

## Going to Grandma's

Grandma had been trying to get me to visit her since my parents separated. "Not divorced, Brandon," my dad was quick to remind me when I saw him at Thanksgiving. My parents couldn't even split up in a normal way.

I knew something was wrong when my mom called me a month after I moved back into the dorm for my final year of Forestry at Paul Smith's. She'd called and told me she'd be a little farther away if I needed her; she had rented a house she'd found two hours south near Lake George. It was strange because she kept saying "I," not "we." "I found this beautiful Victorian four blocks from the lake. I'm moving in the first of the month." She'd made me ask about Dad. "Your father's going to stay in Wilmington," she'd said, like it was deciding what to eat for dinner. "We're just pursuing separate interests for awhile." It didn't make sense to me. What kind of interests could they have after twenty some years together that they would need to do separately?

“Your mother has always wanted to get her real estate license,” my dad had told me, getting on the phone. This was news to me. Mom had always been proud of our house—of her cheery gingham curtains in the kitchen and the birdbath in the back yard—but I’d never heard her say anything about selling houses, and I didn’t understand why she had to move to Lake George to get her license. “It’s her dream,” Dad had said, as if Mom were going to Africa to save the children. “I’m going to take up yoga.”

“I don’t understand,” I’d said, and I didn’t. My parents had always seemed happy enough together. Dad had a good job as an accountant in Wilmington. Why would Mom need a job? Why would Dad need yoga?

“We’re both happy about this, Brandon. We want you to know that,” Mom had said.

Dad had added, “It’s not a divorce. We just need to be apart for a while.”

“How long is a while?” I’d asked, hoping this would all be over by Christmas, or at least by graduation. The silence on the line told me I was out of luck.

Grandma called me the next day, asking if I was all right and inviting me over for some fresh baked cookies. She lived just a ten-minute drive from campus, but I’d had a test to study for and didn’t go to see her. “Brandon, I know things are hard for you right now. You can talk to your

old Gram," she had said sympathetically, but I didn't know quite what to say. She kept calling, with offers of meatloaf and chocolate cakes, or saying there were raccoons in her garbage or a clog in her drain.

Grandma finally got me down there when her power went out. It was a snowy Saturday in late January. We had accumulated about ten inches by four o'clock, and the plows hadn't been through in a couple of hours. The North Country plows were pretty good about digging us out of the snow, rolling by us where the two main roads cross. But the college itself was up a hill off the main roads, and we had to wait until some school employee in his quilted flannel coat and flap-eared hat ran his truck with a plow stuck to the front of it around campus roads.

This suited me fine, since I had a lot of studying to do. I was supposed to be reading four chapters for my land management class, but I had already lost interest in the first chapter and had been doodling in my textbook, adding a drowning man and a capsized raft to an earlier wave-like scribble. When the phone rang, I put my pen in my book to mark my spot. "Brandon?" my grandmother said when I picked up the phone. "Do you have lights up there?"

"Hi, Grandma. Yeah, we do."

My grandmother paused, and I could hear her swallow dryly on the other end. "Well," she said carefully, "I don't know if a tree downed a line or I blew a fuse. But my lights are out."

My grandmother lived in Lake Clear, in the house my mom had grown up in. It was a modest place, made more modest by disrepair, covered from top to bottom with slush-colored shingles and sheets of plastic stapled over its windows all winter long. Grandma had a little Chow mix that was fond of biting her if she fell asleep on the couch and an old wood stove that got so hot it practically cooked the food still in her cabinets. There was enough to worry about with my grandmother without her electricity getting cut off.

“How long has it been off?” I asked.

“I don’t quite know,” she said, clearing her throat. “I went to turn the TV on, and nothing happened. So I tried the light switch, just to see, and it didn’t work either. And now it’s getting dark.”

I looked out my dorm room window to where I’d parked my car on the back hill of campus. I could make out its shape under a heap of snow, the mounded top of it breaking through like the soft inside of a loaf of bread. “My car’s snowed in. Did you try one of your neighbors?”

“I called the Leary’s first, but they didn’t answer.”

“I don’t know if I can get down there, Gram. The whole campus hasn’t even been dug out yet. Last I checked, Route 30 hadn’t even been plowed.”

“Well, the plow came through here about ten minutes ago. It must be on its way up.”

"I guess." I slumped back in my desk chair, staring at my stack of books. I couldn't leave my grandmother alone without power, but I'd planned on at least four hours of studying that night. I flipped through the land management book to see how long the reading was. I had thirty pages from my drowning man doodle to the end of the chapter. I sketched a paddle floating in the river beside the drowning man.

"Listen, if you've got more important things to do than come help your grandma..."

It was like she could see what I was doing. "It's not that I have more important things." I put my book down. Beside it sat a paperweight my grandmother had given me when I started college, a glass globe with a pewter toad on top of it, the bumps of his skin carefully etched, his feet curled around the glass. My grandmother has a thing for frogs, and so she tends to buy other people gifts with frogs on them. I didn't have the heart to tell her that, technically, the bumpy skin of the frog on my paperweight indicated he was no frog at all. He was staring at me now, the toad, his cast metal eyes shaming me for my hesitancy to help my grandmother. I turned his face to the wall. "I was just studying."

"You're always so busy," my grandmother said. "You didn't even come at Christmas."

I didn't say anything. She knew I wasn't busy at Christmas. I'd gone ice fishing with some friends in Quebec rather than come home and deal with a replay of Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving day, I'd spent the

afternoon with my mom at her new house, watching her sip Chardonnay with some new real estate friends, her hair all teased out like an anchorwoman's. In the evening, when I'd visited my dad at home, I'd found him burning incense in the living room and wearing some kind of caftan. He'd had tofu simmering in a pan. I hadn't seen either of them since.

"It's getting hard to even see to light the fire in here." My grandmother's voice sounded so small I could almost picture her succumbing to hypothermia while I sat not answering her on the phone.

"I'll try to dig my car out, Grandma."

"Oh, thank you."

I heard the whir of the plow scraping by as I shoveled around my car in the snow. We were used to getting a foot of snow at a time, and in the winter you could nearly set your clock to the plows they came by with such regularity, scraping away what coated the road and tilling fresh sand in its stead. I drove the shovel in fits and starts to where the drive met Route 30, breaking the crest of newly-spattered plow dust that edged the turn. I was glad for my Subaru's all-wheel drive.

My parents had given me the Subaru when I was home over the summer. It was my mom's old car; a reliable sedan for the mountain roads. When Mom handed me the keys and told me to take it back to school with me, I'd figured she was just getting a new one. I'd spent the whole summer at home like I always did, working to maintain the

Adirondack trails. Everything had seemed normal, from the tourists to the black flies to quiet evenings on the front porch with my parents, talking weather and listening to the police radio out of Ray Brook for any mountain rescues. Now it felt like all that time, while my folks sat smiling on the porch swing and drinking lemonade to fend off the humid evenings, they were just pretending. Now my mom was zipping around Lake George in a bright gold GTO, and my dad was making his own snowshoes out of reeds.

I passed a few cars coming out of Lake Clear, then darkness. The sun had set behind the mountains and sure enough, there were no lights for the last quarter mile into town. I shined my brights, scanning for deer that may have taken the opportunity to come out and search for food, and let the car coast around the bend onto my grandmother's road.

Her windows glowed faintly with the warmth of a candle or an oil lamp. I pulled up as close as I could to the snow spray piled high at the roadside. Grandma's steps were still deep with snow, but she had swept off her porch. As I waded up where her walkway would be, I realized I how hungry I was. I hadn't eaten dinner, and I could taste the metallic edge of the snow in the air. I started hoping for a slice of Grandma's famous cherry pie.

"There you are." Grandma came out onto her porch in a robe the pink of the wintergreen candies she kept on her dresser. Behind her, I could hear her dog snarling. I stomped the snow off of my boots on the

porch mat. "I was afraid you might not get your car to start," my grandmother said, opening the door. Her little dog sniffed my boots as I entered the house, nipping at the leather. I nudged her away with my toe.

"The snow kept it warm. Still no lights?" The house was dark except for an old oil lamp on the dining room table, its round, glowing belly like a ripe apple.

"Not yet. I'm going to need some more wood soon to keep this fire going. Are you hungry?"

"Very," I said, glad that she had asked.

"I was just opening a can of corned beef hash, if you want some."

"That'll do."

My grandmother sat a cast iron skillet on top of the wood stove.

"I'll fry it up in a jiffy. You just get me that wood out back. Watch your step out there."

The sky was swimming with stars, a sliver of moon floating among them. I waded through snow to the woodshed, flipped the latch and rooted in the dimness for some dry logs. I had split those logs in the fall and stacked them tight, stretching a tarp over the top row to run the rain off. But Grandma had been pulling logs from the center of the stack, and the tarp and top layers of logs had fallen into a sharp wedge in the center of the woodshed, collecting rainwater instead. I filled my arms with what didn't feel so much damp as just cold, and did a balancing act up to the back porch. The creaking of the back steps was muffled under the snow,



and Grandma didn't hear me to get the door until I had half opened it with my shoulder.

"Here." She hurried over with a spatula still in her hand and pushed the door the rest of the way. "Dinner's almost done."

I set the logs down beside the stove. My cheeks were tingling as they thawed from the cold outside. I rubbed my hands over the stove and leaned my face in.

"Go sit down, Brandon. Take your coat off. You'll catch fire leaning all over the stove with a loose coat."

I put my coat across the back of a chair at the kitchen table and sat down. "Got any coffee?"

"No electricity, dear. I could make you some tea."

"No, thanks." Grandma had lit a candle and set it on the table. I turned it in my hands. *Bayberry*, the label read. I couldn't smell anything over the corned beef hash.

Grandma brought two plates to the table, her dog following all the time like one of the plates was going to be hers. I wondered if my grandmother let the dog eat at the table when no one was around. "Here you go," Grandma said, handing me a fork and a paper napkin. Her eyes aren't good even in adequate lighting; she nearly stabbed me in the ear with the fork. I picked it quickly from her fingers and scraped at the edge of my plate to get a good forkful of hash.

Grandma sat back in her chair with a sigh. "You'll have to get your Christmas presents, since you're here."

"Grandma, you didn't have to get me anything." I hadn't brought anything for her.

"Oh," she dismissed me with a wave of her hand. "Mine's just a card with some money in it, dear, like always. I don't do much shopping these days. But your mom left you a package. It's in the living room, so be sure you don't forget it when you leave."

I put down my fork. We were not going to talk about my parents. "Grandma, I'm eating."

"I don't want to forget to tell you."

"Yeah, well, it doesn't matter. I told them both I didn't need anything for Christmas this year."

"Brandon."

"What is it, a sweater?" My mom was always giving me sweaters, saying I needed to stay warm and that I'm hard to shop for.

"I didn't open it, dear."

"Well, I'm not taking it." I took a mouthful of hash. It was greasy and bland as it slid past my tongue.

Grandma chewed slowly, and I could tell even in the candlelight that she was disappointed in my answer. "Your mom really wishes you would talk to her. It broke her heart when you didn't come at Christmas. You could at least take your present."

“Gram—“

“I know this had been hard for you.” Grandma reached a hand across the table. “I don’t pretend to understand it myself. But they’re happy.” She pointed to a spider plant that hung in the corner of the room. “Your dad even brought that by New Year’s Day. Said it would help my funky sway.”

“I think you mean feng sui, Gram,” I said, and the thought of it made me mad again. “Was he wearing pants, at least?” Her expression told me he was in the crazy caftan. “They’re insane!” I banged my fork on my plate as punctuation.

Grandma wiped at her mouth with her napkin. I could feel her studying me. “This isn’t about you, Brandon. I hope you know that. This is about what your mother needs, and your father needs, and their lives.”

“But it is about me, too, isn’t it?” I shot back. “I’m their kid.”

Grandma took another bite of hash, then set her fork down on the edge of her plate. “Let me ask you something,” she said, still chewing. “Where are you planning to go, when you graduate this spring?”

I frowned. Grandma knew I was planning to work for the National Park Service. It had been what the past three and a half years of studying had been all about. “Wherever I can get in, Gram. Yellowstone, Joshua Tree, Shenandoah.”

“But you weren’t planning to go back and live at home, were you?”

“This isn’t a National Park, Gram.”

Grandma smiled at me, her hand patting the tabletop and making the candle flame dance. "So you just wanted your parents to go on with life, the same as always, even though you won't be there?"

She had a point, but I didn't like it. I ate another forkful of hash instead of answering.

"You wanted your parents to stay the same, even if you're not there to see it, just so that you know they're there? Even while you move on with your own life?"

"I'm the child!" I protested. "I'm supposed to change. It's not like I'm giving up everything I have to sit there chanting in a potato sack. I'm getting ready to go off into the world." I thought of how uncertain next year was; I didn't even know where I'd be. The mystery of my future was exciting, for sure, but that excitement seemed tempered by the changes around me. "It's bad enough I don't know where I'll be next year. Now I don't even know what kind of a home or family I'll have to return to."

"Everything's always changing, Brandon," Grandma said with a smile. "I'm an old woman; believe me, I know."

I was sure Grandma had seen plenty of change, but she didn't have to smile about it. "Not like this, Gram."

"You can't decide how other people change," Grandma said.

"And I don't have to talk to them, either."

The candle danced again and it reflected in Grandma's eyes, making her pupils dance like she was laughing at me. "That's not a very mature answer, Brandon."

"I don't care," I said. Grandma smiled at this, too, which made me even madder. I threw my napkin across my plate. "This is the worst hash I've ever tasted." I wouldn't have said it if I wasn't angry, but it was true.

In the flickering candlelight, my grandmother's expression changed from laughing to surprised. I thought for a moment she might cry, and wished I hadn't opened my big mouth.

Grandma cleared her throat and said, "You think so, too?"

"Maybe it's bad or something." I got up from the table, glad to talk about something else and eager to wash out the waxy film coating my mouth.

"It's the same kind as always," Grandma insisted, getting up to examine the can. "Where'd I put my glasses?"

I turned labels on cartons in the darkened fridge until I found some fruit punch and poured myself a glass. I drank it over the sink. Grandma fumbled around in the dark, knocking the can opener to the ground and finally finding her reading glasses on the counter top.

"See if there's an expiration date on there," I said, taking another swig of punch.

"Oh, Brandon." With a whir, the fridge started up and the lights popped on.

“There we go, Gram. You got your lights back,” I said, turning to my grandmother. She was holding an empty can by the wood stove, and her face was still grim.

“Brandon.” In the light, the red-brown label didn’t say “hash,” but “Alpo.”

I started feeling really ill. “Grandma, is that the hash we just ate?” She said, “I thought it tasted funny.”

I could feel the slime of the dog food stuck in my throat and lumped up in my stomach. I poured more fruit punch and rinsed my mouth with it, spitting florescent red into the porcelain basin of the sink.

“I could have sworn it was a can of hash.” Grandma was turning cans in her cupboard, returning to the scene of the crime.

“You keep the dog’s food in the same cabinet with yours?”

She gave me a stern look. “Where else am I supposed to put it?”

“I don’t know. Make a space for it.”

“All my canned goods go in this cupboard,” Grandma said. It was exasperating, how matter-of-fact she was, like she hadn’t just fed me dog food. “Let me fix you something else.”

“No, Grandma, I’m going to go. Your lights are back on, you’ve got more wood.”

“At least have a cup of coffee, now that I can run the coffeemaker.”

I already had my coat on and was past her to the living room. “I’ve got to get some studying done.”

"Are you sure you have to leave so soon?" Grandma followed me to the door, wiping her hands on her apron. I was sure. I wanted to get back to my toothbrush and scour the insides of my mouth, scrub away the slick, fatty coating of dog food from my teeth. I didn't want to talk about my parents any more.

"See you soon, Gram."

"Thank you for coming, dear." She gave me a hug and her little dog started yipping like crazy, wedging between our ankles. "You come for a proper visit sometime."

"I will."

"I'll make you a cherry pie, and we can sit and chat."

I forced a smile; even the thought of Gram's famous cherry pie couldn't quell the nauseous pinch in my stomach.

"I almost forgot," Grandma said. "Your card and your mother's present." She went to the top of the TV and picked up an envelope and a soft form wrapped in wrinkled layers of tissue paper my mom had probably used to pack things when she'd moved.

I took the envelope and put it in my coat pocket, pulling my hands back from the bunched up ball of a package. "I don't want it."

She pushed it into my hands, holding her thumbs over mine. "Just take it, Brandon." Her faded blue eyes swelled behind her glasses, a fishbowl effect. "Quit fighting with your old Gram."

The package bunched in my fingers. "It is a sweater, isn't it?"

Grandma raised her eyebrows to the top of her glasses frames. "Maybe there are still some things you can count on to be the same, after all," she said. The corners of her mouth curled with affection. "Maybe even with all these changes, your parents still love you just like they always did."

I looked down at the bundle in my hand. It was an object, just a present, and it couldn't make those kinds of promises to me. "Stay warm, Gram," I said, tucking the present under my arm to get out my car keys. She closed the door behind me, the springs of the screen door squeaking as it shut.

It was snowing again as I got in my car. I tossed my mom's present onto the passenger's seat and went to start the car, then let the keys hang from the ignition, unturned. I picked the package up again, and peeled back the tape, tearing into the paper to reveal the nubbly wool underneath: a sweater. A forest green, wooly sweater, the color my mom always said brought out the green in my eyes, though I always thought they just looked blue. A thick, wooly sweater, the kind I liked to wear around campus in the winter, the bunch of the weave keeping me warm on my walk to classes.

I remembered my mom asking me last winter if I was staying warm enough because she worried that the dorms were drafty. Then, I thought of the way she had laughed with her new friends on Thanksgiving, her nails glossy with red polish she had never worn before. I thought of my



dad humming to a CD of Gregorian chants as he flipped his tofu in a pan. I burped and tasted dog food.

I looked back at Grandma's house, at her little front windows with the plastic flapping in the wind. The bluish light of her TV flashed against the sliver of her living room wall visible through her curtains. I sat and watched her life go on and held the sweater in my hands. We were all changing, like Grandma had said, whether we wanted to or not. Who knew how long she would even be able to live by herself, or even be alive. Who knew where I'd be after graduation, or five years down the road.

Snowflakes swirled, dancing in the streetlight. In an hour, everything would be buried, tire tracks covered, my car back under the snow. The layer of white would mask all of it, from campus to Lake Clear, to Wilmington and maybe even Lake George. It could be like nothing happened: another Christmas, another sweater, the changes covered up, softened for a while. Maybe when it all melted away I'd be ready to come back out and see where the roads went that had been hidden underneath.

End