hours,* he thought comfortably upon entering his familiar woods, *she's always so wonderful about my adventures and sets aside plate for when I get back home again.* He had loved his wife. Donald had loved her as naturally as a leaf is green. And she had loved him like the sky loves the clouds; even though they disappear at times, clouds always have a way of coming back, just like her dear Donald on his treks into the trails. In both storm and shine they had stood by one another with hands linked together. She was the only woman he'd ever longed to kiss, and the only one he ever had.

Alone on the trails, all Donald wanted was to remove his wool sweater. Though the afternoon was shifting into evening, the occasional sighs of breeze were not enough to cool him. Recognizing a tree from his youth, he shrugged off the heavy layer and hung it upon a short branch. He'd named it the 'coat hanger tree' decades before due to its small stature and dumpy jabbing limbs. Even today it still looked the exact same, but having lost some of that boyish brown flop and having gained a good few feet of height, Donald could not say the same. Continuing on his walk, the sleeve of his sweater caught in the sighing breeze and waved farewell at him in parting.



The shadows leaned into him and pressed grey over his eyes as he still followed the trail, but Donald had become confused with the departure of day. He had never ventured into his woods at night. He wandered farther along the trail and took deliberate steps after a few frightening trips and slips. These woods were not his with darkness poured into them; he could not remember where he was on the trail, and he wondered why he hadn't thought to bring a sweater with him for this walk. His brown eyes stretched wide in searching the immovable black tunnel ahead. Chest rasping in the clutch of white knuckled awareness, Donald arrived abruptly out of the forest. He felt overwhelmingly exposed after spending uninterrupted hours in tree cover, but as he drank fresh open air, his eyes overflowed with the scene he'd entered and he forgot to fear. It felt like a dream to him, with the gaping sky watching over the lines of graves.

There was grace in the slightly sloped hills all swept with strands of gold. He desired for the breeze to return and stir the tall grass, but this scene felt as though normal forces would have no effect. Donald wanted to sit a while; he wished to join in the restful atmosphere now that he could hear the swollen silence of it. Quiet, oh how dulcet it tasted in his ears and how swiftly it intoxicated him. An especially bent tree was where he settled, and he rested his head against the smooth bark with lips barely ajar. Plum red, over ripened to a deep burgundy wine, and a bleeding mahogany stained the fabric of night with moody tones that barely clung to the horizon. Donald didn't notice, his eyes were closed to the world. His head was bowed like in prayer. His dusty grey hair drowsed in the whisper of a breeze. Exhaustion draped over his failing body with the weight of quilts being tucked in around him; the weight of existence that he still remembered.

