Doubtful Daughter: Finding Myself in Memaw's Stories

Jaclyn Kay Jennings
jaclyn.jennings145@topper.wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses

Part of the American Studies Commons, Nonfiction Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses/1605

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses & Specialist Projects by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.
DOUBTFUL DAUGHTER: FINDING MYSELF IN MEMAW’S STORIES

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the English Department
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Jaclyn Kay Jennings

May 2016
Doubtful Daughter: Finding Myself in Memaw's Stories

Date Recommended: April 14, 2016

Dale Rigby, Director of Thesis

Wes Berry

David LeNoir

Dean, Graduate School Date
I dedicate this creative writing thesis to my family because they are my tribe, village, the voices in my head, and the stories beating in my heart. They are my type of crazy.

Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

- Panic Attack.................................................................1
- Memaw’s Baptism.........................................................5
- My Baptism.................................................................13

Part I

- Open Heart..............................................................14
- Memaw’s Front Porch Stories..........................................16
- Meatloaf and Memaw’s Daughter.................................20
- Stories She Told.........................................................22
- Fears: Yours, Mine, Ours...............................................26
- Vincent.................................................................30
- Sarcophagus............................................................32
- Other Stories She Told................................................37
- Another Story.........................................................39

Part II

- Daughters..............................................................44
- Wesley’s Daughter...................................................46
- Memaw’s Daughter...................................................47
- My Mother’s Daughter...............................................48
- Aunt Carolyn as Daughter, Mother, Wife, & Self........50
- Her Sisters’ Daughters & Us.......................................53
- Mothers & Sons.......................................................58
- Alzheimer’s............................................................61
Part III

Easter.................................................................62
Sunny Days and Sight.............................................66
Foundations and Footers.......................................73
The Diabetes.......................................................79
Home’s New Normal.............................................81
Fried Pies and Grandpa..........................................83
Over in the Valley................................................85
Kitchen Knobs.....................................................87
DOUBTFUL DAUGHTER: FINDING MYSELF IN MEMAW’S STORIES

Jaclyn K. Jennings  May 2016  92 Pages

Directed by: Dale Rigby, Wes Berry, and David LeNoir

Department of English  Western Kentucky University

Explore through nonfiction essays the question of who will record my grandmother’s generation’s stories especially the oral stories she always tells. Topics discussed will include but are not limited to: Memaw’s oral stories, familial relationships, small town life, rural-living, hard-work, hardships, upbringings, food, family gatherings, moonshine, life, death, dementia, and Alzheimer’s. In addition to the aforementioned characteristics and specific topics, my relationship as daughter to Mom and granddaughter to Memaw will be examined in comparison with and contrasted to other matriarchal powers in my family.
Introduction

Panic Attack

Why does shy turn into anxious? I realized today, as I ran the last leg of my three and one tenth of a mile course, anxiety has become a big deal for me. We moved this weekend and today was my first run on a new route. Unlike in our old neighborhood where I knew my starts and stops, where the inclines are you might not realize in a car, distances and healthy goals because I had achieved them before, today I had no idea. Perhaps that’s the point and at the same time –my problem.


A month ago, I was hiking with my family in the woods. We were trekking to a falls and because we’d stopped to stare at the sun from a cliff for far too long we were now running the risk of being stuck on the trail after dark. Having not accounted for how dark the dusk would truly be in the vales between the hillsides, we were hot-footing it back out. The feeling of not making it out crept over me as the shadows danced, showing off before their daily demise was complete.

*We’re not going to make it. We’re not going to make it.* Became the mantra ringing silently in my head. Matching the beat of my feet on the trail. Providing the drumroll for the shadows’ escapades.
When you’re having a panic attack, words of encouragement from others do no immediate good. Your conscious is still there, like Jiminy Cricket sitting on your shoulder, agreeing with them, telling you they’re right.

It doesn’t matter if we don’t make it out before dark. We won’t be stuck. We’ll just hike slower, watching our steps, planting firm feet.

I wanted to believe them. I knew they were right. But I couldn’t take control. It was as if my body had a chemical reaction going on. Flowing through my veins was fear I couldn’t stop. My mind was separate from my body’s emotional distress turned physical toil.

I’ve experienced an attack before in a similar situation, although at the time I hadn’t realized what it was. We were riding bikes with his family on an old railroad track transformed into a paved trail for bikers and runners and walkers and strollers. He and I had pedaled ahead. Racing and goofing off. Eventually his long legs took him further and further away from me. I grinned and waved him on, willing to lag behind and enjoy the scenic view. After a bit, I tried to catch up, figuring he’d waited for me just up ahead. He was still nowhere to be seen after I’d hit it hard.

An icky feeling slowly crept in.

Mistakenly, I believed it to be anger. We’d left the others to ride alone together hadn’t we? So why must he run off? Why hasn’t he waited for me? I focused my energy
on my anger. As my steam began to roll off like morning mist from a pond, I began to wonder why the new pain in my belly. It was unlike any anger I’d felt before.

Something was happening in my chest—a tightening! Yes, I’ve heard other people talk about this! Stop. Put feet on the pavement and off the pedals. I’ve never felt this way before. Others experience this uncontrollable feeling. Not me.

Not catching up. The fear of not being able—or capable of! Making it. All the other times I have made it. But this time I can’t. And there is no before this. No moment outside of this one.

***

This time I knew what was going on and only because it reminded me so much of before. And really, both were so similar in situation. On a trail. With other people. Getting left. Behind.

Only other time I have had any sort of episode was different. And it just didn’t feel the same.

I was batting in a high school softball game. Jamie was the runner on second. I fouled off the first pitch. Second was low ball inside. Fouled off the third pitch. And the crowd cheered. Our dugout hollered chants of ‘let’s go J!’ And ‘come-on Jackie-Baby, you got this!’ I stepped out the box and looked down the third base line at coach. As I did, my nerves starting singing and everything went quiet. I could see coach clapping her hands together, tilting her head to the left, and smiling. I stepped back into the box with
my hand held up for time, dug my front foot in and then the back, both hands on the bat, and deep breath.

I fouled off pitch. After pitch. After pitch. Eleven. Eleven strikes and finally a meaty connection which just went singing off my bat and all sound returned. I sprinted down the first base line, rounded second, and slid into third. A triple. Coach Schultz standing in the coach’s box on third base line slaps my helmet as I dust off dirt from my slide. Deep breath. And clapping for my teammate as she steps up to the plate. Clapping and yelling feel amazing as the endorphins run through me. I could jump up and down, if it wouldn’t make me out, my feet leaving the bag. JL hits me home. Cracking the ball over right field’s head.

Next thing I know, warming up with someone as we’re about to take the field, I hold onto the ball. Turning it inside my glove. Feeling the seams in my hand. Lining up my fingers on the threads, I throw it back. Asking her to wait. I start shaking. And crying. Losing it.

Coach Schultz comes out. Says it’s my nerves. Because I haven’t batted much in games since my orbital fracture last year. Seeing pitch after pitch come after you. Psyches only stay geared up for so long.

Want me to pull you out? No. I’m fine.

Out in the outfield, from my defensive position in right field, hot tears stream down my face. Wiping my cheek with the back of my glove hand, I take another deep breath.

Yea.

Alright.

***

Composure. Dignity. Strength. Have I ever lost it before?

The face of keeping it all together. What does it mean when we fail? What does it mean to lose face? What are we all so worried about.
Memaw’s Baptism

I park my deep blue 2000 Honda Civic in the small single file lot between a new four-door Nissan Altima with chrome accents and a rusted blue—or maybe that’s green, Chevy pick-up truck sporting a large dent in the tailgate holding-in the R and O. Asphalt has faded to a gray. Gravel connects the lot to the pale and cracking two-lane road, and both the parking lot and the road could use new stripes. A Dodge caravan and small SUV occupy the spots I pass walking toward the sidewalk. Memaw always calls her sidewalk *the walk*; I recall her voice as she commanded us to stay on the walk because her yard was too muddy for our childhood antics. Aunt Red’s Expedition holds down a final spot in line. All of these cars are strikingly clean and crisp holding sanctuary in the Sunday morning sun. Many county residents drive Nissans, an undoubtable nod to the influence of the Nissan Powertrain Plant built near Decherd in 1997. Nissan added fifteen hundred jobs. Everyone knows someone who works out at the plant. Plenty of our tee-ball team shirts while we were growing up had Nissan listed as a sponsor along with Sun-drop, Pepsi-Cola, Frito-Lay, and Amana. The pollen forming a yellow film on top of my blue car, covering it as a t-shirt all its own with bug splats decorating the windshield, makes my Civic stick out like a sore thumb among the congregants.

I glance back up as a Murano pulls in, crunching over gravel. Unable to identify other familiar vehicles in the inventory of this church’s small lot, my cheeks heat up. I’m here first, beating Rebekah and Mom’s arrival despite the fact I’ve driven two and half hours to get here and they’re thirty minutes away. Running late to church on Sundays seems to be part of our genetic makeup as a household. Growing up at the Old Salem house we would linger over breakfast. Mom set up her ironing board in front of the utility
room using an outlet in the eat-in kitchen. Hissing of steam, jiggling water, spraying starch can, and peeling of sticking clothes off the ironing board’s mat are sounds I often woke to during the week while only witnessing them on Sunday mornings from my seat at the bar’s counter in our kitchen. I turn toward Keith Springs Baptist Church striding by a stone formation standing on guard to my right and hedging my walk along the concrete path. Beneath a huge, beautiful sycamore tree, these stones hold erect a wooden sign with hand-painted black letters spelling out Keith Springs Baptist. The church looks exactly as it always has: stone exterior, matching sign, stained glass windows with blues, greens, reds, and yellows trimmed in white not plated by iron – a telling sign of age. A white steeple decorates the front porch. Neither of the two Baptist churches I’ve been a member of has had steeples adorning their rooftops. Leaves rustle across paved concrete before the porch’s long steps. Following their fluttering journey takes my eyesight up and eastward toward a plot of land lurking beyond the Fellowship Hall just yards away. Dotted with stones gray and white, clean and dirty. This plat of ground marks and makes the only commentary on passing time with old and new headstones. As if, time stands still here. An untouchable mountain in one of Tennessee’s southern-most counties where an automotive industry has passed education as this region’s main draw for people settling in our area. Before education, trains hauling coal, lumber, and granite were kings of this area’s commerce. Even today a quick trip over to “the valley” on a two-lane road will have passengers in cars meeting semi-trucks hauling loads of lumber out. On a tiny mountain road, it’s enough of a meeting to inspire prayer from even the most reluctant saints. May both vessels pass and not fall. Down. The mountain.
“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.”

Pushing the church door open, my stomach flips. Smiling faces confront me. I’m turned around thinking I would be inside a vestibule; I’m surprised to find myself standing in a back hallway, not near sanctuary or front of church. Aunt Carolyn and Mom are holding up one side of the hall’s wall while my twin sister and Aunt Red hold up the other side. Sunday School classes are dismissing as a soft bell I hadn’t noticed from outside the building rings. It has three tones like a doorbell. I am not about to walk into the sanctuary alone, as I had previously believed. Rebekah reaches out to hug me hello and whispers in my ear, do you know why Memaw is doing this? It hadn’t even occurred to me to ask.

“Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow; Praise Him, all creatures here below; Praise Him above, ye heavenly host; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.”

We slowly make our way down the hall, around a corner, and to the vestibule. In front of two wing-backed chairs and a small brown table, the pastor greets Aunt Red, telling her he’s missed seeing her at church. Aunt Carolyn whose bright blue eyes shine against the light blue walls is mistaken for my mom, but neither seems to mind too much as each claim a different church as home. They both have the same skinny frame which I didn’t inherit unfortunately falling more on the George side of my inheritance line than
the Bradford. Mom steps back from the pastor’s handshake and introduces me and Rebekah by saying these are my two girls, the twins. I shake his hand awkwardly as it is at least my third time meeting him.

Slipping into a pew together, the four of us are joined by Aunt Barbara and her two daughters, Ashley and Lindsey. Aunt Barbara waves to someone she knows and I notice a few familiar faces as I look around while standing to greet my aunt and cousins. One woman in particular sticks out to me. She has dark glasses perched on her short pointed nose and stares directly at our family’s exchange, watching. Her curly gray hair is pulled back in a French braid, multiple tones of gray weaving in and out the hold, and ringlets who’ve escaped the binding curve out at her temples a lighter gray than all the rest. Today her dress is a floral pattern, small flowers form a print and lace trims the neckline. White buttons make a center line and march all the way down the dress’s front which stops at her hose-covered ankles. From across the sanctuary her silver sandals look like an orthopedic pair with wide black bottoms.

She sits down in her pew, one back from ours we’re claiming today on the opposite side of the aisle. This is where Memaw always sits and that elderly woman is Memaw’s rival of sorts. I have no idea why or how it all started, but for better or worse their relationship hasn’t changed in seven years. Southern women often operate on a playing field of competition—who makes the best strawberry pie, who helps to cook in the church kitchen most habitually, and who donates their time by making gift bags for the needy children at Christmas. It’s a competition I can’t quite comprehend having been born two generations too late for such contests. I remember last time we all came to church together and formed a community around Memaw. It was Mother’s Day and we
were recognized by the pastor who asked us to stand and be counted. The same little old woman with gray ringlets around her temples stood up to have her family recognized by name and counted too, despite their attendance here every Sunday. Perhaps the woman just needed someone to testify to years lived, lives touched, and generations which will be left in her wake on the little mountain.

*She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness. Her children arise up, and call her blessed.*-Proverbs 31: 27-28.

“*I just don’t know why she acts like that,*” Memaw complained. “*Everyone knows who she is and who her children are. They’re there every Sunday. It’s like she always have to be recognized. Even when she bakes the preacher a pie.*” Memaw and I were having lunch at her house the Wednesday after her baptism. It was my day off from working at Goodman Manufacturing Company, or Amana Heating and Cooling as it had been in prior years. Company’s name change had happened while I was away in college, or maybe it was late in my high school career. I still have a tee ball t-shirt somewhere with Amana written on it. The shirt’s black with District Champs written on it in white. Amana’s logo has white letters trimmed in gold. Normally I don’t get to visit with Memaw so often, but curiosity was drawing me.

“I don’t see how anyone could get along with her,” Memaw finished.

*Jesus loves me, this I know; For the Bible tells me so; Little ones to Him belong; They are weak, but He is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so.*
The wall behind pastor’s pulpit was built using wide brick which had been painted beige. Breaking pulpit platform from choir loft stood a wooden wall. Its height hit about mid-thigh of congregants singing in the loft’s front row. Sinners dressed in their Sunday best ranging from modest dresses paired with pearls to clean denim over-alls covering gluttonous bellies. The preacher sang from a wood chair resembling a primitive throne with burgundy cushion. In ancient Roman times, only royalty were allowed to use the purple-pink or burgundy marble from Egypt. These cushions reminded me of such a color as pastor sat tapping his foot to the piano’s beat. He wore dress slacks, with a matching jacket, dull-colored tie, and white button-up with a collar. This throne of the gray-haired, gently-wrinkled, and foot-stomping preacher clashed nicely with the deep blue durable carpet covering the pulpit’s floor, cascading down the three short steps of the altar and dripping back through the center aisle as if it were a tide on the shoreline rising toward sinners’ feet, dangling from pews. A rise and fall to wade and struggle through on their way to the altar. Each step made heavier.


*Victory in Jesus, my Savior forever; He sought me, and bought me, with his redeeming love; He loved me ’err I knew Him, and all my love is due Him; He plunged me, to Victory, beneath the cleansing flood.*

Memaw why are you getting baptized if you are already a believer? I am twenty-six years old, but sound like a child even to my own ears. What is she seeking?
Attention? Forgiveness? Peace of mind? I don’t understand her doubt. It seems familiar and sounds foreign all at the same time.

Her doubt makes me angry.

And my inability to ask her any of these questions directly infuriates me, too.

I squeeze Hunt’s ketchup onto Memaw’s meatloaf she’s served me for lunch. Mashed potatoes with gravy, corn-on-the-cob, sliced tomatoes and cucumbers garnish the rest of my Styrofoam plate. I was coming here today to get answers; instead I’m swigging sweet tea from a red Solo cup. Ice cubes clink and sweetiness sloshes.

*Shall we gather at the river; the beautiful, the beautiful river; Gather with the saints at the river; That flows by the throne of God.*

The preacher appeared behind the choir loft and stepped into the baptistery. My Memaw followed after him. Seventy-eight years old this past winter, her baptism spoke more of death than rebirth. I watch her slow, steady descent into baptismal waters. The white of their robes, hers and pastor’s, match silver in her short-bobbed hair. Lights from above the pool shine down, glistening off pastor’s forehead. Like the dove descending down brightly through slants of sunlight. Over the Jordan.

*He leadeth me, O blessed thought! O words with heav’nly comfort fraught! Whate’er I do, where’er I be. Still ’tis God’s hand that leadeth me.*

“That man who baptized me was a crook,” Memaw said. “He gambled and drank and gambled some more. Now you tell me how that baptism can be any good with the likes of him doing it?” Memaw answered referring to the first pastor who
baptized her years ago. I’d asked why she felt the need to be re-baptized at almost eighty years old. After raising five children, surviving her husband by nineteen years now, and having been baptized once in adulthood already.

*This world is not my home; I’m just a passin’ through; My treasures are laid up, somewhere beyond the blue; Angels beckon me, from Heaven’s open door; And I can’t feel at home in this world anymore.*

She was born Pauline Myrtle Fanning to William Thomas and Biegie Sanders Fanning in Paint Rock Valley, Alabama on a cold winter Saturday in January 1934. One of her earliest memories is her uncle being hauled off to jail for making moonshine. She “couldn’t’ve been more than six or seven” years old at the time. Her first-born, Barbara Ann Bradford, was also born on a cold Saturday, but in spring.

“Pauline Bradford, upon profession of your faith, I baptize you, my sister, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”

She held her nose as he dipped her back into the pool. Then she rose up. Soaked. Forgiven. Clean.

Cleansed toward forgiveness she doesn’t extend. And grace she has not earn.

*Amazing grace, How sweet the sound; That saved a wrench like me; I once was lost, but now I’m found; Was blind, but now I see.*
My Baptism

I’m dipped under the blue. It’s cold and water burns as it gets up my nose. My tears from the burning mix with the baptismal pool waters. I come up blinking, shaking. The first face I see is my sister’s. My twin. Rebekah Lynn. And she’s dripping and shaking, too.
Part I

Open Heart

As I park under Centennial Hospital in a dimly lit garage with hidden corridors glowing yellow, I wonder what had possessed me to volunteer to stay all night with Memaw under such extreme conditions. She’s having open-heart surgery tomorrow.

Calm down, I tell myself as I step into an elevator and press a greasy second floor button. You will not be by yourself when her surgery is going on, Aunt Barb’ll be here for that. I tap my index finger and thumb together as a greasy film makes my skin mat together. Pinch. Stick. Pull. Peel. Pinch. Stick. Pull. Peel. Who knows, maybe someone else will be here, too. It’d be better to have someone else here because Aunt Barbara will be stressed out. Ding! Elevator’s bell announces I’ve arrived at my floor.

I exit the elevator and make my way down one hall and then another, using numbers posted in white on blue backgrounds. I walk by a nurses’ station and can’t believe this hospital’s elevators open straight onto floors with patients. No security. Doesn’t seem safe. What kind of set up is this? I come to a single hallway which ends with a window. By looking ahead of my feet and walking quickly, I avoid the temptation to look through open doors into strangers’ rooms. I can see reflections from TV screens flickering on the highly glossed floor near thresholds of individual rooms. Room 239, laughter. Room 237, crack of a baseball bat and the crowd cheers. Room 235. This is it.

As I walk into Memaw’s hospital room, the first person I see is Aunt Red, who’s dressed in a yellow mustard sweater and black pants. She has her traditional big jewelry on in silver, and dark brown Timberlands with black bottoms adorn her feet. Next I see
my mom. Hugging them both I wonder if I should have hugged Mom first. And then Aunt Red? How’d it make Mom feel when I hugged Aunt Red first? I mean, Aunt Red was closer to me and the door when I walked in so I just went in order. Right? Surely Mom doesn’t care either way watching me hug her older, red-headed sister.

“Your sweater is cute! I love that color, mustard! Not too yellowy. Great for fall!” I say to Aunt Red.

“You like that? I have to be careful with yellows!” she says with a big, standard Aunt Red grin.

“How are you, Mom?”

“Fine. How are you, Jaclyn?”

“Good. Good. Just fine.” I love how she says my name. Don’t know if it’s because I’m a twin or because I’m one of her three children, but hearing my name individually always makes me feel cared for. Like she’s genuinely interested in my well-being and me as a person.

A door behind us opens with a low whine as Aunt Carolyn comes out of the room’s bathroom with Memaw, who’s dressed in her pajamas and hooked up to a steel pole on wheels. IV, maybe?

“Hey girl!”

“Hey, Aunt Carolyn,” I answered, hugging her. “Hey, Memaw.”

“Oh hey, Jaclyn. How you?” she answers in her gruff, tired voice.
Memaw’s Front Porch Stories

We often sat on her long front porch together. Memaw’d stroke her orange tabby cat on her lap as he sat perched there. He’d purr from his posture of leisure. Wasps hummed foreboding overhead. The corner of her porch’s roof whined, moaned, and creaked from the strain of weight with her swaying on the swing. Those wooden, painted planks of the swing itself creaked as Memaw went back and forth, back and forth. She leaned forward, then leaned back, then forward again, and chains sang as they continued running to ceiling rafters above our heads. It creaked as she went back and forth, back and forth. Her feet never totally touched the porch’s floorboards beneath her. My grandmother was short even before she started shrinking. Memaw used her toes to rock. I would sit on her love seat sized glider feeling its cool metal beneath my shorts. So many times my cousins and I sat here waiting for our next turn to swing with Memaw. I always think of family barbeques when I sit on here on her front porch. I see Uncle Bobby standing over a charcoal grill with smoke billowing up, flames flickering. I hear hamburger meat sizzling. Its smell wafts up following gray smoke in a soft breeze gusting my direction making my mouth water and my eyes burn. Wasps keep humming overhead.

“My parents were not good to me. They kept things for themselves. I made sure never to ask them for things and that my children never asked for nothing. I remember one time when Momma walked Brenda home and we stood out there on that front porch and she told me I should not let my children stay gone at dinner time. Really, the problem was she didn’t want to have to feed Brenda her supper.”
“It was crazy. For my own Momma to be standing there saying that! Do you know when Barbara was real bad sick they brought food out here? Because doc said she needed to be eatin’ more better nutrition. They brought fruit and bread and meat – the bananas were like you ain’t never seen! Oh, you should have seen those bananas! I’ve never seen so many yellow bananas.

“And all I could do that one day with Momma and Brenda out on that there porch out there was stand on that porch and tell Momma how it ain’t right of her and Daddy to do! Have favorites like that! I knew Barbara’d stayed down their house for supper ‘fore. And I didn’t want Momma thinking I was sending my kids there for supper. But Brenda knew Barbara’d stayed for supper with ‘em. It ain’t right. Just ain’t right to do that’ll way.

“You know, if my parents had just set aside a little bit of money and paid for my eye surgery I would have been able to see just like anybody else. And Momma and Daddy didn’t have money, but we had enough. They could have put back and I would’ve been able to do all the normal things.

“Do you know I’ve never had a license? I’m seventy-nine years old and never had a license. Never driven either. Don’t know how to shift gears. But I guess that wouldn’t be a problem now, would it? You see, I’m legally blind even though I can see just fine. I can see forward –always been able to see forward, but my peripheral isn’t as good as everybody else’s. And now that’s why I don’t like it when people come up to my side because I can’t see ‘em. I have to turn my head and face them to see them.”
Open Heart

I’m lying here amazed at the life lived. In a hospital. At 12:42 am. It’s considerably quiet compared to earlier today. Thinking of my bed at home, I roll over fidgeting and trying to convince myself I’m comfortable on this make-shift bed. It’s cold against my skin. And feels like plastic. A chair and ottoman who masquerade together at night as a pullout bed for one special overnight guest. One guest is the hospital’s limit after visiting hours.

A pair of squeaky shoes step by our door every now and again. I listen. A door shuts down hall. Silence after. I turn and look out a window behind me. Its view opens to a plaza with green plants. Candescent lights along sidewalks burn. Rising above this plaza, a glass dome shows the sky. Stars twinkle. I’m a little astonished I can see any this close to downtown Nashville. But I can. And no sky scrapers are in my sightline from this vantage point.

I jump! Startled as a voice cries out from the other side of darkness. Memaw’s figure stirs in her hospital bed. Her little head lifts up and I can tell she’s looking for me in the abyss surrounding us. A bathroom light may be on, but it doesn’t aide her search. Memaw can’t see three feet in front of her without her glasses and I left those on her nightstand. Out of reach. She lies back down on a stiff hospital bed. And sighs.

Guilt washes over me. I should have asked her if she needed anything, but what if she hadn’t really woken up all the way. A large part of me doesn’t want to help her. She’s been so needy lately. And I wonder if she even realizes how much other people have sacrificed for her. And continue to sacrifice. I’m not doing this for her. Not after the way
she’s been acting. And the way she takes advantage of them – just letting them do what she could do herself. I’m doing this for them. For the sisters, her daughters. For the Bradford girls. No, for her. I’m doing this for my mom.

Mom told me to let Memaw do what she can by herself. If she truly needs help, she’ll ask. This actually calmed my nerves about staying all night. In this hospital. By myself. With her. I justify not comforting Memaw by remembering Mom’s instructions. I’m doing this for Mom, for her peace of mind. This is her mom after all. I can’t imagine what it’s like for Memaw to be someone’s mom. There’s no way my Mom could love this dramatic, overbearing, complaining woman as I love her, is there? No way. They’re too different. My mom isn’t selfish. Their relationship isn’t the same as ours. Mom and I have a way better relationship than my mom has with Memaw. Right?
Meatloaf and Memaw’s Daughter

Drew’s last meal would be chicken casserole the way his mom makes it. Rebecca Ann. My last meal would be my mom’s tomato-based vegetable soup. Beverly Louise. A recipe I simply can’t master or duplicate well enough to taste like hers. My mom’s favorite meal is meatloaf. Pauline Myrtle.

“But not any meatloaf –Mom’s meatloaf.”

Nothing extraordinary happened; it was a Wednesday so I was off from my job at Goodman Manufacturing. Mom was working at Huntland’s post office so we both went to Memaw’s house over on Neal Street for lunch.

I learned two very important lessons that day. My mom’s favorite meal –which I have no chance of ever making for her- is her mom’s meatloaf. Pauline Myrtle Fanning Bradford. And my mom is a good daughter to her mother. She loves her.

Memaw is hard to love. She bristles easily and rarely extends grace to others, making it doubly hard to extend grace to her.

“She is who she is,” my mom said to me about Memaw once. “At some point I have to stop being responsible for her and realize I am only responsible for me.”

I have tried numerous times to duplicate my mom’s vegetable soup, but no matter how closely I follow her instructions my soup doesn’t taste the same. I won’t ever be able to love my grandmother as well as a daughter does. I guess that makes three lessons.
Open Heart

You three can talk to her. Will she remember this? I don’t know, probably not. But you three can talk to her. She’s awake. That’s when I realized this room wasn’t for Memaw. It was for us. The family. Each family. Every family. This is where we say our last goodbyes. Just in case. Just in case she doesn’t make it out. And that’s when I realized for the first time that there really was a chance Memaw might not make it out of surgery. I looked at Aunt Barb and Ashley. I envied how they could talk to Memaw. I couldn’t. She didn’t seem all there. She was talking about random things. Aunt Barb was answering her questions and then going on with other topics. Ash just asked Memaw how she felt. I couldn’t think of anything to say. Not with two Knoers listening. It’s been so long since I’ve had to have a conversation with Memaw that other people are privy to. I’d much rather be sitting on her front porch talking. Alone. Just me and her.
Memaw could go on and on about people, things, places from another time. A truck passes down the empty road in front of us. I can smell the honeysuckle growing along the side of the house as a breeze lifts its smell. A woodpecker knocks on the ugly ant tree we were always too scared to touch much less make base for hide-and-seek games. A limb bumps up against the roof of the porch overhead as she squeaks back and forth in that old black swing.

“Wesley was a good husband, but he had this one sister I’ll never forget it. She’d sleep around with whomever! It’s a wonder she didn’t come up with some sort of disease. Even slept with a married man for a while. And do you know that same married man he came over here?! He knocked on that door and I knew who he was and he said Inez had sent him over here to my house so here he was. I told him there wasn’t nothin’ here for him. He said it’d be alright and Wesley wouldn’t be home for a while and nobody’d have to know. But I’d know! And I told him it wasn’t right and he best be gettin’ on down the road. I’m not like my husband’s sister.”

“I began to realize what I had married into. His momma’s house was never clean. Whew. I used to line my kids up –and I wouldn’t let ‘em sit on their couch when we went over there either because you just don’t know what kind of critters could be livin’ inside ‘a there! Straight back chairs. I had ‘em sit in straight-back chairs, if there were any. At least that way if a bug is crawling up its leg you’re goin’ be a’ble to see it in a straight back!”
“He never offered to help. I was in our kitchen slaving over fried chicken and there was no reason for us to have company that day, not as pregnant as I was. I had no business being in a kitchen up on my feet! We’d already been to morning service and pastor and his wife were there for lunch. My water broke while I was standing at the stove. I’ll never forget how embarrassed I was! And your grandfather never offered to help get all our kids settle or anything. Pastor up and offered to drive us to hospital and his wife said she’d stay with the kids. I don’t know what I’d have done if they hadn’t been there that day.”

“I can remember when we were up North and Wesley was working up there. We’d moved up there for more work, see? There wasn’t as much to be had down here. And it was more money there. It was cold. So cold. But main reason we went up there is ‘cause Barbara had to have surgery, you know. Wesley couldn’t make enough down here so we moved and went and he found a job up there. She had to have braces on her legs for a while. After her surgery. Her and Brenda can’t remember much about it because they were too little and your momma was just baby.”
Open Heart

I looked at Aunt Barbara. She was going to have a hard time leaving this room. I wouldn’t even call it a room. A curtained section of space and floor. What if Aunt Barbara is the only one here? Memaw’s only child here to say goodbye. What if her other children have made a mistake by not being here today? At this moment. Of course we are keeping them informed as the day goes on, time ticks and surgery happens. But, she’s still the only child here. How will that make her feel if this is the end? Will she have any regrets? Will her siblings? I venture to guess Aunt Barbara won’t have regrets. She’s here. And she’s been through so much already. Her youngest daughter having a cancer scare in 8th grade. Her mother-in-law passing away. Apparently, Aunt Barb’d felt like something wasn’t quite all right there, but she’d been unable to convince any of the family of it.

“She won’t remember any of this probably Mom,” my cousin Ashley said to Aunt Barbara.

We were standing in a small space with a hospital bed, a curtain, and all kinds of machines which were hooked up to my grandmother. The nurses’ station was right outside on other side of that thin curtain and it all felt like an emergency room to me. But it wasn’t, it was a holding cell of sorts. Memaw had been prepped for surgery, and was just waiting on surgical nurses to wheel her in. To surgery.

I could tell my aunt was nervous as she talked to her mom about whatever she wanted to talk about. Memaw led their conversation. Tabby Cat came up. Aunt Barb reminded Memaw who was in charge of feeding her cat while she’s away from home.
Memaw was quiet and looked around this small space at our faces. The three of us. Ashley asked Memaw again about how she was feeling. Memaw complained about how dry her mouth was and Ash said perhaps Memaw could get a swab but that she couldn’t have any water before surgery. Ashley’s bedside manner was good as she’s fresh out of nursing school and has always sought to make others comfortable. Your stomach has to be empty for surgery Mom, Aunt Barbara said. I thought about how many times she’d already asked for water this morning, if everything after midnight counts as morning it’d been a lot. What kind of hell had she slipped into? Just a drink of water would be something out of paradise. For the first time, I hoped Ashley was right and Memaw wouldn’t remember any of this. I fear becoming old where something as simple as a drink of water is outside my realm of control.
Fears: Yours, Mine, Ours

Walk out and check the mail. Feed the cat. Fix lunch. I knew there were days when her phone never rang, she never talked to another person or saw another human. I could see her there on that pink sofa watching Judge Judy at 5 o’clock and the 6 o’clock news afterwards. Letting the cat in for his supper. Putting it back out for night time escapades under the full moon.

We went inside and I sat down on her pink sofa which felt fuzzy, soft, and comfy against the back of my thigh exposed beneath my summer sundress while Memaw straightened her newspapers stacked neatly on the other end of her couch. My mom had a blue couch like this, very eighties in style. As Memaw sits down, the grandfather clock chimes from its corner. Oh how much trouble we used to get into for making that thing ding when it wasn’t supposed to! We were either jumping in this living room, or shutting the large wooden heavy front door too hard – no we were slamming it! “Quit slamming that door!” Memaw’d call from the kitchen. Or we were just walking across this old house’s uneven floor too hard. Geez! That grandfather clock is still dictating time as the ultimate authority standing, counting in its corner.

My mom recently told me a story about her sitting in this very living room rocking back and forth, back and forth. “Mom would call out from the kitchen, ‘Are you rocking in there?’ No I’d say and just keep rocking away. Here she’d come. Step. Step. Step. Step. Step. Whack! ‘Quit that rocking, I said!’

Memaw sat down in her gliding chair in the corner, the rocker she called it, and spoke of a time I can barely picture, a totally different world with this house in smaller
form, no bathroom, and an outhouse accompanying it instead. This small house was full to the brim with five children and her husband taking up any free space. My mom spoke of being scared outside at night only here. At this house, the one she grew up in – her childhood home. She would never go out to that outhouse at night; often she waited until morning and simply tried not to wet the bed she shared with her younger sister, Carolyn Jean.

Memaw never spoke of her fears. She simply complained. Complained about a house too full then and too quiet now. Complained about children going and coming, even that remained the same.

“I can’t believe Brenda didn’t offer to take me to the grocery store when she talked ‘bout going herself,” Memaw said. “I’ll have to ask Barbara if she can take me I guess.”

I wonder how my grandmother would have done with more freedom, or less. Did she have freedom? I’m not sure.

At one point in her life my grandfather, Papa Wesley, was a type of bondage to her. She hated having to drop everything or anything to please him on his lunch break. He walked home from the sawmill smelling like wood and sweat. I don’t know what kind of meal my grandfather had for lunch, knowing my grandmother hated his lunch breaks. I envision cold cuts and room temperature cheese, not oysters and chocolate covered strawberries.

But Memaw always had a large glass of sweet tea waiting on the porch for him after work each day. Every afternoon, she’d place it there beside his rocker and ash tray.
As a sort of peace offering or perhaps a truce. Papa had a break at three-thirty before going to cut yards for extra cash or mowing the Presbyterian’s large lot for free before supper at six. My mom says she’s not sure how long Papa did that for; she’d have to ask Memaw. Rayburn, my stepdad, took over when Papa passed.

I can picture Memaw opening the front screen door; hear the long creaking whine of its spring, followed by its slapping too! As she let it close on its own. Memaw would stand there for a moment on their threshold watching our antics to be sure we weren’t up to no good. My cousins, sister, and I’d be playing in the yard out front after getting off the big, yellow school bus and throwing our backpacks down on her porch –never even making it inside. Memaw’d take two, three steps, sauntering with toes pointed outward only slightly then compared to her open-toed hobble now. I can see the back of her frame, small and hunched over a bit silhouetted in the door as she disappeared back inside. SLAP! Goes the screen door. Closed.

I wonder what Memaw’d say now, if she’d take Papa back after having had him taken away from her so unexpectedly. And sudden.

Aunt Barb and Uncle Bobby were the ones who came over that night. Did dinner linger in the air? Or did dish soap cling as Memaw was in her kitchen washing supper’s dishes. As she heard Papa thump to the floor from his favorite chair, did she call out his name “—Wesley?” Did she dry her hands as she walked through the house toward their living room out at front of their house? Or did she take her towel with her? Drying her hands as she went. Did Memaw run or walk? Why was Barbara the first child she called?
Sure, Aunt Barb was closest. Did Memaw call 911 before or after Aunt Barb and Uncle
Bobby’s arrival? How was Memaw acting when Uncle Bobby and Aunt Barb arrived? I can’t imagine how dramatic Pauline Bradford must have been in a situation which actually called for drama. Was she fearful then? *Oh, God!* I can hear her say.
As we sit here, the three of us waiting for updates from the nurse in surgery, I listen to Aunt Barbara and Ashley talk. They seem to be so good at communicating. I try to decide if Mom and I are that good at talking. I can remember Aunt Barb giving me, or maybe us, I don’t really remember what the situation was now, but saying you can’t ever know what goes on in another house under that roof when the doors are closed and the blinds are pulled tight. That’s a good way of putting it.

I’m sure Ashley doesn’t tell her mom everything, they don’t seem to be that open. And how could she? Her mom’s a perfectionist, type-A personality. Which isn’t bad, but Ash is the exact same way.

And they’re both like Memaw. You just can’t tell them that. Mom says that’s why Memaw and Aunt Barb butt heads so bad. And it’s probably part of why Aunt Barb was always Papa’s favorite. I’d been under the impression parents and grandparents don’t have favorites.
You should’ve heard what Grandma told Mom when she found out Vincent and I were getting married,” said Stephanie, my cousin and Aunt Red’s only daughter.

Steph joined the Navy without telling her mom. On her eighteenth birthday. Just went and signed up. It was Aunt Red and Memaw that went to see her graduate from basic after boot camp. And on her first ship assignment, she met Vincent. His family is Vietnamese. He has eleven siblings. It’s rare we Bradfords find a clan larger than ours. And it impresses us. Not every family is as close as ours is with the extended family and all. Only recently has the youngest generation realized this.

“She says the most embarrassing things when we are out shopping. I just have to remember I’m not responsible. I’ve learned to remember that I’m not responsible for what other people say. Even with the boys. Especially with Rayburn. Rayburn more so than Nathan. It’s embarrassing, but I can only control myself,” explained my mom.

“Oh, she knows not to say that stuff when we are out together. I won’t tolerate it,” Aunt Red said matter-of-factly.

“What she said to that nurse was embarrassing,” Ashley replied.

“The way she looked at the nurse was embarrassing. I know she noticed it. That nurse was just too polite to say anything,” Lindsey stated.

I tried to ask what’d been said to this nurse, but the only information anyone at that hospital cafeteria table was willing to provide was simply that the nurse was African
American. Black. I can only imagine how Pauline Bradford acted to horrify so many of this female clan.

“Well, but you’ve got to remember the time Mom was raised in. It was a lot different. Things were a lot different. Everything was. And she’s probably not the first elderly person to treat that nurse bad like that,” replied Mom.

Honestly, I think my mom really wanted us to think about that. The history. Not justifying it. Memaw’s behavior didn’t deserve justification. Realizing there’s a history we’d like to forget is at work here. And it’s a culture hard for my generation—maybe even Mom and my aunts’ generation to understand. We didn’t live it. Memaw did. How could we understand her?

“Yea,” replied Aunt Barbara in whole-hearted agreement but too exhausted to add comments really. “Things were different then.” Aunt Barb’s going through a lot right now. Lost her mother-in-law this past year. Her father-in-law is barely hanging on. But it’s got to be hard, being strong for your spouse in such straits. I think Aunt Barb was really able to lean on her in-laws when her father died unexpectedly of a heart attack. I imagine her being strong for Uncle Bobby as he lost his mom. Mrs. Elsie. Strong for him to lean on her, while she’s grieving the loss of a beloved mother-in-law at exact same time. Aunt Barb and Uncle Bobby were the first kids of Memaw’s who’d stood up to say, you can’t have every holiday, Mom. We have to visit with Bobby’s family too. I’m sorry if you don’t think that’s right. But the world doesn’t work the way you think it does just because you think that way.
I don’t remember how I came to be lumped into that class my senior year or what requirement I was trying to fulfill, but I found myself without my normal crowd. It took a while to realize I was among friends. About the time I realized that, Jermaine removed my security blanket by seizing a moment to utter six words that struck terror in my heart: I know someone who likes you, Jaclyn.

As the year progressed and we moved from cutting out construction paper shapes to collages made from magazine clips somehow relating to our identity, it became an inside joke between Jermaine and myself. One day I made the disastrous decision of saying what I had been thinking, Jermaine if you like me why don’t you go ahead and tell me? He countered. And this became our new game.

If your dad wouldn’t shoot me, would you consider going out with me? If your mom did not disapprove, would we go to the movies? If I wasn’t black, could you like me then? More often than not, I was no longer white when he asked me such pointed questions. Instead I magically became a chameleon, blending into my embarrassment with a lovely hue of red coloring my cheeks.

We sat there with sticky fingers; peeling glue off our hands. You’d never know we were in high school instead of grade school. Oh, the small miracle of fingerprints in glue! And as we peeled the glue off, our glue skin was the same. We were the same, made the same, no longer separated by our skin color. No longer were we decaying to the social norms and rural expectations of our hometown, not surrendering, just being.
I slowly became infuriated that Jermaine thought that little of me. What if I didn’t choose him because he wasn’t an A student or because he wasn’t a stand-out athlete? Or maybe my problem was that he is not goody-do-gooer enough, and not bad-boy enough to be appealing either. Why did my issue have to be his skin? Why’d he think that? Do I not have my own mind? Could it be true? Why does he like me if it’s true? Can’t I choose without my parents’ approval or disapproval in mind?

As winter came to a close and spring began to peak out from the weeds and into the four large windows of the art classroom, we transitioned from painting with water colors to molding clay Egyptian coffins. I finally had grown weary of my constant battle with Jermaine doubting if there truly was an individual interested in me any longer. One day after learning of my friend’s absence I slipped out of my senior art class not quite sure where I was headed. The old high school hallway was deserted not unlike an Egyptian tomb. I began thinking about my coffin lying next to Jermaine’s. It was obvious who had the true talent as intricate details had been etched in his which was now awaiting color as mine remained bare unsure of true design. I found myself at the end of the dimly lit hallway studying the former graduating class pictures and picking out my mom and dad from the class of 1982. Suddenly, the end door directly to my right opened and sunlight streamed in. Jermaine appeared with the light slanting around him. His snow white smile crept across his face and into his eyes as a friend stepped into the hallway behind him.

Jaclyn, Jermaine started nervously, I’d like for you to meet my friend, Allen. Was it me or did all the air leave the hallway and my lungs? Was this his out? Is there ever an easy out?
* * *

Jaclyn, did you hear me? Brittany burst my reminiscent bubble as I flashed forward to the present college classroom and her terrifyingly similar six word phrase of: Jaclyn, I know someone who likes you.

He is a really nice guy Brittany began, starting what I knew would be a continuing, gushing conversation for the remainder of our semester and perhaps every encounter she and I would ever have again. Pretty soon the ‘ifs’ would start and they would sound nothing like if I had a mind of my own, if I was motivated enough, if I could actually form my own opinion, if I wasn’t too dumb to miss an opportunity, or if I could choose for myself with no one else’s limitations in mind and without Brittany’s expectations of the perfect match. I envied her freedom in the situation. She could sit on the outside, knowing both parties and decide in a very nonpartisan way that the match was indeed a good fit.

From water colors, glue skin, high school hallways, and clay Egyptian coffins to the present college classroom which is my current sarcophagus against personal convictions, expectations, or my own mind.
Open Heart

At Centennial Hospital, everyone in our family seemed to be filling their normal familial roles. Uncle Danny was complaining about not even knowing which hospital Memaw was in or that her surgery was today. But he couldn’t have come all this way to her hospital in Nashville anyways. His wife, Dorinda, has to work and she can’t drive at night. Aunt Barbara did not want to be in middle of a confrontation but wanted to be sure someone was talking to Danny and keeping him updated. Denial. Best ways to camouflage anger or think you’re hiding it and your actions aren’t giving you away. She was working on school stuff this whole time as much as she could. Aunt Red began handling things with Uncle Danny. Smoothing them over. Fun job making sure no one’s left out. Mom was observing everything from a distance and also resolving conflicts where she could before they arose. Her distance physically gave her an advantage in interpreting events. With all the changes coming down the pike internally for the United States Postal Service right now, Mom can’t take a day off for anything or she will be written up. Aunt Carolyn could not get off from her job as assistant teacher in a special needs class room in a city school. She called often not knowing what all was going on, but volunteering to help if she would be of any help. She’s never quite sure if she’d be helping, but she’d like to try. Aunt Carolyn’s fond of saying, you know me I just want to help.

It’d been hours since Memaw’s open-heart surgery began. We all sat together in the hospital cafeteria waiting for Memaw to wake in post-op from being put under. They’d assign her a room when she woke and we’d be able to see her before leaving the hospital. A few snack stashes from our homes sat on our table spread out before us. A
hodge-podge of yogurt, fruit, and snack machine items mixed with the stash we’d shared all day. Chex Mix. Cheese-Its. Fruit Snacks.

“I can remember once when we took all our money and put it together,” Aunt Red began, “Mom told us we better not get any candy with it, and what do you think we did? We put all our money together and bought candy with it. We were going to take it all home and stash the candy under our beds, but of course our chocolate started melting so we had to eat it all. All that candy on our walk home. I didn’t want candy for a long time after that.”

“I used to run away from home,” said Aunt Carolyn.

“I remember that,” agreed her sister Beverly, my mom.

“Mom would have to put my dress under the foot post of their bed so I wouldn’t run away, and do you know what I did?”
“Oh, let me tell it!” Memaw interrupted walking in from her kitchen. Here she goes! It’s storytelling time. “I went in there into that there bedroom and found her
dress on my floor, still around and underneath that bed post at the foot of our bed.
She’d gotten out of it somehow. And would you know it? She’d run off again down the
road! I couldn’t keep that child home.”

“Yep, I was down the road, but I hadn’t run far. I’d run away to grandmother and
grandpa’s house, stark-naked!

Most every one of us had already heard the story or another one about Memaw’s
wild child Carolyn Jean. But we listened to Memaw as she told it again that
Thanksgiving. And without missing a beat, she hopped into another one of her favorite
stories. Needing no transition to tell one of her favorites

“I was only ninety-five pounds the day I married Wesley! You wouldn’t know it
to look at me, would you? Only ninety-five pounds and that was with my shoes on.”
Her weight fluctuates a little with every telling of the story. Sometimes she’s only ninety-
three pounds soaking wet.
Open Heart

“We used to play in Ms. Delilah’s yard. Remember that big tree?” Beverly asked her three sisters at that cafeteria table in Centennial Hospital. The Bradford girls kept strolling down memory lane.

“We would play pageant and wedding. We were always making up games and playing outside.”

“As if we had a choice!” Aunt Red replied.

“Yea, mom used to lock us out,” remarked Aunt Barb as she chuckled.

“What if y’all had to go to the bathroom?” Rebekah asked.

“Are you kidding?” answered Mom without missing a beat. “We’d go outside.”

“Were you allowed to play in the garden?” Lindsey, Ashley’s younger sister, asked. We four cousins grinned at each other because we were not allowed to play in Memaw’s garden. But oh, how we loved to run through those rows of corn. Green stalks would whip across my face, cutting my cheeks and making them burn as I raced through and ducked down to the other side of Ronnie Fanning’s yard. The neighbor. A cousin of Memaw’s. His yard was off limits and out of sight from Memaw’s kitchen window.

“They didn’t always have a big garden. Not while we were all still at home. I can remember every spring Dad would call. He’d always ask Bobby to come over and help him put out the garden,” Aunt Barbara answered her younger daughter, Lindsey.
Another Story

“Yea, Barbara and Bobby were always so good about coming over and helping us plant all them seeds and helping Wesley till up the soil.” Memaw was talking in that loud voice of hers. The one that reaches up and over everyone else’s to be sure it’s heard. To be sure it’s recognized. No one tried to talk over this voice. Authority. That’s what it sounded like. But it wasn’t. It was attention sapping and heart draining. It’d seek you out when you are low and make you give in, usually to something you weren’t sure you agreed with. Respect. That’s only reason why no one talked back to her.

But we were all thinking and disagreeing with what she was saying and where she was standing so firmly planted on the issue at hand. As if she was the ultimate authority. She was one of those people who always had to have the last word. And she enjoyed having it. She’d look around with that one hawk eye, squinting –just waiting for some poor, smart-sucker to try and stand up to her. I wonder if we’d done her an injustice. If we’d stood up sooner or more often or just more would she be better behaved today. Did we make our own beds with her? Or is it really just a part of getting old. Getting older. Elderly.
"Nathan and I got a spanking with the fly swat one time when she thought we’d been playing in her garden. There’d been a footprint in the dirt. Memaw checked our feet to see if they were dirty and of course they were. We’d been playing outside barefooted all day,” Lindsey went on as we all sat around our cafeteria table in Memaw’s hospital.

“I remember grapes on the vine. We used to love spreading out our little blankets under that vine and the tree next to it,” I said.

“That was an apple tree,” Mom interjected.

“We would always dare each other to go around and pick grapes on the other side because we weren’t supposed to be on that side, remember?” Rebekah asked Ash, Linds, and me. “There was an old well near there between the house and their old shed.”

“Memaw was afraid,” Ash commented, “that we’d fall down into it.”

“She had us terrified of falling into that well or at least Nate and I were because we were little, younger than all y’all. I was scared!” cried Linds. Lindsey enjoyed using the phrase we were little either as an excuse for reckless behavior or because she’d always been bigger than her older sister who has a petite frame. Lindsey is a perfect hour glass. Her last boyfriend was Polish. When she’d brought him over to meet Memaw at her house on Neal Street, Memaw’d called him a Polack. Lindsey didn’t know what it meant until after they left. Aunt Barb’d called Memaw to straighten it all out. But Jacob never went back to Memaw’s house again. Not even for Christmas.
Aunt Red’s cell phone started ringing. “Bet that’s them,” she said as she answered. “Okay great, thanks. They’ve got her set up in a room.”

We all stood up to go together.
Open Heart

Walking into that room I was stunned. Memaw looked so small. So tiny. She looked absolutely teeny-tiny. I guess this bed was a lot higher. And, maybe longer? Definitely higher. So many more machines than before. The nurse was explaining to us what all they were doing and keeping track of, but I zoned out. Ashley was listening intently. She should know what’s going on. And I knew she’ll understand it better than I ever could. I wondered then what this nurse’s life is like, what family she has and how did she decide to become a nurse. I’m sure she meets all kinds of different people. In here. On this job. Many people probably don’t understand what’s going on or have to have it explained more than once.

I should be listening. We’ve all eared higher educations here, just not in medicine. But there’s no way for this nurse to know that.

“When my mom had open-heart surgery, she was out watering all her plants three months later.”

“Really? Three months later?” Aunt Carolyn asked surprised.

“Yea, I mean she wasn’t mowing their yard or anything. But she’d pull a few weeds and carry a light watering bucket around. She’d have her little gardening hat on. It makes a big difference how hard they work when they leave here. We’ll have her sitting up before she goes to sleep tonight and walking a few steps in twenty-four hours. But it’s going to be painful."
I tune back out. There’s no way to know how Memaw will do. Her walking in the past changed her future up until now. Now, only time could tell. Would tell. And our family isn’t out of the woods yet. Memaw is still going to have to be cared for which means more sacrifices for everyone.

At least, everyone who’s close enough to help.
Part II

Daughters

She leaned into the fridge, pulling out leftovers. Leftover pizza. Leftover fish sticks and fries. Green beans. Pinto beans. Tortillas. Tomatoes –she could slice those. As she opened an old sour cream container, a stench assaulted her nostrils. Jeramie came running into the kitchen as she scraped molded mac and cheese into their trash can from its reused plastic container and turned to recycle it in her kitchen sink.

“Mom, is it picnic night?”

“Sure is sweetheart,” Brenda replied as she reached for a knife. “Go ask your sister to come and join us.”

As Jeramie dashed off in that way which little boys have to his little sister’s room, Aunt Red began slicing tomatoes. Her children were young enough to enjoy leftover picnic night as an adventure. She hoped that they would not be able to figure out what it really was. Until later on. Down the road. If ever. That’s when she’d tell ‘em. That’s when she would have to tell them.

There was no money for supper. Brenda Red carried leftovers to her old faded sheet spread out on their living room floor in front of a TV. Pay day wasn’t until Friday. And it was only Wednesday. Perhaps she could rummage up enough loose change for milk, then they could have cereal tomorrow night.

Or maybe she’d take the kids for a walk after dinner. They were good about spotting pennies, dimes, and sometimes even nickels out along the road or up in a nearby
parking lot on old Decherd’s square. Quarters were rare, but sometimes Stephanie or Jeramie had found a few. Brenda Sue always let them keep quarters and put those in their piggy banks.

“Steph! Jer-a-mie! Dinner’s ready!” Red called to her children from across their house.

***

I’ll never forget those ugly old piggy banks Rebekah and I had. We each had one which is sometimes a rare occurrence for twins to each have their own and not have to share. Literal pigs. That’s what they were. With an orangey-pink color to them. They also had white flowers and green vines embossed on their sides and hind quarters. Their faces smiled. And their eyes looked up and to the left. Sparkling. They were shiny. Glossy. Our cousin Stephanie stood on top of one when she was over one night. It broke. Into many splintered clay pieces. Copper laced between clay. Smithereens.
Wesley’s Daughter

“I can still remember standing in the vestibule of that church before our ceremony. It was just me and Dad. I’ll never forget his words to me, “Beverly, you don’t have to do this.”

No wonder my belief in love had always been returned from Mom in a slightly jaded form with a dose of realism hinting at its underbelly. Wow, I’m sure that’s what every little girl dreams of hearing from her dad on her wedding day. Geez.

“Mom, what did you say?” I asked gently.

“I don’t really remember. I guess I’ve forgotten what I said back. Do you know, your Grandmother George tried to convince me to turn the sanctuary lights down? ‘It’ll be so beautiful in candlelight. You, walking down that aisle. With light twinkling off your dress.’ I insisted the lights stay on. I didn’t think I could make it down that aisle with those lights off,” Mom’s voice changed as she continued remembering, “Those wooden doors opened and instantly all sanctuary lights dimmed. I knew it was Bettie Sue who’d turned those lights down. Or she’d had someone turn ‘em down. Do you remember my big gray bag with the initials of my nickname, BEV, in black embroidered on it? Your dad bought that for me back before we were married. And I just couldn’t bring myself to put my future married initials on it. A part of me already knew then I guess.”
Memaw’s Daughter

“I’ll never forget having that talk with your Papa George,” Memaw was telling me. “We were in church. Service had already let out but we were in church. In the sanctuary. I told him, now Thomas, they’ve tried. They’ve stuck it out a year. Gone to counseling. They’ve tried and if they want to get a divorce it ain’t none of our business. Of course I didn’t tell him maybe his son should stop drinking. Everybody knew Carl had a temper. Wesley knew it. Young men often do. And they grow out of it. But that don’t always mean they get to stay married. And Thomas had a temper. Bettie Sue did too as a matter of fact. Your grandfather also drank. Like his son. Mainly while he was in the service, but if you ask me it ain’t right. There’s his son struggling and struggling with the same things, the same demons. Anger and alcohol that had struggled inside of him. Seems like he’d be the perfect one to help his son if he’d quit talking down from his high-horse. Get down from behind that pulpit and help his own son out!

Strange that my Memaw would say this when she had a daughter who she should’ve helped. My dad did grow out of it. I’m not sure how bad it all truly was. My parents don’t talk about that time in their lives. Silence. And skeletons whisper in closets.
“I didn’t even know sex was supposed to be enjoyable. I knew your dad liked it, but I guess we never talked about sex growing up. I mean, we learned about it from other places not talks with our parents.”

“We never talked about it either Mom,” I responded. A look crossed over her face, making me realize I should’ve kept quiet. But I knew I had two options. Leave this uncomfortable conversation in silence, like we normally did. Or, keep talking. “Is it like that with you and Rayburn?” I asked gently and curiously.

Mom stirred lasagna sauce on her stovetop. Oregano, garlic, and the smell of pepper flakes filled our kitchen. “Rayburn wants to have sex every night,” Mom replied in a voice that sounded closed to further discussion.

And there it was. The endless cycle. Her mom had suffered through this same thing. A zealous husband. Or at least, that’s the way Memaw spun the tale to me. Complaining about how Wesley always wanted to have sex on his lunch break and I had so much to do. And he’d come in sweaty from working down at the sawmill and I just couldn’t understand it. How he’d wanna get all sweaty again even if it was hot out. Lord, I hated it all when it was so blooming hot out! Now here was my mom suffering through the same thing.

I remember a conversation Mom and I had before Drew and I got married. She had just given me a bra and two matching pairs of panties. That underwear felt softer than any other I’d owned being a tomboy and all.
“These feel so soft, Mom. Thanks! I bet they’ll be really comfortable.”

“Well, I know you were wantin’ some matchin’ sets, but you know the fancy bra isn’t really for you.”

I could feel color rushing up to flush my cheeks. But I decided to go ahead and dive in, so I could know what to expect. “Mom, how often do married couples have sex?”

“Hmm,” she squinted her eyes in a way which always indicates she’s trying to decide what to say, how much to say, or how exactly to say it. “It just depends on the couple really. Everyone is different. Has different needs. Rayburn could have sex every night.”

“I know. Did he really think we didn’t know what he was asking you every time he’d lean over and whisper into your ear? Or when he’d just flat out ask you to come to bed?”

Silence ensued.

“You know, Aunt Carolyn actually complains that her and Mike do not have enough sex,” Mom said. “Usually a man wants more sex than the woman. But some women need a lot, too. It just depends on the couple. Now, I don’t know about Barb and Bobby because she doesn’t ever say nothing.”

I nodded, not really sure what to do with this extra information on a close relative. Two close relatives. And two ends of the spectrum.
Aunt Carolyn as Daughter, Mother, Wife, & Self

Aunt Carolyn is fun. And different. She was in a bad car accident years ago. Doctors warned Uncle Mike she might act different at first, but there’s no reason to think she’d stay that way. She might, some people do, but doesn’t mean she will. She did.

It must have been a little bit like losing her twice for Uncle Mike. And Memaw. But I wish he’d been smart enough not to make fun of her in front of their daughter, Caylyn. These days Caylyn and Uncle Mike team-up on her. All the time. It’s hard to watch. Especially at family functions. Holidays. Barbeques. Birthdays. Graduations. When everything should be perfect, but instead you’re realizing how dysfunctional everyone is in their own ways of course. And how you didn’t notice it before. Or you chose to ignore it. Or maybe you’re honest and think if I lived with them, this is the side I’d see. They’re normal. Just like our household family.

Normal. Whatever that is.

Aunt Carolyn doesn’t deserve being teamed up on by her only daughter and her husband the father of their little girl. Hard to imagine anyone who does. She’s a sweet woman. And, she deserves respect. So what if she has no idea of personal space anymore? If she stands too close when you’re having a conversation with her or if she talks louder. It’s only when she’s excited. Sure, she’s a little more dramatic, but doesn’t that fit especially in Pauline Bradford’s family. Carolyn Jean survived. Had a near-death accident, someone else’s fault. But she survived. Trauma. To her head. And she survived.

We found out on a family vacation to the mountains last winter that they don’t sleep together. Aunt Carolyn and Uncle Mike. Well, they lie sleeping in the same bed,
but they don’t have sex. Unless it’s their anniversary. Or maybe Christmas. Uncle Mike puts pillow between them every night, so they won’t accidentally touch each other.

“The way Caylyn and Mike treat me is awful,” Aunt Carolyn was saying to Aunt Red and Mom as I walked up on them to put my dishes in Memaw’s sink. Memaw’d just paid Mr. Cook to update a few things around her house from the floors inside to new wooden planks and posts on her front porch. One of Ashley’s admirers from high school helped Mr. Cook. This admirer came and sat behind her in church for a long time. There when her high school boyfriend wasn’t. They both are married and have a child apiece now; the admirer and the high school boyfriend do. Two other women.

I set my plate down beside the new sink. Aunt Carolyn was washing dishes in it just as she always does. “But I can’t do anything. I know she’ll take his side. I can’t lose her too,” Aunt Carolyn finished.

Tears swelled in her bright blue eyes. My heart hurts and I’m stunned. And now I can no longer go on thinking something I’d seen on family vacation in the mountains of Gatlinburg at that large, three floor cabin wasn’t true. It was the truth. That’d been after Christmas and over New Year’s. This was Easter at Memaw’s house. And our quiet family—or well, the family that doesn’t talk about private matters, is talking.

“I know the teenage years are supposed to be hard. I just keep telling myself, the Lord’s brought me through so much already. So much. I know he can bring me through this. We need to get her through high school first. At least.”

Unfortunately, my mom couldn’t make it that far. And frankly, I don’t blame her. Or Dad anymore, even though for a while I did blame him. Dad had a temper. Still has
one. I’ve seen it. Apparently, he drank some too. Okay, he drank a lot. And yet, my mom wasn’t physically hit by my dad. Physical abuse in the form of consummating a love-less marriage maybe, but not beaten black and blue like Aunt Red. Unlike Aunt Red, my mom had Memaw’s support.
“Well, with Nathan they didn’t even have a room available. They put me in a closet. I mean literally they cleaned out a broom closet, wheeled a bed and all the machines in there, and that’s where they put me,” my mom was telling us one night. The whole family’d come over to celebrate Memaw Bradford’s birthday and all our girl cousins were still hanging around. “When my doctor came to see me, he stood in the door and he was only three steps from foot of my hospital bed. Rayburn sat in a chair there beside. He’d have to get up and move when a nurse came in to check the machines and my blood pressure. Be sure I was comfortable. Those machines beeped from right behind Rayburn’s chair. The whole time. Usually he’d walk down to a few snack machines, asking if I’d be okay first before he left our room. I’d say yes, go ahead, go on. I’m fine. I knew he was having a hard time sitting and waiting because anyone who knows Rayburn knows he can’t sit still for very long. He’d stay gone long enough that the nurses were always done and gone when he got back to the room.”

“I’ll never forget when Rayburn came back to see me after work, he stayed for the delivery and everything and to hold Nathan and be sure he was alright. He even followed the nurse when they took Nathan to clean him up. I think y’all’s mom made Bobby do the same thing. Mom said to Ash and Linds. But then after all that Rayburn had to go to work. He was on 2nd shift. And then, after work, he came straight back to the hospital to be with me and see Nathan. And I was crying. He asked what’s wrong and I told him the nurse wouldn’t let me have my baby. I’d asked to see him and then she asked if I was breastfeeding and when I said no, she told me no, that I’d have to wait if I wasn’t breastfeeding.”
“That’s awful! I can’t believe they wouldn’t let you see him!” I said.

“Did they give you a reason? We don’t ever let our mothers not have their baby,” Ashley asked.

“No, but Rayburn went and got him from the nursery for me. He was there not long after it happened because I was still crying. And I mean, you’re crazy right after, my hormones and emotions were all over the place. But you know Rayburn, he took care of it.”

“I just don’t understand why though,” replied Ash. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well, I mean they were busy. I was in a broom closet! That’s how many women they had on our floor having babies. It makes sense. You know, we had that really big snow at the beginning of ’93, the one Papa got sick in? Remember how he helped those people who had run off the road and were stuck in snow coming home from church? Well, he was already sick and Memaw will tell you that ‘he didn’t have no business being out there in the wet snow helping complete strangers.’”

I’d heard Memaw saying that before. “If he hadn’t helped those people he might still be alive today.” Does she believe that? What about Mom? Do I? Is God in control or the Angel of Death?

“Anyway, it was a long cold winter,” Mom went on, “and one big snow. It was late in the season for a snow that big. And nine months later, everyone’s in the hospital
having their snow babies! You know, Barb came with Linds three months later. Your parents were up to the same thing!

“I drove myself to the hospital when I was overseas with the girls,” my mom was telling us.

I imagined her driving to a hospital in their first car that I can remember. The Rabbit. It was green. Not a pretty forest green, but a pale green. Not light or dark enough to be pretty. Onion grass. The Rabbit was the exact color of onion grass.

Mom had told us one time before when it rained, water collected in the Rabbit’s floorboard. ‘Okay then, hold your teddy bears real tight, okay?’ That’s what she’d always tell us when we were little as she buckled us into our car seats with the seatbelts, “okay then, hold your teddy bears real tight, okay?” I knew why she’d tell my twin sister, Rebekah, and me to do this now.

Of course, Mom would not have owned that car overseas in Germany.

“I went up to the nurse sitting at her desk in that ER. I explained shyly my water had broke. She asked how far apart my contractions were and then she told me I would have to wait to be admitted until my contractions were closer together. So, I went back out to the car and waited for what I thought was long enough before going back in.”


“Well, I mean, I went back out to the car and waited for what I thought was long enough before going back in,” answered Mom.
That was my mom. Follow the rules. Too shy, no too young to know better. Some rules should be broken.

“What happened next?” I asked her.

“Well, I can remember waking up after labor, after having the two of you, and only seeing one incubator in the room there with me. But I couldn’t stay awake long enough to ask where the other one was, all I could think was something must have happened to one of you. I found out later of course that you two were small enough to be in one incubator together.”

I tried to put myself in her shoes. I can’t imagine how hard your first pregnancy is much less being married to a man whose job makes him absent and being millions of miles away from your own family and the only place you can really remember living in with a doctor whose language is foreign to you. Brave doesn’t even begin to cover it.

“Women don’t go home as quickly over there. Or maybe it was just that way years ago, but I had to stay at the hospital for a week before I was released. They had already moved you two to a different hospital by then. The nuns were so sweet to me. I can remember how nice they were.

“By the time I was able to leave my hospital, I was visiting you guys twice a day. It was an hour drive, one-way from base to a bigger hospital, your hospital. But, I mean, I didn’t have anywhere else to be. I didn’t want to be anywhere else. The drive didn’t matter. People didn’t drive as much or as far then, but I didn’t mind. I just wanted to be with you.
“I would always ask for your charts as soon as I arrived. I was counting kilograms—your measurements were all in the metric system, your height and weight—waiting for you two to get big enough for me to take you home. I can remember crying when one of you would just lose a little bit of weight because I knew it meant longer until I could take you home with me.

“Probably the most terrifying thing that happened while you two were still in the hospital was when I arrived one day and they told me, the doctor told me, in broken English to sign these papers for a surgery. ‘Her organ fall out’ is what he said to me. ‘Sign. Sign paper.’ Well, the papers were in German, I wasn’t going to sign them! I cried all the way back to base and tried to find someone who could help me read those papers.”
Mothers & Sons


“He could get that belt off and be on your side of the room with belt in hand quicker than you could get out of the room,” Aunt Red said.

“I remember how quick he could get across a room,” Mom answered. “It wouldn’t do you no good to run.”

“No, running would only make the whipping worse!” Aunt Red replied laughing a little and looking at me with her eyebrows raised in exclamation.

“But you know, I just wonder, how much could he stand? How much should he have been able to put up with? How much did Mom egg him on? With her and five kids and him doing hard labor all day long, I mean Dad worked hard. He’d come home bone tired. It’s a wonder we didn’t drive him crazy. Them crazy.”

“It’s a wonder we didn’t get more whippings.”

I knew my mom missed her dad a lot. Kicking a pebble back into the flower bed from Aunt Red’s sidewalk I thought about the time I slipped up on a journal of Mom’s one time. Of course I flipped to the middle and read an entry. Mom was pregnant with Nathan when Papa died, just barely. In fact, she didn’t even know yet. One of her journal lines mentioned wishing her dad could have known Nathan. Nathaniel Ray Flatt. She’d
miscarried before him very early on in a pregnancy. No one knew but Aunt Barb and she only knew because she had also miscarried before having Lindsey. Papa died in late March. Nathan was born in early December. Lindsey was the following March. Born. A year later. One year after Papa’s death.

Mom watched her son grow up and wished her dad had the opportunity to know him. She was just twenty-seven when she had Nathan. Twenty-six when she lost her dad. Every milestone was a reason to rejoice. And a reason to wish for a different outcome. For how things could’ve been. I’ll be twenty-seven this summer.

* * *

“She’s had a rough life. Seems like if something is going to go wrong for somebody, it’s gonna go wrong for Red.” I'd heard Mom say about Aunt Red.

I’d never thought much about why Stephanie and Jeramie call Memaw ‘Grandmother’ instead of Memaw, but turns out Memaw and Papa threw Aunt Red out of their house. Apparently, that’s the reward for getting pregnant out of wedlock. There was no one to rescue her. No one she could turn to.

Until the beating. That’s when a restraining order happened and that’s when they started visiting her parents again. Her and the kids. Coming home. But not really.

Much later in life, we would learn that the father of Aunt Red’s children is bipolar. I’ve been told her son, my oldest cousin, Jeramie is too. Though he’s not as bad as his father because his deepest lows are lower and his temper flare ups don’t range quite as high. Doesn’t seem any safer. But, I’m not supposed to know all that.
“My son understands me better than my own daughter,” Aunt Red was telling Mom as we stood over at her house that night. It was a Saturday evening. Mom and I had brought flowers over to her for Mother’s Day which was the next day. We were kinda concerned her children wouldn’t be bringing her anything. Mom already knew neither one of Aunt Red’s children had plans with her and that Aunt Red would be taking Memaw out to eat for lunch after church.

Alzheimer’s

“I can remember the trouble they had with my daddy’s dad. He probably had Alzheimer’s but it wasn’t diagnosed. They caught him trying to build a fire in the middle of their living room floor one night. He had some wood stacked and was trying to light it. He could’ve set that whole house on fire. It embarrassed daddy that they had to put him in a home over in Scottsboro, but nothing could be done. What could they do? They couldn’t take care of him. And if he’d caught the house on fire that night we’d uh all died in our sleep. When someone becomes a danger to you and your family you gotta get away from ‘em.”
Part III

Easter

Mom rolled her eyes at Memaw in the direction of her sister. Barbara. Barbara Ann. My Aunt Barb. They shared a moment of sibling secrecy as Memaw couldn’t catch their side glances any more. It was easy to pull the wool over her eyes.

Easter was over. Desserts sat perched on their plates and cakes stood on their stands on top of the washer and dryer in Memaw’s utility room. Little Ashley Brooke had used this room for her afternoon naps while Rebekah Lynn and I were at school. A colorful blanket of geometric black, pink, green, and blue squares had covered the small twin bed. An exposed light bulb with a pull string hung over head. The window, lightbulb, and floor were the only remaining artifacts of Uncle Danny’s old bedroom. Now as our family had grown, the little bedroom off the dining room served its fourth purpose and hosted all desserts for holiday get togethers. The green linoleum stamped with an intricate tile pattern rivaled the pink, orange, red, and green icing of our desserts. Strawberry pie. Mandarin orange cake. Cheesecake with whole cherries in syrup topping. Green key lime pie. And banana pudding. The dining room table’d been cleared. Dishes sat drying and dripping, dripping and drying, in the right side of Memaw’s sink; pots soaked on the left. Sheep and goats. Right and left. Matthew 25:33.

“Mom asked me if either one of you girls were pregnant ‘ther day. She always says she just wants to live long enough to see all of her grandchildren graduate from high school, but I know a great-grandbaby would make her thrilled,” Mom said to me from across Memaw’s dining room table.
“I can tell you what I weighed when I was born and exactly when I was born. I was born on a Saturday morning at ten in the morning on a cold January day,”

Memaw began, cutting any other conversations around her table off. Maybe she was aware of others’ talking or maybe she wasn’t. With her hearing, it’s all up for debate.

“And then I had Barbara, my first born, on a cold Saturday morning in February at exactly ten in the morning. Now you tell me if that ain’t something?”

Memaw paused for dramatic effect and response. Her table was covered with a red cloth. Jesus sat at a table with his twelve disciples breaking bread in the portrait behind us.

Birthdays were discussed. How old everyone would be, when all the kids would turn fifty, when the last two grandkids would graduate high school. Future trips were talked over and vacations planned. The beach. A long weekend in July, because May and August and September wouldn’t work. A mountain trip first weekend of December, because September, October, and Thanksgiving were all out.

“Beach is out for Mom because she can’t ride that far,” my mom said in regards to Memaw who’d gotten up to go to use the bathroom. I began to feel like she’d stayed in there for a long while. Papa Bradford, Memaw’s husband, had been in our bathroom for a long time that night at our Old Salem house. He was sick. My twin sister kept knocking.

“Rebekah just go to mine, your grandfather’s in that one,” Mom said as she walked by us in the narrow hallway. I felt sorry for my sister. I hated using Mom and Rayburn’s bathroom. I’m not sure how old I was, but I’d walked in on my stepdad peeing into their toilet one time. I was running through our house on Cathy’s Lane in search of my mom. I crossed over the threshold of their room without reservation and rounded a
corner where their bathroom door was open and his shorts were down. I stood there in hesitation and shock at not finding my mom before turning around and walking out as he cleared his throat. Embarrassing. I wonder if he remembers.

Papa Bradford and Memaw had come over for supper and to play cards with Mom and Rayburn. They always played Rook. Papa and Rayburn had played a game of billiards before supper. Eight-ball. The pool table Rayburn brought into their marriage hailed from Mawmaw and Pawpaw Flatt’s house in Moulton, Alabama. He’d set it up in our garage which had been converted into a den with the addition of our carport. Sometimes Rayburn called it the computer room and Mawmaw usually called it the den because they had one. But mostly we all said garage because old habits die hard as the saying goes. I can still hear the rhythmic roll of the triangle back and forth, knocking together fifteen pool balls, as they’re racked and centered on the green felt before the cue ball is struck and spins rapidly whacking seven stripes and seven solids sending a chain of smacking in motion as balls bump one another, some thudding softly into a pocket, others rolling all around on the table top.

We all ate together. Most likely steaks or burgers on the grill with fixin’s on the side –potatoes or fries, mac n cheese or corn, grilled veggies or salad. No doubt Mom had some sort of dessert prepared too, unless Memaw brought one. After supper, the adults started their card game while my sister and I played by ourselves on the blue carpet in our adjoining living room.

Papa had a heart attack the next night. In their living room which had been their children’s bedroom before they added on two at back of their house. Sitting in his chair.
Beside him sat his favorite faded glass full of Memaw’s sweet, sweet ice tea she’d just poured for him. Memaw was in the kitchen. Standing at her sink. Washing up their dishes from supper.

“Today’s the day,” Aunt Barb said to me from the same sink not long after I arrived late at Memaw’s house for Easter. Aunt Carolyn’s working at her new job at the senior center today, so here dishwashing duty has fallen to another’s hands.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“Dad’s been gone twenty-two years to the day today.”
Sunny Days and Sight

The sidewalk stretches from Neal Street to Memaw’s front porch, lounging between two box ball bushes. As children we would run around those two hiding below the left-hand side one during hide-and-go-seek games. Using the right one’s protection as a barrier between whoever was ‘it’ and home base. Memaw didn’t like for us to use her porch as home. She preferred us tagging a tree in front of it instead. I remember Memaw telling me not too long ago she wanted those two big buses out front cut down, because I just don’t like the idea someone could hide behind ‘em. Because they could jump out and grab me and I’d have no way of knowin’ they’re ther’e. When you’re as blind and old as me you think ‘bout these things.

The three of us walked up Memaw’s three front steps. Concrete. No embellishments. New wooden handrails adorn each side. Recent intruders on my childhood. The railroad bed we just walked across hasn’t changed. I adore this landscape. It was an ultimate playground with arrowheads and railroad nails to boot.

Memaw’s old, painted wooden swing at far end of her porch creaked in January’s chill air. Making a slower music than the hymns and folk songs like “Come ‘nd Dine” and “She’ll Be Coming ‘round th’e Mountain” we would sing while swinging alongside Memaw. Black paint peeled off its arms and crevices. Mom pulled on the screen door and stood with it open as she rang Memaw’s doorbell and knocked on her front door. Footsteps sounded slowly inside.

I glanced to my left long enough to recognize an old church pew holding sanctuary over his end of the porch. Memories of a Great-Uncle Someone, Memaw or
Papa’s brother, snuck around that corner of the house, peering at me through beady eyes, recalling my fear of old people. It was summertime when he visited. Came down from somewhere up North. *He’d sit at home on that pew while Wesley went to work.* Papa worked at the sawmill just down the road. He walked the line down that old gray asphalt with no stripes. Four times a day. To and from, home and back for lunch at midday. You could hear the fifteen ‘til whistle from this very porch. I remember one day, Papa came home and sat down in the rocking chair to our right, talking to Great Uncle who’d just gotten up from his afternoon nap. Memaw’d always tell us we had to stay in her front yard and not go around back while he was sleeping in his back bedroom.

Lace curtain covering glass window pane slid slightly before, peeled back by a weathered hand as Memaw peeked out. The door opened. Mom stepped in first. I hid behind her. No need to though, Memaw can’t see well. She’s technically legally blind. Has no peripheral vision in her left eye. Never even earned her driver’s license, her eyesight is so poor. When talking about her bad eyes, Memaw always mentions her parents. They could have afforded the surgery her doctor recommended as a child and it would have saved her vision. “*They just sat there every night at the dinner table eatin’ to their hearts content! Vegetables and everything!!! Knowing they could send me for surgery. They were stingy and I have had to go my whole life without being able to see good. Or drive. All because they weren’t willing to do without. Now a person should want better for their child. I do! They didn’t. Stingy. Stingy people. I’ll never understand it.*” Vegetables as an indicator of how much wealth her parents had struck me as an oddity in comparison with today’s culture’s drive toward fast food, caffeine, and sugar. But Memaw’s favorite thing to do was cook. Perhaps it didn’t begin as a hobby to
love, but grew as a necessary chore perfected over time and eventually loved as the need was gone or at least, the necessity of feeding a husband and five kids dissappeared. So, the high valuation of such produce makes sense in the end.

Being a twin, I am used to presenting myself as most people have less than perfect vision. “Hi Memaw, it’s Jaclyn.” I hugged her gently around her neck and shoulders. She stands five feet tall and never failed to remind her grandchildren of her petite stature as we sat eating breakfast around her kitchen table each morning. *I didn’t weigh 90lbs soaking wet the day Wesley and I got married.* Her shoulders are smaller than I remember.

“Drew’s here too.”

“*He is?! Wellll, hey. Hey there. Didn’t see you. Two. ‘Til you got-in-the-door-there.*”

When Memaw is thinking you can always tell because she looks up out the corner of her eyes and over your right shoulder. Almost like a child looking up. Thinking. She stares past her audience into an abyss. Unfocused on you. Concentrating on words you’ve said. Forming her own in response. When she can’t think of anything to say she just says, *Well.* Drawing it out into four syllables instead of one.

“That was the point Mom, they wanted to surprise you. Come in here. Let’s take this test and then th’e three o’ y’all can visit while I send it in.”

Drew and I sat down at the same time on Memaw’s pink sofa. A couch of my childhood. Its protective plastic wrap was torn off on both reclining ends, but no holes
were worn into her cushions. A ballerina’s silhouette used to stand posed on tiptoe dressed in maroon on that plastic cover beneath some name of a furniture brand I’ve long since forgotten. But the ballerina I remember. No doubt the pink leviathan’s excellent skin condition was due to Memaw’s rule of no grandchildren on her couch after playing outside. And no feet on the sofa either. Couch or sofa? I don’t remember which one she calls it now. Preservation of furniture is stronger than literal memories.

“Jaclyn, that bread is moldy. Should we tell her? Or throw it away so she doesn’t eat it?”

“She probably knows it’s moldy, Drew. She just hasn’t thrown it away yet.”

Just don’t say anything. I couldn’t say to Drew I feared she might eat it, too. Couldn’t admit Memaw might be far enough gone she wouldn’t see the mold on her bread. Or recognize such a mold’s danger lying in plain sight. Visible.

My grandmother, Pauline Myrtle Fanning Bradford, was the first woman in her family to graduate high school, she was diligent enough to save money on her own in order to buy her class ring, too – sacrificing her senior year book because she couldn’t afford both and her parents wouldn’t help. She moved with her husband and three young daughters aged seven, five, and two to a one room apartment so they could scrape together more money and put back every penny for leg braces for their eldest child. Memaw cooked three meals a day every day of the week for the better part of 37 years, kept a house so clean you could eat off her floor, and attended church on Sundays. My grandmother had pride. I couldn’t bear to tear into it by telling her about moldy bread. That’d be an insult.
Looking around Memaw’s living room at artifacts of a life lived daily in their house. I noticed its untidiness for the first time. Her house didn’t look dirty per’say. Heck, my floors were in need of a good swiffering at home. But items lay deserted everywhere as if she had lost interest. Has she lost interest? It wasn’t this bad last time I was here. Was it? When was the last time I was here? Christmas she had a stomach flu. Bradford family get-together was cancelled. Thanksgiving we spent with Drew’s family in Mississippi. Easter? Had we been here for Easter almost a year ago, now?

Memaw walked back in, returning to us in the living room from her adjacent bedroom which opens into her kitchen on its other side. Her kitchen joins to dining room which connects back to their living room. A circle or oblong oval is the house on Neal Street’s shape. The original open floor plan. I remember when we used to play a game we invented called witch with Memaw. She’d put her black witch hat on and we’d all run through her house in circles. Sneaking around corners. Grabbing each other. Scaring each other. Mom remembers when this living room was their bedroom –the kids’ before the hallway, bathroom, and back bedrooms were added on.

“Move that stack of papers if they’re in your way, Drew.”

“Awe-nah, they’re fine Memaw.”

“Can I get y’all anything to drink?”

“No thanks, Memaw,” I replied.

She walked around a center coffee table, passed in front of her grandfather clock, and sat down in the corner glider. Rocker’s what she’d called it.
“Have y’all sat in my new chair? You need to try it out.”

My sister and cousins had warned us of this. Hard chair. Looking at it you’d expect it to be plush and give-way when you sit down. But it don’t. Firm. When this topic of conversation came up, and Ashley and Lindsey were going back and forth with Caylyn about their experiences with this new chair, I’d thought of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Too hard. Too soft. Just right. Memaw had always fallen on the firmer side of things.

“Okay Mom, it’s all done,” Mom said as in she walked from Memaw’s bedroom.

“Well, that didn’t take long.” Drew remarked.

“I know! It’s crazy isn’t it? Just hook it up. Press two buttons. And it sends all Mom’s information to her doctor up in Nashville.”

“Well, have you got just a minute, Beverly? I was gonna see if you could help me with something,” Memaw asked her third-born child. Third daughter. Beverly Louise. My mom.

***

“I hate to leave, but we need to get going, Mom. Gotta get Jaclyn and Drew back to the house.”

“Oh, are y’all driving all the way back home tonight?”
Drew and I share a secret smile as if two and a half hours on the interstate is a big deal. But Memaw’s not the only one who misinterprets how far away from ‘home’ we live.

“Yes ma’am. We both have to work tomorrow,” I answered.

“Well, it was good to see you. Don’t know when I’ll see you again,” Memaw said as she is now in the habit of hinting at how old she is now and how she may not be around much longer.

“Good to see you, too. Love you Memaw.”

“Oh. I-love-you-too-honey.”

I smiled to myself as Memaw ran that phrase together only drawing out her term of endearment, honey to two syllables. As if the faster she said it, less it would hurt or less she’d have to think about it. I’ve heard Aunt Barb, Aunt Red, and Mom all three talk about how Memaw never said ‘I love you’ to them until after they’d all had kids and even then it wasn’t right away. Love’s a hard thing from their generation.

“Why do you think I call Memaw Grandmother when the rest of y’all call her Memaw?” Aunt Red’s daughter and my first-cousin, Stephanie asked me one day. “It took her awhile to warm up. I can even remember when I was little and I’d say it but she wouldn’t say it back.” Stephanie and her older brother, Jeramie, were the first two Bradford grandchildren. “You too, Doodles,” Memaw’d reply to Stephanie employing her family nickname, “you too.”

***
As the three of us climbed into Mom’s light blue Honda, Mom started in.

“I think she’s lonely. She’s never had that problem before, but she’s the last one left. All her family is gone. She lost her sister last year and the last friend her age three months ago.”

Mom went on. Raindrops tapped on our front windshield like our childhood tap shows on Ms. Belle’s dance floor. A familiar cadence strummed up a forgotten conversation. I thought back to something Memaw had told me a few years ago, before her heart surgery in Nashville or stay at Winchester hospital’s extended-care place, Southern Tennessee Skilled Care. I’d always thought everyone was saying Still Care.

“You wouldn’t believe it, but sunny days are the hardest. It’s so pretty outside. And you’re home. Alone. All alone. Everyone else is out there living their own lives - and you want them to! I want my kids to have a good life, better than me. Better than what I had. But you’re home. Alone. Left behind. No one calls all day. And it’s hard. Wesley’s been gone now twenty-one years.”
My grandmother, Pauline Myrtle Fanning Bradford, grew up ‘over in the valley.’

Paint Rock Valley, Alabama. Paint Rock’s a little town which sits just over and in between a few hills from Huntland, Tennessee, my hometown. Huntland is where my grandmother and grandfather raised their family of five children. Four girls. And then finally, a son. Barbara Ann, Brenda Sue “Red,” Beverly Louise, Carolyn Jean, and Danny. Known to the eldest and first two grandchildren as Granddad and Grandma, the rest of us knew Wesley and Pauline Bradford as Papa and Memaw.

Their white siding house with painted black wood trim sat up on a slight rise, facing train tracks. Or what used to be train tracks. Now it’s just an empty bed. Their front porch stretched the whole length of front of their house. Two individual front doors were separated by two chairs and a small table which always held an ashtray for Papa and later in life Uncle Danny. And in the afternoons, that’s where Memaw’d put Papa’s big glass of sweet, cold iced tea. Their porch held some other furniture too. An old wooden church pew. Painted black. A metal glider. Same as the two chairs and table. And one old wooden swing. Painted black and suspended in the air by chains.

I didn’t know until recently why there were two front doors on Memaw and Papa’s house. I had kind of assumed it was built that way so two families could live in it together comfortably. With different entrances and one common kitchen space, it seemed very likely the house could have been called home by two families. But, in my class on Southern Literature, one of the works we read made reference to a verse in the Bible. Something about two different doors. One for men and one for women. Or maybe it was one to exit from and one to enter.
Memaw and Papa’s front doors are flanked on each side by windows. The windows were trimmed in same black paint as that porch swing and so were window shutters on each side of their house. That window on the left is in living room and window on the right is in their master bedroom. One front door opens into their living room while the other leads from porch into master bedroom. We never used this door. And since Memaw has been widowed for most of my life, it has struck me as odd that she would feel safe with a door leading outside the house opening into her bedroom where she sleeps alone each night.

Originally, this house on Neal Street only had two bedrooms, a living room and kitchen. Both dining room and kitchen were narrow and the second bedroom Memaw would later convert into a laundry room which barely held a washer and dryer on one side along with a stand-up deep-freezer on the other.

I can remember when Memaw’s laundry room held a twin bed. It lounged where her deep freezer now stands. Nothing else fit in on that side of this small, narrow room other than the bed. It was covered with a patchwork quilt, backed with a kind of black fabric which I can remember was not as soft as other blankets or my sheets at home. It wasn’t cotton.

One limp pillow sat beneath the twin bed’s headboard in a blue pillowcase. A single light bulb hung from overhead with a long pull string attached. For a while, this bed kept the washer and dryer company. Uncle Danny’s Room. That’s what we’d called it before. Memaw was still calling it Danny’s room long after he’d moved into one of the
two back bedrooms and even after Danny moved out of their house. Of course, he couldn’t occupy one of the back bedrooms until all but two of his sisters had moved out.

“I’ve already asked Rebekah what she’d like to have when I’m passed away. I know I’m giving her that little light up house with the oil light. And I tried to get her to pick out a few other things but she wouldn’t. Now you won’t do me that way will you?”

“Memaw, if you want me to pick something out I will. If that’s what you want.”

“I just want to make it easier on my kids so they don’t have to fight when I am dead and gone. I want it to be easy on them. And Danny ain’t getting a thing. He ain’t never helped me out. All the girls have as much as they could. Driving me around everywhere I need to go. Danny ain’t done that for me see.”

“Well…” I replied. What else could I say? Me picking something out or saying yes or no to what she already had picked out for me was totally different than making a comment on which children had done what for her. Memaw started talking about a lady at church whose son never did nothing to help her.

For as long as I can remember my Memaw has gone to church up on Keith Springs Mountain. I know her and Papa used to go together, but I have very few memories of him. One of my best memories of him is from playing in their front yard. An old train track bed where trains used to cut through the land provided us with two sloping hills. We really only played on one side of this bed on one hill because other side had the road on top of it. Neal Street. And we were not allowed to play in the road. Even though there was never any traffic.
There are pictures in one of my mom’s photo albums from a day spent playing in their front yard on that very hillside. My cousin Ashley is little as are my sister and me. Lindsey and Nathan are not in our lives yet. I’m not sure how old Rebekah and I are, but we have little pastel sweatshirts on with jeans. Purple and yellow. Ash was dressed in a pink sweat suit. Must’ve been spring. Based on our parents’ color scheme. And our lack of winter coats. Papa’s wearing his work clothes. Khaki colored pants and matching shirt. The shirt had two front pockets, one on each side, buttons up its front, a collar, a navy patch with his name on it in cursive, and a white under shirt is just visible peeking out top, from beneath his kaki work shirt. His outer shirt is short sleeved, but the sleeves went all the way down to his elbows. Loose big sleeves. Another reason to believe its spring – it’d already be toasty and warm inside that sawmill.

In Mom’s picture book, Papa is lying sprawled out on his back at the top of our hill. It’s really just a small embankment, but in childhood both sides were hills to us. We’d run down ‘em. Roll inside an old tin garbage can down its sides, making it part of the way back up the other side which was exhilarating. We even rode our three-wheelers down those hills some. But only if it wasn’t wet out because we’d get into trouble for messing Memaw’s grass up!

Ashley is sitting on his chest, looking at the camera. I’m on one side of Papa and Bekah is on his other side. Papa has his arms propped behind his head and is grinning wide into someone’s camera. I remember that grin. And I can remember his laugh too. If I close my eyes.
Memaw laughs but hers always sounds a little held back. Mom talks about how they were not to laugh in church. Ever. They were also expected to sit still.

“I remember how long the services could be,” my mom had told me once. “We were just waiting for a chance to get outside. It’s hard to sit still for so long when you are that small. We only had church services in the morning back then and our preacher; well, you never knew how long he might go. And it’s not like today where you hand a kid a pencil and some paper or maybe even some crayons or a Hot Wheels Car. We were expected to just sit there. I hated just having to sit there. Felt trapped. And pinned down. Like you can’t do what you wanna do”

Three out of five of Memaw and Papa Bradford’s children go to church and have raised their children in church. Two didn’t. But as you get older, you begin to understand why. I wonder who Memaw’s giving all her photo albums to. At one time, she was working on a family history album and notebook for me. She’d said I was the only one who’d asked for anything like that. I’m kinda afraid to ask after it now. She might remember, she might not. It’s funny what people can remember over others.

“Well what’s your sister up to these days?” Memaw interrupted my pondering. I answered her briefly before she launched into updating me on what she knew about Ashley and Lindsey. I’d ask all three of them what their favorite Memaw stories were not too long ago and I couldn’t believe it when I heard three stories I’d never heard Memaw tell.

My sister shared a story I can’t remember Memaw telling, but it’s one of my favorites. Not very religious. But faith-based perhaps.
When Memaw was a little girl, her mom, Biegie Sanders Fanning, wife of William Thomas Fanning, had her outside. Biegie was hanging clothes on the line and Memaw was in a basket at her feet. Little Pauline Myrtle Fanning. Their neighbor comes walkin’ by. Now, Memaw says this isn’t any ordinary neighbor. She was a witch!

Well, the neighbor tells Biegie, “You need to teach that baby to roll over.”

“This baby is too young to roll over.”

“Do you want to see your baby roll over?”

And little Pauline rolled over in her basket! Of course, Memaw will tell you she didn’t do it herself, that witch made me! This neighbor had also told Biegie her daughter would never be very tall, or maybe she said would not grow up much. Either way, it turned out to be true. We all know Memaw’s always been a short woman. She only reached five two and a quarter full grown in her adulthood. And that was before she started shrinking with old age. Back when we all were younger.

That’s the strange thing about grandparents. You’re growing up so fast, you don’t even know it’s happening to you really even though everyone’s telling you all about it. Oh, how much you’ve grown! We’re going to have ‘tu put a brick on your head to keep you from growin’. You look like your daddy! You look just like your momma did at your age! And then, finally, you get caught up, so caught up in growing up, it takes a little while to realize your grandparents are growing down. Growing older.
The Diabetes

“Mom, you did a good job taking care of your body. An awesome job. When you got the diabetes, you started walking and eating right. The doctor even said after your stroke you had the strongest heart muscles he’d seen in someone at your age which came from all that walking and that’s why you did so well after your open-heart surgery.” My mom was sitting with Memaw eating supper at Memaw’s kitchen table.

“Mom, what’s going on now, in your head, you have no control over. There’s nothing you can do and that’s not fair.” I teared up as Mom continued relaying her conversation with Memaw to me from this past week.

“The doctor says you’re going to have good days and bad.”

“Well, what’s wrong with me?” Memaw asked.

“You have dementia, Mom.”

“What am I doing?”

“How ‘bout I give you some examples? Sometimes one of us will call you on the telephone and ask if you’ve had your lunch and meds. And you’ll say you have, but when one of us gets here your pills are still in your box. Okay? Or, do you remember, one time I came over and your front door was unlocked – both of them? I asked you if you were expecting someone. You said no, you weren’t expecting nobody. Then, I asked if I’d woken you up, if you’d fallen asleep on your couch, and you said no, you were sitting up waiting because you were expecting someone. Do you remember any of that?”

“Well, no.”
“Okay Mom, that’s alright. Here’s what we’re going to have to do. We have to keep you safe. And Mom, I want you to get to stay at home as long as you can because that’s what I would want to get to do…”

“I do, too. I want to stay right here,” Memaw interrupted.

“Okay, Mom. But you have to be safe. And that means no cooking.”
Home’s New Normal

“How’s everything taste, Mom?” Mom asked Memaw later that day.

“Oh, it’s alright,” Memaw replied. “The green beans are good. What’d you put in ‘em?”

“There’s a little bit of oil in there.”

I’ve heard Memaw repeat a few things once or twice – that’s the second time she’s asked Mom about the green beans. But mainly, she sits there quietly which is totally different from normal. Her tip-toes rest on Mom and Rayburn’s wooden floor as the rest of her feet don’t touch from her perch atop their dining room chair.

***

A few hours later Mom asked Memaw if she was ready to go back to her house.

“Well, yea I guess I am if you can take me,” Memaw answered.

“Sure, Mom. I’ve got your purse right here. I’ll be back in a little bit guys, I’m running Memaw home,” Mom called as they slowly walked out our garage door.

Memaw repeated herself some, but this is a nice evening Mom informed me later after she’d returned from dropping Memaw off at her house.

“This is just the new normal for a while,” Mom said as she shrugged her shoulders. “There are days when she’ll call and ask about something we just talked about an hour or two earlier. She was calling about her supper and I just told her I’d be over with it, but to her it was like we hadn’t discussed it.”
“Sometimes, I’d just give anything to have my grumpy old Momma back. This nice, quiet woman, it’s not Momma,” Mom said as she sat down in her chair, throwing a blanket over her legs, and propping her feet up on the ottoman. “The doctor said she’d have good days and bad. This is just a bad day.”

She’d been to Memaw’s house again to help her get ready for bed. Put her PJs on. Take her nightly meds. Get a snack before bed. Everything but put her to bed. Memaw might stay up watching TV and fall asleep on the couch before getting up at three in the morning to finally make it to the bedroom to sleep until someone came to wake her in the morning.

Bits of our conversation from a walk with Mom this morning play back to me as I get myself ready for bed this evening.

“I’ve tried to explain to her, Mom, you just have to take it one day at a time; if you wake up and you don’t feel quite right or you’re angry and you’re not sure why or you don’t feel good and you’ve got somewhere you’re planning on going or have to be then just tell us and you don’t have to go. We’ll find a way to reschedule.”

“I want you to be home for as long as you can be at home because I would want to be at home.”
“You can’t say mind to Memaw,” Mom was explaining to me as we walked around her block, “because to her mind means crazy. And ain’t none of us told her she’s crazy. She’s said it! Said I’m not crazy, but we just tell her –Mom, nobody’s said you were.”

We walked past Donaldson Grove Baptist Church. Its brick exterior with white siding looked as it always has. This is the church I grew up in with cousins in the pew behind us and elementary school teachers pulling double duty here as Sunday School teachers. Three preachers in my lifetime. The one who’d baptized me and my sister. The next one who’d baptized my younger brother, Nathan, and Lindsey, the cousin his age in the pew behind us. And the pastor now. He came while I was away at college for undergrad. We turned the corner of her block and the wind hit us straight on now. I could smell cow manure as Mom continued. “When I’m talking to her, I say head because her head can just be a thing, it doesn’t have to be her –it’s not her mind.”

I could smell sweet wood as we passed Elora’s lumber yard. Pallets set out in stacks of all different shades. Brown. Dark brown. Yellow brown. Older pallets looked gray as a streak of sun spit through sky above where clouds were racing, pushed on by March winds.

“Sometimes I’ll just ask her a question –off the wall. To see how she’s doing and what she can remember. You see, Jaclyn, it’s her short-term memory that’s the problem. Nothing’s wrong with her long ago memories, but it might just take a little while for her to gather her thoughts and respond.”
We turned back for their farm, not wanting to be followed around the second half of her block by a neighbor’s dogs that were always out. What a view we had as the one-lane road rose up in slight hills and the mountain stood at a distance shrouded in blue almost turned purple as dark grey clouds cloaked its rim. Rain threatened.

“I asked her the other day,” Mom continued, “because I wanted to know, when did you know or how could you tell something was different with Grandpa, Mom? And I thought thinking about him, may make her understand more about herself and what she’s going through. She didn’t think he was crazy. She could just tell something was different.”

“Well, one time I walked down there to his house and carried him some fried pies. He loved fried pies. He’d eat ‘em with milk. And he asked me to get him some juice out of the fridge that day. It was hot outside so I didn’t think much about it. Who wants to drink milk when it’s hot out? So, I poured him some orange juice. Handed it to him. And by time I put that juice jar back in the fridge and turned around, he had his fried pie turned upside down in that juice cup!”

“Well, Momma, how old was Grandpa when y’all had to put him in a home?”

“Let me think,” she put her index finger up crooked across her lips pondering, “He was seventy-nine.”

My mother turned her head to look at me and said, “Mom just turned eighty-two.”
Over in the Valley

“My older brother and uncle ran moonshine. He’s buried now. Over in the valley. There’s a cemetery over there,” Memaw said.

I imagined a field with sunlight slanting through it. Little grey headstones interrupting tall meadow grass, slowly sloping up a hillside.

“I’m not sure if they ever put headstones on their graves. Some of ‘em graves don’t have headstones. There’s markers sure. But not headstones. People were too poor then. Couldn’t afford it. I’m so glad I was able to get Wesley a nice headstone. You see the kids didn’t want me to spend as much money as I did. But I wanted to do something nice. And when I’m gone it’s something else they won’t have to fool with because my name goes right beside his.”

Papa Bradford’s buried in Huntland. Trees separate the cemetery from houses on one side and city park on other. We grew up playing tee ball and little league on those diamonds. Over top its back hedgerow of trees, the cemetery’s view improves as the mountain’s visible in that direction. Looking down on all the grave markers.

“Wish I’d buried Wesley in Beech Grove now,” Memaw went on, “that’s where all my people who ain’t over in the valley are buried.”

Twenty-three years ago today, March 12th was on a Saturday. Just like it is this year. Today. My mom was working part-time at Huntland’s post office.

“Going in wasn’t that bad, just a lot of ice,” Mom said, “but by the time I got off there were snow drifts. Especially in Old Salem. The wind over on top t’he hills I guess.
Dad and Mom came over to eat and play cards. He stopped and helped someone. Pushed ‘em out of the ditch on their way home. He had his stroke that night.

“You know, Mom told me something she’s never told me the other day. She said he was standing in their bedroom. Stomping his foot. Just stomping, stomping. Mom said she figured he was trying to catch his breath since he couldn’t breathe. That or he was in so much pain he just kept stomping. Sad, ain’t it?”

“Mom said she just stood there terrified. Because she couldn’t do nothing to help him. Said it took her three times to call Barbara. Couldn’t dial the numbers. Couldn’t remember the order.”
“Did you hear about your mom’s week?” Aunt Barb asked me as we sat down around a dinner table.


“Oh, she almost got arrested.”

“What?!!” My cousin Stephanie and I asked at the same time.

“Oh, let me tell it! Mom called the cops on me,” my mom shared from across the table.

“Called the cops?!” Steph asked.

“Yea, because your Aunt Bev stole her knobs off the kitchen stove,” Aunt Red answered her daughter.

“And wouldn’t give back,” Ashley, Aunt Barbara’s oldest daughter added.

“On Tuesday I took Mom’s knobs off her stove because we’ve been worried about her and I didn’t want her to try and cook. She had a breakfast burrito and lunch both for the next day sitting in her fridge on the second shelf. I showed her right where it was and it’s where we always leave her lunch. Anyways, when I went back over to her house after work the next day, the knobs were back on the stove. She didn’t say anything. So, I didn’t say anything. But before I left, I took the knobs off, dropped ‘em in a Ziploc bag, stuck ‘em in my purse, and took ‘em home with me.”
“So, Thursday morning I’m working the window at work because Mackey’s out. I’m helping a customer when the phone rings. I excuse myself, answer the phone because I’m the only one there, and it’s Mom. I ask her if everything’s okay and she says in her high, tight voice ‘No, everything’s not okay! Someone’s stolen my kitchen knobs and I want whoever’s taken ‘em to bring ‘em back to my house and I want ‘em brought back NOW!’ She was so angry her voice was shaking by the time she got through. I explained that I have a customer at the window and I’m the only clerk, so I’ll have to call her back in a few minutes. Mom says ‘Whatever’ and hangs up.”

“She hung up on you?” Lindsey asked.

“Yea, so I finish with the customer, they leave, and next thing I know my work phone’s ringing again. And the voice on other end of the line says, Hello this is officer – no Sergeant So-and-So with the Huntland Police Department. Is this Mrs. Bradford’s daughter?”

“Did you say, it depends?” I interrupted. Laughter sounded from around our dinner table.

Our waiter brings our drinks.

“I didn’t know you had to take the knobs off twice,” Lindsey addressed Mom.

“Yea,” Ashley chimed in, “how’d Memaw find ‘em the first time?” Ashley asked.

“It was a pretty interesting week,” Mom answered.

* * *
At the end of our meal, we all lingered.

“The guys in the back were asking how many drinks y’all’ve had,” our waiter said as he passed out our tickets.

“Oh, my,” Aunt Barb said as she laughed.

“Told y’all we were loud,” Ashley said.

“Well, I’m always loud so.” Lindsey shrugged her shoulders.

“What’d you tell ‘em?” Aunt Red asked our waiter with a grin across her face.

“I said, ‘Let’s see, they’ve had eight waters and one diet Coke.’”

A chorus of laughter erupts from our table. We’re high on life and drunk on sunshine as my sister says. Well, tonight it’d be moonbeams, I guess. At Olive Garden, we’re all family like their restaurant’s motto says.

Or at least, we’re acting like it.