

# The Cemetery of Our Memories

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I was only 10 when my grandparents died. Granny lay in the hospital, 15 miles from home where her husband also lay at Death's door, the pristine white sheets of his hospital bed so out of place inside the parlor room of their farmhouse.

"She's gone, isn't she?" he'd said, knowing, before we did, the truth.

Their connection breached more than mere physical distance. My grandfather was the oak that grew strong and steadfast under the light of my grandmother's sun. Without his strength, my grandmother's light dimmed; and without her light my grandfather's limbs wilted.

"No, dad, she's not gone yet," my mother's voice cracked.

We were all there that night, in that back parlor room. Cousins, sisters, parents, aunts, uncles, daughters, sons. All there in that tiny room, around his tiny bed, all pretending that our hearts weren't silently breaking into tiny irreparable pieces.

"Kiss Grampa goodbye," my mother had said after a while, and I listened as any obedient child would to a mother who'd been living under the shadow of death. I approached the side of the bed and looked down upon my grandfather. My young mind was so innocent of death that I couldn't make sense of the frail old man before me. His eyes were the same, the same kind eyes that were each a smile of their own as he gazed up at me. And his smile, weak as it was, was the same smile I'd always known. But this frail shell of a man was not my grandfather. This was not the man who braved the deep side of the pool with me when my mind conjured up imaginary sharks. This was not the man who got on his hands and knees to play with me and my Fisher-Price farm. This was not the man who always smelled of sawdust, whose magic hands could craft beauty from wood, nor was he the man who inspired in me a love of nature on our adventures through the woods. Who was this man? And what had he done with my grandfather? I missed him, and I wanted him to come back. One more swim, one more adventure. Please? This frail old man was not my grandfather, but I kissed the lips of the body my grandfather was trapped inside, and I left that parlor, that house.

The parlor doesn't look the same now. Eleven years of neglect have treated it unkindly. Cobwebs hang from the corners, dust coats the windows, much of the furniture is gone, and all that remains are piles of boxes; one side "for keeps," the other "for takes." But the memories are still

there, lingering along the walls, drifting through the air, echoing through the silence; like so many ghosts. The house is alive with them.

I walk from room to room, trying to engrave the memories into my mind before I say goodbye to the house forever. In the parlor, I run my fingers along the smooth wood of the mantle aside from where a tiny rabbit-eared television used to be, and I remember spending hours with my grandfather watching the same Berenstain Bears VHS on repeat. The television is gone now, and the VHS sits on a shelf back home collecting dust. It was never quite the same to watch it without him.

I pass to the next room, and I find my eyes searching for objects no longer present. Where is the small circular table that used to sit in this room? And where did the bottles and vases that used to spill such colors of light from the windows go?

Gone. They're all gone.

The windows are covered in dust, and the only light that does filter through is weak and dim. I want to give them a good scrub, for they only need some TLC, but why clean up a condemned man on his way to the noose?

I turn around in the empty room. Thanksgiving had been here once, such a grand affair that it had people spilling through the doorways, their echoes ringing across the whole of Grampa's 50 acres. It's silent now; the only echoes come from the creaks in the floorboards where my mother and uncle walk upstairs.

In the kitchen, the same large wooden table still stands, famous to my memory for being able to seat the whole world. It's smaller now, somehow, seemingly shrunken over the years. But at its head, from the corner of my eye, I can almost see my grandmother seated aside of her oxygen tank playing cards with my mom as I swim along the bench. The chair sits empty now. This feels wrong, somehow, for that chair to be empty. Like it's defying logic.

I creep down the side hallway and I see the spot where a pullout couch once sat, where I used to lie aside from my sleeping father believing the sputter of an old radiator to be the footsteps of ghosts that walked the halls. The old childhood fear is with me now, I can feel it in my bones, and its irrationality makes me smile, makes me sad.

I find my way to the next room. My grandparents' room. My heart is a heavy stone, and I sit myself on the floor before it plummets from my chest.

It's empty. So very utterly devastatingly empty.

I reach out and feel the rough cream carpet against my fingertips, not far from where their bed used to lie. To the right, my memory shows me a glimpse of my grandmother's dresser. I

remember glass perfume bottles, figurines, and scattered bits of jewelry, my small fingers not daring to touch such fragile objects. I can remember my grandfather setting up a cot at the foot of the bed for my little sister and me to share for a night. And I remember never using that cot. I would lie awake in the darkness until I was sure they were asleep before I climbed my way under the covers between them.

My fingers dig into the carpet as I pull at these memories, desperate for something to hold onto, something to keep with me forever. I can feel my grandparents lingering in the air here as if they're hiding behind the walls, but no matter how much I beg, they won't come out. Rejected, my bones shaking against my skin, I leave to seek comfort in the darkened hallway.

In my childhood memory, the staircase in the back hallway was always a grand circular thing. It is not circular now, proof of our memory's inevitable evolution, though the staircase is still just as grand. My hand runs along the smoothness of the dark wooden banister that curves up to a second story where seven children used to sleep. I run my fingers back and forth across the wood, and I wonder how many other hands have felt their ways along its slopes. How many children came rushing down these stairs every morning for breakfast? How many times had parents carried these same sleeping children up to their beds each night? I imagine I can feel the spirits of these memories rushing like blood through veins beneath the surface of the wooden banister. The house might now be an empty shell, but like my grandfather's eyes there is still life here.

As I leave the house, a piece of me remains behind, absorbed from my hand into the banister, intermingling amongst the other spirits. It's those spirits, those memories, that keep the house alive, a warm pulse beating steadily through its decay. The house itself, however, does not sustain the memories, for when the house falls my memories will not. But they will alter, they will change. And maybe it's change that we fear the most. Our memories make us who we are. If our memories change, will we change as well? Already I forget the color of the wallpaper peeling in the parlor, and the position of the furniture in the upper rooms. The layout of the porch has started to blur, and my imagination is now forced to fill in the gaps.

As I approach the edge of the front yard where the grass meets the stones of the U-shaped driveway, I pause reflexively. *No further than the driveway!* My grandmother's voice comes to me as from a fog. *It's not safe. Wait for Grampa!* And I wait, for a man who will never come again, still obedient to the woman who taught me caution. Will this memory change? When this front yard no longer exists to remind me of that caution, will I become careless? Negligent?

I look both ways as I was taught, smiling in the presence of the man who is now only with me in my heart, and I step across the driveway.

I sit by the van as the last of the boxes are loaded into my uncle's truck to be deposited at his new home. The cedar shingles of the house are like dried up scales of an old beast; the red shutters hang at odd angles and the single pane windows are dark. The house is now truly a hollow husk of what it once was, its life draining out of its windows as it had through my grandfather's eyes. This house is no longer my grandparents' house, but when the wrecking ball comes we will mourn it as the cemetery of our memories that it has become.