

Josef's Lake

by Jessica Blackbourn

Cori and I fly west from Comox in a tiny, aluminum floatplane, the medications stowed in a backpack wedged under my seat. The oval of sky visible at my shoulder is an orange haze of wildfire smoke blowing up from the Beaufort mountains, and my thoughts loop endlessly on themselves. I don't want to be here, but I'm a nurse and I have to be here.

Less than ten minutes in the air and it's suddenly under us, the narrow ribbon of logging road stitched to its shore. From up here, Josef's Lake is a blue, tear-drop jewel, a palm-sized gem nestled in the rough green silk of cedars and firs. It looks insignificant next to the vast Pacific nearby.

We begin the short descent, and I feel like I'm falling with no parachute; the last few days were nothing but a blur of long work hours and anxiety. I want everything to stop, to give me more time, and Josef too. I try to breathe slow and deep, ignoring the shuddering of the plane.

There was no one else available with experience. I checked. Summer staffing is thin, and there's only a handful of us on the team. It had to be me.

We touch down, rainbows spraying past the tiny window. I peel my thighs off the vinyl seat and Cori and I step out onto the homemade dock; nurse and physician, a tired team of two, single mothers.

My nose and throat are tight with smoke, my hairline sticky with sweat. I wish I could dive into the cold lake, grow gills or webbed toes. Instead, I reach for my water bottle.

I drink deeply and try to visualize the tiny, closed flowers of my kidneys opening softly in response, like complex blossoms inside my body. It's not how kidneys work, I know that better than most, but it's how I've pictured them since childhood. Imagining that when I swallowed water, they bloomed like soft-petaled roses, happy, refreshed. Nothing feels that way today.

Cori checks her watch and strides down the lopsided dock to the trees. She's expected back at her family practice this afternoon. I shove the water bottle into the side pocket of my bag and follow her. This is not about me—this phrase has been my mantra.

Glen waits for us on shore, his ancient pick-up parked under a cedar.

The three of us seem too ordinary, too casual in our shorts and t-shirts and sunglasses. If I can't stop time or swim away, then I want speeches and a ceremony, some dignified elder to stand open-armed in the woods, hold a sacred space and somehow keep me safe in it.

"How's your dad?" Cori asks, pushing her sunglasses up onto her hair.

“Pissed off,” Glen opens the passenger door. He’s a sixty-ish ex-logger, ex-smoker, full-time caregiver. He looks exhausted.

Cori and I climb onto the long bench seat. The truck smells of spicy green pot.

“The logging roads are closed because of the fires, so I haven’t been to town in over a week.” Glen gets behind the wheel. “We’ve got all the basics, but Dad ordered a special bottle of schnapps from Germany weeks ago. It’s been sitting at the Post Office since last Friday.” He turns the truck around. “He wanted a last taste of his youth.”

My sweaty hands press down on my knees, and I wonder again if Josef ever regretted his decision so many years ago, or if his son now regrets it for him. I wouldn’t blame either of them.

We travel over a salal and blackberry-tangled road, under towering firs and over roots as thick as my thigh. Another minute and giant trees give way to a garden exploding with pink peonies, restrained by a sagging net fence.

Josef’s small cabin is wrapped with grape vines and a purple wisteria. I walk inside and find him in the big back bedroom.

“Hi there,” I sit down on the edge of his bed, and he flashes me a dry-lipped smile. He’s wedged upright against the handmade headboard, nestled among pillows.

He’s lost more weight. It’s not surprising; the cancer has taken almost all of him by now. The last time I saw him at the clinic I could count nearly every vertebra—and that’s when I found it. An old scar, over his left kidney. Dazed, I’d stared at his back, knowing that place in my own flesh, knowing my own scar matched his exactly. Without thinking, I’d asked him about it, and he’d said, “I was an anonymous donor. About twenty years ago,” with his usual simplicity and a quiet pride. That was it. That was him. I hadn’t slept well since.

“You made it,” Josef croaks at me now from his bed. “I’m a mess.”

I hand him the cup of water from the bedside table, and he takes it in a bony hand.

“My Claudia was here the last time you came to the cabin.” He holds my gaze and takes a sip from the straw.

I nod.

When his wife first got sick, she baked apple cake for the nurses who came to help her manage her pain. They listened to her hopes and fears. Eventually, she was too weak to bake, then she couldn’t stand the smell of food. When the cancer overtook her, she applied for Medical Assistance in Dying.

Josef was strong for Claudia, but after his own diagnosis, he came to town for all his healthcare appointments, and that was the only reason he ever left his property. I imagined he didn’t want us in his home again. Not until the paperwork was done and he was ready. Not until today.

“Hello, Josef,” Cori says, standing at the end of the bed, one hand on the fleece blanket covering Josef’s stick-thin shin.

It’s thirty degrees outside the house, and warmer inside. Sweat pools at the base of my spine.

“Hello, Doctor Cori. I’ve been stuck in this bed. Three days.” Josef’s voice cracks.

“Five, Dad,” Glen says.

“The bed we’ve slept in since the Kinder were small.”

Josef talks, sipping occasionally from his straw, and tells us about being a child in Germany after the war, about moving to Vancouver Island, and logging, and the crab pots that he and Claudia set out at low tide. He tells us about building garden soil from the seaweed they hauled up the cliff, and about his wife’s garlic pickles.

His breathing is quick and shallow after he says all these things, as though he’s been chased through his stories, but had to tell them one last time.

Then, with a twinkle in his eye, he says, “I am one of the last great chauvinists. I never changed a diaper.” He looks at Glen. “But my son has changed mine.”

Cori gives the blanket a gentle squeeze.

A silence stretches, shielding the four of us. There is only Josef’s breathing and the birds outside in the trees. There is peace here, and I don’t want to disturb it, as though it were mine to keep. But Cori and I have been through this together many times. I know what comes next.

“You asked me to come here today, Josef. Is it time?” Cori asks, clear and soft, “Do you want me to provide assisted dying now?” The words fill the room.

Josef’s face softens, and he closes his lake-blue eyes. “Yes, Doctor Cori, I will go to my Claudia now.”

Glen leaves the warm room. He comes back a moment later, his arms filled with four simple bouquets, each one a giant pink peony surrounded by lavender. The stems are gathered and tied with flagging tape, their ends dripping wet. I imagine Glen picking the flowers in the cooler morning air, setting them in a bucket of water in the shade.

Glen hands one bouquet to me and one to Cori and lays a third next to his dad on the bed. Glen’s own flowers hang heavy in his big hand.

Josef clears his throat. “These are for you. From my Claudia, and from me. From our life.”

I’m sitting very close to him, can smell lavender and a hot room with too many people in it.

“You are angels to come to me here. Angels,” Josef says quietly, looking at me.

This is the sacred circle I need; this man, a hand-built cabin, these precious flowers. Josef created it all himself, has shared it all with us, with me.

I want to tell him now, the need so strong I grip the mattress under me and clench my teeth together.

I need to tell him about my matching scar, thin and silvered on my back. Tell him that I know in my blood, filtered through the healthy kidney he gave up years ago, that it’s because of him, his selfless act, that I am here at all.

They wouldn't tell me much about the donor when I was nineteen, but I became a nurse because of that experience. I want to tell Josef that I am here, in this room, because he saved my life, and I am here, at the end, to help him let go of his.

But I can't say any of that, not now. There isn't enough breath left between us.

"Thank you," I let myself say instead.

Cori asks father and son if they would like a few moments alone, but Josef shakes his head. Maybe this room and the giant trees that shelter it have already heard everything they needed to say to each other.

Glen sits down next to his dad, flowers everywhere, and holds his hand while I let go of my own bouquet and try to do my job. Josef isn't as badly dehydrated as some; I find a vein and insert the intravenous port.

I let go of Josef and move out of Cori's way. I note the time, then look back at him, my tears brimming.

It doesn't take long.

"Do you have friends coming to help?" Cori asks Glen.

We stand outside now, bouquets in our arms, surrounded by the sound of bees.

Glen nods, wiping his eyes.

He's been through this once before, and still has the special transport license, though the logging roads were open last time. I try to imagine the staggering task of moving his father's remains out of a cramped cabin, into a truck, through a forest, then down haphazard stairs to a shallow beach at low tide. Glen and his friends will carry Josef into Glen's boat and will travel to the landing about two and a half kilometres south. The van can meet them there.

"Is there anything you need us to do?" I ask him.

Glen shakes his head.

There should be a meteor falling from the sky, a plague of locusts, a tsunami. A giant bumblebee perches on my knuckle instead, then zooms towards a patch of sunflowers. It's not the end of the world.

I squeeze stems in my sweaty hand and think of the cool, bottomless lake, the same colour as Josef's eyes. I want to be submerged, heavy and inert in liquid dark.

"He liked you. He was glad it was you," Glen says to me.

I can't stop the tears.

They flow down my cheeks, gratitude and grief squeezing out of me, and all the unsaid words falling onto the blossoms in my arms. Maybe I am the soft-petaled thing; and maybe my tears will find their way into the lake, and all our bottomless hopes will be gathered there together, safe in the dark.