

### The Hardest Goodbye: A Memoir

I remember the first time my sister made me cry. It was a warm August day and we were walking through the streets of an intimidating college campus. A light breeze gently rustled the olive-green trees back and forth like swings swaying in the wind. I could hear the intermittent sounds of laughter and sobs from the people around us, a mixed bag of emotions like the ones stirring inside me. We were telling jokes and laughing loud and off-key at stories that didn't even make sense to try and get our minds off of the hurtful reality of my sister's imminent departure. We put on grins for the final pictures mom took for her album, for the memories that would soon be all we had left. I remember how beautiful my sister looked that day, how radiant and full of life with the sun beaming down on her like a spotlight, illuminating her from head to foot. The image of her there is still imprinted on my mind, as fresh and vivid as the photograph in the album. She was holding my hand tight, although her's seemed twice as big as mine. I remember the feeling of security that simple touch gave me, as if everything would be okay – every storm could be weathered, every obstacle conquered – if only I continued to hold on to her like this.

Mom and Dad didn't say much. They looked around and whispered to each other in Korean, the emotion in their voices tangible. Up until now, I'd assumed that they would always have all the answers, but I guess that at the moment of goodbye they were at a loss for words as well. Too many words and never enough time to say them all. I'd rehearsed a speech in my head, but I couldn't remember it anymore. My mouth was dry, my hands clammy. There was a tight feeling in the back of my throat, making it hard to breathe. I looked away, blinking into the bright sunlight, unable to meet my sister's eyes because mine were stinging with tears. We stopped in front of a white sandstone building, large and vintage, like something out of an old movie. Silence settled into the space between us. The noise around

us faded away into a steady background hum. It was like someone had pressed pause on the movie and left me without a script or stage directions. I was lost.

*This is it*, I thought, but the feeling that pierced my chest was too painful to face. The end of the journey we had been on together, the journey that was all I knew. From this moment on, the only certainty was that nothing would ever be the same. The knowledge of that scared me more than anything. My sister had always taught me to chase my dreams. Now it was time I let her chase her own. So I swallowed the lump in my throat and gave her one last hug, forcing a watery smile onto my face. I refused to cry then, but I knew I would inevitably cry later, when the dust had settled and the moment had passed and all I had left to look back on were the memories. Mom and Dad took their turns hugging her, giving her last pieces of wisdom and whispering sweet messages as she sobbed into their arms. Unlike me, they knew when to let go.

I watched my sister walk away, away from me and into her new life. Tears still streaming down her cheeks. I realized the forced grin on my face matched Mom and Dad’s, the kind of smile you fake when you are too broken inside. They put their arms around me and we walked away in silence. Suddenly, the warm August day didn’t feel warm at all.

For the past twelve years, it had been me and my sister against the world. We used to film videos together on dad’s old flip phone when we were younger, camera-quality sepia-toned and shaky. Our world was no bigger than a brick house and a green yard and two kids, immortalized in grainy film. Even today, I still sit down and watch the last video we took together, this time on an iPhone that crystallized reality and captured it perfectly. The same memory of us walking through the streets of her college campus, narrating and laughing as we went, even knowing that each step brought us closer to the last. I

could almost convince myself that we could always just be two kids dancing through a beautiful August day. Sometimes when I close my eyes I can hear the sound of our intermingling laughter, as clear as if she were sitting right next to me again. I remember my sister telling me that nothing was going to change, that it would always be us in our own world, except now that world extended beyond the backyard and those seemingly endless summer days. Now that she’s gone, following her own path and chasing her dreams, I have realized that there will come a time when I will have to do the same. I’ve realized that she can still inspire me from far away through the glowing memories that we share.

I remember living room dance parties punctuated by our favorite songs. I remember laying under the pillow forts that we spent hours building, laughing our way through childhood movies. Most of all, I remember watching my sister walk away. It was the first time she ever made me cry.

**Well-Worn Paths: A Love Letter**

Dear Friend,

I still have the photograph from the day I first met you, tucked into my album. I'm swung over Grandpa's shoulders, back when they were still as strong and steady as the trees that lined your body. We're both smiling wide, mine gap-toothed and lop-sided, his indulgent as he glances up at me. The shape of you, an overwhelming mountain, is a towering silhouette in the background. If I stare at the photograph long enough, I can almost hear the distant echo of the chirping birds and the smell of the spring breeze, nipping gently at the tip of my nose. You, illuminated by the beautiful March sunset, lit up by amber flames as if you are taking the spotlight all to yourself. Back then, you seemed giant compared to the buildings out in the distance, the sprawling landscape before you that you called your kingdom. Even though I was only four years old, I can still remember being awestruck by your beauty, by the minute details that seemed to paint a watercolor painting, preserved and immortalized by a timeless photograph and a flood of bittersweet memories. I held tightly onto grandpa's hand, desperate for an anchor amidst the overwhelming force of your presence. You were intimidating and I, scared to say hello, had Grandpa lead me through your paths, whispering old stories about his childhood spent running through and memorizing your trails. He used to stop and tell me to listen for a moment to the intermittent sounds of nature at work. A distant bird call, the rustling of leaves, footprints left in the dirt. He could categorize every creature, tree, and flower we saw, pronouncing its name with articulate Korean syllables that I could barely comprehend. I can still remember the intense vitality I felt in those moments; I had never felt so alive as that day Grandpa introduced me to you.

*Ready, action!* I dart through the trees, leaping over rocks and dodging branches as if they are imaginary bullets. I glance back as my family trails behind, the hot summer sun burning my face and making my shirt sticky against my back. As I wait for my parents to catch up, I pick up a stick and swing it around, pretending it is a sword as I fight off an invisible enemy. I play a mini movie in my head: *The enemy has almost caught up to The Mighty David. As he is about to strike from behind, David swings his sword around, slashing the glinting blade through the air... and misses. He falters, but manages to pick himself up and gives one last ferocious strike through the monster's heart –*

“David!” My dad’s voice cuts through my daydream, telling me that it’s time to go. I sigh and slowly stroll down the mountain. We descend the path that I’ve long-since memorized. I don’t need Grandpa’s help anymore. The hero’s journey is never easy, but I’ve learned to forge ahead on my own. As I hear a bird chirping in the distance, its call echoing through the valleys, I can instantly recall it. *Magpie*, I instinctively think in Korean, remembering the easy tricks that Grandpa taught me to categorize the different types of bird calls. Even though my Korean is still shaky, it’s as if you’ve helped me connect with my culture in a different way than just conversations shared over the dinner table. It’s been so long – it took me three years and a thirteen-hour flight since to get back to you – and who knows when we’ll see each other next? As we reach the end of your trail, I throw one last look over my shoulder into your mysterious depths. *Here’s to many more adventures, Friend.*

The light fall breeze floats through the air and the leaves slowly begin to tumble from the trees. Their vibrant colors stand out like neon signs. I’m in middle school now, and it seems as though the freedom for childish games has been traded for books and schedules. Now that I’m older, we don’t get to see each other as often. Each time it’s as if I have to meet you for the first time all over again.

I still hold onto Grandpa’s hand, but this time I’m the one that leads him along the path that’s as familiar to me as my name. His grip is frailer now, and his hair is sprinkled with white, like a coat of frost over a neatly trimmed lawn. He falls behind, and I have to pace my steps to match his. He looks tired, an expression I’m not used to seeing on him, but his smile is still as bright as ever. It’s as if being in your presence has brought his youth back to him for a moment. After taking our time, we finally make it to the top. I’ve never been up so high before. Grandpa points to the sunset up ahead, radiant and incandescent on the horizon. His eyes seem to glitter as he beholds it, so much spirit still left inside. I notice that the buildings in the distance are taller now, and sometimes you even seem small in comparison. Less intimidating. But to me you will always hold a sense of wonder and grandeur, and you will never cease to inspire me with the way you carry the weight of the sky on your back. If I close my eyes, I can almost convince myself that no time has passed at all. Grandpa puts his arm around me, the weight warm and familiar as we take in the breathtaking view. It is moments like this when seconds seem to stretch into infinity, captivated by the wonder reflected in our eyes.

Finally, it’s the winter of eighth grade. I’m thirteen, supposedly older and more mature. I’m sorry that it’s been so long since I’ve seen you. Life’s been hard and stressful. I’m expected to manage all this newfound responsibility. I wish I was like you – you always manage to stand strong, planted firmly on the ground as you reach for the sky. The distant calling of the birds stirs a sense of nostalgia within me. The dead branches are reminiscent of the times that we played pretend together along your trails. They crunch under my feet with each step, the skeletal remains of our imaginary world. I lift my hands out of my coat pocket and pick up a stick, giving one last swing, and it’s as if the enemies that the Mighty David once battled seem so much more real now. Chunks of snow slowly dance down from the sky, melting as they touch the ground. As I sit beneath your trees, my chin tucked into my favorite navy coat, I realize that time feels like it simultaneously stretches forever and goes by in a split second. Life is funny like that. It

feels as though I've lost touch with a part of myself that I want to get back. An innocence, maybe. Or a naive enchantment with every intricate detail of nature. Reconnecting with you means I'm reconnecting with the little boy who used to play beneath your shade, endless adventures waiting behind every corner. Coming back to you feels like coming home.

A day will come when my grandparents will no longer be able to climb with me, and to them you will be just a fond memory to look back on and an old friend to reminisce about. It is up to me to carry on their legacy and continue the tradition, so that one day I can lead my own children along your paths and teach them the same lessons you taught me. The end of one journey bleeding into the beautiful beginning of another. I know that now I may be too old to play pretend and swing your branches around as if they were swords, but I realize that maybe you've been the real hero all along.

Thanks for everything.

Yours truly,

David