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Finding Roots

Settling into a window seat, I tuck the begonia cutting into the edge of my handbag, the roots wrapped in sippy paper towels inside a plastic sack, and the leaves poking out of the top. The leaves showed a little wear, droopy, as though in a state of shock. A split had appeared on the biggest one. I could feel its discomfort, its tiredness. I was tired. Forty-four hours visiting my mother is demanding. During our visits these past six years, we try to stay positive, but moments of sadness always creep in. I try to visit more frequently, in part because I have the time, and in part because I feel a longing to learn more from her, to cherish her, and to reassure her that life—although not always fair—can emit rays of light when you least expect it.

I sensed everyone, specifically the flight attendant, was watching me as though I was importing a bag of invasive zebra mussels from the Midwest to the East Coast. The look of the plant wasn't helping, appearing as though it was trying to escape its captor. As self-conscious as I was about lugging around a plant, I laughed thinking about the lady I heard about on the radio who brought a live turkey onto a plane as a "comfort pet." Maybe my new begonia will serve as a comfort plant. I already felt a connection to it. Although looking a little fatigued, I could see its potential. Silvery spots speckled the emerald tops, a slight crinkle to the edge looked like vintage paper, the faint rose-colored underbelly revealed dark veins, pulsing with my family's history, and long slender stems felt lithe as a mouse's tail.

My life up until recently was fragmented, slightly chaotic in its structure and function. So perhaps this begonia—with its history of four generations, roots running deeper than I am accustomed to—will offer a tangible connection to all the cleaved pieces of my past. Perhaps this begonia will remind me that no matter how many roads we travel in life, full of curves and bumps and wrong turns, home is just a state of mind.

I couldn't wait to get back to my small row house in Washington, D.C., and give my most valiant effort to keep the plant alive.

Trait one: Over the years, begonias faced trials and tribulations, making some species resilient to misfortune, but not necessarily rigid to change.

Six years ago, I remember waking up, rubbing my eyes, disoriented about the time of day, and blinking at my phone screen. 5:45 a.m. Waves thumped against the hull of the boat, rhythmic, in sync with my breath, then crumbled away. Rain pounded on the deck above me. As I stared at my phone and the three missed calls from my mom, the text message from my friend caused my heart to lurch into my throat, "call your mom ASAP."

I had just arrived at a port in Viareggio, Italy, having landed ashore the night before after sailing a boat up from Tunisia through a mistral. Facing ten foot swells, we took an extra four days due to numerous setbacks: weather problems, engine problems, crew problems, bilge-pump-breaking-and-taking-on-water problems. Winter can come early in the Mediterranean.

Even though it was almost midnight where she was, I didn't hesitate, knowing something was wrong. Six time zones and an ocean away, nothing mattered. She picked up on the first ring. Her voice sounded small, distant, and frail, like we were talking into tin cans connected with a wax string 4,698 miles long. It was my father, technically my stepfather, but those technicalities melt away when someone raises you from the time you were five as their own. He was dead. Shot in a tragic accident.

Birds stopped singing. The ocean drained. Sundials around the world fell over.

Lying in my bunk and staring out of the porthole at the raindrops distorting my view, salty pools gathered in my eye ducts and pain throbbed down the right side of my body. Midnight blue splotches spattered my thigh, hip, and arm, a reminder of the treacherous docking situation last night and how my jump from the boat to the wet dock sent me

careening. Nothing seemed serious, but the difficulty breathing made me wonder if I cracked a couple of ribs.

The pain paled in comparison to the agony from the news. The only thing I wanted was to wrap my arms around my mom's bony, sturdy shoulders and breathe in the patchouli, vanilla, earthy scent of security that lingers in her thick, wavy auburn locks. To tell her she would be okay. I would be okay. But I couldn't. I was far from home. A recurring theme for the past ten years.

I don't remember how I got to Indiana from the tiny Galileo Galilei International Airport in Pisa a few days later, but I do remember standing in the main plaza at the Indianapolis International Airport all alone. My diversion to the bathroom to vomit—a side effect of being overly distressed—extracted me from the gaggle of passengers on their way to baggage claim. Silver arches crisscrossed the rotunda windows revealing a black sky. Various kiosks selling hamburgers, books, sleeping pillows, and race car memorabilia stood behind cages, ringing me in Americana. Glass cleaner and modernism floated in the air and made me more nauseous. Standing in the shiny tiled atrium, I realized that I didn't come home enough, and that tragedy should not be what forces my hand.

Trait two: The begonia's lineage is unclear, having been crossbred, hybridized, and prone to circumstances that support irregular evolution.

During the months after the tragedy, I floated through the days: tending to the boat, going through the movements, and thinking hard about what I wanted out of life. Like a flipbook animation, my life revealed itself in slow motion, vignettes on how I ended up here. A page that lingered longer than the others was a simple image of a nondescript evening not long ago, when a friend and I were catching up over a few glasses of rosé. I had just returned from a month freelance gig on a boat in the Bahamas and was trying to buckle down again in my graduate program. In a concerned tone masked by laughter, she called me a vagabond.

Thinking upon that remark, which in the simplest terms categorized my life so well—bobbing from place to place, eager to try something new, moving on once life started to feel comfortable—I realized that my vagabond life came out of my own irregular evolution.

Being raised by hippie parents in a rural part of Indiana created within me an open, idealized mindset, yet one filtered with notions of small-town friendliness and tradition. Learning to entertain myself, with a freedom to roam the woods and creeks and fields, created a wanderer. As my childhood progressed, the push-pull of feeling like I was meant to be somewhere else, doing something else, grew stronger. My passion for science in school would compete with my time spent in the dark room or sitting in the backyard painting until dusk, when my mom would convince me to come in and eat dinner. Because she encouraged me to try new things, it had a resonating effect on my ability to stick with one thing or stay in one place.

I went to three different colleges before settling into graduate school. A year and half after starting my graduate program, I ran off to work on a boat for what was supposed to be three months over the summer, but turned into six. While my colleagues were spending their time on homework and projects, I was doing the same but also teaching Pilates, running a photography business, bartending, consulting on a water reclamation project for a green building, and skipping off to freelance crew on boat gigs whenever I got the chance. Most of my friends, family, and colleagues never quite understood, and at the time, maybe I didn't either. Was I searching for something? Some new experience, some new adventure possibly? Or was it just my *raison d'être* to ramble through life?

Derailing the Ph.D. track for a master's degree seemed logical at the time. I was ready to move along. With my eyes on Washington, D.C.—envisioning myself changing the world, saving the oceans—I immersed myself down a path towards a fellowship.

When I didn't get the fellowship, I felt as though a fluttering moth without a lamplight to flock to. I limped through my final weeks of graduate school. That was until a saving grace with a South African accent called me a day before my thesis defense. A captain friend I had previously worked for and who had showed me some of the ropes to crewing, invited me to join a boat on its way to Greece. With tens of thousands of dollars in student loan debt, I didn't take much convincing. Four days after graduation, I dashed off to Europe ready to start a new adventure on a 115-foot yacht, which did not require the advanced degree I had just earned. Dreams of traveling the world, living on the azure waters of the Mediterranean, sipping aperitifs, watching the sunset reflect off sapphire roofs in Santorini filled my head.

Trait three: Once begonias were given room to breathe, to be shared among the masses, they gained traction.

Psychologists say that feelings of uncertainty can make inertia more prominent. Eager to break my apathy and the haze of emptiness, I fumbled around in the months after my stepfather's death, and I started to rethink what would make me happy. Living on a different continent and not being able to support my mom during this difficult time didn't seem right. Plus the flicker of boat life was burning out, and I didn't know if I could handle another season. I struggled to place my finger exactly on the pulse of what I wanted, but for now it didn't involve floating on teak, fiberglass, and steel. The decision to leave the boat and try something new wasn't difficult, as I was always eager for a new city, a new job, anything with a dose of novelty. The difficulty was deciding what to do next. To balance the pull to be stationary with my passion for wandering.

Somehow I wrangled my way into a job working on ocean policy under the freshly appointed Obama Administration. What I had wanted when I left graduate school a year ago.

Perched in the leather captain's seat at the helm of the boat filling out security clearance papers, the gentle roll from the tide and the moonlight shimmering off white stucco houses stacked along the coast, I remember a feeling of hesitancy. Was I really about to give up this lifestyle to make a run at a professional one? I tried to convince myself that nothing lasts forever. And if this didn't make me happy, then I could just as easily move along.

Line one was the trickiest: current abode. I didn't have a permanent address. Technically I did, but it was a square foot aluminum cubicle at a Mailboxes Etc. in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where I seemed to have an oddly close relationship with the elderly woman who smelled of alcohol and ran the store because she knew more about my whereabouts than anyone else. I scribbled Port Vauban, Antibes, France, and listed the harbor master's name for the landlord, since we would be here for the next four weeks until we moved further down the coast. Page after page, I racked my mind to list the last ten years of places I had lived. Was it 644 or 446 4th St SE? And was I there for one year or two? In total, I had entered nine different addresses in those ten years, in four different cities, excluding the dozens of ports I temporarily called home. When I finished, seeing the black and white map of my adult life, thus far, triggered a crack in my itinerant seed, exposing my radicle to oxygen, supplying my roots with their first breath.

Trait four: Keeping a begonia alive depends on the variety—the heartier ones are that way because of the environment in which they were raised.

Weathered skin, short nails, and swollen knuckles pulled a few strands of single-root begonias from a mason jar of water. I could almost see the wispy hairs on the fibrous roots growing under the attentiveness of its owner. As my mother handed me the pieces of plant she asked if I knew what it was. I didn't; she is the one with a green thumb out of the two of us, *The Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening* for a brain. A fourth generation begonia stalk, it descends

from a plant of my great grandmother, Ella Kupferschmidt. In a loud voice, my mother turned to my eighty-three-year-old grandmother, who doesn't like wearing her hearing aid because it's too expensive and she is afraid of losing it, and queried her about the plant. My grandmother responded that it was her mother's and she remembered the pot it was kept in. It seems it doesn't want to die, she said, her dry humor getting funnier as she gets older.

I listened, amused, as they bantered back and forth about how my mom acquired her cutting years ago—did she get it from my aunt or directly from my grandmother's plant? Watching their interaction made me wish I visited more often. My mom scurried around the kitchen, her long greying hair barely masked by a topcoat of auburn brown, my grandmother sat with her head cocked, a short silver bob tousled and thinning, trying to listen. The similarities ran deeper than the surface, I realized, ones that I haven't gotten to see very much.

They say you don't know where you are going unless you know where you came from. Well, the one thing I do know is that my free-spirited, environmentalist mother can keep anything alive—even if she has to give mouth-to-mouth to wet kittens that I accidentally drowned, a three-year-old child who thought they were thirsty and wanted a drink from the pond. She has built her life around taking care of people, plants, and pets alike. I think of her as an old oak tree that provides shelter from the rain, sturdiness to lean against, and nourishment to grow. Like an oak tree, whose underground limbs can course for miles, her resilient roots run long.

In the forty-four hours I had spent in Indiana on that trip, I stood amazed at the brilliance and determination my mother has for life. The hand-sanded hardwood floors that she spent months stripping bare to uncover the century-old wood in her farmhouse—her new home and project since the six years after the death of my stepfather—revealed a strength, wrapped in sweat and tears, that permeates her bones. I stood in awe as I held a six-foot tall metal stake while she hoicked a sledgehammer over her shoulder, driving it into the packed earth, so that we could restring the wire for her half-dozen, fifty-foot rows of blackberry and raspberry plants. As I inspected her not-yet fully painted barn where the second story eaves were just out of her ladder's reach. As I stood by the patch of ground where she had sketched out her plans for a chicken coop that, of course, she will erect herself. Her resiliency to build and grow and nurture is one I admire. She knows that it will take two years before she will see berries grow on her new plants. She knows that work is never done until you finish the trim. She knows that before you can harvest eggs you must build a coop.

One thing my mother has taught me is that most things in life require effort if the foundation is to be strong. The part that escaped me is not the effort but the foundation. Most of my life has been spent making decisions that require little more than a whim or change in direction of the breeze. As I age, however, my interests and values are shifting. Spending time building something that lasts has become more desirable. Finding a way to grow my roots has appeal.

Trait five: Propagation of begonias can be as easy as taking a cutting from a leaf and giving it some water to regenerate. Under the right circumstances, they thrive.

Sitting at my kitchen table, I discern how well my begonia revels in its new home—on top of a bookshelf next to a south-facing window—with leaves that have tripled in six months. The early sun illuminates the veins, dark and thin, running through the broad, outstretched emerald fronds. Hazy dust floats in the streams of light providing an ethereal, dream-like quality to the plant, accentuating an antique look—like a handed-down piece of furniture with character defined by the generations of women who kept this plant alive. I'm rather pleased with myself for keeping the cutting flourishing. I'm rather pleased to have been in one place long enough to maintain a plant.

I may not have the most anchored roots, but they are there, germinating, burgeoning, and happy to find a spot in a sunny window.

