

To: Grandpa, With Love

By Katie Vosgien

Our golden brown minivan inched along slowly, loose gravel crunching and kicking up underneath. If we'd gone any faster we likely would've spun out. The gravel, older than Grandpa was when he'd died in his eighties, had been sprayed this way and that by wind, cars, tractors, trucks, and even, at one time, the rickety wheels of a pony and cart drawn to rumors of gold. After many years of use, the wagon fell into disrepair. It rests now in the dark recesses of the large barn at the corner of the tree-choked acreage. Settlers moved to the thriving boomtown of Speltsville in droves, first to mine, then to grow crops: wheat, onion and alfalfa.

Now unkempt and falling apart as the years drew by, the old barn stands as a reminder of a once-busy family farm home, with kids scattered this way and that, helping with chores or playing in the fields. Grandpa and Grandma, by then, rarely ventured out of their home except for the most necessary of errands, and even more rarely did they ever invite visitors. Neither could hear well and their joints ached far too much to stand in the produce aisle listening to neighborly salutations and the requisite gossip. An illicit affair, out-of-wedlock birth, children playing ding-dong-dash all hours of the night. All very riveting stuff, unless your legs are swelling like tree trunks and for decades your shoulders have borne the very weight of the world. Instead, they read many many books and listened to the house creak with age and indomitable termites.

We rolled down the road, lined with white-gray sycamore trees. My parents talked quietly, too low for me to decipher their words, but I didn't mind. I was too busy reading Harry Potter for the hundredth time. Shade dappled the windows and the rays of the early morning sun peeked through. This part of Speltsville was one of the few spots where trees grew with abandon and, in the fall and winter months, moss settled on their branches. An odd oasis in the desert, where the lone river flowed and a fish hatchery replenished the local habitat with bass and wide-mouth trout.

I'd gone on a field trip in elementary school to the hatchery and walked down the rows of differing age groups of fish—from babies in a large building full of rows of them to the larger rows outdoors, signs indicating that sticking your hand in the water might get your fingers nibbled on—with a fascination that most the other kids didn't have or were too busy chasing each other up and down the rows to notice the fish much. Our close-to-retirement teacher, Mrs. Scherwood, hollered at us to settle down but, as she usually did, soon gave up on the matter and let the hatchery staff, who were accustomed to these sorts of field trips, take over. They appeased us with snacks and juice boxes and educational coloring packets with crinkly plastic packets of Crayola crayons. We sat down at the picnic tables, lulled into a carb-and-coloring-induced quiet.

The old farmhouse was once full of activity. Men in sweat-drenched shirts would collect the alfalfa while their kids would chase each other with the plastic toy revolvers their moms had picked up at Rex Drug Co., which still stands today. In my pre-D.A.R.E days, I'd ask my mom why they could legally sell drugs with toys and makeup there. She looked at me like I was an idiot, then smiled kindly and explained the difference

between medicinal drugs and *bad* recreational drugs, which were terrible and illegal, and you'd die if you used too much of them. Coffee is a drug, she explained, but it is one an adult can drink as much as they need to function throughout the day. It's medicinal, she surmised. Probably.

After the trek back from the small schoolhouse in town, and their chores, the kids on the farm would be allowed to run and play until dark. In the sweltering summer months, they'd be out hunting for sticks to battle with or cattail reeds to chew on. The dry heat barely touched them, their arms and necks were nearly impenetrable as their tans deepened, as they screeched and hollered and laughed through dry, parched throats. The moms would also come out during the busiest harvest season, hefting red gas cans to the John Deere tractors that needed to be worked on throughout most days (as the engines would crumble). Sometime later, the houses surrounding its structure would be sold off on land divided by realtors, decreasing its some odd hundred acres of alfalfa and onions, rows and rows and rows of it.

This was according to Grandpa, who'd tell me stories of Speltsville and its varied frontier-era boomtown roots transmuted into its small-town agricultural modernity, of which he embellished to the full extent of it. Then of his life of growing up in California and of his parents and his cousins and siblings and rarely of his own children, over a pitcher of iced tea that he was dumping a cup full of sugar into. He then cut a fresh lemon, squeezed one half into the pitcher, and folded a piece of aluminum over the other half. He said it wouldn't go bad in the fridge because he'd use it the next day. Grandma, glasses resting at the tip of her nose buried in a prolific romance author's

most recently released book, pointedly commented that they spent a good chunk of their social security checks on fresh ripe lemons and yellow boxes of black Lipton tea bags. Grandpa merely “hmmm’d” and nodded his head in agreement, and he stirred his concoction in a couple of ice cube trays pulled from the mustard-yellow freezer. Later, after the visit, Dad told me she’d never have suggested Grandpa spent unwisely or frivolously, back when he was a kid. The following row wouldn’t have been worth it. “Things change with time,” he said, fingers drumming on the gray steering wheel. He glanced over at me, maybe thinking but not saying it: *I’ve changed with time*. I don’t know for sure if that’s what he thought, but he might as well have said it.

Satisfied with its appearance and taste, Grandpa glanced around for my parents, who were watching a game show in the living room with Grandma, and poured a small glass for me with a wink, one wrinkled eyelid folding atop the other, and pulled out a tray. He poured four glasses for himself, Grandma, and my parents. I downed the lemony-sweet tea, parched, and asked for another. Grandpa swore me not to tell and I never did, except for now. Mom had declared that I wasn’t ready for fully-caffeinated tea and Grandpa steeped it twice as long as the packaging recommended. I was jittery for an hour and tried to hide it by sitting on my shaking hands. I’m not sure if she ever knew, but I suspect that she did. It was one of those things moms know you shouldn’t do but when you do it they pretend not to know it.

Grandpa shuffled into the dark paneled living room, swallowed whole by three sofas and two sitting chairs, and set the tray down at the coffee table. He’d hand out each glass with a slightly unsteady shake, carefully stooped over the tray, the other

hand poised, ready to catch the table just in case. He settled into his frayed and faded plaid chair, sighing and resting his chin against his plaid flannel chest. His motions were slow and deliberate and practiced. I wonder if they'd always been that way. I squeezed onto the flannel couch between my parents. The vivid rapid colors and shouting, laughing audience would hold my attention for at least thirty minutes before the boredom and inattention set in.

After finishing at least half her glass of iced tea, Grandma pulled herself out of the chair, huffing for a moment before gathering the dishes. Mom offered to help. Grandma waved her hand, an annoyed look crossing her gentle and patient face if only for a moment. Mom followed her into the kitchen, touching her shoulder softly and insisting on helping with the dishes as Grandma started dinner. Mom, not quite knowing what else to do, pulled up a chair at the yellow metal dining table and recounted my accomplishments and, in a loud whisper, pitfalls. Grandma mostly ignored her until she couldn't, dolling out demands to make the words stop. Mom popped up out of the chair and fetched spices, kitchen tools and recipes on Grandma's command, ever-eager to please her mother-in-law but never quite getting how, and told her about her day at work and the going-ons in Speltsville that Grandma was now rarely a part of. Then again, Grandma never truly was. She'd always been introverted and quiet and, according to my dad, the antithesis of a pastor's wife. Still, she'd perform at social events and functions with the grace and refinement expected. She was on par with any old Hollywood starlet, acting with alacrity—veiling an acute, nearly vindictive apathy—at services, luncheons, and community halls. She'd rather have been curled up

in a floral chaise in the bay window nook, nose in a yellowing paperback and listening to her favorite records. Grandpa's retirement favored her more than it had him.

This was our routine nearly every other weekend. Visit Grandma and Grandpa then, later, after Grandma passed and Grandpa was moved to a memory care home in Texas, where my retired uncle had more time to visit than we did. Grandpa would call sometimes, and I'd pick up the home phone with excitement bubbling in my chest and answer, "Your favorite granddaughter!" He'd acknowledge me with a distant tone, trying in vain to mask his confusion each time. He'd ask for my dad by all of his brothers' names, until he landed on the correct son. Dad would reluctantly take the call in the room furthest to the back of the house, his voice muffled by the door and his generally soft way of speaking. He'd update his dad on all the going-ons in Speltsville, once again going through the litany of Sunday friends who'd passed on or left the church ages ago. Grandpa rarely asked about the mysterious girl who'd answered the phone.

Grandpa spent most of his early married life as a driver's ed instructor at a DMV in California, having moved across states from Texas after Bible college with all the intentions of starting his own congregation there. He met Grandma and that was that. He needed to find decently paid consistent work. After his kids had grown up and out, he picked himself and his wife up and chose Speltsville, Nevada. California had grown to eclipse him, and the town reminded him of the southern one he'd grown up in. A move back to Texas and his family was out of reach, financially. Their station wagon could make it down to Nevada and that was about it.

It was time to use his hard-earned college education, now that they didn't have so many mouths to feed. While not entirely enamored with the idea, Grandma did eventually fall in love with the small, inexpensive farmhouse tucked away in the sycamore trees and winding river. It was a dream compared to their California home, surrounded close by neighbors and dogs that barked long into the night. Grandpa soon bought up a decrepit Baptist church not too far from their home. He went about town preaching to those who'd listen. Many followed him to the countryside church, lending a fixer's hand and a can of paint or two in its restoration. Grandpa's voice was strong and powerful in both hymns ("love songs to and from God") and verse. He could move the least pious sinner to tears and professions of faith.

Meager but consistent tithes only just carried them through the lean years. They never had much money, as Grandma worked as a homemaker all her life. She never learned to drive or balance a checkbook. But, growing up, neither did most of the women in her family. She took on leadership in other ways: delegating tasks to the children, deciding on meal plans and which one of Grandpa's many ties spoke to her that day. Replenishing the pantry and mending socks. Hosting church potlucks that went on without a hitch. She didn't regret not working outside the home while raising children; only that there hadn't been, to her eyes, any other feasible option.

Dad and Grandpa had a strained relationship. He questioned deeply the religion—the *only* kind of Christian faith that'd get you into heaven, accordingly—he'd

been brought up in and to which his brothers either adhered strictly or rejected full-stop. Even so, I'd never seen him cry so openly as when Grandpa passed away in a Texan memory care facility. He was buried next to Grandma. I thought I might be buried there, too, if it weren't for moving and marrying elsewhere. Still, there's a chance that could happen, seeing as how all of us who've gone on to other places almost always return to Speltsville, one day or another.

A celebration of life followed shortly after. It brought his family, friends, and congregation to Speltsville again, after many decades and miles apart, as deaths are wont to do. The invitation mentioned a memorial, a graveside service, and a potluck afterward, but the word "funeral" was neither written nor spoken. There were no dirges to be heard. After the burial, we drove to the community senior center decorated in gauzy ribbons and silk flowers. Spread on a long vinyl-clothed table were hamburgers, hotdogs, salads of various kinds, juice boxes, and soda cans by the dozens. Two tables were adjoined nearby; one loaded with sympathy cards and floral arrangements and the other with condiments and disposable dinnerware.

Family near and far gathered to share a commemoration of memories. Good ones, mostly, until later in the evening after the sherry (his favorite) was poured into clear plastic Dollar Store cups. Then, lips loosened. Stories turned from saccharine retellings of childhood adventures, camping trips, and saving up allowance for old-fashioned stamp tickets to Mount Everest at Disneyland, to the longer, more complicated stories woven by an ever-shrinking group of very close friends and immediate family. Tones dropped and voices faded. The mood dampened, and

conversation dwindled. Like most anyone, Grandpa was complex and often contradictory. There were aspects to his person impossible to celebrate.

After some time the meal drew to a close. The men milled around the entrance, waiting as their wives deftly pushed ribbons and silk flowers back into a container, flipping the grey latch down over a navy blue top. They gathered plastic forks and paper plates in black garbage bags, then wiped down and neatly folded the tablecloths. All that could be salvaged would be reused for a birthday party, wedding, or maybe the next death in the family. Mom moved with a purpose, focused on the task at hand, shoving away emotion with rapid blinking and a clearing of her throat. Kids pulled at their parents' sleeves, complaining that they were tired and ready to go. They were gently pushed away and given little boxes of chalk to occupy themselves with.

After the beige community hall was put back together again for the next event (an early morning baptism, I'd heard), and all the hugs and kisses and teary goodbyes, we made our way home. Mom and Dad discussed the old farmhouse. The sale of the property was to be divided between the siblings. A friend's family bought the home. The peeling wallpaper was painted over stark white, shaggy orange carpet ripped out in favor of faux-wood laminate, and vibrant green and gold-flecked vinyl countertops replaced by cool gray granite. The remaining acre parcels were sold off and developed. Fields of alfalfa were burnt and pristinely manicured sod was laid. Houses sit practically on top of one another and an HOA mandates that all be painted shades of beige. No longer do children run about their mother's hips, clambering in and out of branches and weaving through barbed-wire fences, to crawl onto their grandfather's lap at the end of

the day. He'd have sipped tea on the porch and tell his grandchildren grandiose stories about the old farmhouse, backing up to a winding river and sycamore trees. An oasis in barren, tumble-weeded goldrushed land.