

## **The Man in the Old Brownstone**

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Grandpa Phillips died on a Sunday. He passed surrounded by his twelve beloved dogs, all of indeterminate breed, but faithful to the last. How long he would have laid there is unknown, but the neighbor below heard the thump of something falling and decided to investigate. No response from his apartment prompted the neighbor to contact the local police and they found him. He was face down and unresponsive. He was dead: deemed a suicide brought on by an overdose of barbiturates, washed down by copious amounts of whiskey.

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I was sixteen when grandpa died. I would not say I knew him well since my mom and dad kept us kids sheltered from him. He was what they called a “bad influence.” He lived in Cleveland while we lived in Detroit so he was not a constant presence in my life, but still when I did see him I felt some connection...there was love, fear, and pity. Every time we visited his apartment, it was an adventure. He lived in the second story of an old brownstone downtown across from a spooky cemetery that attracted ghost hunters and partying teenagers. My parents were usually evasive when planning a trip to my grandpa’s, because my older brother would scare me and my sisters with tales of grandpa as a wild demon preying on the souls of children. The arrival at 2635 West 46<sup>th</sup> Street showcased the destitution of the area, reminding me of the slums of Detroit. I was always afraid of the winos who hung around there, eyeing the children in the matching outfits like candy; sweet and sugary. Upon entering the foyer, I remember the smell of dog urine, stale cigarettes and overcooked cabbage; the combination made me gag and I would turn to go back outside, always stopped by the impetus of my siblings’ bodies struggling to climb up the narrow stairway.

Grandpa would greet us at the door with suspicious eyes; we were like a small army on the offensive and ready to bolt if he was in one of his volatile alcohol-induced moods. However, he would finally recognize us; his face would change from the mask of anger and distrust into one of unconditional love, oozing tenderness to his seven grandchildren.

“My babies, you’ve come to see me again,” he slurred his words and reeked of a cheap libation, something that was affordable on the miserable pension and scanty social security check he received monthly. My mom would block us from his overenthusiastic onslaught of caresses and the rambunctiousness of his overflowing kennel.

“Hi Pop, you look well,” she would tentatively begin, and then questions like “How are you? Are you getting enough to eat? Is the heat working? Do you have enough money?” would tumble out of her mouth before we even removed our coats.

We huddled in the background until my mother would give us the heads up that everything was fine or she signaled my father to take us back downstairs to the car because grandpa was unfit for a family visit. I liked the visits to grandpa although they were a little scary to me. I was his favorite, possibly because of my visible cherubic cheeks or my naivety in not realizing trouble when it was before me. The family entered his apartment cluttered with old Life magazines, overflowing ashtrays, and empty Kessler’s Whiskey bottles. His dogs hovered around him with a defensive air; challenging anyone they believed a threat. The dog pack loved me though, their protection turning instinctually to me – they would snap at my brothers and sisters, who would back away afraid of an attack. I stroked their coarse fur, dirty from weeks without a bath, remembering their names from the last visit – Heinz, Clayton, Harry, Ursula, Violet, Franz, and Klink. There were five new dogs, but they followed Heinz, the alpha around like the puppies they used to be.

“Opa, what are the new dog’s names?” I said as I scratched a scraggly mutt behind the ears.

“You know your fairy tales don’t you baby girl?”

“Uh-huh. I know them all.”

“That is Hansel and Gretel, Aurora, Sleepy, Dopey and Doc.”

“I like those names”

The beasts would sniff at my hair and lick my face as my mother watched in terror ready to spring if the dogs so much as growled. But I wasn’t afraid, not of them, I was more fearful of the familiar stranger who owned them.

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Sometimes for no reason at all, grandpa would make his way up to Michigan. It was always an unannounced visit that left us unprepared of what to expect. One time, during summer break, he arrived while my mother was out at a church function. We identified him to our babysitter and welcomed him into our house. He seldom saw us so he insisted on getting the seven of us a special treat.

“Hey you little bastards, who wants to go to the store with me to get some ice cream?” he asked as he searched his pockets for his keys. My brothers and sisters, being more astute than me, stepped backward leaving me as pawn in this dangerous game of chess.

“Angel! It looks like it’s you and me, sweetheart” he grinned as he grabbed my small hand. I stared at his fingers intertwined with mine, feeling the rough calluses from many years laboring in construction. He beamed at me, gently pulling me along to get in the car with him.

“Where’s the nearest grocery store?” This question perplexed me; I was only seven at the time and didn’t know where anything was.

“There’s a party store called the ‘Rusty Keg’ on the corner of Ryan, I know they have ice cream.”

However, my directions took him not to a party store, but to ‘Yosin’s Bar.’ Grandpa stopped the car in the parking lot, his eyes turned glassy and he repeatedly licked his lips, making me thirsty with the memory.

Even to a seven-year-old the look alone spoke volumes about his internal struggle to deny himself a drink. Looking at me he sighed and turned the car around heading back to a market he had seen on the way to our house.

In front of the store, there was a group of kids from a local YMCA selling chocolate turtles. My grandfather took out his careworn wallet and pulled out five dollars.

“I’ll take two boxes.” The kids handed him the candy and he turned to look at me.

“This one is for you,” he handed me a box, “And this one is for those cowards you call brothers and sisters to split, because they were too afraid to come to the store with me, but not you my little one, you are brave.” He took my hand and we walked into the store, me with my gapped smile and grandpa sober for once.

My mother was home from church when we returned and she was livid that grandpa took me out. Knowing his history, I knew she feared the worst. But I stood up for him, which only bonded us more than just being his favorite.

“Grandpa is fine Mom! He didn’t even swerve on the road or anything! He made me put on my seatbelt and held my hand when we crossed the parking lot. He took real good care of me! So be nice to him!” I started crying after my impassioned speech. Grandpa came up and gave me a hug.

“She’s not really mad at me, you know? She’s just worried about you. It will be all right.” And it comforted me. More from the soothing sound of his voice than the reassuring words. My mother looked at him and saw the truth that he was indeed sober, she started to cry and apologized for her accusations.

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I was twelve when my mother and grandpa had a falling out. They hadn’t spoken in months. One night, probably two o’clock in the morning, some police officers came to our door telling us the Parma Heights public safety in Ohio informed them of a terrible accident and my grandfather was one of the victims. My mom sat on the stairs and started weeping inconsolably. As we stared in shock at my mother’s powerful display of emotion, the phone rang, startling everyone, my oldest brother Dan ran to answer.

“Hello. Just a second,” he called, “Mom, it’s for you... it sounds like grandpa!”

My mother sprang from the stairs and ran to the kitchen grabbing at the phone, saying “Dad, Dad is it you?”

“Hiya baby! April Fools” which was silly because it was August, he slurred and stuttered inarticulate mumblings into the phone, but all we saw was the relief and possibly some exasperation on my mother’s face. She called me over and told me to entertain grandpa for a few minutes, while she took care of the police at the door. How does a ten-year-old entertain an intoxicated man? By singing a polka he had taught her of course.

“Roll out the barrel, we’ll have a barrel of fun...”

He sang it with me in an off-the-wall jocular voice emphasized even more by his inebriation. He added his own raunchy lyrics, which not realizing the time I sang loudly with him. My mother screeched and grabbed the phone from my hand and shooed me off to bed, saying we would talk about my inappropriate language the next morning. I went to sleep that night thinking: grandpa is crazy, but he is sure funny.

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It is hard to imagine, like *déjà vu* really, when the Detroit police, apparently in communications with the force from Cleveland, came to the door early that Sunday morning to break the news that the neighbor found my grandfather dead. The conversation was short and abrupt but not without tenderness.

“Mrs. Rossi?” The officer looked nervous, visually shaken.

“Yes officer?” I could sense anxiety in my mother’s voice – it was a tight sound like she was straining to talk.

“Are you the daughter of Alexander Phillips of Cleveland, Ohio?”

“Yes,” she spoke so quietly, I struggled to hear her voice.

“We are very sorry to inform you that your father was found unresponsive this morning in his apartment.”

“Unresponsive. What do you mean unresponsive? Did he drink so much he passed out?” she gazed at them with confusion in her eyes.

“We’re very sorry, EMS couldn’t resuscitate him, and ... he died.” The officers looked down, perhaps afraid to see my mother’s grief, or because they were self-conscious that they were the ones who had to deliver a message like that. My father stole up behind my mother, thanked the officers and guided her back to their bedroom, where she could process what had just happened.

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My father took care of the funeral arrangements. We loaded the Suburban with all the church outfits we had and headed toward Cleveland. Cracuin Funeral Home had hosted the family's wakes for fifty years, and treated us like the prodigal son every time someone died. The wake for grandpa would go on for three days. It was a surreal experience for me, because people did not say many nice things about him when he was alive, but in death everyone had a fond memory of what a "character" Al was. The funeral home oozed heat and the flower strewn room reeked of wilting buds and hypocrites. Three Cleveland police officers stood off to the side of my grandpa's casket joking "that the electric company is going to come in under budget without 'crazy Philips' shooting out the streetlights on Halloween." My mom's friend from high school, Andy Rysmun, with his beer belly hanging over his jeans, reminded my mother, "Remember when your dad would take that damn goose for a walk, and it would attack everyone who passed them?" The longer I listened to the reminiscing of "friends," the angrier I became. I went down to the coffee room to sit with my brothers and sisters who were playing a game of Euchre. More of the same confronted me, "Did you know that Al got his parakeet a bus pass," "What about the time he got his Great Dane drunk at Healey's Pub. It won't be as exciting around here without him," "You could always count on Al for some outrageous stunt, like the time he took a piss in the fountain at the zoo." This final remark pushed me over the edge.

"You know, my grandpa was more than a court jester or troublemaker! He was sweet and caring. I bet you didn't even know that he never let a child in the neighborhood go without a coat or shoes during winter, or that he gave some of his own kid's Christmas presents to needy children. Yes he had some problems. Now that he's dead do you think we could possibly let him rest, without you demeaning his spirit?" "Angel!" it was my mother, she looked scandalized, "I am so sorry, she's not taking my father's death well. Please forgive her." She took my arm and led me from the room into a private corridor. Then unexpectedly, she hugged me and whispered, "Thank you."

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My mother once told me that she never knew her father when he wasn't drinking. That he started very young because during prohibition my great-grandfather Francasic ran a still and my grandpa would test the liquor to make sure it tasted right. He was an alcoholic by the time he was fourteen. The times when he was sober, showed a soft-spoken, shy man who felt he did not have enough education to comment on anything that mattered. My mother also mentioned that even though he drank, he never let his own children go hungry or want for love. Grandpa was a complex man that no one really understood.

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The day after grandpa's funeral, we all went to clean his apartment. The dogs were gone, to where I never found out, possibly following his spirit from this world to the next, like an old Indian legend. It made sense though because they were loyal only to him. I wandered around the messy rooms in a daze, not sure what to do. I fingered through his stacks of old magazines and books, some brought over from Poland when he immigrated back in 1917. The ones written in Polish had words I recognized from what I heard grandpa say from time to time. I glanced down at the threadbare area rug that covered the badly scarred floor ruined with deep ruts from mammoth dog nails. The air still had the stale smells of my childhood visits. I continued to wander searching for anything that would remove the cloudy haze that permeated my brain since his death. I walked zombie-like towards albums leaning against his old hi-fi. I shuffled through these albums trying to make sense of everything. I glanced at the record player – there was a record still on the turntable. I picked it up and smiled, it was Bobby Vinton – Greatest Polkas.