

What Grandpa Said

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When I think of my Grandpa, I hear him more than I see him. His hearing aids emitting a metallic screech when I lean in to give him a hug. His fork and knife grating against one of my grandmother's plates as he presides over the dinner table. The rustle and snap of his newspaper. But most clearly, I hear his voice, low and rasping from hundreds of Lucky Strikes. What he's said weaves through the photo albums of my childhood like captions only I can see. The pictures may curl at the edges and the glue may yellow, but his words remain clear.

When I was six years old and still afraid of the ocean and the way seaweed wrapped around my ankles as though it would never let go, Grandpa bought me a kiddie pool at the hardware store. That summer, if the weatherman predicted sun, he dug the kiddie pool out from under the house first thing in the morning and filled it so the water would be warm enough for me to splash in by noon.

"No seaweed monsters there," he said.

One day when my older sister and cousins went to the beach, he sat in a lawn chair in his front yard and fell asleep with a newspaper draped across his chest while I squatted in the plastic tub and made whirlpools with my fingers. I studied his chest as it rose and fell under the tent of paper and kept watch for Grandma, who would be furious if she knew Grandpa had fallen asleep while he was supposed to be lifeguarding. The second I heard her car's tires on the gravel parking lot, I planned to shake Grandpa awake and wink at him, the way he did whenever he slipped me a cookie before dinner. I was his lookout. I had his back, just like the guys in Korea did. He woke up before I needed to save him, but we still exchanged a knowing nod. A seventy-year-old former-Naval officer and his six-year old spy-in-training.

When I was eight, I gave up on being a ballerina like my sister, so my grandpa taught me how to play softball. Standing barefoot in his dusty backyard, his trousers cuffed, he adjusted my grip and taught me to swing hard enough to peel the skin right off the ball.

"Just like an apple," he said.

When I finally hit one over the clothesline, a pop-fly that would have been an instant out in a real game, he ran around the yard with me and threw his Yankees hat in the air. We kicked up clouds of dust as we danced in celebration. The top of my head barely reached his hip, so he picked me up and spun me around until I was dizzy. When he finally put me down, he strode across the yard to collect his hat and clapped it onto my head.

He let me wear his hat for the rest of the afternoon. In pictures from that day, you can't even see my eyes. Just a gap-toothed smile under the visor of an ill-fitting hat. After dinner that night, he

reached over the table and grabbed his hat by the bill to flip it back onto his own head. Then, as he tugged it down low on his forehead, he told me what a shame it was that I had to play softball.

“Baseball,” he said. “That’s the real game.”

Squinting at me from under his cap, he handed me his empty dinner plate and told me to bring it to Grandma at the sink.

When I was sixteen and Grandma had open-heart surgery, I kept my mom company in the hospital waiting room. Grandpa stayed home. I spent what seemed like hours emptying the vending machines of Kit Kats and waiting for a doctor with good news.

“Grandpa hates hospitals,” my mom said.

He hated hospitals so much he hadn’t even been in the waiting room when each of his four children had been born, she told me. Instead, he had waited to hold them for the first time until my grandma passed them—clean and wrapped in blankets—to him in the comfort of his easy chair. When I asked her why, my mom said she’d never asked. She didn’t think Grandpa would answer. She guessed his aversion stemmed from some type of PTSD from the Navy, or maybe even from when he was Chief of the Bridgeport Fire Department. I’d never considered that the challenges he was so proud of might also have made him weaker.

Even when Grandma was home recovering, my mom and I stuck around, just in case Grandpa needed help reheating the dinners that Grandma had prepared for him before she had gone into surgery. On the third day of her outpatient recovery, when Grandma was feeling well enough to sit up for a cup of tea, my mom suggested that Grandpa put the kettle on the stove for her.

From his chair, he angled the remote control away from the TV and jabbed it toward my mom. “You watch your tone,” he said. Then, he turned back to Fox News and increased the volume.

I laughed, out of confusion or shock or maybe just to diffuse the tension in the room. My mom asked me to put the kettle on and, while I was at it, to take a slice of cake for Grandpa out of the freezer so it would defrost. I did as she asked, if only to get away from the man whose forehead had the same parentheses-shaped wrinkles as my Grandpa, but who acted nothing like him. As I rummaged in the freezer, I wondered how many times Grandma had left the same room for the same reason.

When I was seventeen, Grandpa’s oldest grandchild, my cousin Ashley, came out. He’d spent years frowning at her black nail polish and commenting on the fact that she was approaching thirty and still hadn’t introduced the family to a prospective husband. I lay on the couch reading as my aunt explained over and over that, no, she wasn’t kidding and, yes, Ashley was in love with a woman.

“They live together,” she said. “They might even get married.”

Grandpa stormed off to his office, a room in the basement with a computer and an overstuffed chair where he napped when he said he was going to pay bills. He didn't resurface until dinner. As I passed him a Corning Ware dish full of twice-baked potatoes, Grandpa gave his opening and closing remarks on Ashley's sexuality.

"What a shame," he said. "She was such a beautiful girl."

No one said anything until Grandma apologized for putting too much salt on the green beans. Later, as I was brushing my teeth before bed, my mom stuck her head into the bathroom. I looked at her in the mirror. At the nose and mouth that Grandpa had given to her, and she had given to me.

"Don't think too much about what Grandpa said. He didn't mean it."

I nodded and avoided my own eyes in the mirror until I spat a grayish paste into the sink and turned off the lights.

When I was eighteen, I visited Grandpa during my first break home from college. I sat with him in his office and showed him how to enlarge the print on his computer screen. He asked me how I'd gotten so smart and how I liked school, and I told him that I'd decided to be an English major.

He smiled and opened the filing cabinet where he keeps memories from all his grandchildren's childhoods. He pulled out my file, my name scrawled across it in his blocky capitalized handwriting. Grandpa shuffled through its contents until he found the picture he was looking for. Beneath the smudges that coated the glossy photo paper, a three-year-old version of me sat curled against Grandpa's chest as he read *Harry, the Dirty Dog*. The flash reflected against the thick lenses of his reading glasses, but I could tell from the softened frown lines around his mouth that he was enjoying reading me my bedtime story, and from my drooping eyes, fighting to stay open, that I was too. Grandpa told me to keep the picture, but not to lose it, because it was the only evidence he had that proved he was responsible for that brain of mine. He even offered to lend me some of his favorite books. From under a stack of old newspaper articles, he produced Bill O'Reilly's latest volume, and gave it his whole-hearted recommendation as he waved it around in front of me.

"Such a shame that all those women are ruining his reputation," he said.

I kept the picture, but returned the book to his desk before I left the next morning.

I've kept a lot of things that Grandpa gave me. I've kept a photo of me in a hand-me-down bathing suit squatting in the plastic pool, the softball glove he gave me a year after I quit the team, an empty bottle of the cologne he wears, a spool of twine that he knotted for me just like he knotted ropes in the Navy. But I've also kept some of his comments. They vibrate deep inside my brain, like the buzz and chirp of his hearing aids when I lean in to give him a hug. When he adds a new remark to my list of his observations, sometimes I wish he hadn't. I try to ignore the rotten taste in my mouth, as bitter as the time Grandma forgot to put sugar in the pumpkin pie. I make excuses

for him, pretending he's the same Grandpa who read me picture books and that I'm still naïve enough to believe my mom when she tells me he doesn't mean what he says.

When my visits with him come to an end, he stands on his front porch to wave goodbye as I pull out of his driveway. Despite his white hair and his shrinking stature, he still looks so much like the man who taught me how to hit a home run. I wave back.