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November 14, 2016
Intro to Nonfiction

Poem on the Wall

My grandmother lives in a retirement home now. It is called the Quadrangle, and it was started by the founders of four of the nearby colleges in Haverford, Pennsylvania. The Quadrangle's motto is "Celebrating the life of the mind."

"The people here like to think of themselves as intellectuals, and some of them have done incredible things, but all this 'life of the mind stuff' gets a little bit..." my grandmother said, wrinkling her nose at me confidentially. "What would you call it? Pretentious. We joke about it, sometimes. What good is 'the life of the mind' when everyone here just talks about their indigestion?"

I produced a measured amount of laughter, which did not echo at all in her tiny living room. Every time I visit her I am amazed at how she has re-created the exact interior feeling of her old apartment in Wynnewood within this much tinier and more institutional living space. The tall black bookshelf in the corner is filled with books of poetry by Mary Oliver, Robert Frost, and Louise Gluck, interrupted by at least one framed family photo per shelf. The most infamous is the one of my sister and I as curly haired toddlers, squatting naked as we play with the hose in her old backyard. The lemon colored couch I sleep on during my stay has cushions that make me sink down to at least a foot shorter than my normal seated height. There is a glass coffee table hosting an array of figurines collected from her travels around the world, which happened during the late '80s- early '90s gap between her children leaving home and her grandkids being born, when my grandfather was still alive. I have a special fondness for the row of Chinese soapstone monkeys, which I remember playing hide-and-seek games with when my sister and I were younger and would visit her in the old apartment.

"Did you get enough to eat at dinner?" My grandmother pattered in the kitchen, returning the last teacup to its designated spot in the cupboard. Lillian Rubin Sharpe is the epitome of spic and span. To my sister, my cousin, and I, she has always been Grandma Lee. She is ninety-one years old, but when I tried

to help her with the tidying, she refused. “I did something you’re not supposed to do. I took two extra bran muffins from the dining hall. They have the food police on the lookout now, because too many people were taking.” She unwrapped the two sweating muffins from their napkin parcels, and transferred them into a tupperware container, with slightly shaking hands. “But I only ever take something small, like these, or a piece of fruit. Some people try to get away with whole meals!”

It is only 8:00 pm, but Grandma Lee is already prepared for bed. My grandmother always has a put-together outfit, and her pajamas are no exception. During the daytime, when she is meeting with her poetry club or playing her weekly Scrabble tournament, she wears brightly colored cardigans and chunky necklaces with stones, usually turquoise. At night, she wears a classic white flowing nightgown, which looks like the one Julie Andrews wears in *The Sound of Music*. However, when I muse about my grandmother’s true movie star doppelganger, I remember an ancient photograph of her that my dad dug out of his late father’s collection. She is standing in the front yard of their suburban Pennsylvania home, feeding my infant uncle a bottle, with a shiny dark bob and laughing brown eyes, a dead ringer for Audrey Hepburn. That photo was taken in the 1950s, and what strikes me about it is not that she looks so much younger, but that she seems more relaxed. She still looks very good now, especially for 90, with sharp but delicate features, never-smudged lipstick, and a well-kept patch of fluffy chestnut hair.

“I’m practically bald!” she complains. “I keep asking my hairdresser, what can you do to hide all the bald spots?” Whenever she talks about her hair, or her appearance, she never fails to mention, with a smile, “My favorite hairdressers I ever had were you and your sister. Remember when you used to give me make-overs, and put your plastic lizard toys in my hair? Oh god, I always ended up looking like— who did I look like? Alfred E. Newman!”

She is an expert at keeping up pleasant conversation about almost anything, but my grandmother is always stressed. When we go out to a restaurant, she is concerned that the food won’t be to everyone’s liking. Once we

went out to brunch and she sent her bacon back three times. On my last visit, she got extremely bent out of shape because the sheets on the couch had gotten wrinkled after I slept on them overnight. She was extra on-edge because my uncle was going through chemotherapy after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and she couldn't sleep or go for more than a few minutes without thinking about him and feeling sick from fear. After putting away the bran muffins, she sat down next to me on the lemon-colored couch and took my hand, saying it was so good to have me come visit, as a distraction. She told me that she was crying every day, and that she wished it had been her instead of him, and at this point, she was just waiting to die. She told me that I always managed to say the right thing, which I had better, since she only has three grandchildren, and my cousin and my sister are very introverted and barely talk at all. I didn't know what to say, but I hugged her tiny, tilted body and told her I loved visiting her and was glad to be there for her and that I hoped she would have good dreams tonight that would help to distract her, too.

The following night, her poetry club put on a performance in the Quadrangle auditorium, in front of the entire community of residents. The rows of scratchy velvet-backed chairs were filled with septua-, octo-, and nonagenarians, and apparently even more were watching on their televisions from the seclusion of their private rooms. Eight members of the poetry club were scheduled to perform, and I sat through several of their trailing, metaphor-heavy accounts of beloved cats and idyllic childhoods spent in the woods before my grandmother took the stage. Her poem was short, self-aware, and to the point, and her Brooklyn-tinted voice was clear and strong in the microphone. This same woman, who had been worked up about the wrinkled sheets just 24 hours earlier, was standing at the podium reading her personal poetry in front of a packed auditorium without so much as a pause in her breath.

The poem, titled "Once Upon A Time", was about the tenement apartment in Brooklyn where she was raised as the child of Polish Jewish immigrants, fearful of the unfamiliar outside world and all the hardship it brought them. She mentioned sneaking off to the basement and playing kissing games with a little

boy her age, Saul, who lived in the same building. Her well-chosen, imagery-rich words told me things I had never known about her life— things that I had never thought to ask. It occurred to me that this history was my history, too.

My grandmother's voice ended in a throaty growl when she delivered her parting line, about being "delivered from the Egypt of the present" into a new day. I knew she was talking about my uncle— his suffering from the cancer, and her suffering, as his mother. The applause spattered over, and she walked off the stage, her mind clearly too occupied with its own troubled thoughts to take in the magnitude of the performance she had just given. I wonder if the worry preserved her, like a type of formaldehyde, protecting her from the exterior forces of evil in the world because they were no match for her interior forces of anxiety and dread.

"I'm a worrier, not a warrior," she said to me, later that night, holding my hand again on the lemon-colored couch, her feet in their crocheted bedroom slippers barely touching the floor.

"Grandma," I told her, looking at the silvery-blue veins running through her trembling hand, "I would say that you are both."

On the train back to Providence, I sat curled into the seat with my legs tucked against the one in front of me, scratching away in my sketchbook with a dried-out Sharpie marker while industrial Pennsylvania streamed past outside the window. Before leaving, my grandmother had given me a plastic tote bag printed with a pixelated rendition of Monet's waterlilies that she had found buried in her closet. "A little something from grandmother's attic!" Within the tote bag, she had also imparted one of the bran muffins, and a folded paper copy of the poem she had performed at the reading, which was titled "Once Upon a Time". I had asked for a copy because I wanted to remember the experience of hearing her perform it. I wanted to tape it to my bedroom wall so that the next time I was at the peak of frustration with one of my own pieces of art, I would remember that my grandmother was an artist, too.

I hadn't thought about her as an artist, before. She had always been quick to point out how much she envied the way my mother can paint, my father can capture a moment with his camera, and I can draw cartoons. "Some people are just gifted," she told me over the crackle of the speaker-phone when I called to ask her more about her poetry practice. "There's a woman who just joined my writing class who does these poems about Odysseus coming home to Penelope. For some time, I was the only poet in the group, but now I've got competition! I both admire her and dislike her because she's so damn *smart*. But she's an inspiration, and I tell myself, I can't be jealous of other peoples' gifts."

The writing group is one out of the dozens of active "extracurricular" clubs at the Quadrangle. Many of the residents were professors or academics before they retired, and some were even professional, published writers. "We have people who are very gifted, and people who are just trying their hand at it." There are twenty people in the class at this point, which my grandmother says is "too many". They meet twice a month to critique the submissions, which range from memoirs, to satire, to poetry, like her own. The group is led by a 90-year-old former English teacher, who insists that the feedback given in the workshops should be positive, or at least constructive. "We get to know people in a way we would never get to through other encounters," she tells me, and I reply that the interactions I have with my classmates in our studio critiques sometimes feel that way, too. Most people at the Quadrangle write about the past and their memories. Once a year, the teacher compiles and edits a selection from all the workshop submissions into a community publication called "The Quadrant". This year, my grandmother's poem "Once Upon A Time" has been selected, as well as another one that she wrote about her own grandmother.

"I get more satisfaction out of writing poetry than prose, I guess because I'm an emotional person," she ponders during our phone call, and I scribble furiously in my notebook, trying to catch all of her words. The inspiration for "Once Upon A Time" came from a vision she had of the apartment building in the New Lots neighborhood of Brooklyn where all her relatives lived in the 1930s. "The façade of the building split, and opened toward me like a dollhouse," she

recants. "I could see all of my relatives inside." She had an aunt, on the sixth floor, who was always in mourning because her child died young. He was a cute little red-haired boy who got a mastoid infection in his ear, and then was gone. As a child, my grandmother remembers seeing her adult relatives doubled over on the bed, wailing from the loss. "My parents never should have brought me there." She has never forgotten the feeling of that fear, of seeing the adults in her life completely shed their appearance of sturdiness and control. "We lived in that house for a brief time during the Depression, when my mother had nowhere else to go. You probably don't want to hear about this, but she had a miscarriage while we were living there. It was before my brother was born. I was five years old, and I remember blood all over the sheets. I didn't know what a miscarriage was. I thought my mother was going to die."

Nobody in her family expected her to go to college, although she excelled in high school. She was assigned to the "commercial" track as opposed to the "academic" one, receiving vocation-oriented training to become a secretary. Despite this uninspiring placement, her outstanding grades qualified her for "rapid advance", meaning that she was able to graduate at age 16. Her close friend Estelle had also grown up with immigrant parents, but at this time had an American stepmother who insisted that young women should attend college. Through Estelle's daily persuading, my grandmother eventually worked up the courage to take the night classes required for admission to the City College of New York. She was interested in becoming a lawyer, but had no examples proving that to be a realistic option for a young Jewish woman coming out of a low-income immigrant family. Instead, became a teacher.

"I had always enjoyed writing compositions for my English classes, and I thought that if I could help just one person, it would be worth it." Lillian taught for a number of years, in middle schools and high schools throughout New York, and later in Philadelphia, after she moved there to marry my grandfather, Malcolm the dentist. She stopped working to raise the sons who grew up to be my uncle Ron and my father, Stuart, but stayed involved with the causes she cared about by volunteering as an abortion counselor at Planned Parenthood and directing

Junior Great Books for the Delaware Valley. “We would go into schools with a list of great books, to get the kids reading outside of school, away from censorship or grading. That was always very important to me.”

She started writing poems in the ‘80s, through a series of classes offered for Jewish women at the YMCA. The organization was aimed toward women who were “coming out of the home”, breaking free from their domestic responsibilities to improve their education and feed their minds. Many of the women enrolled ended up divorcing their husbands and taking on their own careers. The local rabbis were not thrilled. My grandmother met an instructor she liked there, and asked if he would start a writing class. “He was a terrible poet, but a wonderful teacher.” There were five women in the class, and he asked them to fill a book with their own poetry, which they called “Voices of Five Women”. My grandmother submitted it to 70 different publishing houses, but none of them picked up the draft. “We were unpolished, I guess. But some of the publishers did encourage us to submit to anthologies, as individual writers. I don’t think any of us ended up doing it, but it was a nice encouragement.”

Then, she says, she didn’t write for many more years, until she moved to the Quadrangle in 2010. “I’m 90 years old, and my access to my vocabulary isn’t what it used to be,” she says, though I have always thought of her as one of the most articulate members of my family. “Thank God for the Thesaurus.” She does reflect though, that having more distance and perspective from the poems she composed earlier in her life has greatly improved her abilities as an editor. She asks me if I have an interest in writing poetry. I tell her I do, but that I am still struggling with narrative writing, which I see as Step One before diving into the even murkier realm of the abstract. “Do it sooner, rather than later”, she advises me. “And bring something you’ve written to show me when you visit in December.”

“Once Upon A Time”, taped to my paint-peeled bedroom wall, is one of many poems that she is proud of. Grandma Lee says that her favorite moments are when the poems pour out of her organically, and she feels as though some other power is guiding her hand. She quotes to me the line she is most proud of,

from a poem she wrote during the '80s about visiting a nude beach. "I saw a man running alongside the water, no clothes on, just his body and nature," she remembers. "I fell in love with him because he looked so free. The poem goes, 'I take him for a lover, safe from time and touch, in the amber of my eye.'" She tries to use as few words to encompass as much meaning as possible, and is most satisfied when her emotions can be successfully condensed.

My hand absent-mindedly doodles bug-eyed cats and dogs in the margins of my notebook during our conversation. Drawing comes easily to me, and writing is harder. I have a pile of notebooks filled with scrapped attempts at short stories, autobiographical accounts, and even a few feeble stabs at poetry, which are the most embarrassing fragments of all. But if my genes are as good as my grandmother's and I get to live until ninety-one, perhaps there will be time to grow past these inhibitions and into a more graceful phase of life, like the one I see her in now. In old age, the practice of creative expression has shed much of its sense of pressure and high standards, and has transformed into a catalyst for communication between her past, her present, and the people she loves. Her poem on my wall reminds me.

The brick facade removed
From the tribal tenement
The apartments stand open
Like Joseph Cornell boxes
Crammed with memories.

At irregular intervals
Dolls emerge
Turn slowly
Like porcelain figurines
On antique clocks,
Pause...
And move to their assigned places.

The dolls:
Grandparents, aunts,
Uncles, and cousins
All lived here
A primary school where I read
From their books of sorrow

Aunt Lily offers a bowl of fruit
Her door always open-
Her door
First entry to grief. A child's death
Dried up the thin milk of her joy.

In the apartment below,
Uncle George
Has exchanged the Word
For the Worker.
Aunt Eva, discarded on Sundays for Lena,
The fellow traveller
Welcomes us with a kiss.

On the top floor, Cousin Pearl, princess
In a tower, fair daughter of dark mad
Gypsies, dreams above the turmoil.
Mirror-obsessed, forever combing her hair
Lends her face to every storied girl.

Her father spews curses at the gypsy mother
She laughs and dances out to Rose Land.
The villain beats his only son, Saul
Saul, the scapegoat, I take him by the hand
Down to the cellar- birthplace of dread
Haunt of Jack the Ripper, Frankenstein, and Hyde
Into the cellar- hiding place of the Chosen
Out of the cellar- locus of death.

A wooden sukkah in lonely vigil
Stands witness to consoling games
Furtive experiments in anatomy
Saul takes me by the hand.

Bubbe, bone of anxiety in three sweaters
Scolds from her window. Upstairs we nibble
On her hard, un-Proustian sugar cakes
At the black iron stove, she stirs and stirs
The stew pot of mourning and guilt.

Home from the sweatshop, Zeda prays
At the kitchen table, prays and ponders
Why none of his progeny hear his God.
He shushes our jabber

My head filled with visions of an old man
In the Swiss Alps, my Zeda is the fiction.
No mountain, no goats, no serenity
The storybook grandfather is my reality

Saul and I tiptoe into the dining room
The straight, blue mohair chairs wait
Like virgins for the holiday intruders
The odor of musk prevails

Above the prayers, I hear the IRT sputter
Its last stop in Brooklyn.
I hold my breath
Someday it must carry me from the Egypt of the present
Through the desert
Across the Red Sea to the city of Promise.