

A Story of Old Age

Julie

Bogart



I was loading my laundry into the washing machine when my grandmother mentioned a story she had found in my grandfather's filing cabinet.

"It was in with his teaching stuff," she told me. "But I don't know whether he taught it or not."

"Oh?" I called to her from the kitchen, wondering if this bit of information had a point or if she was simply making conversation. My grandmother and I had spent more time alone together in the last three weeks than we had in the previous twenty-eight years of my existence; we had reached a conversational wasteland. "What's it about?" I asked, slamming the top down and turning the knob. Water trickled then rushed.

"Well," she said, watching me lower myself into the seat beside her, "it's kind of interesting. The topic, I mean."

I waited for her to continue. She pulled some paper-clipped papers out from underneath the mess of newspapers on her formerly white, now dirty-gray, couch. When my parents and brother had been in town the week before, when we thought my grandfather was dying, my brother had sprayed the couch with deodorant while my grandmother was in the bathroom. "It's about an old man at the end of his life who decides to go to a nursing home."

"Huh," I said. "That is interesting." After lunch, we planned to visit my grandfather in his nursing home.

"Yes," my grandmother continued, "and I'm not sure why he saved it. But it's a very meaningful story."

She handed it to me, and I gingerly paged through it. My grandfather had clipped it from a magazine or photocopied book, cut it into columns, and pasted it onto scrap paper.

"Maybe he made copies and handed it out to his class," I said.

"Maybe," my grandmother said, "but I don't think so."

"I guess photocopiers weren't around when he was teaching," I corrected myself.

“What?” she said. My grandmother often said “what” even when she heard you.

“Nothing,” I said, starting to read. The story was by Anne Tyler and was entitled, “With All Flags Flying.”

Weakness was what got to him in the end. He had been expecting something more definite—chest pains, a stroke, arthritis—but it was only weakness that put a finish to his living alone. A numbness in his head, an airy feeling when he walked.

“You weren’t kidding,” I said to my grandmother, who was glancing through her newspapers.

“What?”

“This is pretty weird,” I said. Before we left, I managed to read the entire story, about an elderly man who insists that his family (daughters, their husbands, and grandchildren) place him in a nursing home. The family resists—they want him to live with them—but he insists. An “old folks’ home” is what he wants. He doesn’t want to be a burden.

I couldn’t help but think of another, similarly themed story that my grandfather, a former English professor, had raved about and included in one of his own published short story collections: “The Blanket,” by Floyd Dell. In this story, a grandson and grandfather spend their last night together; the son, who is getting remarried, has decided to send his father to a nursing home and has given him a blanket as a going-away present. At the story’s conclusion, the grandson dramatically cuts the blanket in half and tells his father that he’ll give him the other half when the boy sends *him* to a nursing home:

“I’ll give it to you, Dad—when you’re old and I’m sending you—away.” There was a silence, and then Dad went over to Granddad and stood before him, not speaking. But Granddad understood, for he put out a hand and laid it on Dad’s shoulder. Petey was watching them. And he heard Granddad whisper, “It’s all right, son—I knew you didn’t mean it...” And then Petey cried. But it didn’t matter—because they were all three crying together.

Three years earlier, when my parents, brother, and I had helped (forced) my grandparents to move from their two-story home into a one-level condominium, due to my grandfather’s frequent falls, I read and re-read “The Blanket”; a story that, unlike my grandparents, allowed and encouraged me to cry, to acknowledge the sadness that I felt, the difficulty of watching loved ones age.

Now, two weeks after the near-death of my grandfather, when decisions were made, decisions like removing the IVs and where and when and how to dispose of his body, here was another story, clipped and saved and filed by my grandfather.

His other daughters called long distance from all across the country and begged him to come to them if he wouldn’t stay with Clara. They had room or they would make room; he had no idea what homes for the aged were like these days. To all of them, he gave the same

answer: "I've made my decision."

"It's a good story," I said when I finished.

"Yeah," my grandmother agreed.

I handed it back to her and she shuffled slowly across the room. I thought she was going to put it on her table, the place where she kept bills and other important documents, but instead she neared her bags of recycled newspapers. She threw the story in with them, in with the trash. My grandmother hadn't shed a tear in the last three weeks, but she had already purged the condo of stacks of old letters, cards, and papers.

"No," I said, almost yelled. "If you don't want it, I'll take it."

"You want it?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. She retrieved the story from the paper grocery bag, and I stood to pull it out of her hands. I tucked it safely into my purse.

At the nursing home, my grandfather sat in a reclining chair on wheels, two feet from the large TV in the home's TV room. The machine that sent oxygen up his nasal passages hummed and wheezed beside him; his tiny legs were bundled in a blanket. My grandmother and I woke him by tapping his shoulders and speaking his name, Max! Papa! When he came to he updated us on the game—the Red Sox were playing the Tigers—and I noticed with a little disappointment that his dentures were in. I had liked his gum smacks and the way that his cheeks ballooned out without teeth to rein them in. He had been as cute as a baby.

A woman and her rolling walker sidled up to my grandmother, who slid her chair out of the way as if the woman were diseased. My grandmother hated the nursing home and would only visit if someone else went with her.

"Shannon," the woman said. "Are you Shannon?" She looked at me.

"No," I said. "What do you need?"

She mumbled incoherently, and my grandmother rolled her eyes.

"C'mon," I said to the woman. "We'll find you some help."

I guided her out of the TV room and down the hall to the nurses' station. When I returned, I told my grandfather that he was the sanest person in the joint.

"I know," he said. "It's pathetic. Just the other night a man wandered into my room and insisted that it was his room."

"What did you do?" I asked. I bit my lip to keep from laughing at my grandfather's indignation, at the sheer ridiculousness of his situation.

“I yelled at him to get out. He wouldn’t, so I had to press the red button for the nurse.”

He had chosen long ago what kind of old age he would have; everyone does. Most, he thought, were weak and chose to be loved at any cost. He had seen women turn soft and sad, anxious to please, and had watched with pity and impatience their losing battles. And he had once known a schoolteacher, no weavling at all, who said, straight out, that when she grew old, she would finally eat all she wanted and grow fat without worry. He admired that—a simple plan, dependent upon no one.

“How was lunch?” my grandmother asked.

“Awful,” my grandfather replied.

“More pureed peas?” I joked.

He nodded. Due to the effects of the breathing tube, my grandfather hadn’t yet been able to swallow whole food. We had been feeding him ice cream and smoothies when he was hungry, which was hardly ever.

“I’m not sad so much as mad,” Clara said. “I feel like this is something you’re doing to me, just throwing away what I give. Oh, why do you have to be so stubborn? It’s still not too late to change your mind.” The old man kept silent.

My grandfather dozed in and out. Towards the end of our visit, I mentioned the story and pulled it out of my purse.

“Did you teach it?” I asked.

He had recently gained strength enough to hold things and paged through the pieced-together story.

“I don’t remember this,” he said.

“Maybe you just liked it,” I offered.

“I don’t remember it,” he repeated.

“That’s okay,” my grandmother said. “I’ll remember it for you.” She clasped his swollen hand, as always, missing the point.

The tiredness in his head was as vague and restless as anger; the weakness in his knees made him feel as if he had just finished some exhausting exercise.

The nurses had removed the catheter since my last visit and my grandfather declared he had to pee. As I waited in the hallway, I heard him say to the orderly, “I need help getting my penis out.”

“We’ll go after this,” my grandmother said to me.

As we stood to leave, I said, “We’ll let you get your rest,” as if we were doing him a favor, as if we didn’t want to go.

My grandfather nodded. “Thank you for coming,” he said.

“Of course,” I said, kissing his sunken cheek.

“Don’t flirt with the nurses while I’m away,” my grandmother said.

“I won’t,” he said.

Let me not give in at the end. Let me continue gracefully until the moment of my defeat. Let Lollie Simpson be alive somewhere even as I lie on my bed; let her be eating homemade fudge in an overstuffed armchair and growing fatter and fatter and fatter.

I wondered what else my grandfather had forgotten, other than these stories that had once so profoundly resonated with him. Maybe it’s one thing to clip a story from a magazine, read about old men and their choices, their blankets, when you are a young man, a successful one, a healthy one; but another thing entirely when your time has come and you are not ready for it.

Yet why had my grandfather been so drawn to these stories, to tales of old men and aging and the quiet, dignified acceptance of one’s fate? Did he see himself in these men? Or do they merely represent the kind of man he wanted to be? The kind of man I wanted him to be, a man who would die peacefully rather than allow his family to suffer, to watch him slowly and painfully deteriorate.

Perhaps my grandmother is quick to purge, to rid herself of the pages of my grandfather’s past, because she knows that he is not this man. But I am more like my grandfather. I hold onto his stories because I too am not ready to accept that this is it. This is the way it’s going to end.