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# GRANDFATHER IS IN

## EMMA JACOBSEN

### I. My Father Says

Colorado is a safe place for my family. It is the native ground. Though I can't recall it, Steamboat's importance remains without my memories. He is gone, and now Colorado revives its hearty importance. My grandfather had that effect on most everything. He made being a Rutledge feel like being a Rockefeller. I hated it.

There are these family photographs in my father's office. My grandfather's smile stands out, his long arms holding us close, leaning and pushing us together, up in the Colorado air. Set on a mile-high deck, the photograph is centered square on our gathered family, with the Colorado wilderness dropping away from our smiles. The blue of the mountainous distance matched my dress, which was originally coordinated to my eyes. *My eyes*, they are so unclouded in the photograph, highlighted by the surroundings and by my dress chosen by my mother. It looks right. I wish that I could have that memory for myself, but it is only a photograph.

My dad likes to visit those photographs too; they lived on the wall in his office for a reason. He was so proud of them. My grandfather was so proud of them. With a big cheesy grin that could almost burn through his face, my dad would ask me "Are you excited to go see *Cow-lo-rad-ie* some day dear?"

I think my father loved him the most, which only made things more problematic for me.

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## II. To Kauai

We were always being told that my grandparent's Hali'ki'pa house was an undeniable treat. Japan perfumed the walls, but the pristine 60's leather sofa and chair set complimented that aura because of whose house it was. It was the home of American Royalty.

Golden cherry blossom screens stood and spiteful twin dachshunds wiggled within the chair legs. Rooster calls before dawn were there to remind one where they just woke up. Over the years, hurricanes had set the chickens free on the island. Free to scuttle and arrange beneath the palms, only to trip through the sand following trails of white hands dragging silver packages of food. There was a surprising harmony to the heat and hypocrisy. Kauai, with all its peculiarities, is a place where the domestic American goes to be wild. The chickens were just following in suit.

Regardless of the rowdy tourists, I think my grandparents would rather have believed that Kauai was a placid paradise. It was respect that ran the Kauai house and I sometimes think that respect had earned its place there. I always found it incredible for an island so cultured and chaotic. Passing time in that structure also may have been the worst part about vacation, but every Rutledge was expected to like it there. The sponge of grass that the tropical rain bounced off every afternoon, the smoky asphalt and sliding doors, it was a thirsty suburb. I gave in at times because Kauai is such a rich place, volcanic and Jurassic. As the years passed, I adjusted somewhat and my grandparents and their stiff home didn't feel entirely out of place there. I think if you asked my dad he would say it was because of the upmarket bamboo floors and the humidity. You had no choice but to float, I actually think the presence of the house commanded it. As you might expect though, vacation never fully lived up to the expectations. But as I backtrack though the memories, I think more and more that my own unhappiness may have been self caused in this case.

## III. Christmas or Rutledge Spirit

Christmases were spent often in the Kauai house. And so were my first experiences with alcohol. Sneaking it, stealing it, loitering with it. So it is being a third generation Rutledge, and being the middle cousin out of eight.

Peach daiquiris are a Christmas morning tradition. I think, now that I am older, I understand their purpose better. The drink lessened the guilt of spending an adulterated amount of money on gifts. Eggnog doesn't cut it.

Always receiving more than we deserved, I generally embodied some element of shame after

the Christmas morning carnage. The evergreen tree felt out of place, decorated by someone decades out of date. Aunt Luna, drunk before noon. My brother, weeping over some gift gone wrong. So, feeling in the Rutledge spirit, I asked for the child sort of a daiquiri.

My grandfather, architect of the Rutledge spirit, handed me a stemmed crystal glass and pulled the blender from its base. I hope you might expect there to be a virgin version of the peachy drink, and there was. But not for me.

I was kid-drunk before brunch. Grandma's, out of a can, culinary genius, be damned.

#### IV. Margery and the Dragon Dogs

He died and left my grandmother to deal with the "tour-ons" infesting the island, a large and now empty island house, along with no knowledge of how to pay her own bills. She used to be so talented that I wore her corduroy concoctions for Christmas and Easter. They might even be in a box somewhere in my parent's house. She has become a brackish lady over the years I have known her. No longer nimble enough to sew, no longer patient and doting and unthinkably lonely with only two rotten little dogs to bark with.

Molly and Lizzie, the dachshund pair, are little yellow puddle creators, and the more accurately named royalty in the house. My grandmother never swears more than when she hushes under her breath at those beady-eyed beasts. They never got walked because she was always finding more important things to do inside, like watch Fox News or dust grandfather's office.

When we were on vacation my sister and I would volunteer to take the little sausage dogs out for exercise. Looping the Napoo'oo ka'la cul-de-sac, we would race them like thoroughbreds on the scalding asphalt oval. From a lawn chair, Dad would be announcing the track with his booming voice and a beer in hand.

#### V. Sundowners

At this time of day my face would be bonded sideways to leather, my cheek adhered to the green couch. My brother might be nagging Grandpa about the TV, Mom and the aunties are tittering over recipes and plants; it was time for a drink. The men of the house would realize the time, and the ladies would put in their drink orders as they moved out onto the lanai.

Now the Sundowner is a special South African ritual, most completely, an evening drinking ritual, adopted into the Rutledge family sometime before I was born. I guess that there was something

cathartic about drinking with the sunset; we liked watching the day end on the tiny island. Welcoming the night reminded us that there was another island day tomorrow, building the anticipation was a great family specialty.

I always thought that we were especially lucky when a malka shower would bust through during the sundowner. We could see the first major ridge of the Na’Pali Coast while we sat pleasantly on the covered porch. As a shower would pass through, the deluge would set the water escape system of the island into motion. Spitting, my grandmother would dismiss the little deluge as a disruption to the evening ritual and rush to the kitchen. But I never had any trouble with it, and I would watch in wonder, as new waterfalls would magically appear on the distant green mountains.

## VI. I’ve Had Plenty

Attempting to help my grandmother in the kitchen was kind of like helping her with anything. It’s usually better not to ask. I never got to do more than set the table, pour milk for the kids, and plop mayonnaise on to canned peaches for what she considered “the dinner salad.” I learned to set the table before she had time to tell me to stop. In the end, I’m not sure if I was helping her get dinner ready or just making her more compulsive about getting dinner ready. It seemed more frustrating, and I couldn’t figure out if I was doing it for her or so I wouldn’t get in trouble. If she was in a particularly convincing mood I would get uncomfortable enough to drag my mom into it. That generally ended with me losing dessert or dinner all together.

Whatever.

Dinner itself, when I was present, was usually spiced up by my brother’s expertise. I had my own instruments of torture, but my brother’s ability to look ungrateful with each forced bite of food, that took grandma for all the cake she baked. Unable to get a word in, properly, she often left the scolding to my father who never understood where David’s spiteful streak came from. I think my brother took a quote, or 20, from the dachshunds. I know I don’t blame him. Plus, I think he was the only one who didn’t feel self-conscious being dragged out of the dining room by his ears.

One down.

If I was feeling crafty by this point I usually brought up my horses, or my humanitarian streak. Nothing quieted that table faster. I liked the bottom of the totem pole. The totem pole consisted of Grandfather Rutledge at the top and me with my compassion somewhere ten feet underground. It was from this position that I could ruin dinner. I didn’t even have to be upset. Or raise my voice. Or forfeit dessert.

The only person who ended up looking like shit was Grandpa.

“I’ve had plenty Grandma, thank you.” That was how each of us politely ended dinner. It wasn’t so bad, especially when we had the beach to look forward to.

## VII. Legacy

My grandfather produced a son of controversy and prosperity, a virtuous pair of a younger brother and older sister, and a baby of love and guilt. Each of the four children grew to his strict measurements besides the youngest. The guilty baby fell a little short of surprising, becoming a small-scale organic farmer and losing the love of his wife. The controversial eldest had to learn to live with the consequences of his actions but was such a successful businessman that he could be pardoned. My father and his sister, they were planted right in the center of the range “disappointing to embarrassing.” Over the years they each have accepted and fallen into these roles, my father and aunt taking on the task of being not the best nor the worst.

I’ve learned that the only manner in which to embrace the Rutledge way was to realize that I am not one. I have the name; I have the blue eyes and that resounding belligerent nature when it comes to work. But I never would accept that I was better than anyone else, that I deserved more or even that I deserved that damn last name.

I was always feeling guilty for nothing, is what my grandfather said.

## VII. No Salt

Life for my Richard “Jake” Rutledge began in Australia, sometime in the 30’s. When Richard was near nine years old, Great Grandfather Rutledge died and World War II beached Australian shores. Grandpa’s father left quite a family behind when he did that. But they were already Rutledge strong even then. That headless family, with one mother and many uncountable children swam across the Pacific Ocean to a bustling America. Littleton.

Colorado was waiting.

My grandfather began to throw newspapers on square lawns and work at a one Piggly Wiggly’s grocery store to sustain his large family throughout high school. This new country had many new challenges. Australia though, had strengthened his adventurous and devious soul when he was a child. It was often that he would have been sent to challenge glossy black vipers with machetes in the bottom of the bush house. He collected horrendous spiders in the closet and bedded them in dusty linens to

frighten anyone who wanted clean towels. He was talented at capturing singing parrots that he brought to live between the stilts of their airy home; they filled the air with music and painted the house when they molted. There may have also been a half wild dog, which howled across the mountains with jackals and ate from young Richard's feet when he felt like it.

Colorado though, would be where he grew into a Rutledge father. No longer was the challenge spooking his siblings with spiders or taming the wildlife, he had an entire family to live for since his mother couldn't provide.

He worked hard.

He came out of college with a degree, a drive for business and a woman named Margery who was as smooth as butter. No salt.

Persistent and intelligent my grandfather worked his way up the ranks of a massive telecom company. And even in status he was kind, diligent, and genuine. He said he used to eat lunch in the mailroom. Nothing less than lovely things could be said; he was a brilliant people person. Just not with me.

## VIII. The Big Time

They lived together in Colorado, grown up Jake and Marge did, with a station wagon and a nice house. Those five kids happened. They took that family-wagon all over Colorado. To pass the drive, wobbly-kneed football games were held in the back of the traveling family-mobile. There were no seatbelts of course, and punishment for complaining about anything was mitigated with a swift sealing of the windows while the happy couple chain-smoked. It was re-named the rolling coffin.

With a bounty of dachshunds and children, Littleton is where they lived before they retired to the Hali'ki'pa house in the middle of the Pacific. Their own personal Midway Island. But, Colorado wasn't to be forgotten. It was the land of plenty, and a house was had in Steamboat. I'll be there soon, in less than a year actually, to revisit the ghost of my grandfather's smiles, hollow hugs and "Big Time" success.

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Thankfully though, Grandma is ready to leave the island now; Grandpa left her with more than she could handle. Her life is hers for the first time in five decades; I wonder what she will do with it. Our family is ours, for the first time in five decades; I wonder what we will do with it. I realize now that I am grandfather-less for the first time in my life, and I am wondering if I should do anything with it.