

## Manatees

After a series of mishaps, my grandfather agreed to wear a helmet while going about his daily business. I had lobbied for the relinquishing of his car keys, as a measure that would protect the entire community. But my uncle Walt—his son—argued that it would be an affront to his manhood. Besides, he reasoned, “People are texting and watching television while driving these days.” I disagreed with the logic that things were already so dangerous on the US highways that adding one brain-addled 95-year-old to the mix wouldn’t make any difference. My grandfather recently had surgery for a “macular hole,” and lost most of the sight in his left eye along with his peripheral vision. If the state of Florida wouldn’t revoke his license, I considered it my civic duty to take the matter into my own hands.

I arrive at the West Palm Beach airport on a damp and drizzly day in late afternoon around magic hour, a phrase that feels ironic in this setting. It’s a time of day I love at home in Southern California but loathe here, where the mugginess hangs in the air like a blanket that won’t let any light or happiness in. I haven’t told my grandfather my arrival time because he’d insist on picking me up at the airport. I figure I’ll rent a car, and then call and tell him I’d already arrived. As long as it’s a *fait accompli*, he won’t press the issue. He’s not an argumentative man, just a prideful one.

I pick up the rental car and head toward his house in Riviera Beach, descending several economic levels in the space of the ten-mile drive from West Palm. More than a place that looks like it’s seen better days, like parts of Cleveland or Detroit, it looks like it never had those days in the first place. People think if you live near the ocean, you must live in paradise. They’re wrong. I pass block after block of liquor stores, bail bondsmen offices, and fast food joints,

punctuated only by empty lots, along the route. An Applebee's would stand out here as too upscale.

As I pull up to that familiar address—329 8<sup>th</sup> Street, written out hundreds of times on the envelopes of my weekly girlhood letters—my grandfather stands on the small porch, anticipating my arrival. He looks oddly frail, this once barrel-chested bear of a man. His stance is tentative, as if he could be knocked down by a strong wind. Over his full head of bright white hair, he wears a soft brown helmet that resembles those worn by football players in the old days of the sport. White bangs stick out from under the helmet, pressed in a sharp straight line across his forehead in the Prince Valiant-style haircut he'd worn for decades.

He sees me and heads down the stairs with surprising speed, if not his former grace. His limbs jut out like matchsticks, and the way he moves—stealthy yet uneven—reminds me of a spider. I park the car and jump out to hug him. He grabs hold tightly and unsteadily, and I fear I'm now holding him up.

“Grandpa, why don't you use your cane?”

He ignores the question. “My beautiful granddaughter is here.” He looks me over and lets out a thin whistle. “Sexy as ever.” I let the comment slide, alarmed that he's aged ten years in the two years since I'd last seen him.

He gives me an exaggerated wink out of his right eye, his left is covered with an eye patch like a pirate.

I look into his one eye and smile. “That's quite a get-up.”

He laughs good-naturedly. He's able to laugh at himself perhaps better than anyone I've ever known. And we understand each other. We have that kind of instant connection, a familiarity that goes beyond blood, one I've had with only two or three people in my life, none of

them in my immediate family. It's a level of bonding that almost makes me believe in reincarnation—that rapturous sense of being in love, without concerns of age, gender, or blood relation. A dance of souls. I can say things straight out to him, without sugar-coating, and without fear that he'll be hurt or angry. This is why I flatter myself that while no one in his immediate family has managed it, I am the one who can convince him to surrender his car keys and move out of his castle.

I pull my bag out of the trunk and he extends an arm as if to take it from me.

“Is that all you brought, Ellie?”

Putting the bag over my shoulder, I interlock my arm with his and point us toward the steps. “I travel light. And besides, I'm only here for a week.”

Inside, I am greeted by the smell of six decades of life lived in a 1200 square foot box in a humid climate. My grandparents had always been hoarders and neither of them was very interested in housekeeping, but these past two years without grandma around has sent this place into Department of Health territory. I fear his state of mind was worse than I'd thought and am convinced that I'm right about getting him out of here. I deposit my bag in the back bedroom, which he has “cleaned” for my visit. The stacks of magazines and books and 40-year-old cardboard boxes full of mementos have been pushed aside to create a two-foot-wide path to the bed. I breeze through the room, holding my breath, and quickly gather up all the bedding and towels and throw everything into the ancient washing machine at the end of the dark hallway. Later I will scrub the bathroom, replace the sheets, and wash more sheets to cover the rest of the room. I've never heard of contracting asthma in your forties, but this would be the place to do it.

A contractor by trade, my grandpa built this house for my grandma when they moved here from Arkansas in 1950. He bragged that he had bought the twin sofas in the living room at

J.C. Penney's when they moved in for \$50, and they'd never needed replacing. To say he was cheap misses the point. He'd lived through the Great Depression and for him, spending money on nonessential items was strictly for suckers.

The bond I've always felt with my grandpa has grown even stronger over the past two years since my grandma died, a few weeks shy of their 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In their early 90s, they still called each other "doll" and "handsome" and held hands on their nightly neighborhood walks. Uncle Walt and his daughter, my cousin Sandra, took care of my grandma's funeral arrangements. But I was the one who was with him nearly every waking moment. We pored over the photos that told the story of their life together, and he never tired of telling me the hidden intrigue behind each image. Our tears and laughter became indistinguishable in our grief. After I went back home, he started calling me at least once a week to talk about grandma or reminisce about his childhood. Previously he had phoned only for special occasions or emergencies, in the style of his generation.

I'd met my biological father, my grandpa's other son, for the first time at my grandma's funeral. He lives in New York City and finds work as the distinguished older man in commercials. My husband and I refer to him as "bio-dad." My mom had a one-night stand and never saw him again, and she and my adoptive dad never had any more kids. So my grandpa is not just my only living grandparent, but the only relative with whom I'm close.

Back in the living room, my grandpa sits on his chair like it's a throne, his arms arranged symmetrically on the armrests. He's doing nothing that I can tell, simply staring straight ahead, waiting for me to return. He looks up at me and smiles.

"Ryan didn't want to come with you?"

"It's not that he didn't want to, he just couldn't get away from work."

“Well, a man’s got to work.” He seems satisfied with that explanation.

“Besides, I kind of like having you to myself.”

He grins and launches into his favorite narrative: “what he did for this damned city” while he was commissioner in his 80s. I nod at the appropriate moments since I know most of these stories by heart. My husband Ryan could have been here if he’d wanted to, or more precisely, if I’d wanted him to. He loves my grandpa almost as much as I do. The truth is that we’re separated, after one of the worst fights of our 18-year relationship. I’d accused him of emotional infidelity when I read an intimate text exchange with a woman I’d never heard of. He was angry that I didn’t trust him. But the thing I couldn’t forget was the way he’d said, “You’re no fun anymore.” It wasn’t the worst insult in the world, but it cut deep, and I kept playing it over and over in my head.

“You’re no fun anymore.”

So now we’re living in the same house, what I like to call a “California separation,” when you can’t afford to keep up two residencies, but you’re estranged in every other way. Even though I feel like I can share anything with my grandfather, for some reason I didn’t want him to know my marriage is in trouble. I tell myself I don’t want to worry him, but maybe I’m afraid of disappointing him.