HE ROSE GARDEN

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My family played a game whenever we were waiting in line or on a trip somewhere, whenever we were here and wanted to be there. We would define things. It always started the same way, with my mother saying, "Indianapolis." And someone, my father or me or my brother Sammy, would say what Indianapolis was. My father's favorite was, "Indianapolis is a bunch of people living in small towns who woke up one day and realized that there were so many small towns, it was now a city." From there, other people would name terms, and we would all try and offer the best definition for them.

My parents started the game with each other accidentally, back when they met at Indiana State, my mother a nervous chemistry major and my father an awkward would-be journalist. When she asked him to define what journalism was, he stammered something that involved Woodward and Bernstein. She was able to offer a far better definition, so good in fact that it led her to become a journalist. My father quietly switched his major to math, something he was actually good at.

He taught calculus at a high school on the east side of the city, close enough to the county line that my parents, both raised in small towns, had a chance to acclimate themselves to living in a city. My mother got a job at the Indianapolis Star and worked her way up until she was writing opinion columns, with occasional stints in the Travel section.

One of those stints, a series of articles on places to go over weekends, included a monastery in Southern Indiana with a famed rose garden. Since my brother Sammy liked flowers, and since neither my father nor I had anything else to do, it became a family trip.

My mother drove, as she did on almost every trip we took. My father only felt comfortable, he said, driving routes he was familiar with: short trips to school, the supermarket, or the tobacco store; he'd turned my recent driving lessons into a way to be chauffeured through long-delayed errands to unfamiliar places. My brother and I sat in the backseat, struggling not to touch each other. At sixteen and fourteen, we were both old enough not to fight, but young enough that we still wanted to.

Ten minutes out of the city, after my father had quit messing with the radio, my mother changed lanes and said, "Indianapolis."

A few seconds of silence went by and then Sammy, my younger brother, said, "Indianapolis is a city built on a river that's too shallow."

I rolled my eyes. The point of the game was to make your definition true, of course, but funny at the same time, and to try and make it seem subtle.

"That's a good one," my father said, trying to encourage Sammy, who never seemed to put much effort into the game. "How about a car?"

"A car is a rolling waiting room," I said. My answers were always better than the ones Sammy came up with, which were either boring or just non sequiturs.

"Grass," Sammy said. He always looked out the window for things to define; we'd defined signs, grass, and guardrails at least half-a-dozen times over the past few months.

My mother changed lanes again, unnecessarily. She always thought better when she was doing something else. "Grass is an edible carpet."

"How far away is this place?" I asked.

My father looked out the window at the nearest mile marker. "About an hour or so, Ike."

After I was born, my mother was still kind of loopy from the drugs, so my father had free reign to name me after Newton. Sammy's birth was a natural one and my mother was awake enough to want to name him after Sammy Davis, Jr., whom she'd interviewed for the paper once. Out of all the Rat Pack, she thought he was the best; Dean was a phony, she said, and Frank, she thought from looking at his eyes in pictures, probably beat women. She thought Peter Lawford was just okay.

Sammy had been looking around the backseat and he found a brochure from the place we were going to, tucked in the pocket on the back of my father's seat. He pulled it out and glanced at the pictures.

"Rosevine," he said.

My father closed his eyes tightly, remembering the wording on the brochure. " 'A tranquil retreat from a hectic world, featuring one of the largest rose gardens in the Midwest, as well as an award-winning vineyard.'" He remembered formulas and theorems as easily, which had been part of the reason he became a math teacher.

"Cheat," my mother said.

"A cheat is a coward with the high ground," I said, and my father looked at me. There was nothing he could do; you couldn't get mad at someone for playing the game. It was one of the rules. In the rear-view mirror our mother smiled.

Rosevine was just outside a small town called Wilson. The monastery sat alone, surrounded by cornfields and woods. A small parking lot full of cars stretched in front of the ranch house the three monks lived in. It looked, my father said, like a group home.

A man stepped out to meet us on the porch. He shook my mother's and father's hands, then nodded at Sammy and me.

"You must be the Reynolds," he said.

"Father Bell?" my mother asked.

He nodded. "What would you like to see first?"

"Could you take us on a tour of the buildings?" my mother asked.

"Well," he said, his pale face twisting in on itself, "Father Ewyer is presiding over a wedding right now, so the chapel's full. How about I show you the garden?"

He led us around the side of the house to the gardens in back. The roses and grapes rolled down a slight hill, blocked from the road by the house, the chapel, and an old stone winehouse. Wildflowers edged the other two sides.

We stood and looked out at the roses for a few seconds. My father put his arm around my mother, who jotted a few things down in a small notebook. Her pencil tip broke and she rummaged through her purse until my father dug a mechanical one out of his pocket.

“They’re beautiful,” my father said.

Bell nodded. He’d acted as a tour guide before, enough to know how long to be quiet. After a few more seconds, he smiled.

“Would you like to see the winepress?” he said.

“Sure,” my mother said. As we walked over, skirting the edge of the garden, she said, “I should have made the photographer come with us today.” My father quietly reassured her.

The winehouse was the middle building, in between the chapel and the house. The door was open, and inside looked cool and dark. Standing on the shiny hard-packed dirt in front of the door, Father Bell talked about the monastery’s history.

It had been founded in the 1850s by a group of German monks, he said, and the town had grown up around it. Originally, both the town and the monastery had been named “Helige Rose,” but during the First World War the town changed its name to Wilson and the monastery became Rosevine.

Sammy and I wandered away, over to the grapes. Father Bell didn’t seem to notice; I imagined people left during this part of the tour quite a bit. He and our parents moved inside.

In between the evenly-spaced arbors, we were shaded from the sun by the grapes, which hung like cats’ tails from window ledges. I could still hear Father Bell’s lecture, his words rolling smooth and clear down the walls and out the door like wine from a cask. Occasionally his voice would stop, and I could hear my father asking a question about winemaking, probably to use in a word problem on a test.

Sammy had wandered over to the rose garden’s edge. “What kind are these?” he asked, pointing at a bush of deep red roses.

“How the hell should I know?”

“They don’t look right here,” he said.

We wandered through the garden, along paths of stones pressed firmly, dogmatically, into the rich soil. From the chapel the sound of muted organ music seeped through the stained glass windows. I heard Father Bell’s voice more clearly and turned to see him leading my parents out of the winehouse, towards a room jutting out from the monks’ home.

"State regulations," he said. "We have to keep the sale of wine a certain number of feet from where we make it."

My mother leaned forward and said something to him. His voice rang out loudly. "No, not since the seventies. There used to be enough of us here to do it, but if we tried it now it would take months to fill orders. Besides, stomped grapes only seem to appeal to people if the wine comes from Europe."

As they wandered inside, I turned back around and didn't see Sammy. I shouted his name a few times, as loudly as I dared that close to a church, and walked quickly along the paths to find him.

Near the giant stone sundial in the center of the garden, I shouted a few more times. Suddenly he rolled out from underneath the sundial.

"You found me," he said. "Now it's your turn to hide."

When I shook my head, he said, "Come on, Ike. What else do we have to do?"

I thought about it, realized my only other option was trying to get an uninterested Sammy to play the definition game, and then said alright. He lowered his head to the sundial and started counting loudly.

I sprinted towards the edge farthest from the road. I slid in under some orange roses, face up, flat against the dirt as he shouted out, "Ready or not, here I come."

I lay hidden, watching the clouds moving through the gaps in the branches above me and listening to Sammy's footsteps. After ten or fifteen minutes, as ants began crawling on my back where my t-shirt slid up from my jeans, I started to wonder if Sammy was actually looking for me, or if he was waiting for a shift in the wind to bring bees and drive me out.

Swatting ants from my back, I army-crawled back onto the path and stood up. Sammy was at the other end of the garden, near the grapes. We started towards each other, meeting at the sundial. I wiped dirt from my ass.

He walked to the edge of the smooth stone middle to smell some of the roses. I looked down at the sundial. It was large and looked old; the raised metal hand that cast the shadow was rusted and the deep lettered inscription on the face looked worn. I held my hand up to block some of the light so that I could read it. It was some passage about plants taken from the Psalms.

I caught Sammy's eye and led him through the garden back to the grapes. A smooth-looking wooden bench sat against the side of the winehouse, looking as if it had been planted and trimmed along with the flowers. We were in the shadow of the building and in its calm dark coolness I was able to look out over most of the monastery without shading my eyes.

All the noise from the chapel had stopped and I wondered if the service had ended sometime while I was hiding. Just then the doors opened and a couple raced down the steps, followed by a crowd throwing birdseed.

"Why don't they have the weddings out here?" I asked. "Instead of in that little church?"

Sammy shrugged and slid along the bench to the other end. I watched a monk tending the roses. Sammy, down near the doorway to the winehouse, tapped the old stones with his fists, trying to get some sounds out of them.

Finally, our parents came out of the building where the monks sold the wine. We both turned when we heard our mother drop her purse. My father hurriedly picked it up and handed it back to her, prompting her to giggle a little bit. Father Bell was nowhere to be seen.

My father walked over to us, one arm around my mother's waist. In his other hand he held a cigarette.

"Ike, I need you to drive us home," he said. "Your mother's had a little too much to drink."

She laughed and laid her arm gently on his shoulder. "I always was a little bit of a lightweight," she said, and then she giggled again.

That explained the cigarette; my mother had been after my father to quit ever since I could remember and would normally never allow him to smoke around her or us.

I stood up and, with Sammy next to me, followed my parents back around to our car. Sammy got into the backseat quietly; I think he was surprised at seeing his first drunk up close and having it be our mother. The giggling got to me too, and I was glad she made no noise after she got into the passenger seat.

I spent a long time adjusting the mirrors; I'd only had my license for a few weeks. My legs were longer than my mother's so I slid the seat back, to

the sound of a groan from my father, whose legs were longer than mine. I gave him a nervous smile over my shoulder and slid the seat back up.

"Are you sure you can't drive?" I asked him.

"Look, Ike, I would if I could but I can't drive us home. You know that," he said.

"Well, yeah, but we already came here so you should kind of know the way, right?"

He sighed. "I'm right here behind you. Just pretend it's another driving lesson."

I pulled out of the lot a little too sharply and I heard my father's head slap against his headrest. His fidgeting, nervous knees knocked the back of my seat. My mother started to snore lightly.

The insurance agency said it was the other driver's fault. The other driver, a sweaty cell phone salesman, said it was his fault. The police, as a tow truck dragged the salesman's blue sedan away, said it was the other driver's fault. But, waiting in front of the supermarket for the EMTs to finish bandaging Sammy's glass-cut arm, the real blame was created silently among us.

My mother thought it was her fault, and never drank again, not even the eggnog at the paper's Christmas parties. The eggnog was made by the editor-in-chief and his wife, with so little alcohol as to be almost tapioca pudding poured into a glass. It was better that she quit drinking; her legs had twisted in the collision, damaging her circulation, and a doctor said later alcohol would only make her feel colder.

My father thought it was his fault, and began going on road trips, little winding drives along country roads through the cornfields of Hancock County until he was volunteering to drive us anywhere.

I thought it was my fault, and the vehemence with which my parents insisted that it wasn't made me only more certain. I brought my bike out of the garage, replaced the inner tubes, and started riding it everywhere.

The signs that Sammy had torn the ligaments in his right arm didn't appear until the next day. It was a month later, after the two surgeries, that he was told that he wouldn't be able to use it anymore.

As my father drove us all carefully home from the hospital after the last surgery, Sammy, sitting in the passenger seat, decided to play the game. The rest of us played along and kept our eyes on the thick interstate traffic.

Eventually, as we rolled slowly towards the Post Road exit and we'd almost run out of things to define, Sammy turned to face the rest of us in the car. He said, "My right arm."

My father hunched tighter over the wheel, his eyes flicking back and forth between the rearview mirror and the road. My mother looked hard out the window at the back of an apartment complex. I looked Sammy right in the eyes, a flush running to my cheeks.

"My right arm is?" Sammy asked.

If we thought of anything, we kept it to ourselves. I crushed the brief thought that his right arm was a broken oar and his body a stranded rowboat. I imagined my mother would have said Sammy's arm was a widow or an orphan, a result of poor editing, and that my father would have said the arm was a remainder, some accident of long division and indivisibility.

Sammy looked at us for a few seconds and then turned back around. We drove the rest of the way home in silence.

A week later, after a visit with apologetic doctors who said he could take the arm out of the sling, Sammy asked my father to drive him to a nursery. He went inside alone, and came out quickly holding an infant rose bush.

He planted it in the front flowerbed near the edge, between my mother's columbine and my father's clematis, with one of its small branches leaning out far enough over the grass that I had to mark it out with rocks so that I wouldn't mow it over.

Occasionally I would hear my parents talking about the accident, and if they should talk more to Sammy about it, beyond occasionally asking him if he was alright.

"We should just let him be," my mother always said.

"Let him be what?" my father would ask. "We don't know what the hell he's doing, what he thinks he's doing." And then my father would gesture out

the big picture window at Sammy, who would be working in the flower bed, a garden hose coiled around his bad arm at the shoulder as he patiently turned earth with the trowel in his left hand.

If my father approached the subject of the accident, my mother would throw up her hands and leave the room. Then my father would go stand outside on the back patio and smoke a cigarette.

The next summer, his left arm now muscled firmly like a spike driver's, Sammy added another rose, and another, so that by the time he left for college the whole flower bed was roses.

I had started driving again and I was the one to drive Sammy to Terre Haute and ISU, at his request. He'd wanted to be somewhat settled in before our parents dragged him through their memories of campus. We talked about how he hoped college would go for him. I told him again about how much I hated going to IUPUI and how I wished I wouldn't have partied so much at Ball State.

About halfway there, on an almost empty stretch of road, I turned as much as I could to look at Sammy.

"I don't know if I ever told you this before, Sammy," I said, "but I'm sorry. About your arm."

He still had some control over the muscles near his shoulder and he flopped his arm out across his lap, his limp fingers seeming to point at me.

"It wasn't your fault, Ike, but thanks." He picked up his right arm with his left and shook it a little bit, something he'd started doing a couple of years before to creep out his first girlfriend and that had since become a kind of conversational habit of his.

"It wasn't mom's or dad's fault either," he added. "I don't blame anybody."

"You can say that you blame me, Sammy. I kind of expect it."

"Look, Ike, I don't blame anyone. It's like that game you and mom and dad always like to play, that definition one," he said. "I just don't like breaking things down like that."

"It's not like that, Sammy. The game wasn't, isn't, like that." I started to say more but Sammy turned in his seat, towards me, and lifted his right arm with his left.

"Fine then," he said. "My right arm."

I turned my eyes back to the road, hunching myself over the steering wheel. I said nothing, and my cheeks flushed. After a half-mile he lowered his arm and turned to look out the window.

Outside his dorm there was a folding table setup with a few wilted-looking balloons taped to the front corners. A peppy kid with an Indiana State shirt on smiled when he saw us and walked over to Sammy.

"Welcome to ISU," he said, sticking out his hand for Sammy to shake. "My name's Tyler. I'll be your RA this year."

Sammy quickly set his suitcase down and extended his left hand. "Sammy."

Tyler awkwardly switched hands to shake, his eyes staring too hard into Sammy's. He held the door, and then rode up in the elevator with us.

I dropped Sammy's suitcases off for him in his room and then we hugged, uncomfortably because Tyler was looking everywhere in the room but at us. Sammy's right arm, when he hugs, always seems to drift in front of him and it hung trapped between us; I leaned my legs out so he wouldn't touch my crotch.

The drive back was quiet and I could have driven faster than I did. Halfway home my mother called, wanting me to tell her how Sammy was when I left him. All I could think about, as I mumbled one word answers to her questions, was that without Sammy to prune them in the fall, the roses wouldn't look as good next year.

Sammy got married right after graduation, to a loud redhead with whom he opened a nursery down near Atlanta. They came up the next two years at Christmastime, Sammy driving and her switching gears for him. The third year he rode a bus up alone because she was pregnant; in the pictures he showed me, her belly looked like a mounded furrow. He said she was due in three months, in March, and I told him how rough it had been when my first wife was pregnant during the winter.

We, Sammy and I, had put together our own scenario of how our parents' accident happened: because of her legs, our mother kept the furnace on even that December, when we had a week of record-breaking high temperatures and some people were mowing grass as they put up Christmas lights. She'd probably sent our father, who'd grown used to sweating in his home no matter the season, down to the basement to check the furnace because it didn't seem warm enough to her. He would have gone just to appease her; he didn't know anything about furnaces. The furnace was on, but wasn't putting out much heat because it was leaking gas so thickly that it must have smelled terrible. He'd smoked for so long that he never noticed it. After making sure the furnace was running, he probably decided to smoke a cigarette down there, the only place in the house my mother still let him. And now what was left of the house would fit in two coffins.

They'd both wanted to be cremated, something they told us when Sammy left for college, as our mother was writing their obits for the paper to have on file. The process was quick, and we waited in the lobby. Sammy made small talk with the funeral director about flowers while I studied the patterns in the carpet.

Our parents never said what they wanted done with their ashes, but we figured they would have liked them scattered somewhere; even if they didn't, neither of us wanted to keep them. I convinced Sammy to wait until the weather got warmer to take care of them, and he agreed to come up after his wife gave birth. I waved to him as his bus pulled out.

In April, when he came back, the only place we could think of to scatter the ashes, the only place where we thought it wouldn't seem creepy, was the garden at Rosevine. It had been lovely then and was technically, as Sammy pointed out, the last place we'd ever been a whole family.

He slept through most of the drive to the garden; I knew how hard it was to sleep with a new baby in the house. I liked to think that it was the sleeplessness that ended my first marriage, that both my wife and I were too tired to try and make it work.

As we got out of the car at the garden, a man and a woman came out onto the porch to greet us. They were blond, in their early forties, and stood

close enough together, Sammy said, that it looked like holly growing through an oak's branches. They looked blandly, professionally, like each other.

"Good afternoon," they said. "We're the Larsens. How can we help you?" They talked in rhythm, finishing each other's sentences in a brisk fashion that seemed as if it had evolved around a water cooler and making it hard to tell which of them was actually speaking.

"We must have the wrong place," I said, "we're looking for a monastery called Rosevine."

"You found it. Are you two here for the wedding?" they asked, looking us up and down.

Sammy's suit had wrinkled during his bus ride and I didn't own an iron, so he and I looked, I flattered myself, like hard-boiled detectives from a TV show.

"No," I said. "We came here once when we were kids, and we wanted to see how it looked now. Where are the monks?"

The Church had decided to close the monastery a few years after we'd been there, the couple said, and they'd bought the place as a sort of early, working retirement.

"With wine sales alone, we made our investment back in the first three years," the husband said.

His wife leaned conspiratorially towards us and stage-whispered, "The Church has never been very shrewd when it comes to making a profit."

They were having a wedding there now in the chapel, and the reception was set up in the garden, so they couldn't allow us back there. We were welcome back the next day, but, they pointed out, we could still buy wine now if we wanted to.

We thanked them, said no to the wine, and walked back to the car. As soon as the house's screen door closed behind them, we grabbed the urns, me carrying our father and Sammy carrying our mother, and ducked around the house, back to the garden.

There were fewer roses and more grapes now, "for higher fiscal returns," I could almost hear them saying. A table with wrapped presents blocked the door to the winehouse, with some gifts spilling over to the wooden bench Sammy and I had sat on. More tables, some with punch bowls and others with

big metal trays sitting over sterno cans, sat scattered throughout the grape arbors. Smaller round tables surrounded by chairs dotted the rest of the open space, with one, probably for the bride and groom, sitting isolated in the center of the rose garden where the sundial had been. A few bored caterers leaned against the back of the house, looked up when they saw us, and then went back to chatting with each other and smoking cigarettes.

We walked to the center and the bride's table. I unscrewed the top of our father's urn and looked at Sammy, figuring that the edge of the clearing was a good place.

"Not here," he said. "Over in that back corner."

I put the lid back on loosely and we wound our way to the corner farthest from the house. It was the corner, I remembered, with the orange roses I'd hidden under. Then they had looked good, with rich, Victorian blossoms that covered up their naked stems and obscene thorns. Now they were weaker and more decidedly modern; someone had hacked the sagging branches to make more room at the edge of the path.

Sammy said, "Right here. These need a sweeter soil."

"We should say something," I said.

Sammy looked out over the roses, then back up at me, and shrugged. "Like what?" he asked. "You're the one who was always good with this sort of thing."

I wondered why I hadn't thought of anything to say at this moment during the months the urns sat on top of my fridge. "Goodbye," I said simply.

"Goodbye is saying hello to the end," Sammy said.

I thought for a second that he'd picked up some sort of airport mysticism until I saw the look in his eyes, the one he used to get whenever we were playing the definition game, a look like he was checking every book in a library for misprints, and I remembered the conversation we'd had on the way to ISU. Maybe he'd been right then, but here, in this garden, I felt that I was.

I knelt down and dumped our father's ashes out; Sammy did the same for our mother. There wasn't any wind so the ashes fell into two small heaps off to the side of the path. Our father had been taller than our mother and I was numbly surprised that their remains were the same size. We stood and Sammy handed me his empty urn.

“They’re not taking care of these flowers right,” he said. He used his feet and then his good hand to mix and then spread the mounds of ash loosely around the base of the flowers. “If they don’t do something soon, they might lose most of this corner.”

We stood and looked down at the orange roses for a minute. Sammy had swept back the ashes so that I had to concentrate to see them, standing where I was, and they looked almost like sunlight filtering through the bush onto the soil below. He pulled out a handkerchief and nodded at me. After a second, when I realized what he wanted, I took it from him, opened it, and laid it out flat in the palm of my right hand. He carefully wiped his hand off on it and then stuffed it back into his pocket.

As we walked back to the car, one of the caterers met us near the parking lot.

“Hey,” she said. “What were you guys doing back there?”

Sammy and I looked at each other and then back at her. “We were inspecting the soil,” he said. “We’re from the state agriculture department.”

“Oh,” she said, and walked away.

We made it back to the car, and as we pulled out of the lot I saw a window blind move inside the house, and a hand. I wondered if the Larsens had seen us and then decided against it; they would have run out with a hose, probably, to spray the ashes away as we left. Or maybe they would have been kind and just charged us.

Sammy fell back asleep almost as soon as I made it to the interstate, after he and I agreed to come back later for a more proper ceremony. I told him I would try and come back the next weekend or maybe the weekend after that, and bring my second wife with me, and my kids, if they wanted to come.

I had wanted to ask him if the orange roses would do alright and if the couple would just turn the whole place over to the grapes and, if they did, if the ashes would make the wine taste different.

But I was glad Sammy was asleep: if he were awake we would quickly have run out of things to say, which is to say that, like all families, we would have grown tired of calling things by other names so that we could actually say them.