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My Grandma

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My Grandma

The Ervins, who lived down the road from us, were old when we moved in. She wore gray braids wrapped around her head; he was missing a thumb, completely blind.

They raised chickens and kept a jersey cow. I'd walk the half-mile to their house for a gallon of sweet jersey milk. Their house was old too, with mismatched siding and black coal smoke stringing from the chimney. Behind the back door stood a hand pump and a few rainbarrels for catching bathwater. He'd feed the chickens, feeling about the yard with his cane. Once I arrived to find that he'd killed his favorite hen. A board had been propped up against the barn to form a sort of lean-to; Mr. Ervin knocked the board flat and walked across it as smoothly as if it were a bridge over water. Only it wasn't water underneath but a chicken, who lay smashed and breathless.

It seems that the Ervins grew older. The year of their sixtieth anniversary, all six children came home and put down linoleum in the kitchen. Then, in another year, he died. I went to the funeral and saw him in his casket. He was wearing overalls.

She lived on for awhile. Her braids came unwound, and the nurses combed her hair into a long ponytail. They also dressed her in knit pants. She looked like a teenager in a science fiction movie, eerily aged.

Some time later, she died, and before I knew it, there was Dale, her son, standing on the front porch of his parent's newly-sided pale yellow house with matching garage. The jersey's pasture was now a rolling lawn of lovely, close-cropped green. I didn't see any chickens.

The years are marked by nothing. The years are quite unremarkable. Time moves in increments, each one thin as a hair. Thin as one hair at a time until your whole head is gray. Whether you notice this and are shocked, or whether you notice and are only mildly surprised, it doesn't matter. The point is it turned gray when you weren't looking.

One day I walked down our gravel lane, past the Ervin's house, all the way to South Mutual-Union Road, where I stopped at an old barn. The barn needed a new coat of red paint. It sat alone, unconnected to any house and surrounded by cornfields.
I climbed into the loft; I looked down through the high-cut square window at the rows of corn, as neatly lined as the teeth of a comb. I sat by myself in the deserted barn; I sat high and lifted up, exultant, and I claimed it for my own. On another day (not long after the first, but when, I couldn’t say) I found out that a farmer planned to build a house beside the barn. This is not right at all, I thought, because I already own the place. I wondered: should I protest? Pour sand in the bulldozer’s gas tank? Lie down across the fresh concrete foundation and refuse to move? I never quite got around to any of this. Instead, one day (not long after I found out about the farmer’s plans, but exactly when, I couldn’t say), I noticed that the house was built. A ranch house, with federal blue shutters. Bushes bordered the sidewalk and lawn chairs lined the porch.

A farmer wants to build a house near my barn. I woke up one morning to find it built, brick upon brick, brick by brick. So this is it? This is living? A chance reflection in a mirror and would you look at that: I’m old. A peripheral view of my neighbor’s son and an idle thought: Now where did old Ervin get to?

So this is it? This is dying? Cell by tiny cell until I wake up, so to speak, to find myself dead? “We finish our years like a sigh,” the psalmist says. It seems as though we move through our years in much the same way. And, as most of our breathing is inaudible with our eyelids pulling downward, a sigh becomes a very welcome sound. At the least, it indicates we’ve noticed.

I know I’m waiting to wake up. Waiting to crack my days wide open. I think of the past, see my own life stretched behind me, and nothing comes to mind. Surely something has gone on here, taken place. But I scratch my head. I can’t recall.

My grandpa tells stories. He walks jaggedly, his right leg deadened and nearly useless from the time he was shot, his left knee laced with arthritis.

He propped himself up against my grandma’s light blue silk-lined casket during her viewing hours. He shook hands with his free arm. When the crowd had thinned to a few groups of murmuring people, grandpa decided to move, stiff-kneed, away from the casket. But his dead leg caught the edge of the floral carpet and he pitched forward, unable to break his fall with knees
as useless as hinges crusted with rust. Grandpa lay on his stomach, panting, and the women all screamed and dashed toward him, perhaps envisioning more hospital visits and more flowers to send. Grandpa rolled over on his back and looked into the anxious faces pressed close. He seemed surprised. Maybe surprised to find himself lying flat on his back with organ music playing in the background. Maybe surprised to find that his wife was lying in a light blue casket nearby. Maybe surprised to find that the cane sprawled just out of reach belonged to him. Whatever it was, he must have decided that he didn’t mind. “I’m all right,” he said happily. “Just practicing.”

My grandpa tells stories. His life is not a smooth unfolding of days. I know, because he tells me so. Time is a mountain range, and he leaps from peak to peak. Triumphant or failing; it doesn’t matter. The idea is that something is happening here, and it is as easily marked as an upraised thumb.

I see an old man, half-deaf, who can’t walk straight, and words are falling out of his mouth with perfect clarity. It’s a good thing. Otherwise I don’t think I would believe he had ever really lived at all. Who’s to believe we’ve been around if we don’t tell them about it? If we don’t plant a flag and stand for a photograph?

I heard this: Once, in the Karahoram range of Pakistan, there was a mountain-climber named Alison Hargreaves. She reached the summit of K2 and radioed to her base camp that she was at the top. After she put away the radio, she died in a snowstorm.

Thank God she radioed. For who would have known what she’d done if she hadn’t? Someone in her base camp told someone else, and now I’m spreading the word.

Not too long ago, I climbed into a greyhound bus for a trip home: my brain thoughtless, as smooth and unlined as an apple. The bus rumbled north on Interstate 77. I wanted to end up near my mother and father, near my brothers and sisters, who had gathered around my grandma. My grandma: the withered vine. My grandma, who was dead. Lying close to the black soil of Ohio while I traveled her way.

I was on vacation in North Carolina when she died. “It’s a
shame," said a man I know down there. "Makes you wonder why she had to go and die this week." I nodded and laughed, a sound as airy as soap foam. O death! Where is thy convenience?

I went to the nearest town to buy my bus ticket. The station was really just a gift shop with a card table set up in a corner to sell tickets. The woman who worked there, her gray hair curled in tiny shrivels, closed the shop just as I arrived. I could see her inside as I pounded on the plate glass door. I tried to look desperate, dramatic. I wanted her to recall the movie she had seen where the slick-haired hero must buy that ticket, must get on that bus, or his secret love would never be revealed.

But this didn't happen. Instead, she rolled her eyes at me and unlocked the door, glaring while I fumbled for money. I wanted to lean toward her, close enough to see her scalp so pink in between every gray curl and say, "I am going home because my grandma died. She is dead. Now give me a bus ticket." I didn't say this of course. Maybe I should have. I might have moved her to tears, moved myself to tears in the telling. I might have said how my grandma had suffered for seven years with Alzheimer's disease, how she had raised four perfect children, how she would never see all of her seventeen grandchildren grow up. Perhaps the lady at the bus station would have handed me a tissue and told me about her aunt who suffered too, who was presently wasting away in a nursing home down in Salisbury. We might have parted after an embrace, an exchange of addresses, a free bus ticket. But of course, this was not the case. I left, and she slammed the door behind me.

The bus smelled like flesh left untended and hand-rolled cigarettes. I sat next to a man on his way to Mt. Airy. He was born, raised, and married twice in Mt. Airy, the land of Andy Griffith, where everyone resembles tobacco leaves. He talked to me for 40 miles straight, his vowels sliding out of his mouth like drool. Every few miles I threw in, "You got that right," and I noticed that my own mouth relaxed until each word came out sideways.

We both talked through slits as thin as dimes, our heads leaning drowsily against the seat cushions. "Why you goin' home?" he slurried toward me. "Grandma died," I slurried back. He paused for a moment. "I was born in Mt. Airy," he said.

I was twelve or so when my grandma began to change.
Pieces of her memory, the edges of her personality: they sort of melted away. My grandma was a footprint, impressed in sand. There are sad facts to tell and retell, to mull over while lying alone in bed. She pinned washcloths together for underwear. She sat in the car on Tuesday, dressed for Sunday School with a Bible in her lap and cried because no one would take her.

My grandma became an odd woman. She was an odd woman by the time she died, not normal at all. People stared at her in restaurants. My grandpa would coax her to sit down, coax her to eat, coax her to leave. People stared at them when they drove down the road. She would cry if he went faster than 30 miles per hour. She was everywhere an odd woman.

My grandpa told me this story: One day they were driving along a country road. A carful of teenage boys was following them, honking and hanging out of the windows. Get off the road, old man.

My grandpa could, in his days at the A&P warehouse, carry 300 pounds of dead weight. Three one-hundred-pound bags of sugar. But now, his skin sticks a little closer to his bones. All his mass is concentrated in his stomach, which is lined with scar tissue from the time he was shot. My grandpa is an old man.

He was an old man when those boys were following him, when they were scaring my grandma, huddled in the front seat. But grandpa stopped the car anyway, right in the center of that deserted country road, as winding as the scars on his stomach. The car behind him stopped, too. I imagine it: the tension as palpable as it was the day he competed in the sugar-carrying contest at the A&P. He sauntered up to the boys and said, as cool as iced tea, “In a hurry, boys?” He went on, “Because I’m not. I got all the time in the world.”

-- Sarah Dye