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WHEN I GREW UP

Mielle Hubbard

My grandma wanted us to call her Uma, but my sister Halisia couldn't make her little tongue pronounce it. Her best was "Elmo," which Adriel, our cousin who lived up the road, turned into "Mummo." Our other cousins called her "Mamo," and she officially gave up.

We lived on Three Turtle Crossing, named for the turtles crossing from pond to pond in the summer. Elmo bought these twenty acres of land before Halisia and Adriel were born, a piece of property just far enough away from town to seem like its own territory. My parents and aunts followed.

Elmo lived across the gravel road in a canvas-covered, single room, round yurt, with plastic covering and a small propane stove as her only protection against long Montana winters. We huddled up as close as possible without knocking over the piles of clay molds when we gathered to watch *War of the Buttons* and *Secondhand Lions*. Our backs inches away from the stove, we held competitions to see who could stand the heat the longest. Adriel always won.

We were invested in our art projects, the medium changing with the season. I knew winter had arrived the day I stepped into the yurt and smelled earthy clay. Old yogurt containers sat on every table, some filled with murky water and a layer of silt, others stuffed with tools and paint brushes. Beige dragons already lined the shelves, drying out until they were ready to be fired. Their individual personalities would shine when she layered them with glaze, but until then they all looked over their left shoulders and curved their tails in. I could see Elmo's fingerprints where she pinched up their scales.

I spent the most time in the yurt. I was friends with all of her decorations, and familiar with everything's place. I loved to feel her worn quilt, pluck the strings of her baby harp, and spin the bent forks balanced perfectly on another. Everything crowded together in the small space but it just felt cozy. When the yurt was first built, she asked all of her friends to paint tan tiles, and I could pick out each one. I recognized the white pitbull by my dad, Reuben's purple baby feet, the family trees done by my mom, and the stick figures with prominent behinds I proudly painted.

Elmo covered them up with rugs, but I knew where they lived.

Elmo asked me how school was everyday that I came over and we talked about all the silly things people did. Once, in third grade, I told her about a trick a boy in my class played.

“He told someone to say ‘x’ ten times really fast.” I knew the result, and couldn’t bring myself to say it, so I motioned to her.

“X, x, ex, exs, sex, sex, sex, sex,” she nodded knowingly. “Little boys think they are very funny and clever when they are inappropriate.”

I nodded and returned to my clay elephant.

I always volunteered to walk things over to Elmo, because I could avoid chores for twenty minutes while she showed me the progress she’d made in her scarf, or the pictures of the Cockatoos I’d requested. She loved to have someone to talk to, and I loved to listen to her. She told me about her walks with the dogs and the rocks she gathered. One day she showed me a pygmy owl propped up on a stick. She’d found it dead on the forest floor and carefully brought it home to live among her magazines and art supplies.

There’s something witchy about an old woman living in the woods with a little white Westie and a huge half-wolf. Her hair turned metallic after chemo and was often arranged unevenly, pulled back with the first clip she saw in the morning. When Elmo was pregnant with my oldest aunt she had Bell’s Palsy and the right side of her face froze. She worked on it for months by making exaggerated faces until the muscles began to move again, but it was never quite the same. She smiled wider with the left corner of her mouth and her right eyelid drooped. Even though the right side of her face had less wrinkles, it still somehow looked older. Less alive.

In the crook of her left elbow, at the base of her forearm, the Subud symbol has bled after a long life. Seven blue concentric circles inside each other, sliced into seven pieces by seven lines.

“It reminds me to do Latihan.”

Elmo found all her answers through Latihan, mediating to communicate with her higher power. The energy from the women practicing together allowed answers and insights to be received. She changed her name from Nancy to Lusana. She had just the cancerous tumors removed from her breast. She moved to Montana.

She was a life-long teacher, passing on all that she had learned about nature and crafts to everyone that would listen. She held art camps, and taught the grandchildren how to swim and float in Loon Lake. She patiently showed me how to blow bubbles, but I was scared of the

water and could only keep it up for seconds at a time. She became an elementary and middle school art teacher as we grew up, then moved to an after-school program at a local church. The young kids were enamored with her, and whenever I came to visit they all asked, “Is Lusana really 180 years old?”

“Of course she is! She’s magic,” I always replied. Elmo cackled with delight.

I only ever went to one Subud Congress, when I was thirteen, the same time I decided I didn’t want to call her Elmo anymore. We took the long way back from Denver to Yellowstone to Three Turtle Crossing. I noticed for the first time that her cup holders were filled with loose toothbrushes and dental floss and we sat in silence between rounds of the alphabet game. We had raw corn for dinner that night and I pretended to be asleep until we pulled into Yellowstone. The next day we took pictures of the bison, saw Old Faithful, and walked across geyser pools. I saw some yurts that matched Grandma’s and wondered if they were as cramped as the one I knew.

I knew as a child, when I carefully stroked the clay creations, that all of Grandma’s belongings would have to go somewhere after she died. And, as her health began to fail, Grandma started to pressure the family members to claim their own.

“If you ever see anything you want, just let me know! You can have it!”

I didn’t want to be the one to go over and take everything at once, so I spaced it out. A box of yarn now, great-grandma’s jade earrings the next time. I picked out a stone ring that looked like billowing smoke. I thought, *This will remind me of Old Faithful, when we went to Yellowstone.* It was months before I realized the ring reminded me only of that moment in the yurt.

I stopped going over to Grandma’s so much. Bringing things over to her became a chore when her endless talking started cutting into the time I needed to do homework. Her knitting became less impressive as I compared it against my own. All of her art projects were repeats of the things she was best at making: scarves, clay dragons, painted goblets, rock mosaics. I only saw her on the weekends when we played cards and the school nights she drove me home from piano lessons.

Her memory is fading. At first she was aware of it, apologizing for telling the same stories again. These slip-ups were rare, maybe once every couple days. They started coming more often. Within one conversation, she would tell the same story three times, apologizing after each one.

She was prescribed medication to slow down the deterioration of her memory. She went off of them, forgetting to get them refilled. She convinced herself that they didn't help, anyway.

She needs reassurance often. For a while, she thought I was the only one who loved her because I yelled it as she dropped me off at home. It's easy to think Grandma's fine because she pushes the focus off of herself but every once in a while she'll let slip that she's out of groceries.

"You're only eating cereal?" I asked, "With water? Do you want me to pick up some food for you?"

"Oh, no, no, no," as if this is the biggest hassle she would put on us. "I'll be good for a while. I have my walnuts."

I tried to learn stories from her childhood, picking up little details in passing about how she learned to read maps. She was most honest in the car. She prided herself on her driving, how she could keep a straight line even as she looked at me, at the cousins sitting in the back. I decided that I needed a recording of her. An actual interview on tape, something I could listen to when she was gone. I recruited my siblings and chose questions on the internet. By the time we all gathered in the living room, Grandma had asked six times, "What is this for? For school?" I should have remembered then how little she likes the spotlight.

I started the recording, we each introduced ourselves, and we began. I was hoping to hear more anecdotes, choosing questions like, "What were you like as a child?" and "Do you have any funny stories you want to share?" She talked about her childhood, moving across the country with her military dad. We learn she's happiest in the car with her family, singing songs and playing road trip games. She tells us a little about her siblings, how her relationship with them has changed. Then I got to the one I was most nervous for.

"If this was going to be our last conversation, is there anything you want to tell us that you haven't told us before?"

I could imagine the things she would say. Would she talk about her divorce, breast cancer, the reason she came to Montana, her miscarriage? This was the moment, I thought, her deepest secrets could finally come out. We all leaned a little closer.

"No. I think if I wanted to tell something to you, I would have already told you."

She continued, saying that she would love to go on a road trip with each of us, where we could really get to know and be completely open with each other.

We started asking more pointed questions. Tell us about college, how

you found Subud, your first kiss.

“His name was Harry Hamilton. We were fourteen, both American. There was an ancient burial site, a great tomb, and we stood on top. It was gentle, no expectations or anything, and so, so innocent. I was pretty lucky, huh?” I had to imagine for myself the romantic scene with a gorgeous sunset in the background of the perfect first kiss. Through the rest of the interview, she kept finding ways to turn her stories into life lessons. “Be in the moment.” “Find what makes you happy.” “Just live your life.”

She made it clear how much she would miss me as I left for college through a language of sad sighs and pats on my arm. When I finally came home for winter break, Grandma hugged me tight.

“Your energy has been missed. You have been missed.”

I volunteered to help her find a dress for her eldest daughter’s third wedding and found myself staring at the body of a woman who birthed six children. I never noticed the disproportion breast cancer left her with until she stood naked in front of me. She put on one of the dresses I picked out with a shawl and asked me what I thought.

“We could do better. Go ahead and take it off.”

A recent illness left her constantly dizzy, and the pills to help with her memory lowered her blood sugar even more, so she stumbled, dress stuck over her head.

“Let me hold onto you. Pull the dress off.”

I pulled it over her head, and felt the soft, thin skin covering her small, wrinkled body. I wondered how many times had we been in this exact situation, just switched places.

I know she won't have the energy to go on walks soon, so I forced Sawyer and Basil to come with us to Glacier National Park on a ten-mile round trip hike up to Iceberg Lake. She tried so hard. I reminded her I was making lunch, but she packed us tuna sandwiches anyway. We left late because she forgot where she put her license. She sat in the passenger seat, ready to take the wheel when my fear of heights took over. As we hiked, she reminded us that we didn't need to walk slowly just for her sake.

“I like walking this speed. I like to look at the scenery,” I responded every few minutes.

We came back down the mountain six hours later. We piled into the car and opened the windows to let out the smell of feet. Grandma massaged her ankle. The last time she did this hike was thirty years ago, and her memory told her it was more of an easy stroll than the laborious

climb she just finished. I was more mentally exhausted than physically, and it didn't help that I had to drive us down the road I was too scared to drive up. The boys talked and laughed, and as we got onto the highway, Grandma touched my arm and softly said, "Should we get ice cream? Should I get you all milkshakes or something?"

My voice was tight. "That sounds nice." I knew she wouldn't remember that I drove straight home.