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Stories about time shifted, folded and shared, the extraordinary ordinary, and keeping separate and being a-part.

★ September 24, 2018

# George, the dog

By Emily Yates-Doerr

Babe, my grandpa, was born on the kitchen tiles of a small Seattle home. His dad, whose own grandpa had run a seedy downtown brothel, would disappear and reappear throughout his life. But Babe was not like the men who came before him. He spent his youth delivering newspapers and parking cars to support his mother, went to war when he was called to go, returned, got married, started a business selling auto-parts, had children and grew old. As quiet as he was responsible, he never did anything unexpected. At least that's what I was always told.

I spent enough time with my Grandpa when I was young that I never questioned whether I knew him. Only much later did I think to ask. He was always there, though never like my grandma Donna, who was talkative and full of opinions. I cannot remember a single meaningful conversation he and I ever had. But then I was also a kid – a girl, even – and he was from another generation.

My uncle sounded the first warning something was wrong. He had found his father sleeping in his Lincoln Continental outside the family store. Babe didn't know where he was or why he was there. Just a few weeks later, he left the house to drive his brother to the doctor, but never arrived to pick him up. He returned home to Donna late at night, having been lost for hours. He never said anything, but my grandma thought he must have been terrified. Cars had been his life and he never drove again.

Not long afterward, the electricity went out. Donna found a drawer filled with unpaid bills. Babe had always handled their finances, but in her late 70s, this became her job. The difficulty was obvious and we heard about it often. As

Babe withdrew into the protection offered by silence, she became louder. “I survived the Depression at the start of my life only to end up with my own depression in the end.” It wasn’t meant as a joke. “Nothing about it is funny, frankly”, Donna said when I started to laugh. But then she laughed too.

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They took in a middle-aged dachshund from a neighbour who was moving. Years earlier Babe had issued a command, a rare thing for him to do: “No more dogs”. But things were so lonely for Donna, with Babe just sitting there, rocking in his chair. George, the dog, moved in, and then up – establishing a home on Babe’s lap.

The grandpa of my childhood smelled of aftershave and had a handshake that could break your hand. He woke up early, drove carefully, never overate. He waited until 5 o’clock to start with gin and tonics. After he was pushed into retirement he began to sleep in. Hair grew from all parts of his body. He only stopped eating when someone took away his food. His nails grew long and he developed diabetes. Still, he often seemed happy, whistling away, holding George gently, lovingly, petting the dog over and over again. A lifelong Republican, he developed a tic of repeating the name of the 44<sup>th</sup> U.S. President: *Barack Obama*. Whistle, whistle, *Barack Obama*, whistle, whistle.

Donna suffered. George yipped when anyone approached Babe, guarding my grandpa ferociously with his small body. “That damn dog”, she said with a hint of jealousy. My mom didn’t even hint: “He pays more attention to that dog than he ever paid to me”.

Then George died suddenly, a heart attack it seems. One moment he was living, the next his body was stiff. Refusing the fate of death, my mom and her siblings scoured the internet for another. They came across an ad for a dachshund an hour’s drive away. This one was a few years younger, with a bit of terrier ancestry, and female. But it was close enough, they decided. They started calling the dog George on the ride home.

Do you think the punch line of the story will be that my vacant grandfather knew right away that this dog was different? It’s not, because he either didn’t notice or didn’t care. He held this new George on his lap lovingly, all the while keeping up the hum of *Barack Obama*. The new George took over the old George’s life, looking out for my grandpa until the end.

Long after my grandpa died, the rest of us maintained the George charade, though now the dog’s attention has shifted to my grandma, lunging and barking at anyone who comes near her. George, onetime companion of her dying husband, sleeps dutifully at Donna’s side every night, in the spot where Babe had always been. Nearly all my grandma’s friends, her eyesight, and her hearing are gone. Death, whether quick or slow, has left her with heartache. But she has George. They take their Prozac together.

My grandma now lives in a retirement home near Pioneer Square, not far from where Babe’s great-grandfather ran his brothel. Settlers’ whorehouses, originally built atop Duwamish rhododendrons, have transformed into glass skyscrapers in all directions.

George needs exercise, so one of Donna’s children comes every morning to walk the dog, passing rows of people sleeping on cardboard boxes. The

neighborhood is dystopic and historic all at once, the epicentre of Seattle's homelessness located at the heart of the city's oldest unresolved pain. Every day George pulls them through it.

"That damn dog," they say, though no one really means it anymore. It is George who keeps my grandma alive.

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I call my grandma to ask where the name George came from, but she can't recall. Time is no longer sharp for her. After a pause, she tells me: "I remember my mother getting so mad. She thought we weren't telling her if there was something wrong with him. She thought we were keeping something from her".

Her mother, Emily, died just before I was born – decades before George entered our lives. As I am trying to figure out how to respond, she catches herself. Recognizing something is off, she goes quiet. "Truthfully, I've forgotten everything. I'm not much help to you", she says next. Then she adds, "He was a nice guy. I could have taken care of him a lot longer". I understand that we're talking about my grandpa now.

Before we hang up she asks me to send pictures of my sons. "Everyone does everything remotely, on their phones, these days. But I want real pictures to hang on my fridge for the staff to see". She tries to say their names. As I wait for her to speak, I have the same feeling as when watching my children climb high at the playground: uncertain if it's better to help or stay away. It takes her a while to remember, but finally she does. She tells me that every night while waiting for sleep to come she goes through all of our names. She starts with her children. And then their children, and then the names of her greats – though usually by then her mind has gone quiet.

"I'll try to think of some memories", she tells me. "Call me again soon."

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The phenomenologists have argued over whether a person *has* an illness or *is* ill, but something seems wrong to me about the premise of the debate. What is the word for when experience and memory fail to locate themselves within a person? It might be something like phenomenology's twin: *embodiment*. But I'd want a word for when the sedimentation of sociality happens upon a family or a community – and not a person or a body at all.

Thinking with the every day of dementia is this puzzle of thinking at the curled edges of thought; thinking with words I do not have (Did I once? Will I someday find them?). Thinking with dementia is the double-gendered dog, the suffering felt by those who are supposedly well, the ends that are beginnings that are also ends, and all the names that are ours that also belong to others. It's not-remembering that living is another name for dying. It's all the tenderness mixed up in the fear. It's knowing people as well as we know ourselves – the very same people who we do not know at all.

*Afterward: George developed cancer and died at the start of this summer. My grandmother followed her beloved dog at the end of August.*

**Emily Yates-Doerr** is an anthropologist who studies how nutrition science

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*This post is a contribution to ‘Daily life’ in the Somatosphere series ‘Thinking with dementia.’*

*Read the next story in the series here.*

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