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Stories That I've Heard Before

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Stories That I've Heard Before

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages & Literature
of Bard College

by
Matt Balik

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Home

The two of us, we grew up in the same, odd house. Separated by thirty-four years, it was still that duplex on the corner of Arlington and McKinley to both of us. The one with aluminum siding, painted white, then yellowed with age.

It had long hedges, only a few feet high, that straddled each side of the walkway leading up to the front door. Tall bushes wrapped around the whole house and threatened to spill onto the sidewalk. Your Grandpa kept these well manicured.

When your grandparents first bought the house back in the '50s, your Grandpa set up a fence around the backyard with some salvaged wood. He planted rose bushes and azaleas and hosta plants all along it. He built the brick patio with your Uncle Donnie when I was only ten-years-old. They used reclaimed bricks from when a fire had taken one of the abandoned factories that lined the Passaic River in Paterson. The two of them loaded up the old station wagon with whatever was left. Fifteen years later, he added a sunroom to the first floor apartment and put a landing on top of it for the upstairs apartment. Your Uncle had moved out to California by then. I remember helping your Grandpa load those awkward panes of glass into his car. That station wagon went through a lot of those trips.

I lived in that first floor apartment from when I was born until I met your Dad at thirty-two. We moved away for a little bit, but everything kind of lined up and brought us back. I always thought that was fate—that your Dad's plant closed down and he got laid off, that I was starting to take time off to work on my own writing, that we hadn't started you in school yet, and that your grandparent's upstairs tenants had just moved out. It was a little different then.

It's a funny house. When we first moved there you used to ask me if your Grandpa built it.

We buried a few goldfish in the backyard, right next to the dog your Grandpa and I buried when I was twenty-three. I sent you to the same grammar school that I'd gone to. We still got our pizza from Puzo's—even though you and I liked that place by the Chevy dealership better.

It was all a lot different for me the second time around. There was a Rite Aid where the old Grand Union supermarket used to be and Jenncarelli's Deli got torn down to build the office complex that held your pediatrician's office. Goffle Brook Park was still there, but when you and I walked down to the playground, it looked more curated than when I used to ride my bike through it after school. They'd gotten rid of the roundabout and the little wood chips and replaced them with a set of low-hanging monkey bars and rubber mulch. In many ways, it didn't feel like the same place that I knew.

* * *

It was a few days after your Grandma's funeral, a few more days after she'd died. That was when it first started. Or maybe just when I first started seeing it.

You were ten-years-old. Your Grandpa was downstairs probably still sleeping while I was up, getting you ready for school. Your Dad had left for work at seven, so it was just you and me. You sat at our kitchen table working on a bowl of Apple Jacks. Cowlicks covered your hair (you got those from your Dad). You had on a maroon polo and gray slacks, the uniform you wore to St. Matthew's. I remember when we first got them for you at the Coed Store in the Garden State Plaza. You'd thought it was the ugliest thing and didn't see why you had to wear it. You wouldn't stop crying.

My eyes were still struggling to stay open. I cradled that initial cup of coffee and treasured all the first few hot sips. I was wearing the same t-shirt I'd fallen asleep in and a pair of jeans that I just barely found the energy to pull on.

The kitchen was a cramped room, like most in that apartment. Nothing fit properly inside—beds were too close to doorways, your Dad hit his head on door jambs, chairs constantly bumped up against walls, and it was almost impossible to open more than one cabinet at a time.

It was nice being so close to your grandparents when we moved back, but it was never where we really wanted to be. It seemed temporary, and so we tried to be vigorous, not about finding a new place, but finding our own place.

I put your lunch into a plastic grocery bag—a few pieces of honeydew, carrots and peanut butter, a handful of store-brand potato chips and cream cheese and strawberry jelly slathered between two pieces of bread. That's the sandwich your Grandma used to pack for me.

I looked at the clock on the microwave. It read 7:38. "We'd better get going now," I told you.

I handed you the grocery bag, neatly double-knotted at the top, leaving it a little loose so you wouldn't struggle and have to ask a teacher to open it. We walked out of the kitchen together and into the narrow hallway—the only one in that apartment. You and I climbed down the thin set of steps that led to the mudroom and then onto the landing. I got our shoes and jackets. We walked down another flight of steps and then across the brick patio and past your Grandpa's sunroom. I saw all the lights were still off in his dining room.

I got into the car, trying to move slowly to keep my mug from spilling. We usually walked to school. It was only fifteen minutes or so, but I felt tired that morning.

I pulled the car around to the side of the school where they had the drop off area. Cathy Gramboni was wearing a neon vest and standing next to the entrance way.

She gave me a little wave, and walked slowly up to the car and waited for me to roll down my window. “Jane, I’m so sorry about your mom. I just heard from one of the other parents yesterday.”

“Thanks, Cathy.”

“Are you doing okay?”

I thought it was a strange question to ask, odd that she was even talking to me. She was Isaac’s mom. You had him over for a playdate a few years before when he ended up shitting his pants and getting it all over our sectional. Maybe she still felt guilty about it. “You know, as well as these things go.”

She smiled back. I felt the parents in the cars behind me getting anxious. As a rule, no one honked at the school drop off. “I better get going, Cathy. I gotta check on my Dad.”

“Oh, of course. Let me know if you need anything. I’m sure Isaac would love to get together with Ben sometime soon.”

I let you out and drove around the building. I made it the whole way back, still managing to cradle the coffee cup and not spilling anything.

* * *

I was huddled around the dining room table with your Grandpa, watching him eat his breakfast. Your Aunt Peggy had called me the day before. She wanted to come down to the house and get started, sorting through your Grandma’s things. She had said she wanted to get there by eight,

but I didn't see her until I went down at a little after nine. She was in the kitchen, scrubbing away at a stack of pans in the sink.

I could hear the TV on in the background. One of the anchors from Channel 12 was interviewing a college friend of Governor McGreevey. They talked about how it all came as a surprise, but now that they thought about it they should have seen all the "telling factors." Almost a month after the fact, all the local news sources were still focused on his resignation—even Oprah brought McGreevey's wife on the show. I think it was background noise for your Grandpa though; he usually preferred to read.

"Did you hear about this, Janie?" he said to me, his face still hidden behind the paper. The dining room table seemed big that day, like he was saying it from far away.

I could hear Aunt Peggy, pouring a cup of coffee for herself and then fussing over the coffeemaker, pushing buttons and grumbling, trying to figure out how to turn on the warming plate. "Hear about what?"

"They're opening up a new Corrado's in Midland Park."

I wonder how many times I've seen your Grandpa like that before—the newspaper in his hands obscuring him from the table, a mug of black coffee and grapefruit no more than an arm's length away. It's the same large, round table from when I was a kid. He always sat in the same chair farthest from the doorway, but where he could still see everyone walking in. The table took up too much of the room. It didn't make sense to cram an upright piano and two end tables in after that, but that's the way it was. Each room in the house always seemed too small.

I could hear the water running in the kitchen, the scratching sound of steel wool against a pan. Your Aunt consumed herself in the task of cleaning. She was like your Grandma in that way; your Grandma who used to vacuum in heels or sweep the patio for fallen leaves or keep the

pantry stocked with Cheez-Its and Stella D'Oro cookies and Wonder Bread—always finding something that needed to be organized or tidied.

“Peggy, come sit for a minute,” Dad yelled to her from over the newspaper. “It’s not gonna get any worse. Do you want some coffee or a muffin or something?”

She peered out from the doorway that connects the kitchen and dining room. “Don’t you have any cleaner or anything, Dad? I can’t even find the dish soap.”

“What do you need dish soap for?”

“What do you think I’m doing in here?”

“There’s probably more in the pantry. Just come sit down for a second and have something to eat.” He hated tinkering. When your Grandma used to iron clothes while he was trying to read the paper, he would complain about the “steam collecting in the room” and say, “just come sit with me.”

Peggy said, “I’m okay. I should get started with some of Mom’s clothes.” She turned her head towards me, “I’ll be upstairs, Jane.”

“I’ll be up in a minute.” I was preoccupied by the clip on the TV of McGreevey resigning that I’d probably already seen a dozen times in the last few weeks. It was the part where he was going on about the the “realities” in which he was trying to run from—something that caused him to question his own spirituality. He looked restrained. He said, “I do not believe that God tortures any person simply for its own sake. I believe that God enables all things to work for the greater good.” I wondered about pain, and if it was really worth it in the end. Would McGreevey still stand by that statement, or was it simply something that he said? I guess we can only try and tell ourselves to be ready when moments become hard.

Peggy headed up the stairs, leaving your Grandpa and me at the table. He drew his copy of *The Bergen Record* back up to his face. I looked around at the outdated Christmas cards propped on top of the piano crammed in the corner. There were stacks of bills, junk mail, magazines, and catalogs piled on top of the table. There was an issue of *People* magazine addressed to Amelia Contrini. It'd been three days since your Grandma's funeral.

Next to your Grandpa sat his cup of coffee and plate with a partially eaten English muffin and a grapefruit. From a small bowl in the middle of the table, he sprinkled some sugar over the grapefruit. It was something I had gotten familiar with; it's a happy memory now.

He probably saw me staring. "Do you want one, Susie?"

"No, thanks. I ate before."

"How about some coffee?"

"I'm good." He gave me that *suit yourself* shrug.

I sometimes worried about him futzing in the kitchen by himself. He believed wholeheartedly that he could take care of himself. He lost his mother when he was two, his father when he was nine, and left his stepmother's home at seventeen. All this loss taught him how to be self-sufficient. He trimmed his own hedges, he changed his own engine oil, he retiled his own bathroom floors, he fixed his own roofing, and on one occasion after falling out of a tree, he set his own dislocated shoulder. Yet, he still managed to overcook his pasta, tie his tie too short, or puzzle over how to set up the voicemail on his phone. Your Grandma helped with the things he couldn't manage.

He hadn't shaved since the funeral. He hadn't shaved regularly in years. I started noticing around the same time that his hair went from gray to white. When I was a kid, it looked so thick and greasy. He was always pushing it off his forehead by combing it through his fingers. Over

the years, it had thinned out and gathered in a mess that sprawled across the top of his head, without any care about where it might fall.

I asked your Grandpa if he wanted an egg before I went up to help your Aunt.

He didn't look up from the paper. "I'm okay," he said. "I'm gonna run over to Corrado's later. Do you need anything?"

I gave him the same "I'm okay."

* * *

I'm good at being quiet. I've always thought that. I still like to talk over a meal and catch up on peoples' days, but when I've got something to do, when my hands are working over something, I'm good at not saying anything.

Your Aunt and I were in your Grandma and Grandpa's room (I still want to think of it as the one they shared). I was on the floor sorting through everything your Grandma left behind. Peggy was doing the same over by the closet. The bed stood between us, unmade and a white comforter with a pink hospital blanket piled on top. The carpeted floor was supposed to be white too, but it looked browned and yellow from age. A bureau, a dresser, an armoire, and a closet lined the walls. I never considered how much space that is for clothes. I pictured the two of them wearing a uniform—your Grandma's house dresses that she tapered in to hug her figure, and your Grandpa's varying color combinations of polo shirt, sweater, and slacks.

I held up a pair of your Grandma's stockings. They felt rough and itchy. I remembered them feeling softer when I was eleven and used to help her fold laundry. A lot of them were stitched back up from where she had ripped them. Going through the drawer and folding them

all, they seemed endless. Most were a deep flesh tone and made it harder to distinguish how many pairs she actually owned.

It was careful work separating those that had stuck together with static or because of their abrasive material. I focused on pulling them apart and folding each individual one back together, making a neat pile next to where I sat.

Peggy picked through the closet next to the master bathroom. I'm wondering now why we always called it that. It was the only one in the house. We had a small one down off the sunroom, but it didn't even have a sink to wash your hands. We relied on that one bathroom in their bedroom.

She said, "Donnie's eulogy was really beautiful."

I looked up. "Yeah. He made me tear up."

She stared at me for a few seconds, waiting to see if there was something left to add. Neither of us had anything to say, and so we turned back to our work.

I spread my feet out across the dingy carpet and leaned my head against the dresser from where I was pulling all the stockings. I thought about Donnie's part of the eulogy where he described going grocery shopping with your Grandma as a "rite of passage for the Contrini kids." How she used to have us help her squeeze cantaloupes in the produce aisle, complimenting our eight-year-old egos by telling us she needed our strong fingers to see how firm it was. She let us pick out something from the snack aisle if we agreed to help her carry the bags home. She always phrased it that she *needed* help. It wasn't a demand or an order, but a genuine appeal. She was teaching us how to help people.

"I was thinking about when he started talking about the Grand Union," I said. "He conveniently forgot to mention that time when he got banned from the store."

“Oh that’s right! When he tried to steal that pack of gum?”

“Yeah. They wouldn’t let him come back for something like a whole year. Mom couldn’t have been more embarrassed about it.”

“What was that manager’s name again?”

“Mr. Erickson.” I said the name slowly, like I was savoring it.

“Yeah, that’s it. He used to see Mom bring Donnie in and just say, ‘No. Not yet, Amelia.’ I’m surprised she kept trying to bring him back.”

“She was stubborn about that stuff. She probably wanted to show how she’d disciplined him.”

“How do you remember this so well? You must’ve been a baby.”

“I probably heard this spiel from Mom a hundred times, her trying to threaten me and not end up like Donnie.” Your Grandma could be overdramatic.

“Hmh,” she said like she was missing out on something.

Your Aunt flipped through the dresses stashed away in the closet. The shutter doors were pushed apart and she was sifting through these things that probably hadn’t been touched in years. She grabbed the edge of a soft pink dress and held it so it was at an angle between her and its place still on its hanger.

“Oh, this is gorgeous,” she said.

I stretched my neck so I could see over the bed. “I think she wore that to my wedding.”

“You know, this would look really great on Anna.” She freed it from the closet and held it at an arm’s length so she could go over it. I didn’t think she heard me, she couldn’t seem to peel her eyes away from the dress. “I don’t think she has anything like this either.”

She wore that dress to my wedding. There's a picture in our living room of your grandparents dancing at the reception. Your Grandpa had on his familiar face. His eyebrows pulled up across his forehead, eyes bulging from their place, and tongue peaking from his mouth, which stretched widely across his cheeks. It formed something slightly more malicious than a smile. It was the same face that followed a good teasing, or crude remark, or a joke trying to acknowledge itself as a joke. Your Grandma looked good on that day. Her face was softer, less animated. Her smile didn't stretch too far, hiding her laughter behind her small and bashful mouth. She kept telling the bus boys that it was her "daughter's wedding day and doesn't she just look beautiful." I kept asking the band to play just one more Sinatra song that night because I'd never known anything more romantic than seeing your grandparents dance together.

Your Aunt took her eyes off the dress for a second, just to try and see if I was paying attention. "I think I'm gonna take this one then. Is that okay?"

I tried to seem distracted. "Uh, yeah. Yeah. That's fine."

I wish I could have told her how much I liked that dress.

* * *

I remember my first car. I was seventeen. Your Grandpa bought me a used, brown Mustang. It was only a few years old. It had a big moon roof and I really loved that. That summer, before I started my first semester at Montclair, I drove it down the Shore with Monica and Jen and some of my other friends from school. Back and forth between exits 161 and 105 on the Parkway—it was about an hour and a half each way or else an hour fifteen on a good day. I got to learn about New Jersey from big highway signs that said ASBURY PARK 15 MILES.

I wanted your Aunt's car, though. She had a Mustang too. Your Grandpa told us he knew a guy at the Ford dealership in town, and that he was getting these great deals, but probably he saw these powerful American cars and wanted to do something nice for his kids. She had the famous one—maybe a '64 or '65. I think it was the same one Tilly Masterson drives in *Goldfinger*. It had a convertible top and faded blue paint job that looked teal on a sunny day. She took her boyfriends around in it, to the drive-in theater that used to be in Fairlawn or the bowling alley that was in the same shopping complex as Positano's or just down 287 where it was a nice drive. She always had friends and boyfriends to drive around with.

I don't remember when she got rid of it exactly, but probably after her and John got married. She didn't kiss boys in cars anymore, a station wagon would do just fine. I offered to buy the Mustang from her with all the birthday and babysitting money I'd been saving up throughout high school, but she told me no. I don't know where that car actually went. Maybe she thought she could get more money by selling it to someone else. I'm sure that's what ended up working out for her.

* * *

Your Aunt and I went through drawers for what seemed like hours, none of which were terribly exciting. Mostly the drab colored slacks and single tone sweaters that she'd begun to adopt over the last fifteen years as she shifted away from her housedresses.

Dresses hung in the closet, outdated and losing their original color. Cardigans and formal jackets peaked between these. All the items followed the same monochromatic scale and mostly started to blend together. We folded them into boxes and labeled the tops.

Storing everything away to keep in crawl spaces, it didn't seem like we were really detaching ourselves from anything, but waiting for a later moment to revisit these items.

Your Aunt picked through things slowly. She was deliberate in sorting, not wanting to miss anything.

"I can't decide what I think about this turtleneck. I'm not even sure it's going to fit me. What do you think, Jane?"

Holding up a pair of olive slacks, she'd say, "You know, I don't even really remember when she made this big switch from dresses to pants. I remember her wearing those housedresses growing up."

These details appeared important, particularly when it was only the two of us going through her belongings. It was inevitable that we'd be drawn to our own histories and revisiting our pasts. We had to try and organize everything what your Grandma left behind. None of us were fully prepared, but your Aunt and I were the ones getting things done.

We picked out the few things we thought we might wear or simply to own as a physical point of memory. Mostly, we labeled boxes and carried them to closets in different rooms where they would be less obvious.

We looked through the jewelry. I said, "Look Peggy, I really just like a few of these broaches and want her crucifix necklace. You can keep all the earrings and other necklaces." I think she saw that I wasn't entirely telling the truth—that maybe I did want a few of the earrings and maybe even some of her rings, but I felt like I had to concede. We were equally transparent. We didn't want to give up on things. We wanted to be able to point to something and think of our mother, to remember the time when she wore this brooch shaped like three intertwining roses on Christmas Eve and your Grandpa accidentally knocked over her wineglass and ruined her

ribbed, white turtleneck sweater. The easiest thing for us was just to pack everything away and wait to talk about it.

* * *

We spent the next couple hours like that. We remembered moments offhand, going through all her different pieces of clothing. The surplus of condiments that she always laid out for dinner—salt, pepper, an Italian vinaigrette, ranch dressing, ketchup, mayonnaise, Dijon mustard, grated parmesan cheese, to name just a few. The square black shoes with a little wedged heel that she wore around the house. The plates of cheese and crackers with apple slice and peanut butter that she used to lay out for us when we got home from school.

It dawned on me to eat something. I asked your Aunt if she wanted to take a break or if I could bring something up for her. She told me no and that she would keep working. I wasn't sure what kind of tone she meant to say it with—maybe patronizing or else simple disregard. Sitting down with these large piles of clothes, it was slow work.

I found your Grandpa in the kitchen, his head in the fridge, one arm resting on the door and the other on the freezer above as he braced himself so that he wouldn't fall in. He looked up when he heard me walk down the stairs.

“Hey Janie. I was just about to make lunch if you want some.”

“Yeah, that sounds great,” I said, settling down in the same chair from before.

The television was still going but turned now to an episode of *Law & Order*. It was a rerun being shown on TNT, one he'd probably seen half a dozen times before. It gave him something to fall asleep to or glance over at in between bites of grapefruit.

I heard him shuffling through the cabinets in the kitchen, sifting through stacks of plates and bowls and platters and wine glasses and mason jars, all the treasures that he'd collected over the years and couldn't bear to throw away. At some point in his retirement, he picked up the habit of bringing home lamps, picture frames, cookware, jackets, larger pieces of furniture, almost anything he could find that someone was trying to get rid of and that he saw a second chance in (it goes without saying that he'd never been an entirely capable handyman). Your Grandma seemed to put up with it but there was always a steady stream of things that were getting funneled right back into our own trash. On more than one occasion, your Grandpa would silently notice her act of treason and a back and forth would ensue where things were traveling between the house and the trash. Peggy and Donnie and I used to call it his moonlighting gig. Once your Grandma died, it made it easier for him to indulge in his bad habits.

He didn't ask me how things were going upstairs with Peggy and I didn't really expect him to. He was quiet at the funeral too. He only kept saying that he didn't see it coming, that she was fine just the day before. He had the sneaking feeling that there could have been something more he should have done. We all recognized that, but in many ways her death wasn't that out of the ordinary. The easiest thing became to just say *I miss you*.

Sam Waterston came onto the TV screen wearing an ill fitting suit and his hair looking disheveled. He yelled at another character about a carjacking or bank robbery or embezzlement. I wondered what drew your Grandpa into these shows. He never really watched them, the same way that he never really watched the news when he left it on. It made sense in the context that it was just noise.

A loud popping noise went off from the kitchen and the TV cut out, along with a lamp on an end table.

“Oh, Jesus fucking Christ,” your Grandpa said from the kitchen. I figured it was just a short, and that maybe he had tried to plug in too many appliances at once, something I couldn’t fault him for.

I walked over and saw everything had turned off in the kitchen too. “Hey, what happened? Were you trying to use the toaster and the microwave at the same time?” He was back in the far end of the narrow kitchen that bordered with the boiler room, searching around for the fuse box.

“I don’t know what happened. That fucking microwave is a piece of——Ah. There we go.” The light came back on in the kitchen, but the clock on the microwave continued to stay off.

“Oh, what the hell is wrong with this thing,” he said, jamming every button he could manage and pulling at the door with what seemed like more energy than necessary. It finally popped open with a loud and unsettling creak and a horrible burning smell started wafting out.

“Did you forget to take the foil off?” I said, trying to block the smell as I moved closer. The inside of the microwave was covered in thick, burnt globs flecked with little pieces of a shell that had shattered from the explosion. “Jesus. Did you put a raw egg in there?” He’d done this before, when your Grandma had bought her first microwave—it had been more alarming that time, with the door coming completely unhinged. I guess I just had to be thankful that they started making them sturdier eventually, and although they still couldn’t hard boil a raw egg, at least the doors didn’t get ripped off when you tried.

“I was trying to make some hard-boiled eggs so we could make egg salad sandwiches,” he said, not trying to assert innocence, but with genuine confusion.

Peggy came down then and stepped inside the kitchen.

“What’s that smell?” she said.

“Dad tried to microwave an egg.”

“Are you okay?” She looked at your Grandpa.

“We’re both okay,” I told her.

Your Grandpa was still clicking away at the buttons, unable to get anything on the microwave to respond. Finally, he pulled away and said, “I think I’ve got another one in the garage somewhere.” He walked up the stairs onto the sun porch and out across the brick patio.

Peggy looked at me.

* * *

If we had an odd house, our bathroom might have been my favorite part. The wall was tiled with a deep, fleshy pink and bordered along the edges in a bright green. The toilet was a slightly opaquer shade of green—the same as the shower—and it featured one of those shaggy covers in some variation of a pink color. The mirror above the sink doubled as a medicine cabinet and the only towel rack in the room sat too close to it so that you couldn’t hang anything on it without it spilling onto the sink. Like any space in that apartment, it was cramped and seemed to be overflowing with objects. The sink practically sat on top of the toilet and if I was sitting on the toilet I could reach my legs up and rest them on the edge of the bathtub. I loved the window that opened onto the living room. It was made from a rippled stain glass so that nobody could see in, but it still seemed like an odd moment of intimacy and familiarity within the house. That maybe it wasn’t necessary, just well in touch with the other rooms.

Your Dad and I were brushing our teeth together later that night. You were long asleep and your Dad and I were using these moments to catch up on each other’s day. I was sitting on

the closed lid of the toilet and clipping my fingernails over our wastebasket. He was scrubbing away at his teeth with the same force that might require his entire body weight to scrape away the excess food from a pan or baking dish.

“My Dad broke his microwave today.”

“How’d he do that?” he said between a mouthful of toothpaste.

“He tried to hard boil an egg.”

He spat out what was in his mouth. “What? How do you hard boil an egg in the microwave?”

“Well, you don’t. He tried putting in just a raw egg. He did this once when I was a kid when we first got a microwave and he didn’t know how to use it and he ended up blowing the door off. I know it’s been like thirty years but I feel like that’s something you don’t forget how to do. He uses that thing all the time.”

He cupped his hands together and filled them with water and rinsed his mouth out. “Do you think everything is okay?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I didn’t know which moment to be in. I wasn’t done sorting through your Grandma’s things. It seemed odd to have to worry about something different, with its own unique urgency. “I don’t know,” I repeated. “I just don’t think that we can leave. I think it’s important that we’re here right now.”

Your Dad wiped away at his mouth with a towel that was neatly folded next to the sink and said, “We’re not going anywhere.” He smiled and kissed the top of my head and put the towel in a messy bunch on the towel rack and walked out of the bathroom, back to our bedroom.

I wondered where we were going to be. I wondered when something wasn’t going to be urgent.

Every Night

Peggy used to come over for dinner every night. When she moved out, I took her room, the one right off to the left, at the top of the stairs. Through the window, I would hear her pull up in that 70s-era Mercedes station wagon, park along the curb right outside my window, and corral her kids inside. At first, it was just her and Anna, but then when Tommy was born, he came along too, next Jess, and finally Katie. The oldest of her kids would come running in with Peggy trailing behind. She'd walk down into the dining room with the youngest in her arms and lean down to give your Grandpa a kiss as he sat with the paper, and your Grandma would shout from the kitchen, "Go get your sister and tell her to help set the table."

We had salad to start, with olives and iceberg lettuce and thickly sliced tomatoes and carrot peels and sliced cucumbers. Your Grandma arranged them individually in these glass dishes with ridged designs of flowers and a little lip that curled up about a half inch and protected the white table cloth from any overflow of dressing. There'd be a balsamic vinaigrette in a glass, pear-shaped bottle and a clear Tupperware piece with a red lid that held the grated parmesan. She would cook up a big bowl of pasta, or a few slabs of seared pork chops, or else a meatloaf topped with caramelized onions and a smear of ketchup. There was usually a side of greens—a broccoli rabe or sautéed spinach or string beans with mozzarella and tomatoes. There was a small wicker basket lined with a napkin and inside sat slices of warm bread. Each of these things collected on the table.

Your Uncle John owned a restaurant in Pompton Plains, an upscale Italian joint where they had a regular piano player and huge recreations of Raphael or Titian and it was typical for clientele to spend over a hundred dollars on a bottle of wine. There were many long nights and Peggy eventually found out that they weren't always at the restaurant, that a lot of the time he

was off with the new hostess. I guess all of that didn't leave her a lot of time to think about dinner for herself and the kids.

I asked your Grandpa one time why Peggy and her kids came over so often and he told me, "because John is a piece of shit," and I accepted that as a fact. I was just happy because I was sixteen and got to be an Aunt and that was fun and new for me. Peggy and Anna ended up living with us those first six months after she was born, when she and John got into something awful for the first time. But that was okay for me because I used to lull Anna to sleep, trying to sing "Here Comes the Sun" in my own, corny teenage way.

She eventually went back to John, that's when those every-night dinners started.

I stopped asking about it, the same way I stopped asking why your Grandma wore heels when she vacuumed or why your Grandpa used to water down his wine. These were things that were part of being Italian or being from New Jersey or else simply being a part of our family.

Peggy used to sit and talk after dinner with your Grandma, about John, about new roadwork, about Anna's soccer team at school, about the sweater the local dry cleaner ruined. There was always something to talk about. I'd play with her kids in my room or the upstairs living room. I'd help them with their homework or we'd play cards or read a book. When I got my own job and could splurge on them, we'd go out to see movies or else to the bowling alley in the Preakness Shopping Center or out to get ice cream from the place next to Gencarelli's Deli. I liked being an aunt more than being a sister.

They'd be gone by nine o'clock and I'd walk them out to the car and help Peggy strap everyone in. She would wave goodbye from the inside of the car and tell me, "be good at school." That's often the first thing she would say to me all night.

* * *

It must have been sometime in April.

Like any good Catholic, your Grandpa was engrossed with the death of Pope John Paul II. He was never a regular at Church. He used to fall asleep at Christmas and Easter masses and your Grandma would kick him awake if he started snoring too loud. It was never a regular thing like when your Grandma and I went every week to eight thirty service. I remember it best when Peggy and Donnie were off in high school or college, too busy to go, and your Grandma would take me to Binny's Corner after and buy me a short stack and we would talk about the unbearable theatrics of the new cantors or else how severely the priest was balding.

That day though, I was sitting down with your Grandpa. We each had our own coffee. He was flipping through a newspaper in his hands, one of those that tried to grab you with the headline. I was reading through a piece that I'd been writing. We were only keeping each other company.

"Apparently this guy from Germany, Joseph Ratzinger, is the front runner for the new pope," he said to me. He put a little too much emphasis in separating the syllables in his last name.

"Yeah, I think I read something about that," I told him, lying because it wasn't something I cared to follow up with.

"Wonder when there's gonna be an Italian again. They make good popes."

I was up late on the phone with your Aunt the night before. She had been giving me a hard time about taking your Grandpa to the doctor. We all thought it was going to get worse after the incident with the microwave, but whatever your Grandpa's condition, it seemed to stable out.

It came across in little mistakes, like forgetting to put fresh grounds in the coffeemaker or calling Peggy's old phone number. Some of his stories started to have cosmetic changes. He would remember caddying at clubs he never caddied at, or that he was a supervisor at the IBM plant, not a manager, or that your Grandma used to get her hair done at this shop in Paterson when she got it done just down the street. They were little things, but we both started to notice.

It'd probably been ten years since he'd last seen any kind of doctor. He didn't make it to his dentist or optometrist anymore, let alone his regular physician. I remember quite a few years ago, he fell out of a tree in the backyard after trying to cut off a few dead branches. He landed on his arm and it popped out of place. He set it back by himself and wrapped it in this dirty old sling that he found tucked away in a closet. I only found out after the fact, when I saw his arm hanging limply in that faded blue piece of cloth.

And you know how he ate. He liked greasy food that felt filling. There was rarely a meal for him that didn't involve overindulging. His body always seemed to encourage this behavior. He was never mindful of his health or his age, and instead saw growing old as a reckless freedom. Luckily enough, he'd never had a serious health problem.

He peered out from behind his paper, "Well it says here, he grew up in Germany in the '30s and that he was 'conscripted into the Hitler Youth when he was fourteen.' They're gonna put a goddamn Nazi in the Vatican, Jane!"

"I think you're reading it wrong, Dad."

As if to solidify his point, he dropped the paper in front of me so that I could see the headline. "Look," he said. There was a picture of Cardinal Ratzinger and in big, sharp black letters outlined in white, it read NEW POPE: WE DID NAZI THIS COMING.

I flipped inside and took a minute to scan through the article. I told him, “I think the key word here is ‘conscripted.’ He was forced to join, Dad. Kids living in Germany didn’t have a choice then.”

He gave me a hard look, as if he didn’t have a response, but was going to persist in his beliefs anyway.

I tried not to get too caught up in his conspiracy theories. My favorite was how he used to insist that Gulliani murdered all the homeless people. “Well then where’d they all go to?” he always shot back at people when they objected.

I put my own work down and told your Grandpa that I was going to fix us both something for lunch. The fridge opened with a slight creak and a dangerous rattle. All the decade-old condiments threatened to spill out from the side door. There were two shelves dedicated to leftovers. Anytime we went out to eat, he’d lean over the table and point to someone’s half eaten sandwich and handful of soggy fries and ask, “Are you going to finish that?” and then motion to the wait staff for a take-home container. Or else when we were over at someone’s house for a barbecue or anniversary party or birthday dinner, he always managed to be sent away with a to-go plate. The fridge was an array of Styrofoam, aluminum foil, and Saran wrap haphazardly stacked on top of each other. Between each box there might be some slimy-looking mushrooms or a half-used can of beans with some foil loosely resting over the top.

I found half of a small Chinese food container filled with lo mein, another clear plastic one with a salad mostly constructed of wilted lettuce, and a paper cup covered in aluminum foil and packed with mashed potatoes speckled with little dots of blue mold. Eventually, I stumbled onto a box filled with a handful of fries and almost two thirds of a tuna melt. It didn’t smell too

off-putting and so maybe it'd only been living there for two or three days. I felt satisfied with my search and arranged it on a small tray and placed it in the toaster oven.

The phone rang.

I cradled the receiver between my shoulder and head as I fiddled with the nobs on the toaster oven and tried to get it on the right heat setting.

“Janie? It’s Peggy.”

I rearranged the phone against my other ear. “Oh. Hey, what’s going on?”

“I was trying to call you at your place.”

“I’m downstairs with Dad.”

“You know, you should really invest in a cellphone. I don’t know how you’ve gotten by without one for so long.”

This digressive life lesson was typical for her and I guess came with being the older sister—the idea that I still had something to learn from her. I let out a sigh, “So what’s up, Peggy?”

“I just wanted to check in about Dad. How’s he doing?”

“You know. The usual. I’m helping fix him some lunch now.” I had the fridge door open again and poked around to see if there might be any other left overs that would be safe to heat up for myself. “I might clean out some of his fridge too. A lot of this stuff is going bad.”

There was a pause as I waited for her to respond. “Peggy?” I asked after a few seconds.

“Oh, yeah. That sounds good,” she finally said. “Sorry, I’m on my lunch break in the teacher’s lounge and I was looking at something on the television.”

“Alright,” I said, trying not to sound too annoyed. “So what else is going on with you?”

She ignored my question, “I was thinking maybe I would come down tomorrow night and we could all have dinner.”

It'd been a few weeks since she'd been over.

Your Grandpa and she never really got along. They had all the little fights that were common in every house, about Peggy staying out too late, or how her grades were slipping, or simply that she needed to help out around the house more. But they also had big fights like when Peggy decided she wanted to go to college somewhere off in Pennsylvania, not more than two hours away, but your Grandpa told her in a cold, strict voice, “my girls don't go away to college.” Last time she was over, she started going off on him about how he kept the TV too loud and he “was going to damage his hearing” and “should really go see a doctor if the TV needs to be that loud.” Neither of them wanted to put up with that fight, and eventually it fizzled out like they all do. They spent time together because that's what we're all supposed to do. We'd always been taught that you don't get to choose your family. It was only natural that we took care of your Grandpa when he got older. That's just what we do.

I was leaning next to the microwave when your Grandpa walked over to the fridge and started pushing around the old containers.

“What're you doing? I'm heating something up for you already.”

He turned to look at me like he was surprised to see me there. “Oh, well, I was gonna make up some of this leftover spaghetti if you want some,” he said holding up a container that had to be twice the size of his head.

I waved him away from the fridge and said, “Just go sit down and read your paper. I'll bring it over to you when it's ready.” I took the container from him, returning it to its place in the

fridge. I said to your Aunt, “That’ll probably be good. I’ll have to see if Tim’s gonna be around and make sure I don’t have to take Ben to a CYO game or anything.”

“That’d be great. I’ll bring Katie. Should I bring anything?”

“I’ll make a ziti. I think we should be good with that.”

“Don’t use the ground beef though. Dad always likes it better with the sausage in it. I can bring a salad if you want.”

“That sounds good,” I said as if just to end the call.

“Alright, I’ll probably come by around six or seven. Bye, Jane.”

Your Grandpa wasn’t going to fight about someone making him dinner. He and your Aunt liked to pretend that they still got along. I sat back down next to him and didn’t immediately go back to my writing.

“They just elected some new guy to the head of police over in Passaic,” he said.

He put his paper down, “I’m gonna fix myself some lunch though. I’ve got some leftover spaghetti in the fridge I’m pretty sure.”

I waved him off again, “I’ll get it. Don’t worry.” And I walked off to pull his tuna melt from the toaster oven.

* * *

Your Dad got home a little after six.

This was back when he was still working as a supervisor over at the Nabisco plant on 208, before he’d moved to Uneliever. You liked his job because he used to bring home all these

little presents—packages of mislabeled Oreos or Fig Newtons that they could no longer sell, or sometimes something less extraordinary like earplugs and hairnets and clip ons for ID badges.

I was leaned over the counter, cutting up carrots and peppers and onions and mushrooms, tossing them around in a pan with soy sauce and butter. You were at the kitchen table practicing your cursive, when I heard Dad sneak up and say in that joking, accusatory tone, “What are you doing?”

He started tickling the sides of your stomach which gave way to some deep belly laughing and reflexive shouting of “Uncle! Uncle! Uncle!”

He walked over and gave me a kiss.

“Dinner’s probably not gonna be done for another little bit.”

“That’s okay. Do you want help with any of this?” He grabbed a Bud Light from the fridge and settled into a spot next to you at the table, peering over to look at your homework.

“If you want to start cooking the rice you can.”

“We don’t have those noodles?” He took a swill from the blue can he was holding.

“No. I haven’t had a chance to go to the store yet. I was busy with my dad most of the afternoon,” I said. I couldn’t be responsible for everything.

He started rifling through the cabinets next to me looking for the rice. “So how’d work go today?”

“Pretty good—other than all the toe fungus we found in the spread for the Fig Newtons.”

You made a scrunched up face and gave a very long, enunciated *ewww*.

“Ha. Ha. Very funny,” I said.

“How’s Pasquale doing today?” He loved the chance to say your Grandpa’s name. He told me it was exotic compared to all the Darryls and Todds and Bettys he knew growing up in Iowa.

You chimed in with your ten-year-old obliviousness, “Mom, can I go watch SpongeBob until dinner is ready?”

“Did you finish your handwriting homework?”

“Uh huh.”

“Did you practice the piano yet today?”

I think I saw your face sink a little. “Not yet.”

“Why don’t you go downstairs and say hi to your Grandpa and practice a little bit?” You gave a begrudging okay. We had a tiny upright piano that your Grandpa kept pushed to the side in the dining room. It ended up being too big to get up the thin staircase into our apartment and so everyone compromised by putting it downstairs. I think your Grandma used to enjoy hearing you play, listening while she ate dinner. Your Grandpa was always too engrossed in some article in the paper to offer up any conversation.

I tossed a handful of diced carrots into the pan and stirred them around with a wooden spoon. I heard your Dad still knocking around in one of the floor level cabinets, looking for a suitable pot to cook the rice in.

He flipped the tap and let the water run into the pot for a few moments. We tried to work carefully around each other. Everything felt too close. Not in a cozy way that left you warm and comforted, but something like the pressure of anxiety and impatience that just wanted to move onto whatever was next. The whole apartment felt that way, like it was just a stop on the way to something bigger, that we were just putting in our dues. Eventually we would be where we

wanted, whatever we each thought that might be. I hated pulling orange juice from the fridge and, not paying attention, swing the door open too far and bang it against the adjacent wall. The chairs in the kitchen never seemed to be pushed in far enough. I had to do my writing at the kitchen table because there wouldn't have been room for me to have a desk anywhere. We kept the wine in the cabinet next to the soup bowls because a wine rack would have been an absurd luxury.

“You get any of your own work done today?” your Dad asked me.

“What?”

“Your writing. Did you work on anything today?” I was trying to work on a novel when we first moved into the apartment. I'd been reading a lot of Grace Paley, and so it ended up just taking the form of a bunch of stories. I wanted to turn it into something bigger, but could never really find the energy. It got me to start keeping a journal, though. I mostly kept little notes in it. Occasionally, those things would turn into a story, or else the start of something longer, but nothing that really sustained me for more than a short period. It was filled with my days—the stories you told me when you came home from school, the things I talked about with your Grandpa, oddities I noticed about our house, or memories that for one reason or another resurfaced. Just little narratives that I tried piecing together from the boring details of my days. Your Dad liked the same kind of books as your Grandpa—James Patterson and David Baldacci—and I don't think he read people like Philip Roth or Alice Munro, but I appreciated him asking, the sentiment was still there.

“I was busy with my dad most of the day.” I'd written a few words down that day, like most days. Nothing that felt like it was worth sharing though.

We were standing next to each other, leaning over the stove and attending to our respective pot or pan. All I heard was the dinging when I hit the wooden spoon against the edge of the pan and when the watery rice mixture would pop and slowly come up for air. We were good at being quiet with each other.

I told him about your Aunt coming over.

He placed the spoon on the cutting board where I'd been chopping vegetables, and then covered the pot. He sat down at the table. He offered to pick up a bottle of wine on his way back from work.

He took a sip from his beer as I kept stirring the pan around. We knew how your Aunt operated. Every few weeks she'd find a reason to come over for dinner and spend time with your Grandpa—I was an afterthought, just a witness to say that she was involved. In her own way, that might've been an expression of guilt. I didn't feel comfortable pointing that out to her though. The two of us had our own history with your Grandpa, and that often explained a lot.

He used to recalibrate himself when he met one of our boyfriends. It wasn't intimidation, as much as pure insult. When he met your Dad for the first time and I introduced him as "Tim from Iowa," Grandpa shook his hand and told him, "Well I guess we won't see you again." When Peggy brought John over for the first time, he was wearing a heavy cologne and when we all sat down for dinner, Grandpa leaned in and smelled him and said, "What the fuck is that?" That was how he looked out for us.

In the back of my head, I knew that solidarity didn't always make up for the bad parts of our relationship. Like how your Grandma used to tell your Aunt Peggy to pick me up from my baton lessons, and then your Aunt would forget and I'd have to walk home from Glen Rock. It happened a dozen times and I kept quiet about it because your Aunt said, "that's what sisters do

for each other.” There was also the time she missed my college graduation because it was the same weekend that John was taking her out to the Hamptons.

We made ourselves get along, though.

I scraped away at some of the vegetable skins sticking to the bottom of the pan. I lifted the lid on the rice and saw it was almost done. “I’ll get this. Do you want to go get Ben from downstairs, maybe check on my Dad?”

He kissed me on the top of my head and rubbed the large part of my back between my shoulders. He walked out of the kitchen, the top of his own head just missing the doorframe. I thought about what it might be like to be somewhere else. What if I didn’t feel like I had this responsibility? What if way back when, I had moved away somewhere? Would it have been a lot different then?

* * *

Flecks of sauce and miniscule breadcrumbs littered your Dad’s plate. It looked almost identical to when I set the table. He grew up with eight brothers and sisters, and they learned never to complain about a meal, that going hungry and holding out for something better was never worth it. Sitting next to your Grandpa, their plates looked identically clean. The two of them were the same in that way. Your Grandpa had a different relationship to his clean plate though, one that went through the Depression and so had that base fear of where his next meal was coming from. They were different kinds of appetites.

There were still a dozen pieces of ziti on my own plate. I was mopping the sauce and cheese off them with a slice of bread. Your Aunt Peggy was sipping her glass of wine and trying

to tell your Grandpa about this new restaurant in Pompton Plains she went to with a friend but couldn't pull his attention away from the TV.

Taking advantage of your Grandpa's nonresponse, Katie picked up her dish and moved away from the table, saying, "Mom, I have some homework I still have to finish."

You quickly turned over to me and asked, "Can I go sit with Katie and read my book?"

I smiled and looked up at Katie, "That's okay with me, but you'll have to ask Katie if she's okay with you sitting with her."

"Katie, can I sit with you and read my book?"

"Of course." You always made it very clear to me that you wanted an older sibling. I understood it more from Katie's perspective though, wanting a younger sibling, wanting to have some to dote upon.

You pushed away from the table, "Okay. I just have to run upstairs and grab my book and then I'll be right back down. I'm reading *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*."

"Thank you," I told Katie.

"He's cute," she said. She walked up the stairs out of the dining room and onto the sun porch where she started to take some papers out of her backpack.

Your Grandpa sat between me and your Dad at the table, across from your Aunt. He reclined in that chair closest to the TV room so that when he leaned back he could still catch glimpses of the screen, but close enough so that he was able pull himself back and resume conversation if that became necessary. Your Grandma never talked about how she hated it but she made it clear the way she would snap her fingers at him and say, "Pat! Pat!"

We were in the postmortem part of the meal, which felt like the most engaging. It was quiet up until this point. There was conversation while we were eating, but it was done in

between mouthfuls of food, or else interrupted by asking to pass a dish. It was difficult to engage in a discussion that way, and so most of the time we just ate silently. Food was always a distraction. Afterwards, we talked about families and the news and work and where kiwis were going to be on sale that week and how full the parking lot was outside Nordstrom's on a Tuesday afternoon.

“Hey, Dad. Did you hear about Yazzo's sister?” Peggy said.

“Huh?” he replied, craning his neck away from the TV.

She raised her voice a little more, “I said did you hear about Yazzo's sister. She passed away last week. I ran across it in the paper.”

“Yeah. Shame. Yazzo's kid called me up the other day and told me. I was gonna go to the wake but they were having it way out in Elizabeth.”

“What was her name, again?” I asked turning between Grandpa and Peggy.

“Marie,” he said.

I didn't have any follow up but went on anyway. “I remember when you had Yazzo teach me to golf, Dad. I lost control of the club on my first swing and let it go flying. Yazzo saw how embarrassed I was and just threw up his hands and walked towards me, yelling, ‘That's okay! Didn't hit no one!’” Your Dad laughed a little at that.

Your Grandpa chimed in, “You know Yaz's family used to own a spinach farm in Paramus before they'd started building Route 4. Marie and Yaz's mother used to have sex with men in the back of those fields.”

Totally divorced from logic, these kinds of statements had not become unusual for him, but it still had an innate humor to it. Your Dad broke down and let out a loud belly laugh, which he tried to hide by covering his mouth with his hand. Your Aunt and I could only look on

horrified. But eventually, my own appalled look turned into a smile, which I felt ashamed about, even if there was something uncontrollable about it. Maybe some small part of his statement had some truth to it, that one time him and Yaz found Marie in the field with a boy. It was another story that got mangled in his aging mind.

Your Grandpa didn't seem to care about any of our reactions. He leaned back in his chair and resumed staring at the TV.

I started stacking everyone's dinner plates, piling the scraps onto the top one and carrying them over to the kitchen. They were the beautiful china set that your Grandpa had rarely touched since your Grandma died. They were her every day dishes. Your Grandpa didn't really appreciate them in the same way—they were something he bought on a whim from a garage sale. He was content with whatever cheap and heavy porcelain plates managed to find their way into his house, whether they're snuck home in a doggy bag after a reception or simply amassed from frequent pickings through neighbors' garbage. The china reminded your Grandma of her own pride and the nice things she was able to own.

Your Aunt started gathering up a few of the serving dishes—the three quarters eaten dish of ziti, the little Tupperware with grated parmesan, the basket still holding a few pieces of untouched bread.

Your Grandpa raised the volume of the TV, as if to signify any further conversation would be inappropriate. I walked into the kitchen with your Aunt and scraped away the top plate into the trash. Your Aunt was opening cabinets in a gentle but confused way, looking for something to store the leftovers.

Peggy and I navigated around each other in the kitchen, a narrow hallway of a room. It felt cramped in the same way as the upstairs apartment, but not quite in the same way. It hadn't

changed much over a thirty-year span. This was always your Grandma's space—Peggy and I weren't allowed in there.

We bumped into each other reaching for the aluminum foil, trying to open the dishwasher, or putting a knife back in its block. I asked about what classes Tommy was taking at Quinnipiac or what neighborhood of Brooklyn Anna was living in now—because kids were always an easy topic. We tried exchanging these kinds of pleasantries for a little while. Our conversation resorted to the same innocuous topics it always did, moments that I wanted to be engaging but weren't because there was always something in the way. Whether that was your grandparents or the age difference or just how we had turned out, I wasn't sure.

She put her palms on the edge of the counter and turned towards me. "I got a recommendation from a coworker for a new doctor. I made Dad an appointment for next week." Your Grandpa was consistently difficult when it came to trying to help him. He equated his independence with his decision to completely ignore any health problem that he ran into. Maybe because that's all that he had left. About a month before, Peggy tried to take him to get his hearing tested, but it ended in a shouting match, one that I could hear from upstairs and had to go downstairs to break up the two of them. She hadn't brought up the idea of taking him to the doctor's since then.

She kept going, "His name is Dr. Prierra and he has a private office over in Caldwell. My coworker was giving him really high praises." I had some objection to the way she used the word "coworker"—like it had some kind of authority. This was back when she taught math at that private school in Montvale. It was an all-boys, Catholic high school that, like most of the other ones in the area, cost over ten grand a year.

I could see her waiting for me to respond, to give some kind of acknowledgement of my tacit agreement. My only thought was how your Grandpa was going to do what he wanted regardless.

“Have you talked to Donnie about it, yet?” I asked her.

“I talked to him earlier on in the week. You know how he is. He said whatever is gonna be best for him and that he was leaving it up to us.” He’d moved out to LA maybe thirty years before to start working for CAA. He became a professional and got married and never had any kids and now he only comes back to visit at Christmas or Thanksgiving. He expected me and Peggy to be there to take care of your Grandpa.

“Yeah. Alright. Well, do you need me to take him to his appointment or something?”

“That’s okay. I can do it. I just thought you should know.”

I thought about how he took responsibility for himself. He quit smoking a couple years after your Uncle Donnie was born. A friend at work was telling him how his doctor told him to quit smoking because it would kill him but he was finding it hard. Cigarette in hand, your Grandpa reeled back and said, “These’ll kill you?” He put out the half smoked cigarette, threw the rest of his pack in the garbage, and when he got home he threw away the rest of his carton. He stopped smoking on exactly that day. He took himself very seriously like that.

“I thought he might be more willing to go if we talk to him together about it,” she said.

“Look, Janie,” she kept going, capitalizing on the fact that I didn’t have much to say. “We need to get this done. He needs to see someone. That thing with the microwave back in September? It could have been a lot worse.”

“I know.”

“This part sucks, but we have to do this part.”

I started to pour soap on the dishes in the sink. I turned the water and waved my hand under it until it was hot.

“You don’t have anything you want to add?” she asked. I thought about how that might be something I would say to you, that it had some kind of inherent parental inflection about it.

“Well. I just kinda wished that you would have kept me more in the loop about this and talked to me about it. You keep doing this without me and never ask me what I think.”

“We’re talking about it right now, Jane.”

“Yeah, but you already made the appointment and did that whole thing already. I feel like his maid. I’m just making sure he has enough egg salad in the fridge.”

We tried to keep our voices down. This was a house where that got hard, though. It was bigger than the upstairs apartment, but it had the same tiny rooms divvied up throughout the house. Everything traveled and so we didn’t have a lot of secrets from each other.

“Well, what did you think you were going to be doing?”

“It’s not that, Peggy. It’s that I’m the only one here cleaning up after him. I sit with him everyday. Where are you?”

“I have a job. I’m sorry that I have to work everyday.” She threw her hands out in front of her, her palms raised, “This is what you agreed to Peggy. You said you would look after him. You don’t get to complain about it now.”

She was right about that. I did say I would do that. After your Grandma died, and then watching your Grandpa slowly start to go, I didn’t want the same thing to happen. I thought that I should get to be there for him. I wanted to be ready, just in case.

“All you do is show up once every few weeks and call on me to check in with him. You don’t get to say that’s helping when I’m the one going through his fridge and throwing out

Tupperwares of weeks-old spaghetti. Don't you think that I'd rather be doing something else too?"

There was a little pause and I kept going in case I might lose what I wanted to say, "I just worry about all this stuff because maybe that's not what he wants. You can't make him do something he doesn't want to. He's never been that way."

We looked at each other with crossed arms, stirring around all the little things that had just been let out.

That first time she showed up, it was early October and just starting to get cold. I was only a freshman in high school. She was holding Anna and looked tired. She didn't talk to me other than to ask where Mom was. The two of them sat in the dining room and talked while your Grandpa walked around the TV room voicing his own vulgar opinions. I tried to listen from the top of the stairs outside my bedroom but only heard that her and John got into something awful that night and that she just got up and left.

Your Dad poked his head into the kitchen, "Is everything okay in here?"

"Yeah. I was just going," your Aunt said, not looking at either of us. "Janie, the appointment's on Tuesday at 10:30. You can deal with it now." That comment hung in the air. It was that moment of tension that had always been there between me and Peggy, but bubbled under the surface and never showed itself. Those words felt different from the times before when she wouldn't sell me her car or forgot to pick me up from Glen Rock. Now, she was demonstrating that aggression, something we never did. It felt like a point in our relationship that had been coming for a long time.

She walked out of the kitchen and gave your Grandpa a kiss. She grabbed her purse and rushed up the stairs where she told Katie they were leaving in the same stride. I leaned against

the fridge and listened to them both leave. Your Dad took a deep breath in through his nose. Your Grandpa hadn't moved from his chair, reclined and listening to a news report about a school lunch program that had given dozens of kids food poisoning.

I started stacking dishes into the sink. Your Dad stood behind me and rubbed the large part of my back and didn't say anything.

“Janie. Is there any coffee?” your Grandpa shouted.

A Cemetery, An Address

The B-52s' "Love Shack" came across the car radio. Your Grandpa didn't listen to it the same way that he would Sinatra or Tommy Dorsey, singing along in his own flat baritone. His hands didn't offer any gesturing or even some tapping against the steering wheel. There was no clear evidence that he was even listening, yet he kept the dial where it was.

He had on the same pair of khakis he always wore, the ones that were starting to fade to white and highlighted by several bleach stains. The small print on the breast of his windbreaker read KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS ST. ANN'S PARISH 23RD ANNUAL FISH FRY, and he hid his thinning hair underneath a cap almost as worn and beige as his pants. He was never dressed entirely appropriate for the weather. I was sitting next to him as we hurled through a familiar Paterson.

We passed all the old immigrant houses in the Totowa Section. It used to be a big Italian and Albanian neighborhood, and now it's become predominately Hispanic. Short, square houses still dominate the area, though, with hedges like ours that hug the structure they surround. My Aunt Ann used to live down one of these streets. I visited her with your Grandma. My Aunt Ann used to open up cans of Pearls black olives for me and your Grandma told me to pretend to like them. They would gossip about their cousins and who could afford to move into West Paterson. I would only agree to come on these visits so I could play with my Aunt's miniature electric ice skating rink, which she used to set out around Christmas time.

You probably wouldn't remember the house. It's on one of those side streets off Union Ave. It's still there and not that remarkable. It looks like the ones around it, with faded, pastel-colored paneling, tall hedges that obscure the window, and steps that lead up to the front door. In a lot of ways, it reminded me of our own house.

Your Grandpa and I were on our way to see your Grandma's grave.

It was in between Thanksgiving and Christmas. We had the heater on low in the car. It hadn't snowed yet that year, and it only dipped down below freezing once the sun went down.

I tried not to think about his car's lack of registration, or its questionable brake pads, or that great wheezing engine. It was a black '90 Lincoln town car that he bought when it was only a few years old. The inside was just as heinous as the outside. The leather interior gave off a moldy smell, the fake wood paneling was peeling at the edges, there were at least two knobs missing from the stereo unit, and the carpeting had gone from a uniform black to a patchy mess of fading grays. But it was his car; he loved it.

It was a leftover from his days as a livery driver, the business he took up when he first retired. He didn't know how to stay still, and so he spent almost twenty years driving friends and neighbors into the City and the surrounding airports. He finally gave it up a couple years before your Grandma died.

Besides that car, he used to have an old Buick sports wagon. That was the family car and that drove us to places like Niagara Falls and the Capital and little league games and sleepovers. When your Aunt and Uncle eventually moved out, he traded that in for a boxy little, two-door Mercedes that was probably five years old at the time. He told us he got it for a good deal—maybe that's why the engine fell out of its chassis only a couple years later.

He always drove, or at least that I remember. He taught Donnie, Peggy, and me how to drive. He even taught your Grandma when she decided to learn at thirty-nine.

He was a bad driver. He was loud and aggressive and taught us important things like cursing and the golden rule: Imagine what is the stupidest thing the driver next to me can do and just assume they'll do it.

He sped through yellow lights (and red lights on more than one occasion) and forgot to stop for pedestrians. Driving through Paterson, most people seemed to cross the street at will, and so I remember how your Grandpa used to lean out the window and shout, “find a fucking sidewalk.” He would buckle his seatbelt behind him so that the warning light wouldn’t go off. And whenever I would start to worry and ask him to buckle up, he would reply with confidence, “If I go, I’m going through the windshield.”

He came to the graveyard every Sunday. We drove along the Passaic River while he pointed across to where he used to work at Continental Cans, but I knew that. I knew that he worked there for thirty-seven years and made his way up from a label sealer to a supervisor. I knew that was only one of the jobs he used to work.

We weren’t too far from where your grandparents lived when they were first married. It was your Grandma’s mother’s house, and your grandparents lived there together for maybe two years. When they first started dating, your great-Grandma used to invite your Grandpa in for spaghetti and warm bread that she baked herself. She didn’t speak a word of English and so the three of them would converse in Italian. They’d speculate about their changing city, and she would tell her own stories about growing up in southern Italy and coming to the States shortly before she got pregnant with your Grandma.

I don’t remember her too well; she died when I was ten. Her name was Concetta and I thought that was beautiful and wished it was my own. She loved the modern American convenience items that she could buy in grocery stores. She made me scrambled eggs with Velveeta and loved to drink diet sodas and kept her hair together with hairspray.

The river next to us looked just about the same. Your Grandpa said, “I used to go swimming in there all the time as a kid.”

“You probably wouldn’t want to be doing that anymore,” I said. Every couple years there was a new TV segment about how polluted the river was. One year they would say it’s the most polluted in the country, and a few years later it would only be the seventh, but within another couple years it was back in the top five. All those robust years of powerful factory building and job provision that dominated the industrial sections along the river had wreaked havoc on this natural body. It must have been mostly chemical runoff at this point.

“Me and my buddies would swim in there in the dead of winter. The water was always nice and warm.”

I thought about the small, malnourished tail he must have been growing beneath his worn out slacks. But I’m sure this was only one of his part-truths, a story he’s told so many times that now it’s become something different entirely.

He had his own versions of how he’d lived.

There was a small storefront across from the graveyard—a bagel shop, a pizzeria, a dry cleaner, and an empty shop with a “for lease” sign hanging in the window. They had a small parking lot in front that fit maybe a dozen cars. A man and his son set up a table there that they covered with a few different pots of flowers, wreaths decorated in red and green ribbons, and about a dozen figurines. The man had wrapped a blanket over his son’s coat. There was a window open in the old gray Honda Odyssey parked behind them. I could hear Bruce Springsteen’s rendition of “Santa Claus is Coming to Town” filtering out. A white poster board leaned against the side of the table and read WREATHS \$10, FLOWERS & STATUES \$5.

“Those things are a scam,” your Grandpa said after he noticed me looking. “They probably pull that stuff from the trash.” He didn’t have a sense of irony.

We turned away from the river and that parking lot, and went through the entrance to the graveyard. It had a gate that was always open and probably only there to practice austerity and demand some kind of sanctity. Everything was quiet inside. We sped down the narrow strips of pavement between each section and squeezed past the cars already parked along the thin road. Scattered throughout the lots, I saw a handful of families all with the same idea as your Grandpa and me.

“Shit. I can never remember which one it is,” he said, slowing the car down and craning his neck, thinking that maybe he could spot the gravestone from the car.

Not too far up ahead, we could see the looming statue of an angel with outstretched arms that marked where Gaetano Federici and his immediate family were buried. Your Grandpa took me to visit his grave a few times when I was younger, before I’d known any of the people buried there. He was a sculptor that had been responsible for a lot of the public art around Paterson before the War. He was an icon for your Grandpa’s generation growing up during the Depression. He was like your Grandpa’s own father who came from southern Italy and then committed himself to his city.

Seeing the big statue, your Grandpa said, “Oh alright, I know where we are now. It’s right here.” He pulled the car over to the side of the narrow strip.

He put the car in park and turned it off. “Janie, can you help me with some of the stuff in the back?” he said to me. He swung his door open and reached down to find the button to pop open the trunk.

“Sure.”

He opened the trunk and pulled out a wreath about the size of my head. It had a long stake attached to it and was wrapped in some gold-colored ribbon. It looked new, something that

took me off guard. With his other hand, he grabbed a pot of poinsettias. They had an odd sheen to them, revealing them as plastic. He handed the wreath to me while he continued to pick out a trowel and a cheap looking statue of St. Francis.

“Here. Let me help you with those,” I said.

“No, no. I got it,” he said and waved me away with a shake of his head because his arms were too preoccupied.

We walked across the pavement and onto the grass, over to her grave. “This wreath looks nice, Dad. Where’d you get it?”

He lifted the statue up higher to make sure that I could see it. “Did you see this? St. Francis of Assisi. The Paleskis were just throwing this away.”

She was a few rows back. In a simple font carved into the face, the gravestone read GENOVESE. The front was smooth and polished. The top featured a rough, chiseled cut that evoked a vague religiousness, like the commandments Moses might’ve carried down from Sinai. On the base, it had all their names: DOMINIC (1887–1934), the patriarch she lost when she was still a girl; CONCETTA (1893–1974), the matriarch; ROSA (1915–1989), ANN (1917–1995), FRANCESCA (1921–1999), the sisters whom she all outlived; GIUSEPPE (1916–1922), the brother she never even got to know; and the most recent, AMELIA (1923–2004). Then there were also the couple husbands: my Aunt Rosa’s, JACKIE ABBRUZIO (1916–1989) and Aunt Ann’s, PAUL DI PRIMA (1914-1987).

There beside her own name was PASQUALE (1919–). He caught me looking at the gravestone and he put down his armful of gardening supplies to say, “Hey look. That’s me. Just gotta put in the date.” He said it so casually, like it didn’t even matter.

He got to work clearing out the small bushes and beds of flowers that had been left over from the end of summer. Entirely slouched over, they were varying shades of brown and yellow. They used to be small azalea bushes and bunches of lilacs, a miniature mock-up of the garden that your Grandma used to keep in our backyard. After digging out all the dead parts, your Grandpa tossed them further into the graveyard so that they might land on someone else's grave, at least away from your Grandma's. He engaged in some version of manicuring each time he visited. It became less about the quality of presentation and more about maintaining a consistency. The same way it made them happy to sit across from each other every morning while your Grandpa read the paper and your Grandma smeared cream cheese and jelly across an English muffin. There was value in routine and being able to rely on something every single day.

I imagined some of these new things were hard. Like how he visited more often, and was usually alone. Before, he had your Grandma and they could look at their names together.

"You know, it was her idea to get married in the first place," he told me. "She wrote me a letter while I was in the Air Force and told me to get a furlough. She told me she'd already talked to her parents and that we were gonna get married." I knew this story well, but that didn't matter.

He kept going, "I was down in Georgia in '44. That's where they put me during the war." There was still dirt left on the knees of his pants. "Me and your Mom had only gone on a couple dates though before I left. She wrote me in big letters, 'GET A FURLOUGH! WE'RE GETTING MARRIED!' And I thought, 'Jeez. I hardly know this girl, but alright.'" Most of that was true, but he'd left out most of the sentimentality. They'd dated exclusively for over a year before he got drafted. They wrote letters while he was away and he spent almost all his leave time with her.

I learned a lot about getting married from them, but also from your Aunt and John. I dated around in my 20s, but no one lasted more than a few months. Your Grandma even liked some of them and would say, “Why don’t you just marry that boy.” I didn’t marry any of them though. She thought it was odd when I was twenty-five and not married, but then it was heartbreaking when I was thirty and still the same case. But growing up with stories like that letter, and simultaneously watching my sister’s marriage fall apart, it made me cautious. I was looking out for someone just right.

“I saw a lot of bad things down there though,” he said. “I was an assistant to a doctor and we worked at a big receiving hospital. For a lot of the guys coming in it was the first place they were coming back to in America after some pretty horrible stuff. I guess I’m lucky I never had to leave the country, and that I got to go back to your Mom pretty much the same as I was.”

I knew most of this even though he didn’t really talk about that part of his life, other than the leave time he spent with your Grandma—he valued that the most. He wasn’t off fighting halfway around the world, and so it wasn’t his job to talk about the war in that same way as someone who did. I enjoyed these stories about your Grandma and him together. I think a lot about them when they first started off.

We stood together a few more moments and looked on together. He had put the little statue of St. Francis next to the pot of fake poinsettias he’d just planted, closest to your Grandma’s name. The statue’s head was tilted towards the ground and looked limp. The hands were down near its sides, the tiny palms facing outwards. It probably looked like most of the religious statues I’ve seen throughout my life, whether in churches or in people’s homes, but then it reminded me of the angel over Federici’s grave. I thought about how these two icons now lived only a few hundred feet apart from each other.

Standing there, we each thought about your Grandma. Either we talked to God about her, or we spoke directly to the grave to her, or else we just kept quiet.

I walked back to the car carrying the trowel.

Your Grandpa continued with his stories, “You know my cousin, Yazzo?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you know that we got drafted at the same time and he got sent over to Europe to teach the generals how to play golf?”

I’d heard this one before, too.

He continued, “Yaz had just an incredible swing. He used to be able to really send that thing flying.”

We got to the car and tried to knock some of the dirt off the trowel. “Hey. How about we get something to eat?” I asked him.

“Good. I’m starving.”

We went through Downtown Paterson, ending up at Portofino’s. It was nicer than most of the places where we usually ate. The menus were decorated with pixelated reproductions of Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus*, small candles sat in the middle of the table even in the middle of the day, a collection of wine corks lined the wall behind the bar, and Pavorati echoed through the bathrooms. The pastas were parpardelle or tagliatelle, served in a white wine or garlic sauce, or else just called a putanesca or primavera.

It sat in the middle of the residential part of the Hillcrest section. We’d been going there since I was a teenager. They had a general dining section in the front, and off in the back were private rooms where people hosted baptisms and reunions and wedding rehearsals. It was the middle of the afternoon on a Sunday.

There was only a handful of occupied tables scattered across the open dining hall. I saw them carrying huge trays of covered food to the back room from the kitchen. People occasionally filtered out from one of those back rooms to go to the bathroom. This time of day, I would have guessed that it was a baptism.

Your Grandpa picked where we ate. He was going on and describing the clams that he always got there, steamed open and cooked in a white wine sauce laid out over a pile of linguine. “It’ll be my treat,” he told me smiling.

Portofino’s was only for special occasions growing up. We usually went to Anthony’s Famiglia Ristorante. It used to be down the street from St. Matthew’s, but closed about fifteen years ago. If you weren’t looking for it you would never notice it when you walk by. It only had five or six tables, and you never needed a reservation because there was never more than a handful of customers in there. It tried to pass itself off as a family owned place, that spit out generations of cooks and wait staff and hostesses, but I noticed the change in staff every six months or so, and no one ever met the owner or manager or whoever Anthony was. Your Grandpa always tried to ask the wait staff who was in charge, and he’d end up with the same response each time, “He’s not in today.”

They served up similar dishes that you’d find in any Italian restaurant, but with a slimmer menu and more inconsistent quality. The biggest appeal for your Grandpa was the price. I remember on more than one occasion having to crunch my way through an only half-cooked plate of pasta because your Grandpa feared that making any kind of complaint might establish us as a different kind of people, someone ungrateful. We bore our way through baguettes with the consistency of Wonder Bread and picked out unwanted fish bones or clumps of fat, all in the name of maintaining good graces with an owner that your Grandpa never got to meet.

Your Grandpa was okay with sacrificing quality for quantity and especially quality for cost. He liked hot dog stands and burger shacks and snack food, “all you can eat” and “deluxe size,” because it usually meant something along the lines of “more bang for you buck.” He had a misguided utilitarian understanding of food, ignoring even his own taste buds. The purpose of eating was to feel full, and when given the opportunity to eat in excess, embrace it.

He never had problems with his weight and had the lean kind of body that comes from always doing his own yard work and never making a call to a contractor. That changed with old age. He developed new wrinkles or odd discolorations. You could see his body become more angular underneath his clothes.

We sat near the back where we could smell the different concoctions emerging from the kitchen—thick waves of tomato sauce and roasting garlic. The walls all around us were lined with a series of mirrors that fooled people into thinking the place looked fuller than it actually was.

Your Grandpa had a favorite dish at all the restaurants he went to. He didn't stray from them. He always got a chili dog with relish and onions and a side order of chili-cheese fries at Johnny and Hanges, a half slab of ribs with a side of mac and cheese at the Chicken N' Rib Crib, or an order of General Tsao's Chicken and a side of scallion pancakes from King Wok. It was expected that he'd order the clams while we were at Portofino's. He didn't believe in too much of a good thing.

I broke off a piece of bread from the basket in front of me and used it to soak up the olive oil and balsamic vinaigrette pooling on my plate. “If you order the clams for an appetizer, Dad, can we share those?” I asked him.

“Sure,” he said. He left his menu balancing on the edge of the table, like a signal to the waiter to tell him that he’d always been ready.

Our waiter came over and said, “How’re you folks doing this afternoon? Did you want to hear about some of our specials?”

Your Grandpa waved him off, “I think we’re all set.” He took a used tissue from his pocket and started to blow his nose. In between wipes, he said, “I’m gonna get the clams with butter to start, and then the clams over linguine.”

“Excellent. And for you, ma’am?” he said turning to me.

“I’ll have the penne putanesca. And can you bring two plates for the appetizer?”

“Sure. I’ll put those in for you. Anything else to drink or just water for now?”

Your Grandpa chimed in, “We’re fine with water.”

Visiting your Grandma’s grave every Sunday became a ritual for your Grandpa over the last year. He took it on just like the religion he never felt too included in throughout his life—a “fair weather” Catholic, but a constant husband. Their marriage was realistic. Most of their conversations happened with mouthfuls of food, or by screaming the other’s name, or else by making elaborate hand gestures to emphasize a point. They either talked over each other or didn’t listen to what one was saying. I never saw them hurt each other, except when your Grandma tried to throw a plate like a Frisbee at your Grandpa’s head. She missed and it smashed against the wall instead. When they fought, your Grandpa would end by leaving the room, to go fall asleep on the couch, to pick up a late shift at the IBM plant, or to just go out for a drive. They would forget by the time he came back and everything became normal again. They had three children to raise and so they always realized their fights weren’t worth having. It made more sense to get along with each other—that rule tended to dominate over our whole family.

Ultimately, it's harder to lose a spouse than a mother.

I tore away another piece of bread from the basket and said, "You know Ben has his first basketball game of the season coming up next weekend. He would really love if you came and watched."

"Oh yeah?"

"It's over at St. Paul's in Ramsey." Before, he always had excuses to miss someone's graduation, or a holiday dinner, or attending Mass, because he had work. He doesn't have that same defense anymore.

"Isn't that where Peggy sent Tommy and they had that big lice outbreak?"

"What? I don't remember that happening. They went to school in Mahwah anyway."

"Are you sure? What was the name of the school?"

"I don't remember. You'll have to ask Peggy."

He tapped his fingers on the table. "Yeah. I remember seeing something on News 12 and listening to Peggy worry over it. I don't know why everyone gets so worked up about it now. We used to get them all the time as a kid in those run down old houses in the Riverside section. My step-mom used to make up this paste from lime juice and garlic. Let me tell you: that shit stung."

Our waiter brought the appetizer over and laid out little plates in front of each of us. We ate through it silently, your Grandpa finishing most of it by himself. He was a focused eater, usually unresponsive until after at least the first few bites.

There was little talk, but we still noticed each other sitting across the table. We took comfort just knowing that the other was there. It seemed important to eat together whether or not we were going to take advantage of each other's company.

The waiter exchanged our dishes for bigger ones that held our entrees. Before he even got a chance to ask us how we had liked the appetizer, your Grandpa was already prying through the new clams on his plate. When he finally did find a chance to speak, your Grandpa responded by wordlessly picking up the bread basket with the hand the wasn't covered in clam juice and shoving it into the waiter's midsection. I tried to give the waiter the most apologetic thank you I could manage, smiling at him as he walked away and told us to enjoy.

That was a quiet meal. I worked on my puttanesca, stabbing at the pieces of penne. I ate the olives and anchovies individually. Your Grandpa picked apart the clams with his hands and sucked out their insides. When he finished with those, he twirled the linguine at the bottom of his sunken plate and slurped up the wet noodles when they became too long for his fork. We both used extra pieces of bread to soak up the remains of the oils and sauces that had gathered at the bottom.

We talked a little more about you and your new teacher, Mrs. Baig. You recently picked up a copy of *The Lord of the Rings*, demanding that it wasn't too difficult for you to read. Your Grandpa liked talking and hearing about his grandkids. He gave you five dollar bills when you did good on your report card and constantly goaded you about taking golf lessons from him (which you never ended up pursuing). He enjoyed the people in his life.

When it came time, the waiter removed our dishes—mine mostly clean and your Grandpa's entirely clean. He asked us how our food was and Grandpa's face perked up, nodding along and saying, "It was good. It was good." The waiter smiled back, understanding your Grandpa's prior hostility—just an old, hungry man.

When he came back with the check, I tried to sneak him a handful of cash but your Grandpa knew all those tricks and started to protest and shoed the waiter away. I tried to insist

but he wouldn't hear it. He picked up the check book himself and stared at the receipt, scanning—and maybe hoping—for errors. He finally pulled out his own wallet and flipped through to find the right bills.

The waiter grabbed the book from him and before he could say anything your Grandpa said, “I don't need change.”

“I'm gonna go use the restroom before we go. Do you wanna go warm the car up?” He handed me his keys.

I went out to the car and let the heat sputter through the vents, only half-heartedly trying to warm me up.

Your Grandpa walked out of the restaurant with a nervous look on his face, and kept turning his head back to the door of the restaurant. He was carrying a plate in his head, covered with a cloth napkin that he kept steady with his hand on top. He kept his body facing the car so that he was blocking the plate, shielding it the same way that someone might cradle a football before they're tackled.

Behind him, I saw our waiter come bursting from the door of the restaurant, running after your Grandpa and shouting, “Sir! Excuse me! Sir!”

Your Grandpa kept moving in the reasonable and unassuming pace that he had adopted. He probably thought he looked more inconspicuous than he actually did.

Our waiter caught up to him only about ten feet away.

He put a hand on his shoulder and said, “Sir, you can't leave with that.”

I picked this moment to get out of the car and intervene, whether or not it was some kind of blow to my ego, having to explain your Grandpa to strangers.

“What's going on?” I said to the two of them.

The waiter looked over at your Grandpa, giving him the chance to explain himself first, but Grandpa's only response was, "What do you want?"

The waiter tried to gain dominance over the situation. "Sir, you can't take food from the private buffets. We need that plate back."

"What plate? This plate? This is my plate!" your Grandpa said pulling away from the waiter. He looked at me the same way he did when I was younger, as if to say, "come on, we're leaving."

Now that I was closer, I could see that he was holding a white porcelain plate, the same kind that we had just eaten our lunch on. On top, he had heaped mounds of pasta and roasted potatoes and grilled asparagus and flanks of steak and even a few bread rolls.

I knew it was exactly in his character, but I still looked at your Grandpa in disbelief. "Dad, did you do that?"

He didn't answer me and instead handed me the plate and walked past me to get in the car. I handed the plate back to the waiter and apologized. I thought about maybe trying to explain whatever it was that was wrong with your Grandpa, but that didn't seem worth my own energy. The waiter took the plate and said to me in a low voice, "Thank you. But, he probably shouldn't come back anymore."

I slid into the passenger seat. Neither of us spoke as we drove away.

We drove down 8th Street that took us from Paterson to Hawthorne. I looked out and saw the bodegas advertising lottery tickets and cigarettes and beer, the hair salon specializing in African braiding, the soda cans that rolled across the sidewalks from the absence of public trash cans, and the kids racing their bikes alongside your Grandpa as he drove until they couldn't keep

up anymore. Past all that was a short strip of industrial section with a big parking lot where they stored big yellow school buses.

Your Grandpa turned the car off and said, “Well I guess we’re not going back there.”

Waiting

“Your Grandpa lost his car today” is what I would have told you if you’d been there. You were away though—you’re first time leaving for more than just a sleepover. It was the July before you entered middle school, you and Dad and I left your Grandpa on his couch, lulled to sleep by an episode of Rachel Ray’s *30 Minute Meals*. We drove you up to New York State on a late Sunday morning to some out-of-the-way place near Port Jervis called Camp NoBe Bosco with your Boy Scout troop.

It wasn’t too long a drive, only an hour or so. We had to turn around twenty minutes into the drive because you’d forgotten your hiking boots, and so you spent those extra forty minutes listening to a lecture from your Dad. We rode up 87 most of the way, but spent the last few miles snaking along scenic county highways. Forests hung over these roads and occasionally broke to offer glimpses of wide mountain landscapes, nothing like the ones we had in New Jersey. We went past big empty fields and run down diners and houses situated only every other mile or so, set a thousand feet back from the road. Your Dad only muttered a few obscenities when he got turned around.

We turned off the highway onto a long dirt road and followed a series of signs, each with a different part of the Scout Law. Your Dad read them out in a robust, Hollywood accent that was only funny to him, “A scout is trustworthy! Loyal! Helpful!” You got embarrassed and yelled at him to stop, starting to laugh at the annoyance of the action rather than the actual joke. The road emptied out into a big, dirt lot and an older boy, maybe seventeen or eighteen, wearing a t-shirt tucked into a pair of khaki shorts waved us down. The back of his shirt read STAFF and featured a miniature camp logo on the right breast. He wore sunglasses and smiled when he

welcomed us to Camp NoBe Bosco. He told us to park down at the other end of the lot and pointed to where a couple dozen cars had gathered.

Your Dad pulled into a spot. We got out and stretched and I tried to look around for some of the few parents I'd met from your troop. Your Dad laid your duffel bag onto the dusty ground and sarcastically asked you if you'd brought enough stuff. The night before I'd helped you pack. I'd carefully folded your clothes when you were too engrossed with the Boy Scout handbook you'd just gotten, something you'd lose interest in in six months. The older boys in your troop had put together a list of the things you needed for the week. Some of it seemed a little extraneous to me. I set you up with some of my old camping equipment from when I had a more adventurous life in my 20s. Stashed away in the attic, I found a sleeping bag and bed roll and folded up camp pillow. You insisted that you were going to need luxuries like fire starters, a twelve-piece mess kit, and one of those plastic water sacks you keep in your backpack and drink from with a long hose attachment. All these things clanked together in your duffel bag.

One of your Scout leaders made his way through a crowd of adults and shouted, "Hey! Prochaska family!" He was slightly overweight, wearing baggy cargo pants and a t-shirt that read YOU'RE ON THE LIST. He had on a pair of knockoff Oakley sunglasses that he pushed onto the top of his head when he gave your Dad an enthusiastic handshake and me an uncomfortable hug. I remember his name being either Steve or Dave. He had four of his own boys who had gone through Scouting. He told us he'd stuck around for so long because he "loves the organization."

He gave a rehearsed speech on all the different things you would learn how to shoot that week: shotguns, BB guns, rifles, arrows. When he saw the worry in my face, he joked, "Don't worry. All the mothers have that reaction. I've been doing this for fifteen years and no one's lost

an eye yet.” Your Dad let out a polite laugh and I tried to smile along. You watched some of the other boys playing tetherball in a grassy section over at the end of the lot.

I thought it might have been scarier watching you go off for the first time. Maybe I didn’t have the same attachment issues between you and our home that your grandparents used to have with me. Or maybe I was having a moment like your Grandpa, when he used to let Donnie stay out later or leave the state for college. Your Grandpa used to say, “It’s different with girls.” I couldn’t shake that older, generational logic from me.

I told Dave or Steve that we had to leave, adding an excuse about how we left your Grandpa asleep on the couch. We gave each other uncomfortable goodbyes. Getting back into our car, your Dad and I watched you run off to go join the other boys.

We went that same way back and it didn’t seem as long. We stopped for a late lunch at one of those run down diners we’d seen before, just on the other side of the New Jersey border. Your Dad ordered biscuits and gravy and I had a bagel with cream cheese. The place was small and greasy and overflowing with pictures of Elvis on the set of *King Creole* and *Kissin’ Cousins* and *Flaming Star*. It looked like a displaced Memphis. The clientele were old men with beards that stretched down to their chests.

We ate our meal and talked about how funny it was that you were out of the house and that it wasn’t sad. We paid our bill and drove a little deeper into New Jersey. We found your Grandpa still asleep right there on the couch.

* * *

It was a few days after we'd dropped you off at camp. I'd sat with him for an hour that morning and had a cup of coffee. We talked about normal things—the sidewalks they just put in on Buena Vista Ave, the 7/11 that had opened up in Midland Park, the new tenant who moved in across the street with the Garbers and how he left his bedroom light on at all hours of the night. Your Grandpa offered me something to eat no less than three times, and each time I told him no. Eventually, he brought out a box of blueberries and I picked at them half-heartedly. He forgot a few innocent things that morning, mostly about whether he had checked the mail yet or if he had remembered to turn the sink off upstairs.

But you know all this by now. This is how most of my mornings went with him.

While your Dad was at work and when you were in school, I usually wrote by myself in the early afternoon. That routine became harder in the summer when you were around. I was interrupted by driving you to a friend's house or to the public swimming pool, or else by making you a sandwich at eleven o'clock and then again at two o'clock. I still tried to find little moments, though. I told myself it would be easier during that week you were away because I'd have the apartment to myself again. It's hard to say whether or not I managed to write a page or two that day. There were plenty of unproductive days.

Putting dinner together, I'd realized we were missing a few things, so I made a trip out to the Food Basics. Grocery shopping involved a fierce loyalty, and I didn't like going back to the Food Basics after catching the deli guy sneaking bits of cold cuts into his mouth, even though that'd been a few years before. When I walked out to my car, I didn't see your Grandpa's around. I thought maybe I had heard his car leave earlier, and so I didn't think anything of it. He was capable of running his own errands and I couldn't stop him from bringing home trunk loads of discarded lamps and silverware. He always came back after an hour or so.

I rode past the Quiznos that had changed over from a Subway a few years ago, and before that I had known it as the old Melcon's Pharmacy, and even before that your Grandpa had known it as Zizek Housing and Loan. I went by the credit union that your Dad had us join for a couple years, but left, citing their "terrible customer service." There were the houses of my friends from grammar school, Anna Dienno, Max Brudzynski, Olive McKenzie. None of them were still there anymore.

The parking lot of Food Basics hugged the building in an odd way. Too many cars parked right by the entrance so that you always felt like you might hit one when you pulled in. It was busy that day, mostly miserable-looking people—mothers with small children frantically trying to arrange meals for their families, husbands forced to stop en route to their homes, teenagers ordered by their parents to pick up a few things before heading out to a friend's. They looked more determined than me and so I tried to stay out of their way.

Pulling away, I thought how I'd forgotten breadcrumbs, but that I could borrow some from your Grandpa when I got home. You were usually the one to run downstairs to your grandparents when I ran out of an ingredient. You would ask to borrow an egg, some stale breadcrumbs, or a piece of aluminum foil. Your Grandma would hand it over selflessly, but your Grandpa would joke, "You're just gonna borrow it? Make sure you give it back."

I was reminded of your Grandpa's days as a livery driver, how that kept him out at all hours of the night. The first year we lived in our apartment, your Dad helped him with some of the driving because he hadn't found other work yet. After he "retired," he used to follow your Grandma around the house like a voyeur, watching her vacuum, wash dishes, and jar quarts of tomato sauce. All the time that he'd spent working, she got used to having her own space and so she encouraged him to find something to distract him. The business started because he had

nothing better to do, and so your Grandpa always offered friends rides into the city or out to the airport. Eventually, he started taking more people and charged them. It was always a small and casual business. It worked for him, that he was like a bartender in the way that he listened to people's stories. I think that your Dad liked that part too, listening to other people and getting to hear the undercurrent of a section of New Jersey. Your Dad and Grandpa had similar work habits too. They didn't seem to mind the long hours. Your Grandpa had three jobs when I was growing up. Between that and the livery service, I'd gotten used to seeing him out often. His independence never worried me.

I still didn't see your Grandpa's car at the house. I let myself in downstairs to borrow the breadcrumbs, but only found a box of stale saltines. I shouted his name a few times, but didn't find him. I thought about the places that he might have run off to—picking through trashcans a few blocks over, piling fried chicken onto his plate from the buffet at The Flaming, driving between the Stop & Shop and Pathmark on Maple Avenue to compare prices of deli meats. Most errands with him involved food. Wherever it was, I told myself that he would get home soon enough, that it really wasn't anything that strange.

I started making dinner, boiling water on the stove for pasta and tossing broccoli in olive oil, salt and pepper, and arranging it on a tray to go into the oven. I moved carefully between a cutting board and a deep pan, tossing in layers of onion, garlic, and ground beef. I was putting together something I'd learned from several different dishes that your Grandma used to make. She never gave me a formal cooking lesson. I learned everything by eating and watching from a distance. Now I know best how to make casseroles, the catch-all word that your Grandma used whenever she needed to empty out a section of the fridge.

I heard your Dad bound up the stairs, a succession of loud creaks that threatened to give way with each step. It was a bad habit that you'd caught onto over the years. He walked into the kitchen and said, "Oh. That smells good."

"It's a mac and cheese casserole," I told him as he walked over to kiss me. "It still needs a few more minutes in the oven, though." We caught each other up on our day. We didn't talk about interesting things. It mostly entailed me recounting whatever inane stories that your Grandpa had thought up that day.

Your Dad was emptying his bag onto the table, trying to find some slip of paper, shifting everything around and making that sleek almost ripping sound of pages gliding against each other. I said to him, "Did you see my Dad when you came in?"

"No. He's not downstairs?"

"I haven't seen him in a few hours and his car's not out front."

"Maybe he went to the store or something." Your Dad held a piece of paper up so that it covered his face. "Did you see me take the electricity bill? I could have sworn I put it in my bag, but now I can't find it."

"I think I saw you take it yesterday," I told him. "He's been gone a couple hours though."

He pulled out a sheet and was studying it intently. "If it's only been a couple hours, I really wouldn't worry about it, Jane. He goes out all the time. Maybe Peggy took him out to eat or something. Or maybe he's out moonlighting again." He tried reassuring me with a smile.

"Yeah." Your Grandpa had told me that morning that your Aunt was on college tours with Katie. She'd been going on about visiting Carnegie Mellon and Dartmouth and Bowdoin and Boston College.

I propped the oven open a little bit and peered in and saw the top glistening and turning a brownish gold, maybe a little overdone. “I think this is done.”

I laid the dish out on the stove and the kitchen filled with the smell of melting cheese, onions, and garlic—the staples of a good home-cooked meal the way I had known it. I spooned heaps of the casserole into bowls, little crumbs of the saltine cracker topping spilled out onto the stove. Your Dad and I ate silently at the table across from each other. Before even taking a bite, your Dad went into the fridge and fished out the bottle of Tabasco sauce, emptying about half its contents into his bowl. He gave me compliments like “this is really good” and “did you do something different?” and “this is your best one yet.”

Between the two of us, there was the sticky sounds of our forks scooping away bites of gooey pasta, the faint clinks when the utensils touched the bottom of the bowls, and then the soft noises of the food breaking down in our mouths. Your Dad gave himself a second helping, repeating his adjustments with the Tabasco sauce. He looked up at me, probably searching for something to say and repurpose these awkward gaps in the conversation into something useful, but he ended up just smiling. I picked slowly at my own dish. Eventually I let my food go cold. I asked your Dad if he wanted anymore, but he shook his head and patted down his stomach. I covered the big dish with aluminum foil and found a place for it in the fridge.

I left the sink filled with dirty dishes; I’d get to them later. I thought about pouring myself a glass of wine, but instead I looked out from the kitchen window to where I could see the curb alongside our house. I didn’t see your Grandpa’s car.

I said to your Dad, “His car’s still not out front.”

He had fished out a newspaper from his bag at this point and was skimming through it. It was the same local paper that your Grandpa often read. It only offered the petty crime beat, or a

profile about the new dry cleaners, or else advertised events like a pancake breakfast at the VFW station every Saturday morning. He asked me, “Have you looked around downstairs yet?”

“I was down there not too long ago.”

“He’s not down there?”

“His car is still gone too.”

I turned away from the window and your Dad looked at me from across the kitchen. “So what do you want to do?”

I suggested going out to look for your Grandpa, just as a precautionary method. We split up, your Dad to drive around the neighborhood, and me to go back downstairs to look for anything out of place.

I let myself into your Grandpa’s half of the house. It looked the same as it always did. I couldn’t imagine it being different. The fake wood paneling in the dining room, the shutter doors that guarded each room, the lace curtains in the bedroom, the electric candles that sat in every windowsill, all these little things seemed structural. It was familiar in a lot of ways, because it was my house, the one I grew up in, and the one I still live in now—but also because it looked the same as all the houses I knew growing up. It looked like my Aunt Rosa’s, or my cousin Jimmy’s, or Emily Talaryzck’s from the fifth grade, or Mickey Sasso’s where I had my first kiss. They all had two kitchens, an upstairs and downstairs, some of them like ours with a second pantry and dining room. They had only one full bathroom that you had to cut through the parent’s room to get to. Sometimes there was an extra toilet tucked away in a corner of the house—no sink or mirror or any other distinguishing bathroom features, just the toilet. They were always cramped with generations of people, but that was the way we always seemed to like them. They were comfortable.

The mail and magazines were stacked neatly on the dining room table. Several pieces of the mail still had your Grandma's name on the address label, but most of it looked like junk anyway. On another spot of the table, your Grandpa had piled up newspaper inserts offering half off when you bought more than three two-liter bottles of Pepsi and four limes for a dollar.

The house had a stale smell to it, something I guess I didn't notice too often because it was just another one of those things that becomes ordinary. It was usually covered up by strongly brewed coffee or burning cheese in the microwave oven or the misuse of cleaning products. It was deep and fundamental to the house. It smelled like pillows without any covers or the tips of fingers or clean plates that have been sitting in a cabinet.

He kept a running grocery list on his fridge with a collection of magnets that held up photos of various distant relatives, and Christmas cards from people he barely saw anymore. The magnets advertised Lucino's Family Pizzeria and Restaurant in Paramus, Downing Tree Service in Hawthorne, the Market Hotel and Dining Hall in West Milford, UCB Medical Supply Co. from Haledon. Other ones featured cartoon dogs or kitschy phrases like "A house is where a grandmother is" or else sometimes were just a blank color like the ones you would buy in bulk at an office supply store. None of these things on the fridge seemed liked an integral tracking of my own life, but I guess they narrated a section of your Grandpa and Grandma's. There was a photo of my cousin Greg from about fifteen years before in a short sleeved Polo shirt littered with food stains, one hand gripping a beer and the other giving a thumbs up, his knees slightly bent and his tongue sticking out, a picture that probably never really had a context. It could have been at a birthday or a baptism or maybe just Sunday dinner. There was another of your Grandpa when he was a lot younger, probably only twenty-years-old. He was crouched on the ground with some of his other friends. They were stacked on top of each other in a human pyramid. There were other

photos of your Grandma and Donnie and Peggy and my Aunt Ann and my cousins Ralphie and Jeanette and a few other distant cousins, who I couldn't quite remember their names but they looked familiar. There were a few scattered Christmas cards, mostly from the neighbors, and any given one was at least several years old.

I saw a newspaper left open on the table, something I guessed that I missed the first time around. It was opened up to the classified section where they had the job listings, offering positions for telemarketers or front desk attendants at dentists' offices or midnight shifts at food processing plants. There was a smaller section where people were trying to sell their cars and writing things like "200k miles but still in great condition!" or sometimes simply "needs work." But even farther below there was a miscellaneous one that offered up used mattresses and boxes of old clothes and "vintage, unopened" packs of baseball cards. There was one little square that read BROKEN LAWNMOWER FOR SALE, ONLY GOOD FOR PARTS, \$30, FORT LEE, NJ. To anyone else it might have seemed pointless and worth overlooking, but I was sure that your Grandpa only saw LAWNMOWER and \$30. He could resist a good deal on a mattress or pack of baseball cards, but he saw something so practical in machinery and particularly lawn equipment. Maybe he saw himself as altruistic.

I walked upstairs, pouring myself a glass of wine while I waited for your Dad. In the few years before this moment, your Grandpa only really traveled in a ten-minute radius. He'd been to a lot of places, the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, Hawaii, Italy, Washington, D.C., but those were often with your Grandma or me or Donnie or Peggy. He had a "why go anywhere else" mentality.

Twenty minutes later, I heard your Dad bang the door open and slowly walk up the steps into our kitchen. He sat down next to me at the table and said, "I didn't see him out there

anywhere. I can go back out and keep looking if you want. I thought I would just come back and check in first to see if maybe he called or something.”

I showed him the paper that I’d found downstairs, “He had this lying out on his table.”

He took it from me and looked it over. “This is just the classifieds. Doesn’t he read these all the time?”

I pointed to the lawnmower ad and said, “Yeah, but look at this one. Doesn’t that sound like him?”

He read it over. “You think he would drive all the way there?”

“I can’t see where else he would be. Maybe we wait a little longer and seeing what happens.”

He nodded along and then squeezed my hand. There was only so much driving around and looking that we could do. He had his car and that could really put him anywhere. It seemed easy to worry.

Your Dad got himself his own glass of wine and sat back down next to me. He took a sip and said, “Did you call your sister?”

I wasn’t thinking about her in all of this, but maybe she had a right to know. “Not yet.” I took a pull from my wine glass. We didn’t say much more about that.

We sat there a little bit longer. I looked at the dishes that had piled up throughout the day, high enough that I could see them staring out at me from above the lip of the sink. What else could I do? *I don’t know* felt like a natural response.

Another half hour went by and your Grandpa still hadn’t come home. I tried adding up the hours in my head, figuring it’d been at least four or five at this point. It felt like longer. It got

to the point where I needed to get someone else involved, and so I tried calling up your Aunt but the phone rang out and went to her voicemail. I didn't bother leaving a message.

I had your Dad make the phone call to the police station afterwards to fill out the missing persons report. I heard him relay information about your Grandpa, his weight, his height, his age, the color of his hair, what kind of car he drove, his license plate number, when we had last seen him. Your Dad told me, "They said they'd call back when they had something."

And so we waited. We waited around a while because there wasn't much else that we could do. We each did careful things like wash dishes rearranged the growing pile of bills that occupied our table. I scraped away at the flecks of egg yolk and jelly that had hardened onto the plates that were leftover from breakfast. I wiped the spoons and forks with sponges to cover them with warm, soapy water. I ran water over them that was too hot and bit at my skin. Your Dad helped me wipe down the counter and scrub at the spots on the stove where spilt casserole had hardened. We even dried the dishes and put them back into the cabinet when we still had nothing to do. We didn't necessarily try and do these things slowly, but just so they took more time. These weren't important things; they were just something to do instead of thinking, instead of talking, instead of going to the worst, instead of worrying.

Eventually we got a call from the police station. They told us that your Grandpa had been pulled over outside of Fort Lee a couple hours ago for speeding, but they had let him go. They told us that they would call us when they had more information.

Your Dad and I curled up on the couch together in the living room. I was tired from all this worrying. It didn't make me feel good. The two of us watched old reruns of *M*A*S*H*. Your Dad told me it was an episode from the last season, a Halloween special where David Stier has to

remove a billiard ball lodged in some drunken marine's mouth. I fell asleep before learning if they got it out.

Your Dad woke me up sometime later. I was in my own bed. He poked at my shoulder, shaking me, saying, "Jane. Jane. Jane." Your Dad had picked up a call from the Newburgh police in upstate New York, where they had found your Grandpa. They assured your Dad several times that he was unharmed, but that we needed to come pick him up. I tried taking all that in and processing it the right way and all I could manage was asking him what time it was. Five in the morning.

We started driving down 208 which turned into 287, and eventually 87. It was quiet, just like when we were at home. We used the radio to keep each other company and in the early morning listened to some of the early ballads from Bruce Springsteen like "The 4th of July (Asbury Park)" and "For You." These were songs that I remembered dancing to, that I grew up with, and maybe even felt integral to my maturity.

Out the window, I saw the peppered houses that sat along the New Jersey highways turn into the sparse mountains that slowly started morphing into the Hudson Valley. We went along big ridges that swung around rock formations and as the night was slowly fading away into something eerie and blue before sunrise, I peered out to see big landscapes covered in greens and browns. They looked a lot different from where we lived in New Jersey even though it was generally the same Appalachian strip.

We pulled into the Newburgh police station a little after six and it looked a little like our own town. I recognized the same signs for Wal-Mart and Target and Dunkin' Donuts and Red Lobster.

I got out of the car and saw your Grandpa as soon as I walked through the doors, sipping coffee and telling stories. He was talking to the officers that were on duty. He looked the same—his ratty slippers, leather with padded bottoms and lined with fake fur even though it was the dead of summer, those same bleach stained khakis and that white polo shirt yellowed with age. He was missing a hat and so his hair went wild without it, like it wanted to reach out and touch everything around him in a different direction. He stopped shaving altogether maybe a month before and his beard was growing in patches with some parts whiter than others and also streaks of gray. He was telling the cops about when your Grandma and he used to go see Sinatra perform in Hoboken, “before he was even in the Tommy Dorsey Band.” He was taking slow sips from his coffee and when he saw me he started waving and shouting, “Hey! Janie!”

That was him at his most him. When I was in the sixth grade, your grandparents went away for their anniversary to Hawaii for a week. Peggy threw a party while they were gone and ended up getting the cops called. And then with the cops there in our backyard and Peggy’s boyfriend trying to ease them down, your grandparents showed up, home early from their trip. I don’t know what he said, but your Grandpa talked to the cops for a while and offered them a beer as they sat around on the lawn furniture on the back patio. He was good at talking to people.

He introduced me quickly to the two officers he was talking to, only to cut it short to return to his own story. This was the same kind of greeting I got on most mornings when I went downstairs.

Your Dad was off talking to another police officer who sat behind a desk. He waved me over and together the two of us filled out a few release forms. I asked the cop where they found your Grandpa and if his car was okay.

“We found him on the golf course that’s over by the river,” he said. “He was curled up under a tree on the fourth green trying to sleep. We ended up over there because we actually had some reports of an explosion.” Noticing the panicked expression on my face, “Your Dad’s okay. He didn’t get hurt or anything but his car’s totaled. We found it on the golf course with him. It’s in our lot around back, but you’re gonna have to tell us what you want to do with it before you leave.”

He took us out around back and unlocked this big chain-link gate. He walked us around a few cars and finally stood us in front of this shell of a car and said, “This is it.” It was completely burned out. It had a thick layer of flaky ash that clung to every piece of it. Most of the rubber had melted off the tires and the windows only remained in little broken pieces stuck to the edges. The fake veneer that paneled the inside had bubbled up and turned a deep brownish color. The Mr. Met bobblehead that he had glued onto his dashboard was almost completely disintegrated except for its identifying base and the hardened puddle of plastic that surrounded it. And sticking out the wide open trunk, you could see the shape of a lawnmower, itself all burned out as well. I don’t remember it ever looking like a good car, even when he first bought it, but it was never this.

Your Dad was the only one who could get words out, “This is his car?”

“Yep. Car probably had a worse night than your Dad,” the officer tried to joke.

All I could do was look on in fascination and so your Dad kept talking, “Are you sure though? I mean this could be anyone’s car it’s so burned out.”

“The plates were still legible and one of our guys was able to identify the make and model and so we fit that back to your Dad.”

The cop continued, “When we talked to him afterwards he told us he had gotten a flat and had to put on his donut. We were thinking that maybe he didn’t put it on right or something, and then sometime after that he got tired and veered off onto the course and got some leaves or something all stuck up in his wheel well. The whole thing probably just lit up after that. I guess he got out in time too because he didn’t have a scratch on him.”

This was the kind of car that you would see in the movies. The one that would be on the side of the road, post-apocalypse where there’d be some homeless man left in there with only his dog and a quarter can of beans. As monstrous as your Grandpa’s car had become over the last few years, this was something else entirely. All I could bring myself to do was laugh. It wasn’t a belly laugh or even any kind of modest laugh but just a smile and a little chuckle that only your Dad caught. No matter how unbelievable that your Grandpa could blow up his own car, it was perfectly in character for him.

We told the officer to just haul the car away. Your Dad and I waited in the background as your Grandpa finished up his story. Noticing us, he told the cops, “Ah. Looks like these guys are waiting for me. It was good meeting you guys though.” He gave them each a strong handshake and walked off with us.

On the return, your Grandpa didn’t fill us in on what happened. We didn’t ask much. Everyone was tired now. But occasionally he said simple things like “I guess I might need to ask for more rides now” or “How long is this drive home?” or “Can we stop and get some food?” But he fell asleep pretty soon into the drive and we didn’t have the energy to stop anywhere. We were home not too long after that.

It was pretty close to eight in the morning. We settled your Grandpa back downstairs and I fixed him a couple eggs before I sent him off. On our way upstairs, your Dad reminded me to

call your Aunt. "I wonder what Ben is gonna think of this, too," he said with a little laugh. I thought about how I might write all this down.

Where I'm Going

We had the wake at Browning-Forshay Funeral Home. It sat in between the liquor store and TD Bank on Diamond Bridge Avenue, across from the dance school. They offered two rooms for services and they had put us in the West Room. It was clean with deep red carpeting. The large center filled with rows of padded folding chairs occupied by friends and distant relatives of your Grandpa. Wreaths hung from big tripods, tiny cards pinned to them that read messages of love and reassurance. End tables displayed vases arranged next to picture frames and photo albums. Comfortable couches and armchairs lined the wall, desperately trying to remind everyone of a generic, suburban living room. Your Grandpa's casket sat against the wall without any furniture and farthest from the door. Someone had left it open so that he could see people as they walked in.

You and your Dad were sitting down in some extra chairs in the corner of the room, laughing about the photograph frame in your Dad's hands. It was a diptych of your Grandpa from when the three of us plus your grandparents went to visit your Uncle in California. In both the pictures, your Grandpa was asleep in an armchair, mouth agape, his arms crossed in front of him, and his head nodding backwards. You could see the beads of drool starting to form in the corner of his mouth. In one photo, you had gotten a large stuffed snake, like the kind you might win at a carnival, and coiled it around the top of his balding head. You had done the same in the other, but with the wizard hat Mickey Mouse wears in *Fantasia*, complete with its own set of cartoon-mouse ears sticking out from the sides. On the picture with the snake, I had written in a green sharpie WE LOVE YOU DAD! HAPPY FATHER'S DAY XOXO. He kept it on top of the piano that was wedged into the dining room. Now it sits in our new house, still on top of that piano.

I remember the stacks of prayer cards, set up right next to the sign-in book. Little laminated cards that I'd probably seen at every funeral I'd went to—they were at your Grandma's too. Maybe three inches by two, they featured a photo of your Grandpa top center and the Lord's prayer below that. It was a bad picture of him, a blurry close-up of his face, like he was moving while someone took it or else resized from a much bigger picture. You could see the identifying marks of our backyard in the background, the big tree where your Grandpa and I buried Gigi so many years ago, the brick patio he laid himself, and that old, broken down, wooden fence that was the first thing he built when he bought the house. Below that was a little inscription that read DECEMBER 28, 1919–NOVEMBER 17, 2006.

They looked like baseball cards with the same size and weight of the ones that you used to collect. I had ones of my aunts, Rosa and Ann and Frannie, and of my cousin Jerry, and of a friend from high school, Annette Williams. Sometimes they sat propped up on an end table or else stuck to the fridge for a couple months, no more than two. Eventually they all found their way into a box in the attic where we can now remember them from there. We still have your Grandma's pinned to our fridge, your Grandpa now hanging right next to her. This is one of the things we have to look at everyday.

The day after the wake, we gathered together at Holy Sepulcher Cemetery in Totowa. The scene looked like the one at the the funeral home, but more close-knit. There were fewer friends and more uncles and second cousins and children of half siblings. Your Grandpa's casket hung over his open grave, suspended by a metal contraption meant to lower it down gradually. They'd brought those same wreaths of flowers from the funeral home and hung them next to it.

* * *

The priest from the funeral mass at St. Matthew's stood in the front clutching a bible, no longer wearing his vestments, stripped down to his uniform black shirt and pants. We gathered into the few rows of folding chairs set out underneath a tarp. I sat down in front with your Aunt and Uncle. It was sunny that day but still with a November chill. A woman from the funeral home ceremoniously put a large green blanket over your Aunt and me—it resembled the grass next to us. You and your Dad stood behind me, each with a hand on my shoulder; yours felt lighter than your father's.

Off to the side, seemingly not a part of this grieving, were two Air Force officers. Their dress blues were angular, as if pinned to their bodies, and they had on starched hats with large brims that hid most of their faces. They stood about a hundred feet away from our group, over near a tree on the other side of the casket. Eventually, we all finished huddling in and the priest welcomed us. He said a few words about your Grandpa, and then gave a final blessing. A long, quiet pause crept over us when he finished. The priest turned his body to the two officers. One of them started shouting commands. They walked mechanically over to where your Aunt and Uncle and I were sitting. I could see that one of them held a folded flag in the crook of his arm, the same way you would carry a football. They stopped once they reached the edge of the casket, turned toward each other, and the one handed the flag to the other. In that same automatic way, one of them walked up to Donnie, knelt down in front of him and presented him with the flag.

The officer put it in your Uncle's hands, but didn't remove his own. They were locked together by that object. He stared at Donnie while saying, "On behalf of the President of the United States, the Department of the Air Forces, and a grateful nation, we offer this flag for the faithful and dedicated service of Private First Class Pasquale Contrini."

Your Uncle whispered a thank you and, uncomfortable with the intensity of this action, awkwardly took the flag from the officer's hands, darting his eyes away and finding anywhere else to look. The officer picked himself up and walked back to his partner where they silently continued in their routine. They walked in the same ridged motions to their spot on the opposite side of the casket, over by the tree. One of them bent down to pick up a small black briefcase that revealed a bugle. He began playing taps while everyone looked at your Grandpa's casket. Finished, the two officers continued walking away until we could no longer see them.

I heard your Dad crying behind me and of course I had my own tears, but I didn't hear you crying. I still felt your medium-sized hand on my shoulder.

* * *

We held the repass at Portofino's, in one of the back rooms that they kept for private parties. I hadn't been there since that time with your Grandpa. I'd been horrified at the idea of someone recognizing me. I'm sure your Grandpa tried braving it once or twice. I think I could finally come to laugh at it though.

The room was mostly empty, and usually meant to fit more people than us. In one corner, they lined tables with linens and neatly arranged big, silver serving dishes heaped with potatoes and short rib and ziti and broccoli rabe and chicken piccata and polenta and a mound of bread. The opposite corner featured the four or five tables where we had all arranged ourselves.

I sat with your Aunt Kay and her son and daughter-in-law. She's your Grandpa's younger half-sister; they shared the same father. The two of them grew up in the same house together until your Grandpa moved out when he was seventeen. He called her "Katie" back then. She

looked like your Grandma in the same way that she wore these sleek pant suits with an elaborately embroidered jacket. This one was black, subtly designed with black sequins to depict bouquets of flowers. They wore their hair the same too, short with big, bouncy curls that were carefully placed on top of her head.

We went through all our favorite stories of your Grandpa together. They seemed unimportant, but I listened to them eagerly and let them settle into the bottom of my stomach where they sat comfortably like the end of a meal. Your Aunt Kay remembered the father and grandfather that we knew, but also the brother who used to dance with his eight-year-old sister to impress his girlfriends.

We ended up staying at the restaurant until late into the afternoon. Eventually, they took away the metal trays and packed some of the extra food into Styrofoam containers at our request. They brought out huge cylinders of coffee and hot water with an arrangement of teas. They laid out several plates with different fruits and a tiered platter stacked with rugelach, cream puffs, cannoli, and biscotti. Food and grief went well together.

When it came time to go, I walked over to your Aunt. She sat at another table across the room with her own kids. She looked a little relaxed in her own way, maybe just at ease that everything was finally over. The past few days leading up to this point, she'd just been shuffled around by her kids, gaining an exterior layer that buffered her a little further from the world. They were good to her and put their hands on her back when she was crying at the wake or again at the funeral. We hadn't talked much those days and there was still little to say.

"I'm gonna go now, Peggy," I told her. We awkwardly waved goodbye to each other from a couple feet away before I left the room.

* * *

I was sitting with your Grandpa the morning he died. We sat in our usual spots around his dining room table, him with the paper, me sitting with a book, and the TV going off in the background, but not loud enough where it was a distraction. There was a bag off to the side of the table, stuffed with pastries individually wrapped in plastic (the day-olds from Gus's). Your Grandpa had unraveled a few of them and quartered them up onto a plate. I picked away at my own fraction of a raspberry scone as your Grandpa sat across from me with his lemon poppy seed muffin. He had a cup of coffee next to him too and was spooning in bites of the muffin and plunging each down into the coffee and trying to scoop it back up, drenched and falling apart. It was all unexceptional.

I was reading a copy of Philip Roth's *Everyman* then. It'd come out earlier that year and I treasured it. I thought about it like your Grandpa, how maybe that was a good way to talk about him. He was a father and a husband and a brother and a son—none of those really being unique qualities. He worked a few different jobs—caddying, the one at Continental Cans, another punching cards at an IBM plant, another waiting tables at a restaurant like your Uncle John's, the livery service, and then all the little ones in between that I couldn't keep track of. I guess none of those were special either. He's always had the same activities, reading the paper, and falling asleep on the couch, and overeating. He still made time for us though and showed up to Peggy's eighth grade graduation or Donnie's recitals for the jazz band in high school or the season opener where I twirled baton for the halftime show. He did all his own things around the house, even though he didn't know how to tile his own floor or fry potatoes without having them burn to the pan. That didn't matter to him. Roth's protagonist forgoes a career as an artist, instead working

in advertising as a way to support his family, and so I wonder if your Grandpa missed out on anything. I never really knew if he was happy. I guess that was never really for me to know.

He told me a story while I was down there, how he found his mail in the neighbor's trash that morning. He was out moonlighting, when he started picking through the Zinzar's trashcans and found his mail, neatly stacked on top of their garbage. He started formulating his own conspiracy, that maybe somewhere down the line he upset the wrong mailman. None of this seemed that absurd to him, mostly because we let him have these small irrational moments. There was something inherently comical about it and I had to relish that. In reality, this was probably just sections of your Grandpa's life intersecting with each other—the nexus of where his moonlighting and memory loss finally converged. He had probably flipped through the mail at the beginning of his walk, seen the Zinzar's trashcan and thrown it out there, and then on his loop back, gone through their trash and found it, forgetting that he had put it there just twenty minutes ago. I remember writing about that in my notebook.

The next few moments all came suddenly. He had that first heart attack while we were still at the house and I guess it was lucky I was there with him. I rode with him in the ambulance to Valley Hospital. When we got there, I called your Dad and Peggy and Donnie. Your Grandpa didn't seem too bad until the second one, and then he lost his speech; it was the third one that killed him. The doctor told us he was old. There's not really a lot to say about it all.

* * *

I left the house the way it was. I didn't sort through your Grandpa's drawers of khakis, or throw out the decades-expired cans of food that were haunting his pantry, or coordinate with Goodwill

to have them haul away his fake leather couches. I tried not to attach myself to the house. We would sell it, try to clean it up ourselves, or else one of us would decide to move in.

It wasn't short of any problems. It needed a new furnace, a new roof, and in order to rent out the upstairs apartment, we would have had to build a second egress. Generations of mice had lived and died in his pantry, and now their bodies had started to amass there like a morgue. Over the years, your Grandpa had gradually rewired most of the house, something he never fully understood and I knew wouldn't pass a housing inspection. There was also the water damage that had been done to his living room ceiling that sat below the upstairs apartment bathroom. These were only the things that I knew about, too. Maybe I'd mentioned them to Peggy and Donnie in passing over the years, but they didn't seem to come up after your Grandpa died, and that was fine with me. I only wanted to be done with everything. I could never articulate why I needed to be somewhere else.

That was all about a year ago, and I guess it ended up working out. We got our new place out in West Milford, out in the middle of the woods, where we still had a few neighbors, but it felt a little less suburban. I couldn't walk to the deli or the doctor's office anymore, but now I had a desk in the corner of my bedroom and I could look out and see the edge of Fanny State Park. We finally had a kitchen with its own small table where I could drink my morning coffee, and then next to it, a separate dining room with a table where we could eat dinner and invite people over. These felt like the biggest changes. I like being somewhere different.

Your Grandpa didn't leave behind too many surprises. There wasn't anything extraordinary like a crippling credit debt, or a box of forty-year-old love letters to some unknown woman. There were just the same little mementos that there always were—the various, outdated holiday cards that stretched over every open surface of the house, drawers dedicated to loose

pairs of socks decorated with holes, a shoe box filled with photographs that abruptly stopped after my ninth birthday. It was all interesting in the way that your own history is, and so these things would be just for me.

Your Grandpa's will was straight forward, that we split his savings and the house three ways. Peggy and I didn't expected Donnie to take part in anything, so it wasn't surprising when he returned to California and simply told us, "Call me if you need anything."

I didn't think I needed to step up anymore. I was done with all that. Your Aunt and Uncle never gave me that acknowledgement of my work. I didn't notice if they still had that expectation that I would handle all the details. I was determined to just walked away. I didn't think I needed to explain that to anyone.

Peggy stepped up because she didn't have any other choice. Now that everything was over, she would take this opportunity to finally prove her responsibility as a daughter. She bought out my share and talked your Uncle into some arrangement where he'd finance all the renovations and down the road they could sell it. I heard from your Uncle a few months ago that she was taking some time off work, and that the house had become her full-time job. Maybe she thought somewhere in this process she could reimagine it as her house rather than your Grandpa's.

* * *

I wrote some of these things down. I wrote them down in the notebooks that I'd kept throughout the years and dated them accordingly, so that if I decided to go back to them, they would all be right there—these little instances of our family.

I had several notebooks lying around the house that I filled up over the years. Sometimes I experimented with them, pushing a little detail to become a story or an anecdote, but none of that ever became more than little episodes in these notebooks. I wrote most of the time that your Grandpa was sick.

I wrote almost every day. Only ever the boring details. The little changes your Grandpa and I would notice over coffee and stale pastries, the adventures you would tell me about after school, the office politics that your Dad would indulge me with, the inconsequential memories that would come flooding back to me throughout the day. I wrote about the path your Grandpa used to walk when he went moonlighting, down most of Arlington, turning down Van Winkle and crossing Lafayette, or else some variation on that depending how tired he was. I wrote about your Grandpa's favorite restaurants, The Flaming and Johnny & Hanges and the Chicken 'N Rib Crib and Puzo's. I don't think that I was ever supposed to make anything of it. I'm not sure what you think. All I can say is that I'm writing this now.

* * *

I've heard these stories before. The letters that Grandpa and Grandma exchanged when he was stationed down in Georgia; Grandma's order, "Get a furlough." Grandpa saying "I guess we're not going to see you again" the first time he met Dad. Grandpa laying bricks for the back patio. Also, installing the windows in the sunroom. You singing "Here Comes the Sun" to Anna. John's cologne. Grandpa's swims in the Passaic River. His cousin, Yazzo. Grandma's salad dishes. The hard boiled egg incident (both of them). Anthony's Famiglia Ristorante. Cream cheese and jelly sandwiches. The Riverside section of Paterson.

I remember some of them as they happened. The Air Force officers. Portofino's. Aunt Kay's stories. His theories about Giuliani. The mason jars that lined the pantry. Grandma's funeral. Grandpa's funeral. Grandpa finding his mail in the neighbor's trash. The lawn furniture. Grandpa's chair. His leftovers. His livery business. His moonlighting. How he got worse after Grandma died. How you used to sit and have your coffee with Grandpa almost every day for the two years after that.

When I think of Grandpa, I see him in those tattered, faux-leather slippers lined with fake fur, the khaki pants with dabs of bleach stains across the seat, a white polo tucked under a thin brown sweater, plain rectangular glasses, and wiry white hair thinned on the top and shooting out in every direction. He stands off to the side at my grammar school basketball games and doesn't say much, but watches intently. He gives me five dollars when I bring him a good report card. When I play him the same piano scales that he's heard hundreds of times, he tells me the dining room "sounds like Carnegie Hall." These memories—mundane and ubiquitous—collect inside my head and sculpt a fuller picture, one that very slowly accumulates the nuances of a relationship. I don't remember these moments as part of a linear narrative, but different places on a timeline that come together to form a singular sketch of a person.

About a month ago, I rode down to his grave with you. We drove down Route 80, past Kinnelon and Wayne. We turned off at the exit for Totowa Road. The Passaic River snaked up alongside us, and stacked up on the other side I could see the empty factories that made up the landscape of the Paterson that I've become familiar with, different from yours or Grandpa's. Across the street from the cemetery, I saw that storefront with the pizzeria and the bagel shop and the closed-up shop that still had a FOR LEASE sign hanging from its window. In the little parking lot out front, a man had set up a table where he was selling flowers and statues, trying to

catch people as they drove into the graveyard. You weren't looking that way, but I asked you to pull over, that I wanted to buy a plant for Grandpa's grave. You gave me a blank look and then slowly moved your head over so that you too could see the flower stand.

We pulled the car into the parking lot and walked over to the table. The man gave us a cheerful nod and we scanned the table. There was a pile of bouquets already wrapped up, roses and tulips and daisies. Next to those sat a dozen potted plants, some azalea bushes and perennials and hyacinths and mums. Off on the very edge of the table, there were a few statues arranged, mostly various depictions of Mary, sometimes carrying a baby Jesus. They looked previously owned, with specks of dirt and discoloration on them like they'd already had a lifecycle in someone's garden. They looked like they were made of stone but when I picked one of them up, it didn't have that same weight and felt cheap on the inside, like maybe it was hollow. A couple angels were scattered amidst the portrayals of Mary as well, and also one of St. Francis, just as dirty and cheap-looking as the rest.

I picked up a small azalea bush and asked the man how much it cost. He told me seven dollars. I reached around in my pocket until I found the money. Trying to coax me into buying a bouquet of flowers too, he held up a bunch of roses where most of the petals were already falling off. He offered to cut me a deal, saying that he'd give it to me for four. I shook my head no and looked at you and told you I was ready to go. The man noticed your preoccupation with the statues and without you asking for a price, he told you they were five dollars each. You pulled a bill from your purse and handed it to the man. He didn't try and offer you the same deal with the flowers, and instead just accepted the money. You picked up the cracked and worn statue of St. Francis, and we walked back to the car.

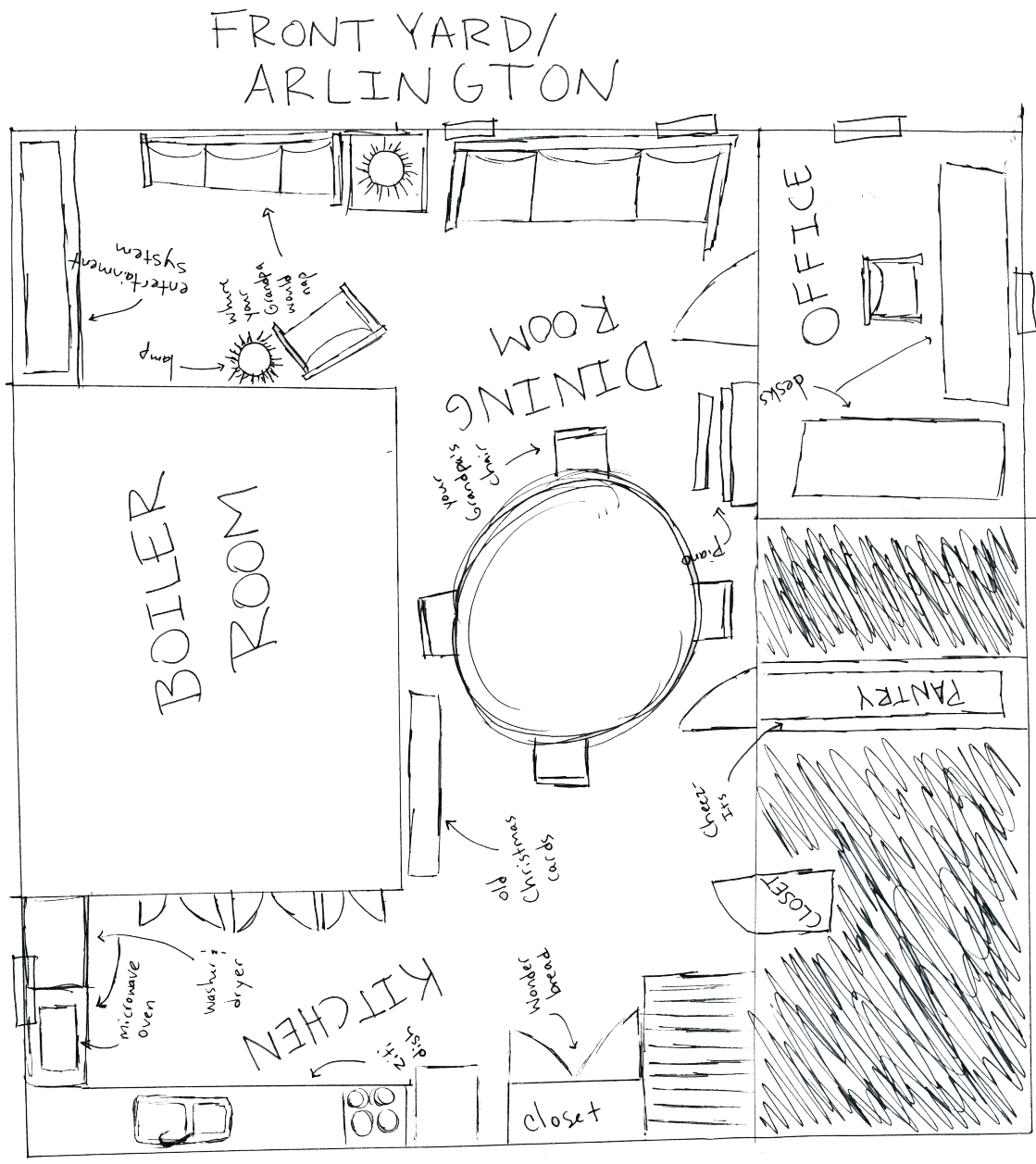
The cemetery was quiet. A Sunday afternoon, I didn't see anyone else parked along those narrow roads that interlock each plot. The grass was at the point of the year where it started dying off, splotchy and balding in sections, like some of it had just forgotten to grow. I saw Gaetano Federici's statue not too far from Grandma and Grandpa's grave. It looked old and worn, the stone giving way to odd discolorations and becoming home to a gathering of moss.

Grandpa and Grandma's grave looked the same in all the time that I've known it—GENOVESE etched in big letters across the front and the rough top that looked common, but not like the ones in this cemetery. There were a couple shrubs already planted there, not dying, but wilted. Some of their leaves had yellowed and were beginning to fall off in little piles. On the edge of this small mound of dirt, someone had stuck a little American flag that hung there limply. I found an empty spot off to the side of the grave. I knelt down and, without a trowel, dug my hands into the soft dirt, moving some of it away to make room for the new azalea bush. It looked nice there, like it fit in with the other pieces around it.

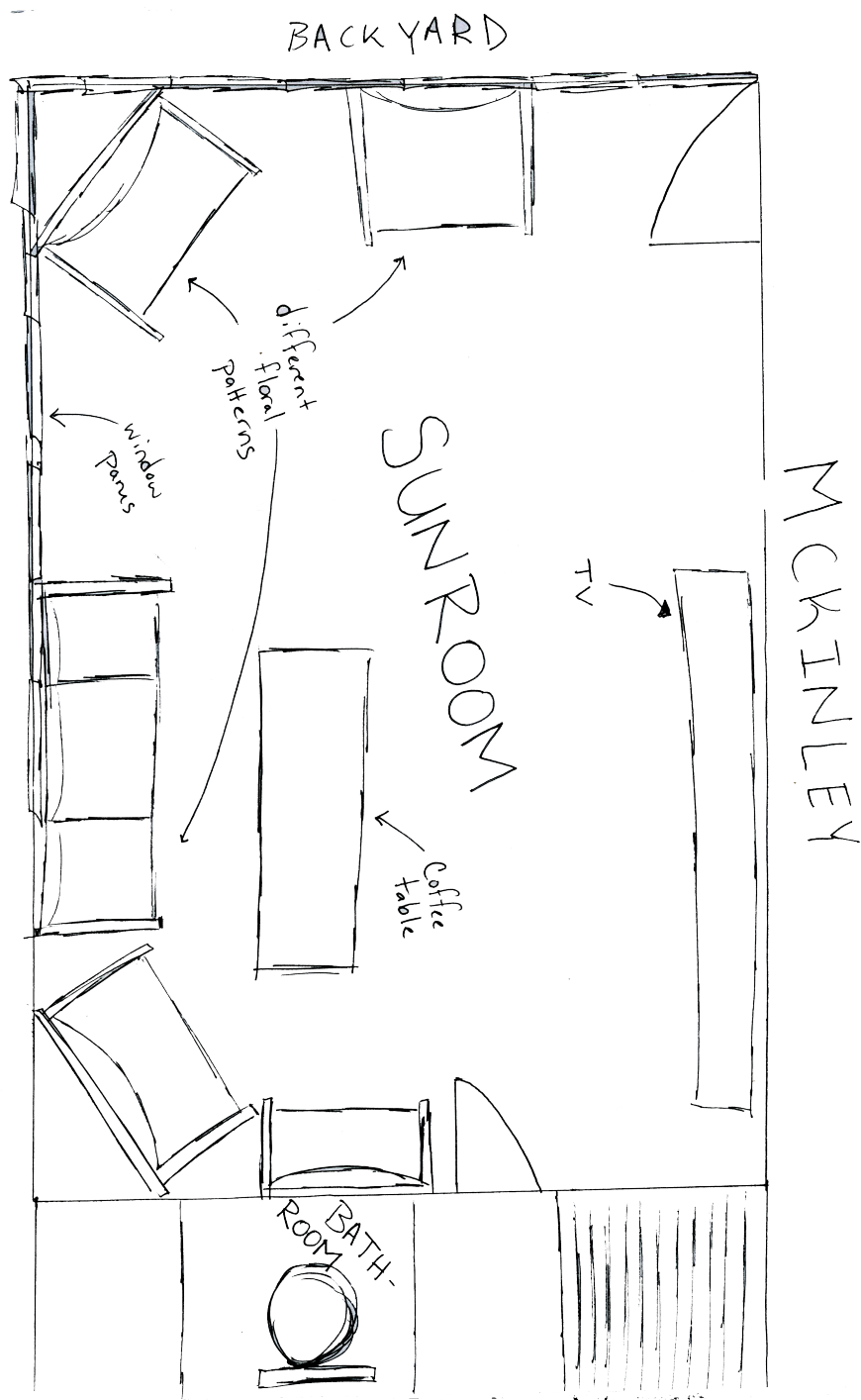
You crouched down onto one knee and pushed the St. Francis statue into an open spot in the dirt. He held his arms away from his body and his palms tilted slightly upward. He had a bald head and his face looked meek and expressionless.

The knees of our pants held little pieces of dirt on them and were smeared green from fragments of the grass. The statue looked good, next to the azalea bush, next to other shrubs that were planted before that. We stood there a few minutes more, silently having our own conversations, happy to be a part of it all.

Appendix

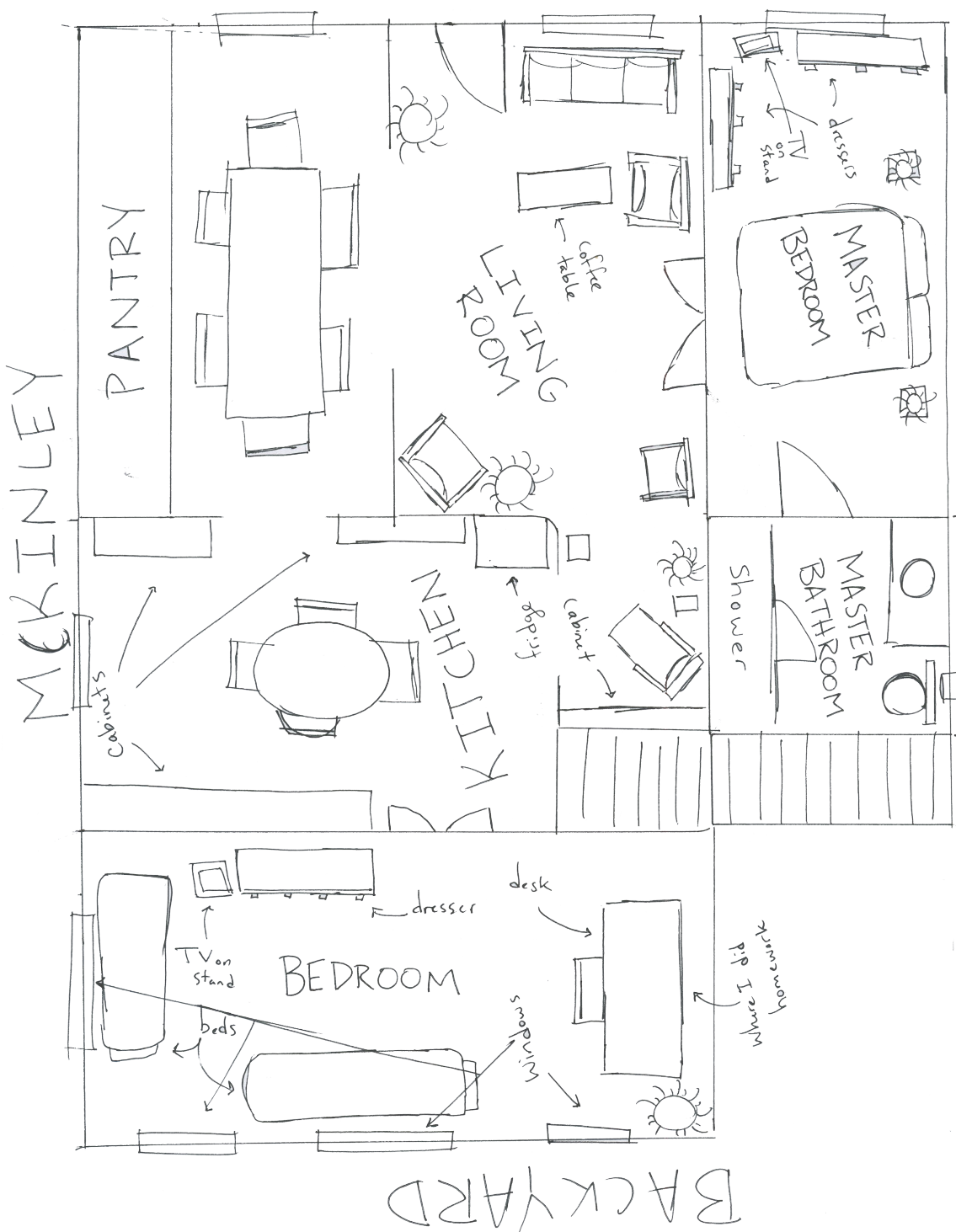


Downstairs apartment, basement floor

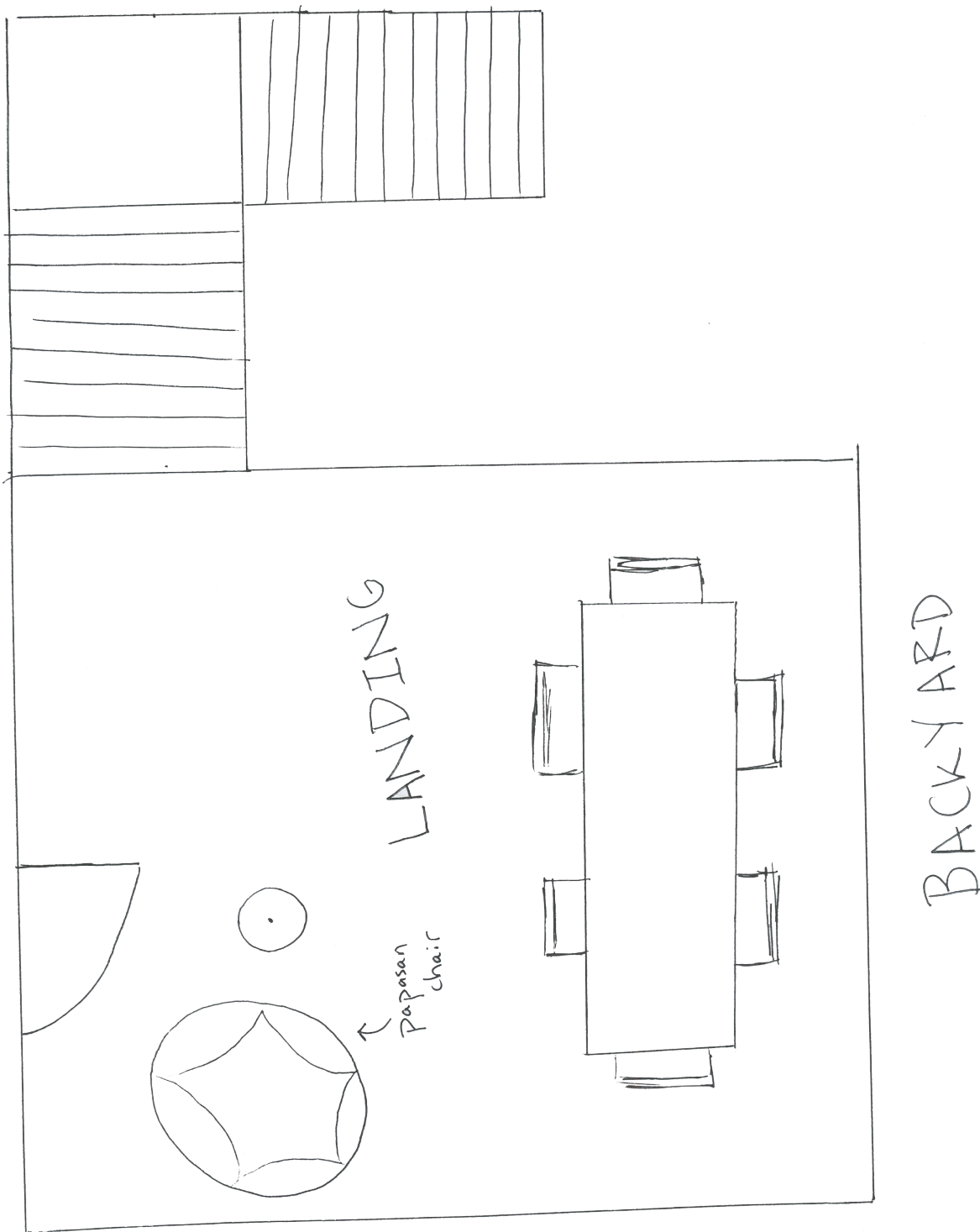


Downstairs apartment, sunroom

FRONT YARD / ARLINGTON

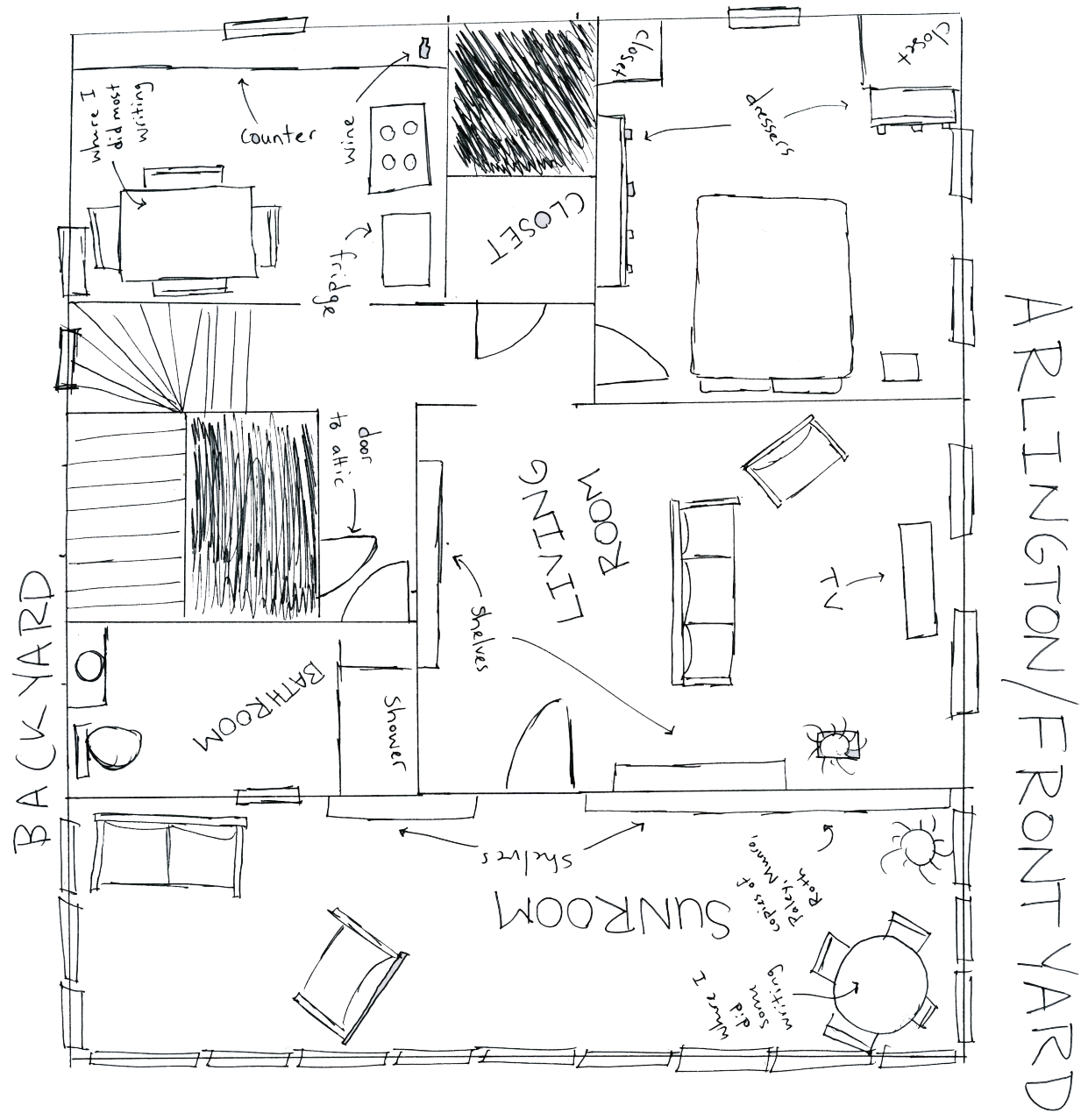


Downstairs apartment, 2nd floor

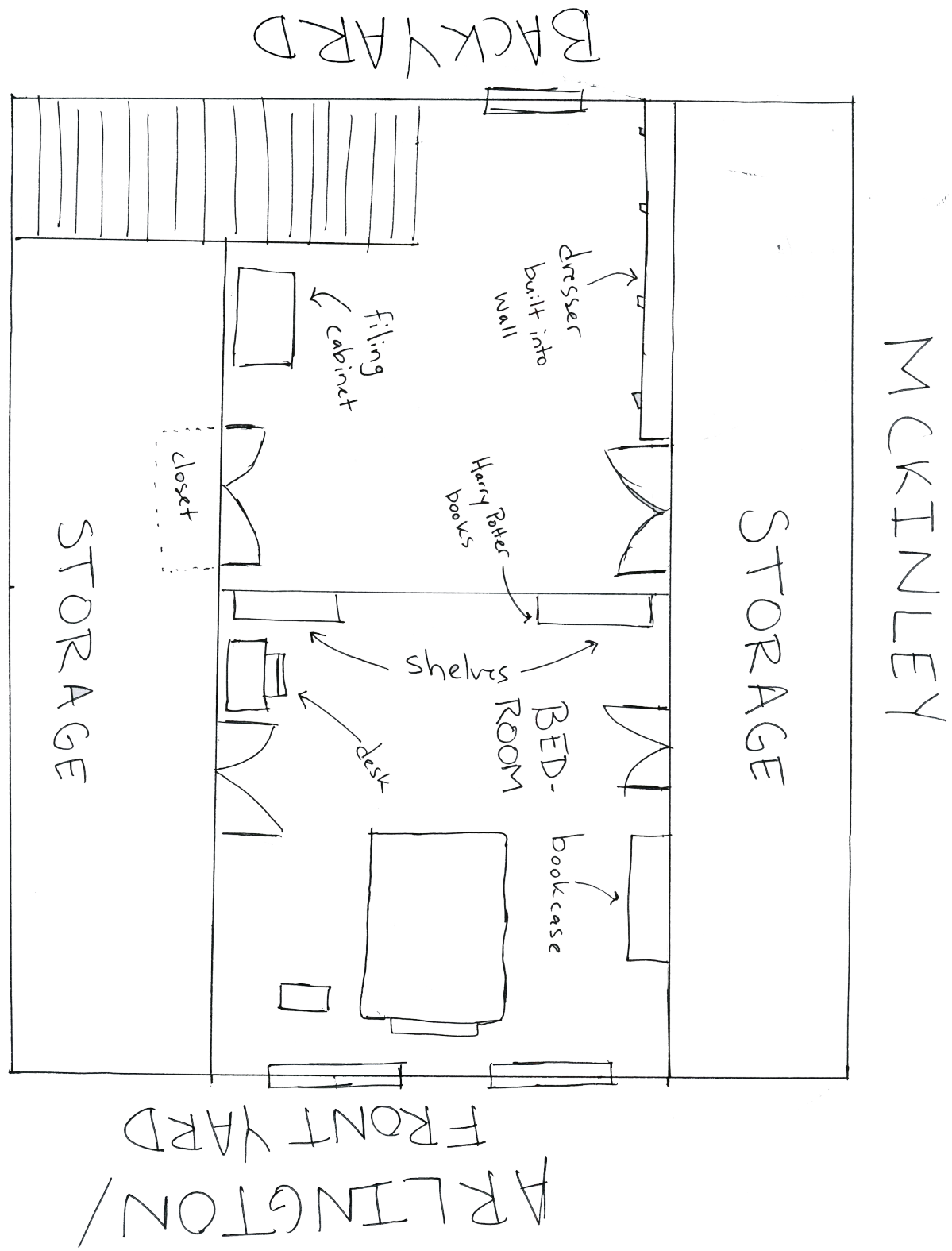


Upstairs apartment, landing

MCKINLEY



Upstairs apartment, 1st floor



Upstairs apartment, attic/2nd floor