

GARRETT ASHLEY

My Grandfather Ran Off to the Woods

i

MY GRANDMOTHER has been keeping my grandfather in the guest bedroom. I saw him when I went to the back of the house to use the bathroom. The door was cracked, and there he was just sitting on the side of the bed, his hands in his lap, mouth hanging open, staring at the wall perpendicular to the doorway. His skin looked splotchy and patched white in some areas. He didn't move, really, except for his chest, which shook as he breathed, like they do.

"It's good," she said. "I'm not crazy. It'll work out. Things work out, you know?"

It'd been around five months since I saw my grandfather alive, so I was a little shaken. I didn't know how these things worked.

"Well it's been tough. But it's been good. I talk to him all the time. All the time," she said. "You can go in there and talk to him for a while. He'd probably like to see you."

I had no idea what I'd say to him, anyway.

My grandmother and I talked for a little while. Not about anything important. We talked about the furniture business. My wife and I were thinking about relocating. Some opportunities had come up, but things had been strained between the two of us lately. But I wanted to talk about my grandfather. Not about me.

I rubbed my eyes. She shook her head and said "No, I don't know about crazy. Not that. Just lonely, lonely." She stroked the bones of her knees.

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ii

MY GRANDFATHER used to drink a lot of coffee. He had a big green thermos he'd drink coffee from throughout the day. He was a diabetic, and one thing I remember from when I was little was this diabetic seizure he had next to a wall at a Mexican restaurant. I was slightly embarrassed that I couldn't just go have a normal dinner with my grandparents.

I liked the meticulous lunches my grandfather would pack himself. One day, he brought a lunchbox with us to Tampa so he could eat if he felt bad. He never talked a lot. But I guess that didn't matter. I miss the feeling of not knowing what to expect from anything, and simultaneously not concerning yourself with whatever came along. That's childhood in a nutshell, basically.

iii

WELL, THE DIABETES just sort of disappeared when grandmother ordered he be dug up and stuck in her bedroom like an ornament. Now it was just a matter of grandpa being a vegetable. But sometimes he'd say something I guess. He'd mutter "I love you" to my grandmother because she was always telling him how much she loved him. I know all this because I stood outside the bedroom while she was changing his dirty sheets. She changed his sheets every day now because as a dead person, he always got the sheets dirty fairly quickly on account of this gross-looking black stuff he'd sweat out.

iv

I DIDN'T GROW UP with my grandparents. My grandmother would come over during the holidays and ask stupid questions like, who cooked this? And Mom would give her a look like she knew damn well who cooked dinners during the holiday, or any day, basically.

When we were still in the business of doing family get-togethers, I was going through my phase of taking up for Mom a lot. Dad never cooked, I mean. And by never cooking, I guess I also mean he never did anything helpful at all. He especially never went to see his parents, so that job fell to me because if there's one thing I hated, as a teenager, it was to hear my grandmother complain to me over the phone about how sad she was that

no one ever came to see her when her husband was offshore.

So I started seeing my grandparents more often when I was a teenager. Those were the years of my pre-maturity. Just moving back and forth between my parents' and grandparents' homes, until one day I met Tammy, who was a good person, owned a furniture store and liked me, wanted to shack up for a while before getting married, and who, after a few years of feeling what I thought was pretty happy for a relatively young couple, started acting rude with customers. She finally decided that she needed a bit of extra mental space home-wise, that this whole marriage thing needed to be put on hold for just a little while so she could clear her head, and that I should just go stay with my grandma for a little while because she was so old she could barely care for herself, much less a rotting husband that was likely to make the whole loneliness issue worse.

So that's basically how I ended up at my grandparents' house.

v

MY GRANDMOTHER had a pinched nerve in her back so she complained about everything. My grandfather didn't have feeling in any of his limbs as far as I was concerned, but he moaned a lot during the day like he needed attention.

I heard him say my grandmother's name a few times. Sometimes he asked who that was in the other room. I was sleeping on the couch so I could hear him moaning all night. I don't think he actually slept. My grandmother would knock on his door at night and poke her head in and I'd hear her ask how he was doing. He'd moan something back at her and she'd ask him if he wanted some water. I don't know what else he was capable of ingesting since my grandmother was the one feeding him and she told me not ever to worry about it because he ate early in the morning when she was up and not at all during the day. Then my grandmother would poke her head into the living room in the dark and she'd ask if I needed anything like I hadn't been trying to sleep either. I'd just pretend to be asleep so I wouldn't have to tell her to go away and leave me alone.

I wanted to go in there and set my grandpa on fire, put him out of his misery if only to stop all the moaning he would do.

Things get better, of course. Not much to say in the way of making things better, except that you just get used to being around certain things, certain people, and you start ignoring the moaning, imagining him

standing over you in the dark, and you finally drift off to sleep, happy that your grandmother has finally decided to give up on poking her head into the living room in the dark.

vi

WHEN MY GRANDMA would go in there and change his sheets and give him a new pair of underwear, smells would come wafting out in thick plumes of smoke.

“You ever give him a bath?”

“It’s real hard to bathe him. His skin is real bad.”

“Oh,” I said.

So I finally worked up the nerve to go in there and fight the stench of my grandfather. He looked at me like he didn’t recognize me. I reminded him who I was and told him I was just across the hall if he ever needed anything. I said this because I was trying to be nice, and I’d rather get up and help my grandfather do whatever at night than my grandmother, who’d complain about her pinched nerve and this pain in her knees on the way back to her room, which frankly was worse than the moaning.

One night I heard papers hitting the wall. I went into the bedroom and watched him sitting there on the edge of the bed looking through some magazine. He’d managed to get the lamp on somehow.

The magazine was an old issue of *Guns and Ammo* and had belonged to my uncle. I asked him what he was doing and he said he was looking for a picture of himself when he was in school.

“You need a yearbook. I’ll look for your yearbook tomorrow,” I said.

He dropped the magazine on the floor. He moaned something incomprehensible.

“What? Can’t hear you. What?”

He looked frustrated with me for not being able to hear him. I knew his speech wouldn’t ever improve, so I didn’t push him like I normally would a really silly person who couldn’t speak well.

He said, “What happened to that woman?”

“What woman?”

“That woman. Sarah.”

“I broke up with Sarah. I married Tammy. You remember Tammy, don’t you? We went to college together. I showed you her picture a while back.”

He kicked the magazine at me.

“Where’s Beth?”

So I went to my grandmother’s room, woke her up, and told her to go in there and do the sheets. I think she’d prepared herself for an uninterrupted rest. She was curled around a body pillow like a chimp. I on the other hand had proven useless in the face of helping my grandfather with the mundane task of keeping him comfortable. This is how I thought it might be for a while, a sort of back-and-forth between the three of us, and me trying to make myself useful now that there wasn’t much else for me to do.

vii

I DIDN’T REALLY NOTICE the coyotes until my grandmother came and woke me up and told me that something weird was going on with my grandpa.

He’d gotten out of bed, apparently, and went outside sniffing for the coyotes. Flashlights in hand, we found him in the gutter next to the neighbors’ house. Some dogs were barking, and somewhere a field over we heard the family of coyotes yelping.

This yelping became a regular thing for a while, and it took a few days to learn that it was the coyotes that perked him up. One night my grandmother and I were sitting in the living room when the coyote yelping started, and grandpa bounded through the living room on all fours in just his boxers. I didn’t like the feel of his oyster-like skin, so I might have let him slip out of my grasp intentionally. My grandmother fussed at me for a moment before bending over and rubbing her knees. So then I had to chase after my grandfather in the dark.

I followed the coyote yips. I shined a light across the neighbors’ pasture. I walked around the fence line looking in at the field and eventually found my grandfather tangled up in old, loose barbed wire. This required me to go and wake the neighbors. So the neighbors went out there with wire cutters and helped me untangle my grandfather. Then they told me they’d call the cops if he ended up on their property again.

My grandmother and I had a sit down the next day to try and decide what to do about my grandfather’s obsession with the coyotes.

“Well I could try to shoot them or something. It’s not too hard to shoot at a coyote.”

“Maybe if you kill one they’ll all decide to leave,” she agreed.

“I guess that’s how they work.”

“Well no. No, that won’t work. There are too many houses around. I’d

rather you not shoot the coyotes. They didn't really do anything anyway. They're just being coyotes. Well."

So we decided that I shouldn't go and shoot at the coyotes. In the meantime we had to get a length of chain to restrain my grandpa at night. I bought two pairs of handcuffs from the adult movie store and fashioned both pairs to either side of the length of chain, which I then attached to the bed frame.

The length of chain was a good idea because when grandpa crawled out of the bed and began to make for the door, he was caught at the ankle and couldn't go any further. He tried for the window as well, but the chain prevented him from going anywhere. It was funny and sad and I didn't know exactly what to do with myself, seeing him chained at the ankle like that, moaning and clawing, unable to speak.

My grandma suggested we just leave the chain on him throughout the day so we'd never make the mistake of getting it on him too late at night. The coyotes didn't have a regular schedule, so this seemed like a pretty good idea.

But after a few days of leaving him chained up like this, I decided his skin had some kind of allergic reaction to the cuffs. His ankles became brittle and black. There was a gnarled impression where he'd pulled all night listening to the yelping. I think he might have tried chewing through the bone. So I decided to get rid of the chains. My grandmother was so angry and confused about this that she retreated to her bedroom and lay on her side reading the newspaper for like three hours.

viii

I BOARDED UP GRANDPA'S WINDOW, for one. I made sure he wouldn't be able to get through the plywood no matter how hard he threw himself into it. He watched me hammering at the wall as he rubbed his ankle. I became conscious of his heavy breathing again, and felt him watching me during the day a lot of the time, and I knew this wasn't because he hated me or wanted me out of his life, but that he knew I was trying to keep him from something he for whatever reason thought he needed to protect us from. Then I wondered if that's what was going on with his arousal at the sound of coyotes—protecting us? I don't know. Probably not.

They came that night. We had the door bolted to his room. I sat up in the living room listening to his body flinging against the plywood window.

Then he started pounding against the door. Grandma jumped at every sound.

“We’ll think of something else,” I said.

She shook her head. I think she was too worried to say or do anything. This is a lot like what I was like when I was going through mine and Tammy’s separation—too sad and worried to really talk about it or try to fix things. So it is.

ix

I THINK IT WAS THAT she was mostly afraid of dying herself. I hesitated for a while to ask her about what exactly she wanted after she died. She told me to just let her stay in the ground. She didn’t want to be a burden to me or my family anyway.

“There are places you could go. I could work something out though. You know, people that could help you out and stuff.”

She didn’t say anything for a while. She made coffee. Neither of us had gotten any sleep for a few nights. One night the coyotes wouldn’t come, and we’d sleep a little, but our bodies and minds had adjusted to this sudden consistent lack of sleep, and we’d wake in the middle of the night with grandpa in mind, go in there and put our ears up to the door and listen.

She lay on her side reading the paper. I stood in the doorway, scratching my elbows.

She said, “No. Don’t bother with me. It’s not really something I want to talk about anyway.”

x

THE POUNDING ON THE DOOR some nights was not him, but just some thing that existed in the world that had no relation to us. Grandma even told me one day that he was starting to behave like a wild animal. She began to take pills. She’d throw up around four in the afternoon some kind of milky green stuff. I asked her if she needed to go to the doctor and she kept saying “No, no, it’s nothing, just old person sickness.” I talked to Tammy about it, and Tammy asked me what exactly my problem was, I couldn’t take care of an old woman?

“I don’t have a problem. My problem is I want to come home. But I have to hear from you every now and then if I’m ever going to come home.”

“Well what if I say come home? Then you’ll leave Beth. And if you leave Beth then she’ll poison herself to death.”

I really didn’t like the idea of being the one thing keeping my grandmother from committing suicide. But the way Tammy saw it was it was a lucky thing she’d kicked me out of the house when she did. I told her about the coyotes, though, and my grandpa acting up at night.

“Crunch up some poison and put it in meat,” she said. “That’s about what it takes. But then again I don’t know if poison’ll take down a coyote. Poison is for rats and stuff, right?”

“It’s an idea,” I said. “Where do I get poison?”

The poison store. I don’t know?”

In the other room my grandfather moaned something about wanting coffee. I heard my grandmother go in there and ask him to repeat himself, and then he said something about wanting his insulin shot.

“Look, it’s just insane here. I just want to work things out. Can’t we work things out?”

“You told me that I could fuck myself, so here we are,” she said. “Remember? Go fuck yourself, you said. How do you say that to someone who’s going through major withdrawals? You know how serious my withdrawals are?”

“I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry.”

“Now you’re sorry.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

So it is.

xi

THAT NIGHT MY GRANDFATHER hurled himself into the plywood so hard that his neck snapped. I could hear the bone crunching from my bedroom. I went in there and helped him back into bed. He rubbed at his head and moaned. Coyotes were growling in the field next to us. I wondered if they were chasing the cattle. Then I wondered why the hell the neighbors weren’t doing something about the coyotes, since it was their field they were prowling. I planned to call them the next day. I’d fix their fence and work things out. Grandpa took my hands and put them on his neck and rolled his head a little like he needed help reconnecting himself.

“I can’t,” I said. I really couldn’t. His skin felt like raw oysters.

Then I noticed the huge gash on top of his head.

I pressed his body into the mattress and covered him up. The coyotes were howling out in the field. He started shaking, panting wildly. I turned the lamp off.

xii

NIGHTS LIKE THIS didn't go on for much longer.

I called the neighbors, apologized again, and asked why the hell they hadn't done something about the coyotes that'd been chasing their cattle?

"Not chasing the cattle," they said. "Rabbits probably. Cows are fine. Coyotes aren't hurting anything."

"I'll come over and fix the fence. I bought a roll of wire. I'll come over pretty soon."

"Thank you," they said. They didn't seem like such bad people, really.

We didn't have poison, and I didn't want to ask anyone whether poison would actually kill a coyote, so I kept my mouth shut about it. What we had was an old window that'd been taken out of the shed when they had to rebuild it after a hurricane. My grandmother was keeping the window for some reason, I don't know, it's just the way old people are.

I'm sure my grandmother would have detested my idea of crunching up a bunch of glass with a hammer and rolling it in a few pounds of meat. I read about this somewhere. I twined a few lengths of barbed wire together, discarded the rest, I looked around to make sure no one was watching, and took the meat out of a sack I'd brought. I hurled it out into the field, and that was that. I know it's a horrible thing to do to an animal.

xiii

BUT IT DOESN'T MATTER, the meat didn't work. The coyotes came back three nights later. I went out to the neighbors' fence and looked out at them with a flashlight. The pack was barely noticeable, and looked like so many little blots moving through the thistle and cogon grass. I considered just letting it go and staying the night in a hotel room.

Grandma was sitting in the living room smoking a cigarette when I got back.

She said, "Don't look at me like that. Don't act like I can't be goofy for a little bit."

I took a cigarette from the pack and sniffed it.

“When I was in college I smoked a little. We weren’t supposed to smoke in the dormitory,” she said. “So we’d go out on the balcony with a wet rag and spin the rag around in the air and smoke.” She spun this little pillow around to demonstrate and it flew across the living room and landed by the television.

I smoked like two puffs and decided I didn’t want anymore. It sat in an ashtray the rest of the night.

“I used to sit up and watch television all night,” she said. “Before I got your granddaddy back I mean, that’s all I’d do all night. Then I’d sleep all day. Looks like it’ll be back to that soon. I don’t think I can stand it much longer.”

She’d stopped jumping at the sound of his banging against the door and window. We talked about our futures. She thought she’d be dead soon. She reminded me again that what she wanted was to just be buried in the ground, undisturbed, for as long as it would take. Then she told me just how much reanimating my grandfather had set her back. “Don’t worry, you’ve got insurance money coming your way. I’m worth something. Only thing is, you can’t reanimate me if you claim the money. So there’s that.”

I thought, well this whole thing is selfish. Why don’t we just talk about keeping her in the ground when she’s such a hypocrite? With my grandfather in there killing himself again trying to get out into the world? I told her this. I used my harsh voice. She drew back in her chair. Then she reminded me that she’d do anything to defeat the feeling of being a widow.

“It’ll happen again,” I said, meaning she’d be a widow soon. “That’s what it’s worth. You know?”

She didn’t say anything. She closed her eyes. Then she shook her head, got up, and went to read her paper in the bed.

xiv

I HAD TO SPEAK TO MY GRANDFATHER first before taking him out for a ride. He sat up carefully in bed when I came in. I turned the lamp on and he put his hands on the side of the bed. His chest heaved in and out. I told myself his body wasn’t a healthy thing that could go on much longer.

“Why do you want to get out so bad? You know, when the coyotes start barking or whatever?”

He looked at the floor, shook his head, and sighed.

“Are you bored? Is that it? Are you bored?”

I’d tried asking him this before, of course. He always sighed. Sometimes he asked for Beth. Then sometimes he’d rub his purpled face, or touch his bruised shoulders, or finger the gash on top of his head. His body was deteriorating at an exponential rate. I knelt next to his bed now and touched his skin. He let me touch his skin and he started to rub his face.

“Look, do you want to go? How bad do you want to get out?”

His face was crooked. Lately, there’d be some sort of uncanny growth I can’t begin to explain—like he was bloating, which might have been a side effect of all the slamming into doors and plywood windows.

“You hear me, don’t you?” I snapped my fingers in his ear.

His mouth drooped slightly, but he didn’t attempt to communicate.

Then for whatever reason I started talking about Tammy. It was something about how I wished we could just get along. Like, I had no clue really what to say about the situation. “She just doesn’t know how to articulate her feelings,” I said. Which I don’t think is what I really meant. What I think I meant is that she didn’t love me. Or that she thought I was supposed to be someone else. I was thinning on the top and my teeth were crooked.

“How did you do it?” I asked. “When you and grandma had fallings out? What did you do about it?”

He shrugged his shoulders. It was the best form of communication. And I guess it said to me that he really didn’t remember how marriage was supposed to work.

“You don’t know. I’ll take that. I guess. It’s just hard. I don’t think you’re proud of me though. You remember meeting Tammy that one time? She came in and stood next to the bed and you talked about where she was from. You said she was pretty. I guess you thought she was pretty.”

Grandpa looked at me. Looked like he was embarrassed of the angular droop of his mouth.

“Well, anyway,” I said. I told him to come on and get up. I helped him up and led him out of the room. The coyotes hadn’t started growling or yelping yet. We went out on the porch. To the left, in the window, a light shined, and my grandmother lay on the bed probably reading a paper.

I put him in the car and told him to buckle up. Which he didn’t do. He was wearing his boxers and looked pitiful and anxious sitting next to me.

He watched me as I drove. A gravel road came up, and I coasted with the windows down until he started looking around sporadically. Then I parked, unsure exactly where we were.

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He started shaking, twirling his arms violently, then fought with the door. I was too afraid to stop him as he jumped from the car and loped to the front into the headlights. Something yelped out into the dark. I yelled at him, unbuckled, and started to get out, my hands were slick, my chest a solid mass of hot wooden fear. He got down on all fours and bounded off into the woods. He didn't turn back and look at me. I sat in the gravel in the dark for a while and listened to the coyotes. They cried and wept, and the moon hung over the line in the trees where the road led out into the thick country woods.