Man on Fire

The detritus of my grandfather's life wouldn't fit into just one dumpster. The first one was filled and toted away but the stuffing of the house still leaked from it seams: hundreds of binders of his scientific papers on embryonic corneal development, piles of souvenir spoons from family trips and his two sabbaticals in Europe, the frayed backpacks my mother and uncle had carried to school as children in the 70s, yards and yards of paracord and ropes of varying sizes, two broken vacuum cleaners dragged back from the town dump, a soldering iron, assorted garden tools, a dozen rusted harmonicas, and a massive collection of books. The things that could be were sold – his 2008 Volkswagen Camperbus, his twelve-string guitar, his fat tire bike. My grandmother rented a second dumpster and filled it with the rest.

It took a full week to clear it all out. My mother sounded exhausted when she called. I imagined her holding each object at the beginning, maybe still feeling the warmth of his hands on the composition notebooks he carried, smelling the mothballs he used on his old flannels. But as the week continued the weariness crept in. The inability to deal with the sheer size that my grandfather's life had taken on.

In the end, my mother drove back across the country to us with a trunk full of his most sentimental things. Among them was his collection of sheet music compiled into a teetering stack of spiral-bound notebooks, the result of a lifelong obsession with rock-n-roll. The notebooks had traveled with Grampy at each stop on his weekly music tour, which consisted of the full circuit of open mic nights available on Mount Desert Island, Maine. Monday nights was reserved for Geddy's, Wednesdays at Tap & Barrel, Sunday mornings at Project Social to hit the brunch rush. When we came to visit, my mother, brother, and I tagged along to his various

musical gigs. We stood in for my grandmother, who by that time had reached the limits of her patience with rural Maine's amateur music scene. During the weeks we visited, she happily took the opportunity to remain at home to watch The Rachel Maddow Show. We'd arrive at least two hours early, toting Grampy's assortment of gear and following right on the heels of the owner, who was usually unlocking the doors just as we pulled up in the Camperbus. As my grandfather carefully arranged his equipment, tuning his guitar and obsessively adjusting his microphone, my brother and I would chase each other through the hazy neon glow of the afternoon bar. At the front of the room, Grampy muttered to himself and hummed chords under his breath, preparing for the moment where he would take the stage to serenade the scattered 6 pm crowd.

My grandfather's performances were, if not necessarily acts of musical genius, a true testimony to his passion for the craft. With the bar lights haloing the wispy silver filaments of his hair, he arrived at the microphone with the stage presence of a one-man-band fallen on hard times. His guitar straps were fortified with duct tape, his harmonica was held up to his mouth with a contraption made from paracord and the dismantled metal spines of three-ring binders, and an overturned bucket provided the suggestion of percussion whenever he chose to gave it a resounding whack with his foot. Dressed in his customary attire of hiking pants, a button up shirt two sizes two large, suspenders, hiking boots, and two fleeces knotted around his neck, he belted out Elvis, Willie Nelson, and Waylon Jennings like a man on fire.

When my brother and I were young, he often brought us up to join him, assigning us the task of bucket-whacking in place of his foot. On three separate occasions, persuaded by my grandfather's all-consuming and somewhat demented belief that one of his grandchildren would become a musician, I performed my own original compositions at the open mic while my grandfather sat in the front row, an ecstatic grin nearly splitting his face under the glint of his

huge, round glasses. “This is the granddaughter I’ve been telling you about,” he’d announce to the patrons he’d befriended, clapping his hand proudly onto my shoulder. “The family musician.” At holidays, he and I would stage family sing-alongs, him on the guitar and me on the piano, performing fan favorites like “Albuquerque Turkey” and “I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas.” He shipped me binders full of musical arrangements, the sheet music crowded by the spindly ballpoint letters of his annotations.

It’s never been clear where my grandfather’s passion for music came from. Certainly no one in his family was a musician – he grew up in a small agricultural town in upstate New York, working to sustain a failing family farm. That side of the family exists as a shadowy question mark on my mental family tree, filled in only with the few things he would say before he changed the subject. I know that his sister lived there until she died, cycling through husbands, unable to find one that suck. I know that his father was mean. I know that they were very poor. We never talked about his mother.

In contrast, I know my grandmother’s whole side of the family up to a very distant ancestor that crossed over on the Mayflower. I’ve spent many summer afternoons with my grandmother and her identical twin, sorting through old marriage licenses and property deeds and photographs to pencil in names in the ever-expanding web of our genealogy. We sit in the formal living room of the family’s house in Wisconsin, which each generation of my family has visited each summer since it was built by my great-great-great grandfather a hundred years ago. My grandmother thrives on this, raised under the heavy sense of tradition.

On the summers that Grampy came to Wisconsin, he wandered around the house with the repressed energy of a penned dog. He didn’t get along with my great-aunt’s husband, who was raised in a Harvard family and carried an air of haughty intelligence with him that irked my

grandfather to no end. Grampy remained in his suspenders and hiking boots for dinner, while my grandmother and her sisters changed into formal dinner attire. While the adults sat on the porch and fanned themselves with issues of House & Garden, he supplied my cousins and I with boxcutters and helped us make fleets of sailboats out of milk gallons and cardboard.

Whenever he could, he escaped the summer house. On many of these outings, I tagged along with him, charting a course up away from the to the Village of Fontana Fen. As a child, the fen was a maze to me. The shrubs grew above my head, blocking out the light and grasping at me with the long tendrils of their vines. But above, at their height, was Grampy. He'd spent his career as a biology professor and knew endless things about plants. The facts came like rain, never scarce. I never feared not knowing them. *The Allegheny serviceberry is native to Wisconsin. The deer won't eat allium flowers. Echinacea purpurea isn't picky about soil type.* He recognized them, spoke about them like friends. *This is Queen Anne's lace. You can identify her by her white clustered flowers.* He picked flowers from the bushes and tucked them behind my ear, found the exoskeletons of cicadas and explained to me how they produced sound from a special organ in their abdomen. In this foreign land, he was my interpreter.

I believe my grandfather felt most at peace amidst overabundance. Maybe it is the reflex of those who grew up with nothing to feel the need to hold onto everything. As he got older, he gradually lost the ability to sort trash from treasure, useful from useless, and their house became its own maze. My grandmother battled fiercely to maintain her hold on their formal living room, but the rest was gradually swallowed by my grandfather's impulse to collect. It was a testament to the severity of his compulsions, that even the urgings of the woman he had spent sixty years married to could not reverse the course of his accumulation. Stacks of old letters and invoices teetered precariously in all directions. Cords snaked across the ground, connected to lamps that

no longer turned on. Side tables groaned under the weight of innumerable dusty books. In the upstairs bathroom, a wire shelving unit was stacked with dozens of packages of Always brand heavy-flow maxi pads, far beyond the realm of scientific plausibility for my grandmother's continued use. Under these was a bin filled with a backlog of hundreds of emptied orange pill bottles. When my family arrived to stay for the week, my brother and I had to move boxes off of the beds in order to sleep in them. We received dead batteries in our Christmas stockings, single mittens, the disconnected handles of garden shovels, all wrapped in newspaper saved from years earlier and labeled *Grampy* in shaky handwriting. One summer, it became impossible to open the door to the attic. The next summer, it was the basement. Here too he played translator. He defended the purpose of each dubious object. In his head, it took on structure. It became an ecosystem, all in perfect balance.

By the time he passed, my grandmother had lost her patience for it. His collections became trash, bound for the landfills that he'd saved them from. It makes me sad sometimes, that I never got to see them in love. My grandmother tells stories of when they first met, how he walked her home from class each day after their graduate school chemistry course, my grandmother doggedly determined to graduate with honors in one of the first classes of women ever admitted into her university and my grandfather the idealistic young farmer's son fighting away his shaded past for something better and brighter. As faculty members at Kansas State University, they gained accolades together for their research on the molecular structure of the cornea. They passed each summer doing marine biology research in Acadia National Park, driving the three days across the country from Manhattan, Kansas with my mother and uncle tucked into the backseat of the previous iteration of their Camperbus. I try to imagine them as the blissful newlyweds of my grandmother's memory. Instead, I bore witness to the ossification that

can happen when people share their lives for too long. I watched my grandmother yell at my grandfather for his driving (which, admittedly, was a privilege that should have been revoked from him long before his passing), and my grandfather yell at my grandmother for allegedly misplacing his glasses, or his phone, or his wallet. I watched the unspoken grooves of routine that they fell into, my grandmother cooking dinner each night and my grandfather cleaning the dishes stooped over the sink, so familiar they no longer needed any words. I wonder if they spoke to each other at all when my family left from our visits to return back home, or if the silence loomed large and pressing in the huge, black night of the woods surrounding their house. In their room, my grandfather kept a length of paracord tied between the headboard and footboard in order to divide the bed into two separate halves.

Now, four years after his passing, my grandmother has moved to Denver to be with us, leaving behind the empty house on Mount Desert Island. She has started dating a new man, a half-blind former pharmacologist named Doug who enjoys opera and fine art museums. Every once in a while, my mother will catch herself trying to piece together the odds and ends of some object rescued from the garbage can. In these moments, she laughs that if we ever catch her turning into Grampy, we have to stop her. She keeps her tone light, but the darting of her eyes betrays her. She is afraid that the same bug that lurked in her father will infect her. She's afraid that, like him, she will be unable to see the signs of her own deterioration, to stop herself from turning her own world inside out.

Each summer when we visited Grampy in Maine, he took us to Long Ledge, a rocky bluff where the ebb of low tide reveals dozens of tide pools teeming with sea cucumbers, anemones, urchins, snails, and crabs. For hours we would poke around the pools with him as he gleefully pointed out the rippled shells of mussels or plucked snails out of the water for us to suction to

our fingers. He would jump into the frigid water of the bay with us and splash and shout until our fingers turned blue, and then he would wrap us in towels and carry us, one hanging off of his back and one bouncing on his shoulders, along the dirt trail back to his old Camperbus. Now, half of my grandfather's ashes rest here, scattered by my mother and grandmother as they left Mount Desert Island for the final time. The other half sits in an urn on my grandmother's bedside table. Someday, we will scatter the two of them together.