

2008

Grandpa's move

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Recommended Citation

Burney, Emily, "Grandpa's move" (2008). *Student Writing Awards*. 5.
<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/swa/5>

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Personal Essay – Myrtle Telleen Collins Award

Grandpa's Move

By Emily Burney

“Grandpa had a stroke.” My dad’s voice echoed across a vast distance and my hand tightened around the phone. I heard my voice respond sympathetically, a reflex. It was like hearing something sad on the news, but what do you do? My parents are divorced, my dad lives thousands of miles away, and I barely know my grandpa.

“He can’t live on his own anymore.”

“Where’s he going to go, then?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” my dad sighed, and I could feel the weight of it as if he were in the room with me rather than sitting in his office in Alberta. “I’ll have to figure it out when I come home.”

“What all do we need to do?” It occurred to me as I said this that I never talk to my dad like a daughter. We talk like two adults. He’s always been more like an odd sort of friend: someone I can talk to but not someone I can depend on.

“Well, we have to get him moved out of his apartment, and I’ve got to talk to his social worker. She thinks we can get him into the Veteran’s Home in Marshalltown. This means I’ll have to spend most of my trip dealing with Grandpa. I hope that’s okay.” Statements like these have steadily become my dad’s mantra to me over the years, but I’ve adapted. A general ambivalence has taken over that region of my heart, and I prefer it that way—it’s less messy.

I had to work the first day he was in town, so when my shift ended, I drove to the apartment in suppressed anticipation. Despite my attempts, I always get excited to see my dad. My grandpa lived in a retirement community called Elsie Mason Manor—a high-rise in downtown Des Moines that ironically overlooks the playground of the downtown school, which sits on the opposite corner. During the school year, the shouts of the kids come floating up, intermingled with the heavy sounds of traffic, to beat against the gloomy silence which hangs in the air of Elsie Mason.

When I entered the apartment, the acrid smell of cigarette smoke filled my nostrils, and I inhaled it unpleasantly, knowing there was no point in resisting. A girl about my size with my hair and facial features was washing dishes at the sink. She looked over at me and smiled brightly, setting the dish down to give me a hug. We don't hug on my mom's side, so I was out of practice.

“How are you?” she asked, and I gave her the canned response, bouncing the meaningless query back. Lindsay and I are cousins, but she looks more like me than even my sister, Kelsey, does. Kelsey has red hair from some distant ancestor on my mother's side, and is taller than me despite my three year advantage in age. She was at a friend's house avoiding the work of packing and cleaning as well as the awkwardness always felt when we are with my dad's side of the family.

Lindsay resumed doing the dishes, and I went into the bedroom where I found my grandpa sitting in an old mustard-yellow recliner, parked in front of the television, watching *Gone with the Wind* and holding a cigarette between trembling fingers. I gave him a hug. He seemed different, as if part of his personality had flown away, leaving a

half-self behind. My dad was sorting through a pile of official-looking papers on the bed and paused to give me a loving, yet distracted hug. I didn't take it personally.

I retreated into the living room, thankful to be with someone young. The kitchen and the living area were one room, and Lindsay and I talked across the bar as I began sorting through the shelves of books that lined the walls. Grandpa had decided not to take any with him, so I was sorting out a stack that I wanted to keep.

“How is Chase?” I asked.

“Getting ready to start kindergarten.”

“Wow, he's getting so old,” I said in genuine surprise. I remember when Chase was born—Lindsay was eighteen and decided not to finish her senior year.

“Dropping out was the dumbest thing I ever did,” she confessed to me. “Getting your GED just isn't the same.” I nodded, not knowing what to say.

By this point my stack of books had grown into a mountain half my height. I continued sifting through the dusty volumes and told her about my life at college.

I learned that her boyfriend is studying at Drake University, and she has a job cleaning model homes after construction is finished. “I like to clean,” she said. “It's quiet, and I can work at my own pace. I'm such a neat freak.” She laughed as she scrubbed harshly at a pan in the sink.

“Are we talking or cleaning,” my dad said jokingly as he came out of the bedroom. We both knew our chatting was slowing down our progress, but neither of us tried to stop it. It was our way of chasing away the gloom, which filled the tiny, two-room apartment like the overpowering cigarette smoke that hung in the air.

As I narrowed my pile down to three leather-bound classics, it suddenly occurred to me that my passion for literature may have come from my grandpa. I had never been sure of its origin, not seeing it in my other grandparents, and the idea made me smile as if I'd stumbled across a secret.

The door opened and in walked a short, stocky guy with a closely shaved head of dark hair and a goatee. He wore a white wife-beater stretched over a faded pair of baggy jeans. Swirls of ink stretched up his arms in a dark form of art depicting intricately detailed skulls and crosses. It was my cousin, Troy, and as he turned to say hello, I noticed the name "Leslie" was laced across the side of his neck in black, cursive ink. She was Troy and Lindsay's mother, who had died two years before of a brain aneurism, following close after her sister, Robin, who had died of lung disease a month before Leslie. They were attached at the hip, and my dad says that Leslie just couldn't make it in this world without Robin.

Troy and I didn't hug. He didn't have the same welcoming warmth as Lindsay. Instead, he seemed drawn inward by some invisible force—not sadness, I think, but shyness. My dad calls Troy a lost soul, especially since his mother's death. But if you look carefully, you can find him.

Lindsay finished cleaning the kitchen, and the three of us began packing away Grandpa's Civil War memorabilia. As we wrapped each item in paper and stowed them in boxes, we talked. Troy has a dark sense of humor, but he can make me laugh until my sides ache. He and Lindsay know Grandpa better than do my sister and I, who grew up sheltered from the dysfunction of my father's family.

“Remember the time,” Troy laughed, “I tried to take Grandpa’s car? He came out of the trailer and saw my head poking up behind the steering wheel, and he started yelling and cussing! Man, I freaked and ran to the park. I didn’t come back for hours.”

“How old were you?” Lindsay asked, laughing too.

“Seven, maybe,” he replied, still chuckling. I slowly realized that this was a fond memory for them, and suddenly I was laughing too. This was not a version of my grandpa I recognized, having only seen a kind, subdued side, but I could appreciate the pleasure they took from this strange recollection, even if I couldn’t quite understand it. My dad has hinted about the difficult relationship he has had with my grandpa, and the hard times they experienced when he was growing up.

My dad believes in forgiveness, though, and he has given me much practice in this art. My mom once said, “People deserve a second chance,” and our family is the perfect example of this philosophy in practice. I believe that you forgive the ones you love. We may be stretched across vast distances, not just of space but of experience too, and yet we were all there because we’re family, and we believe in being there for each other.

Although I could never have guessed it then, that weekend was the last time I ever saw my grandpa. Shortly after we moved him into the Veteran’s Home, I returned to UNI. During September, my mom called to let me know that he had passed away. Later that same night I called my dad to see how he was doing.

“I’m not gonna lie,” he confessed, “This morning, after the nurse told me and I hung up the phone, I sat down and cried.” Then he added quickly, “But I wasn’t bawling or anything...I shed some tears, though. It’s strange...” He paused, and I could hear him

trying to come up with the right words, “It’s the end of an era.” And in that short conversation, in his honesty, we were connected, despite the thousands of miles which separated us.