Weary Constellations.

Nom de plume: Sam Willoughby.
Student: Sarah Ann McCleary
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In a moment of sheer philanthropy, weeks ago, I casually promised Betty that I would drive her to Mudgee so that she could visit her dear old friend June. I don’t quite know what possessed me. Actually, I do - the very idea of being a good granddaughter, the best granddaughter, gaining brownie points from Betty herself, and both Maree and Doug. I guess one never grows out of the old habits of trying to please. I suspected, in all honesty, that this would be forgotten, as so many things I tell Betty are, lost in the hazy black-hole of fading memory. Or at least that we would not find a weekend that suited both of us. Not the case. But I could hardly go back on my word, and I wouldn’t want to anyway – Betty means the world to me.

The car trip was fine, as far as car trips go. I did enjoy driving, after weeks of being desperately carless. Overwhelmed by the freedom of having control of the wheel, the liberation that comes of quiet winding roads through dappled forests. Time to stop. Time to think. God, I missed driving. I missed my car - that beautiful, old, temperamental gentleman of a car. That silly pistachio-gelato green BMW with right-hand indicators, and faulty headlights, the potentially unhealthy whir of the engine hidden by music, constant and loud. But the music was neither constant nor loud on our journey. It’s an odd paradox of deafness I guess – Betty has little tolerance for loud music, bizarre, given she can barely hear me speaking – just nods and agrees, getting frustrated. It was oddly comforting driving past Alex’s house, and dining in his favourite restaurant. I felt that Betty needed to know about Alex (not Alexander, as full versions of names denote trouble)- but what to say? “That’s where one of my friends lives- you’ve never met him. I’m quite possibly falling in love with him, or at least into something a lot like love. He was a bit of delinquent at school, and spent most of year 11 and year 12 in an alcohol induced haze, but he was just going through a rough patch. His dad has cancer, you see, and is dying, slowly and painfully- lovely man, I was talking to him the other weekend while watching Alex play rugby. We talk as if we’ve known each other for years, but we haven’t. Maybe we’ve known of each other for years, maybe now we can just put faces to names. I ache each time I speak to him. Ache with the knowledge that when he says he’s fine, he’s not. Always aware of the pain he’s in, aware that any moment could be final. Inspired by the way he just goes on, he continues to exist as he always has - still working, still watching his son run up and down a field for eighty minutes every Saturday, life goes on, but with more afternoon naps, more checkups, more periods of hospitalisation, more pain, more pain relief. What are you doing with your life Sam? he asks, and I know he genuinely wants to know, and because of this I don’t go straight to my auto-response, I muse momentarily, before I answer...I don’t really know, Sir, I’ve been trying to decide what I’ll do for the last 6 years. At the rate I’m going, I’ll probably end up teaching. Oh - don’t teach, he says, what if you end up with students like Alex? What a nightmare. I slept in a swag in a cubby house with him once- Alex, that is, not his dad, he has warm feet, post-midnight nonsensical chats and body warmth, given that I have such geriatric circulation. ... Alex listens to Radiohead when he sleeps, we both do, though, separately more often than together. He hasn’t been sleeping that well actually. Neither have I, truth be told. I met his mum once, though can’t remember her at all, given that I was disastrously intoxicated, at a friend’s twenty first - probably clutching a cigarette at the time- apparently I made a good impression though, and that’s all that matters, right? Anyway, that’s his favourite restaurant on the right. He loves it there. We’re actually quite close these days, oddly close, maybe
artificially close. And we’re actually quite similar these days, oddly similar, perhaps artificially similar. Hazy, sepia memories. Gin and Tonic at the bar, and a Vodka Redbull for Pte, who, while shouting her order at me through her poor cold-ridden throat, mentioned that Alex had asked her to tell me that he was over there, holding up a table, and on his way to being merrily drunk. So, with G&T sans lime in my hand (apparently I was lucky they had tonic water, let alone lime. Curious the little luxuries one gets used to). Went to find him. Suddenly swept off my feet. Dangling in the air. You know, you can put me down now. What if I lose you? You won’t...Found Alex again, and went outside for a cigarette, although he doesn’t smoke and a cigarette was actually the last thing on my mind. Sadly, visceral reactions were the first thing. Knowing that the bathroom queues were so disgracefully long, I excused myself from the clever little banter, perched myself on the edge of an old bathtub in the garden, and caught up with my mind. Atticus? Can we go home? So, off we went, me clutching a plastic cup of water and ice, hoping to sidetrack my nausea with aqua. Without a word to the people we were gone, with some guy named Carl, to the cab rank, though I probably could have done with the walk. Cold under weary constellations. Alex had ducked back to find a jacket, so Carl and I chatted, sitting on a park bench by the courthouse in the dead of winter, who knows what about. Alex, probably. So who are you then? His Mrs? Something like that- I went to school with him. So where are you staying tonight? His. Oh, I see... Two episodes of scrubs later, the slurred, sloww, witty banter ceased. In a tangle of limbs I was at once the most comfortable and the most conflicted I had been in a while. My phone rang in the middle of the night; but that was after Alex and I had swapped sides, given his penchant for ridiculous pillow configurations and his far broader than mine shoulders, and so I could no longer reach phone. Do you want me to get it? No- if it’s important they’ll leave a message or call back... My right hand clasping his right hand. My right foot with his right foot, at the foot of the bed. My head resting on his arm. His chin resting on my head. My face against his chest. His hand at the small of my back. His lips lightly resting on my forehead. Hours later, the sun poured across the world, but not across our darkened room... I talk to him most days, probably more than any other person, but it’s usually inconsequential, and it’s usually just to pass the time – Betty, do you ever wonder if you’re perfect for someone, like soul mates I guess, but that the two of you are just in different places in your life?” I look to my left in hope of some recognition from that wise old sage, hoping she’ll tell me that I should tell him how I feel, hoping she’ll somehow reassure me that he feels the same. She snores quietly beside me, her chest rising and falling with each feeble breath.

After arriving, somewhat exhausted, from a long car trip made longer by the limited choice of music, we found June in an overwhelmed flood of tears at the fact that we’d arrived at all. And in an instant, every assumption I’d made came crashing down. June did not live in a quaint little cottage, garden rambling from fence to fence. She was much less spritely than I remember. But I hadn’t seen her since Poppy’s funeral. And I was six then. We drank tea. And June cried. Overwhelmed by the very idea that her old friend Betty had come to visit her, and perplexed that Betty had a granddaughter who loved her so much that she’d spend 5 hours in a car with her just to visit a friend.

“Betty, I love you...”

“That’s nice, June...”
It was at that moment that my heart broke a little. Was this my Grandma? My little Betty? Who wouldn't even humour an old forgetful friend with three little words, or, four if you add ‘teo’ to them. Caught in thoughts, I realised that Betty isn’t actually one to throw the ‘L’ word around frequently, if at all. Perhaps she did once. Before Sue died. Maybe her heart’s a little bit broken too.

We drank tea. We sat around the same little table, and drank tea. The two of them reminisced. The stories were fantastic, the first time. Still amusing the second time. The third, tragic. Trapped in a time-warp of memory, unsure of what was real and what wasn’t. And it wasn’t just June. Betty, too, dragged out all the old stories.

I remember when Sam was four, and John was still alive. He loved her. He loved to tease her. ‘Look Sam, look! I’m getting out of my chair – watch how quick I am. Don’t blink – you’ll miss me.’ ‘Grandma,’ my four year old self would say, ‘I’m sure she means well, but it doesn’t help. She makes a scene of June’s inabilities – her faulty memory more than anything. ‘Oh June, you really are hopeless.’

And June would sit, and nod, and cry, and be lovely. That gorgeous, vain old woman. Still beautiful, though a mere shadow of the beauty she must once have been. Sam – your legs are so long. Would you just walk around so that I can watch them? How tall are you? You seem so tall. I used to have a nice little bottom like you. Just like yours. Just the right size for a slim young woman. I don’t know where it’s gone though. It’s just vanished. Please don’t cook. You can’t cook – I won’t let you. I should be cooking. That can’t be true. No one enjoys cooking. You’ll make someone a lovely little wife one day. How much do you weigh? You really are a tiny person, a tiny, lovely little person – you mustn’t weight much. I’m 7 stone. I have a size six waist. I always have.

And Betty would laugh, somewhat cruelly, patronisingly. I’m sure she means well, but it doesn’t help. She makes a scene of June’s inabilities – her faulty memory more than anything. ‘Oh June, you really are hopeless.’

We go to the hospital. I drive. June criticizes. I drive too fast, it seems. 50 in a 50 zone is too fast. I might miss a turn. The hospital smells of bleach and death – you can smell it from outside. I compose myself and walk through the glass doors. I truly hate hospitals. We walk to Don’s room. June’s husband, that is. We walk slowly. Very slowly. Uncomfortably slowly when one has legs as long as mine. Don is dying. Callous as it sounds, I wish he would just die. He’s so old, and so ill, and poor old June spends all her time worrying about him, fussing over him – she forgets about herself. Forgets to eat. Forgets to shop. Forgets to turn the taps off. I think I’ll see this week through, Don pipes up – apparently he’s not as asleep as we thought. I can’t die first. June and I have been battling away for sixty years, I can’t let her win this final round.

I excuse myself to read a book, to escape this all-too-real reality. The conversation increases in decibels around me. June has lost her glasses. Frantic. Blind. Betty laughs. Tells June not to be so silly. I help June, patient and kind, hug her, tell her everything will be fine. That I’ll find her glasses, and she’ll be able to watch the rugby. Maybe Betty’s unfeeling tone is a mix of embarrassment and fear. Perhaps she’s realised that
we all worry about her own deterioration. Her awkwardness is fear. The ebbing of youth.

In the quiet of the night, the house sighs, exhaling after a long, long day. June and Betty snore quietly from their separate rooms. The hot water system creaks. The front door squeaks, I wish it wouldn’t. I sit outside, in the driveway, in the dark. Sitting under an old gum tree, listening to possums scrounge around. I take a cigarette from my pocket and slowly smoke. Slowly smoke and think. Watch the stars. I always watch the stars, and it kills me that they’re never as clear in the city. Kills me. I watch the stars and think. I think of the thousands of millions of years that the same old weary constellations have glimmered in the eve. Distant dots of alabaster on an ebony sea. It’s not death I fear, it’s growing old. Growing inexcusably, insufferably old. And June can’t remember her birthday. Maybe it’s Wednesday. Maybe it’s not. The ordeal is too much. It’s too real.