Funeral for Max and Greta

Okay: Max and Greta, right? My grandparents on my mother's side. He was 98 and she was 97. Max died first—cardiopulmonary infarction, a fancy way to say "heart attack"—and Greta punched her last ticket the very next night. *That's so sweet in its way. They loved each other so much, so endeared to one another*—that's the sort of thing friends and family were saying. Aunt Paula wrote to everyone in this group email, drawing it to a close with *Bless her, sweet Greta died of a broken heart.*

My sister Carmen—and bless her, bless Carmen, that's who I think deserves a blessing here, just for being the way she is and coming out with it—called me up and said, "Clark—dude—did you see this shit? From Aunt Paula?"

"Yeah, I saw it."

Even over the phone—me in Washington, D.C. and Carmen all the way out in her little island house on Puget Sound—I could feel her eyes rolling, I could feel it.

"Fuckin *'broken heart'*?"

"I know."

"You know there was enough oxycodone in that house to kill a rhino?"

"I know."

"And she told me she was ready to go. That she was just sticking around for him."

"She'd been saying that for years."

"And at Cleo's wedding?"

"I know."

I heard the raspy click of a lighter as Carmen lit up and drew in breath around a fresh cigarette. "Aunt Paula with all that crying? Jesus, who cries and goes on like that? At a wedding? That's the kind of shit they'd reject on a soap opera. *'Don't say that! You can't die, Greta! You can't die!'* Who does that?"

The scene came pulsing back—cousin Cleo's June wedding four years ago, Max still in the hospital from his first heart attack—and I cringed at the memory of Aunt Paula. So much turquoise jewellery, so many beads in all that hair, pressing a hand to her chest with a wrist full of silver bracelets, rattling like a tea set. I push it back but still see her, the mask of her face, wet mascara pooling in the rims of her eyes. *'You're my heart,'* she said—she actually said that—*'and you can't die.'*

"I know," I said, moving the memory aside, willing it away. "I know, I know, I know."

"Grandma Greta was no bullshit. She told you what was up. And all she said to Paula was that she was ready to go. 'I'm ready to go,' that's all."

There was a pause then, and in the same way I could feel her eyes rolling, I could feel her thinking.

"It's like I already miss Greta," she said. "She had that photograph of Amelia Earhart. With that quote."

"*I fly better than I wash dishes,*" I said, seeing the framed photo she'd had for as long as I could remember. It was right at eye-level when you walked in the kitchen, Earhart gripping the wing strut of her biplane, wearing goggles and a leather flight cap, giving the thumbs up with a gloved hand.

"Max wasn't exactly chilled," a laugh in Carmen's voice on the last word.

"No, he was not." The thought of him, right then, was like stirring a drop of food colouring in a clear glass of water, the rush of memories coalescing into a remarkable image that I could not ignore. His face, suspended against a black field, floating in smoke like the Wizard of Oz. If you took a hand axe and chopped a face out of wood? It'd sort of be like that.

"Dude was intense," said Carmen.

"I know," I said.

Greta, for much of her life, never ventured far from the city where she grew up. She was in her fifties before she ever fastened a seat belt or raised a tray table on a commercial

airliner. But Max came from Germany. He grew up in a farming town that doesn't exist anymore, and there was always uncertainty about exactly when he'd arrived in the United States. 1928? 1938? The story changed, sometimes making him seven years old, sometimes seventeen, but either way, he never lost his accent. Pointing to the contestants on *The Price is Right* with his open hand, you could hear him from the next room. *'Vas is this bullsheet? No one pays this for digital radio receiver, no one pays this sum.'* But one detail about his crossing never changed: He came to the United States in the cargo hold of an iron steam ship. Goddamn. A steam ship.

I'm skipping ahead here, but at the funeral reception (Or is it still called a wake? Do people still say that?) I stood close enough to hear Carmen speaking with Aunt Paula. I could tell how Carmen was feeling from the way she tightened her shoulders. I moved down the table, scooping hummus on my plate as I edged nearer to the two of them. Aunt Paula did a lot of talking with her hands, and I could see them darting about like minnows in a stream before she touched Carmen on the arm. "They carried the whole of old Europe across their backs. The two of them."

There was a rise in Carmen's voice before it settled. "Greta was born in Chicago. She hardly ever left the city."

Paula smiled. "In a larger sense, they all did. Their whole generation."

"I'm not—are you saying—what does that even mean? *'In a larger sense'*?"

"Those traditions, all that history. They shared the burden. A generational burden."

"A generational burden? That's…huh," she said, looking away as she nodded. She paused, shifting her tack. "David tells me you're making your own candles now."

"The Inner Light Collective, we call it. I render my own vegetable tallow."

"Huh," said Carmen.

"It's vegan," she explained.

I bit into a celery stick, heavy with dip.

Carmen forced a smile. “That is…well, that’s just super,” she said, her head counting beats like a metronome. “Just super.”

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When our parents were splitting up in a nastier sort of divorce—I was eight, which made Carmen ten—the two of us spent a summer with Max and Greta in Chicago. Their house was modest, but clean and well-appointed. I remember walking up the driveway, side by side with my sister, and lugging a suitcase with a broken wheel. Greta met us at the door, wrapping the pair of us in a huge hug, and led us to the dinner table. Mac and cheese with bits of hot dog. And chocolate milk. Greta did a crossword puzzle while we ate, glancing over with warm smiles.

We could see Grampa Max talking to mom outside in the driveway. Carmen claims that she saw him take out his wallet and pass her a thin stack of bills through the passenger side window of our silver hatchback. But what I remember is the sound of her backing out of the drive, the low thrum of the muffler receding down the street.

He came in and stood to the side of the dinner table, hands clasped behind his back. Adults always seem taller in a child’s memory, larger, but Max really was a big guy. He wasn’t just built like a dock worker, he was a dock worker, with broad shoulders that filled a doorway and legs as thick as tree trunks.

He was silent for a moment before he spoke. “I take the bags to your room now.” Then he walked up the steps, a suitcase in each hand.

You could say that Max Hasenkamp was a man of few words. You could say he was stoic. Taciturn. Not known for sentimental expressions of warmth or emotional generosity, you could say.

Greta looked up from her puzzle, smiling and kind. “We’re both so pleased to have you here,” she said, her eyes ranging to where her husband trailed off up the stairs. “Both of us,” she added, turning back to her crossword and filling in the blanks.

That night there was a terrific storm; lightning that lit up the whole bedroom in pulsing white flashes. Carmen and I were both awake.

“I’m going downstairs,” she said, and I followed her down to the front room. We stood watching the storm through the big bay window, raindrops the size of grapes and thunder that shook the windowpanes. “It’s crazy out there,” she said. “Just look at it.”

The lightning flashed again, turning the window into a weird, black mirror. Whenever I’ve told this story to other people, this is the part where they say ‘…and he was standing right behind you.’

And of course he was.

Dressed in a black bathrobe and looming in the reflection, his head was suspended in mid-air. The lines in his skin were craggy and deep, his nose a fierce concentration of clashing angles, and his whole face was huge—wide and huge and bigger than god’s.

We were more than startled, scared we might be in trouble, that we’d broken some unknown rule.

Max pointed at the window, at the storm. The robe’s thick sleeve hung from his arm like heavy black drapes, and in that singular moment he was a wizard in a stone tower. The thunder boomed again, rolling through the whole house. “We call it the sound of the Devil,” he told us. “The sound of the Devil beating his horse.”

We stared at him, breath frozen. Carmen’s eyes were like circles cut from paper.

“We say this in German,” he said. “This sounds different in German.”

It scared the hell out of us in English, and it was a long time before either of us got to sleep that night, even after the storm had passed.

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Carmen picked me up from the airport on the day before the funeral. “Look in the glove box,” she said.

I opened it to find a manila envelope. Inside was a postcard from Barcelona: a picture of that Gaudi church with its curved and pointed spires towering over the nave, the apse, the narthex, and all those architectural vocab words they quiz you on at Catholic school.

I flipped it over. Apart from an unmarked Spanish postage stamp in the upper right corner, the card was blank.

I held it up, a sort of visual question mark. “What’s the story with this?”

“I meant to send that to her,” she said, “to Greta.”

I slipped it back into the envelope. “What happened?”

She turned off the interstate, easing the car along the gentle slope of the exit ramp. “Life happened,” she said. “You know how it is.”

We drove along the surface road, stopping at a red light. It was dark, getting late, and we were the only car at the intersection. She leaned back in her seat, looking straight ahead with one hand casually draped over the top of the steering wheel and the other supporting her head, tilted to the side. “I’m gonna put it in her casket. Send it off with her.”

“They let you do that?”

“I don’t know if they ‘let’ you,” she said, “but I’m doing it.”

“Are you putting anything in with Max?”

The light turned green and we moved through the intersection. “I didn’t think about it,” she said, checking her side mirror as she made a right on Farrington.

“Did you ever wonder what she saw in him?” I asked. “I mean, they were married for like sixty-five years.”

“Sixty-seven years,” she corrected. “Any marriage, you can’t be sure…how can you really know, unless you’re right there in it? Inside it.”

“I know, right?”

She moved her head in a slow, measured nod. “The dude was intense.”

I shifted to the side, forehead pressed to the window. The night glow from the city was gauzy and dim through the spot where my breath hit the glass. We drove on for longer,

bumping over a set of railroad tracks, then turned down a small gravel road that I remembered well. We both did.

I turned to her then—one shoulder arched a bit higher than the other—and said, "You're sure this is—I don't know—acceptable? Staying at Max and Greta's cottage?"

Carmen looked at me sideways. "Acceptable? Why wouldn't it be?"

I blinked at her. "Well…because they're dead."

"Clark," she assured me, in very much her Big-Sister-explaining-things-to-Little-Brother tone, "I'm quite sure it's all more than acceptable. Aunt Paula gave me the key. Besides, it's not like they own it anymore."

"And why's that?" I said.

And then she blinked at me—a blink followed by a curious squint. "Because they're dead, dude. Just like you say."

Max and Greta's cottage was on a small lake about an hour outside of the city. Like their home, it was small but well kept. We lit a fire. We draped blankets over our shoulders and sat on the floor, tapping cigarette ash into the mouth of a Schlitz beer can as we laughed and talked and polished off two bottles of wine.

"I'm gonna sleep out here," she told me, settling into the couch and pulling a second blanket up to her chin. "You take the bed."

"You sure?" My eyes were big, my chin lowered, affecting a puppy dog stare without even thinking.

She extended a hand from beneath the blanket, presented a tight fist, and popped out her middle finger. "Just stop with the eyes."

I stood and stepped to the bedroom, returning with an extra pillow.

Her eyes were half closed. It was getting late and I was feeling it, too.

"I think it's cool that you're slipping that postcard to Greta," I told her. "You're cool for doing that."

"I know I am," she said, smiling as she faded off. "Cooler than you, anyway."

I didn't get to sleep right away, hazy from the wine but not tired. Propped up on my elbow, I leafed through a magazine. *Conde Nast Traveller*, out of date by at least two presidential administrations. Carmen snored—and loudly—a habit she'd denied her whole life. *"I don't snore,"* she'd snap, but it wasn't her snoring that kept me awake.

I got up and put on a jacket and shoes, legs comically bare and goosebumped in the cold. Carmen's snore was like the last bit of dishwater gurgling down the drain, and she did not stir as I passed through and went out the front door, into the dark.

Max had a workshop that stood on the side yard, a detached shed no bigger than a one-car garage. The key was kept under the doormat—of course it was—and I felt for the light switch with the flat of my palm. I hadn't been inside the workshop for years, but it was the same as I remembered. Ordered and linear, not a thing out of place. The workbench was well-lit. Heavy red toolboxes with stainless steel clasps flanked both ends of the bench, the work surface clean enough to serve high tea. He had mounted a two-by-four to the bottom of a cabinet, and a row of baby food jars hung down like the lightbulbs on a stage actor's vanity mirror, attached to the plank by their lids. Filled with nails and screws and bits of hardware, a thin rectangle of white athletic tape was pressed to each jar and marked with what was certainly a fine point black Sharpie (a half dozen of the markers—all black—stood in a plastic cup next to a tape measure). **WIRE BRADS**, they read, written in his precise and unfaltering script. **HEX CAP SCREWS, WASHERS, EYE BOLTS.**

I backed away from the bench and let my eyes take in the whole room. Lining the wall to the left were rows of evenly stacked cardboard boxes, each of those bearing a label, as well.

CAMPING SUPPLIES

XMAS DECORATIONS

NAT GEO (JAN '79 – DEC '85)

"Dude was intense," I said, with no one to hear me but myself.

My thoughts drifted and doubled back, filling in the blanks with brushstrokes of memory and taking me back to that summer years before. I remember it was late in August, in that handful of days at the end of summer that are shorter and cooler at night, when summer is downshifting into autumn.

Carmen and I were riding out to the cottage with Max and discovered that the place was infested with field mice. They'd gnawed open a sleeve of saltine crackers and spilled them across the kitchen table. Most of the mice scampered like mad the moment a human foot touched the floor, but one of the whiskery little things was still there in plain view, poised atop a cracker stealing quick bites from its salted edge. The mouse looked like a kid sitting on a beach towel. Carmen said, "Look," and then it bolted, disappearing behind the stove.

My grandfather bent down and picked up what must have been mouse droppings, squeezing the crud between his fingers. "Each year they come," he said, "these mouses."

"Mice," said Carmen.

"Yes. Mices." He stood and addressed the two of us. "Vait here," he said, and headed out the door to his work shed.

He returned a moment later, armed with a paper sack. He held the bag open, showing us the sort of old-fashioned mousetraps made with a coiled spring, a metal bar, and a wooden base, like the kind of thing you'd see in a Tom & Jerry cartoon.

The interior of the cottage was suffused with muted light, like a dream scene shot in soft focus, a thin layer of sheer fabric stretched over a camera lens, making it feel like dusk even though it was the middle of the day. It was also very quiet, save for the song of distant birds, but after a moment you could hear something else.

A scratching sound, a faint skittering in the walls.

"You hear that?" my sister said.

Max tilted his head. "Yes, yes...the sound of vermin," he said. "There are vermin in the larder." We then went about baiting and setting the traps, putting them under the sofa and behind the refrigerator, carefully hiding them near the dark and tiny places where mice are known to tread. We used peanut butter as bait.

Later that week, we returned to the cottage, my sister and I eagerly checking the traps. Of the dozen or so we'd set, three bore the fruit of dead mice. The last trap we checked was a different story, though. There was something else in that trap, something larger and darker and clearly not a mouse.

It was a rat. And it was not dead.

The trap had sprung and pinned the rodent across the middle, the metal bar crushing its abdomen but leaving its front paws and pointed head free to move around. The rat was very much alive and alert when we found it. I remember reading somewhere, years later, that a rat can live for more than fourteen days without food or water. Its black eyes were like tiny drops of oil, darting in every direction as its paws scrambled in a desperate but hopeless attempt to escape.

My grandfather dropped to one knee and put his hands on his hips. He looked at the rat with a squinted eye, the same way you might look at something through a microscope. He made a clucking noise with his tongue, his way of saying *'Hmmm,'* and asked out loud, to no one in particular, "Vhat to do, vhat to do?" Carmen and I could not stop staring at the twitching, frantic rat.

After a long moment, my grandfather stood up and took a step closer. "Here is the thing to do," he said, putting the thick heel of his work boot on top of the rat's skull and I can still hear that noise. I can still hear that wet and sickening crunch even today, even now, like egg shells cracking on a marble countertop, like celery stalks snapping in half.

"That is what we do," he announced, giving a small and matter-of-fact nod. "That is what we do with rats."

His boot still covered the dead rat's head, a thin trickle of blood oozing from beneath his heel. My sister and I were silent, and for a second I couldn't even move. I looked up at him. He loomed large over me—over all of us—and stood like a bear in the mouth of a cave.

And did I mention his face? That it was bigger than god's?

Because I should've mentioned that. Because it was.

*****

Carmen tapped on the bathroom door. “We’re rolling, Gladys. Get your curlers out and let’s hit it.”

I straightened my tie. “Motor’s running,” she said, the screen door creaking shut.

She was drumming her fingers on the steering wheel as I came around the side of the cottage. I slid into the passenger seat and gave her a smile.

Carmen hit me with a look, eyebrows arched as high as they could go. “What took you so long?” She put it in drive and we took off bumping up the rutted gravel road. “We’ve got miles to make, man. It’s all the way across town.”

I couldn’t help smiling.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I said. “It’s just…you’re a good sister.”

I was wrong about the eyebrows—they arched up even higher than before, her face looking like she smelled a carton of bad milk. She gave a nervous laugh. “What’s with you? Are you gonna ask me for a kidney or something?”

“I’m glad you’re my sister,” I told her. “Can’t I just say that? You’re my favourite sister.”

“I’m your only sister,” she reminded me.

“Even still.”

She brushed a stray lock of hair from her forehead and quickly checked her face in the rear view mirror. “For real, what took you so long back there? What were you doing?”

I touched a hand to the pocket of my suit jacket. “There was something I had to get.”

“Well, did you get it? Whatever it was?”

“I got it,” I said. “The funeral’s at eleven, right?”

Carmen glanced at her phone. “We’ll be fine.”

We drove on for a bit in silence, each of us, I imagine, thinking of Max and Greta in our own ways. When we reached the intersection at Farrington and idled at the red light, Carmen turned her head and gave me a quick once over.

“You pull together ok,” appraising me with a nod and a glance. “You look good in a suit. You look cool.”

“I know I do,” I said breaking into a smile. “Cooler than you, anyway.”

What can you say about a funeral ceremony for two people in their late nineties? That it was respectable? That it was sombre? Quiet and reserved, but not melodramatic or gloomy. I mean, look: they had their share of health problems near the end—Max with his heart, Greta with her hip and bad eyes—but they didn’t linger on, suffering. They had a good run, they had full lives. They were ready to go.

Try telling Aunt Paula that, though. She was the first person we saw when we entered the church, standing next to our mother right in the middle of the narthex (thank you very much, third grade spelling bee at St. Margaret’s Catholic Elementary School) clutching a handful of rosary beads and openly sobbing beneath the high, vaulted ceiling.

Paula drifted over from across the vestibule, seeming to almost float just above her airy, floor-length skirts. She spread her arms out and enveloped the two of us in an unsanctioned group hug. Carmen, like a department store mannequin, visibly stiffened at her touch, her neck at a sharp angle.

Paula shut her eyes and lowered her head, speaking in a stage whisper. “They’ve become part of eternity now. It’s not for us to understand. We need to embrace it. Embrace the unknown.”

There was a shift in Carmen’s face. Her eyes narrowed and her mouth flashed open as she drew in breath, gearing up to unload—but I stopped her before she could. I caught her with a pleading look, locking eyes and shaking my head.

She blinked at me and we let the hug happen. “Embrace the unknown,” I repeated, nodding at Carmen until I saw her jaw close on its hinge, and let myself be drawn into Aunt Paula’s bear hug, breathing in the scented oils of her earthy perfume. “Become part of eternity,” I said, smiling with my eyes and almost believing it—almost—for just half a second.

Max and Greta were positioned in their coffins, side by side, at the open space before the altar. We formed an orderly line of procession and I took my place behind Carmen.

She bent closer to Greta, whispering something that I couldn't hear as she slipped the postcard into the casket, looking back at me as she did. I wouldn't say that she was crying—not Carmen, no way—but the light caught her eyes and her eyes were wet.

I moved into the gap between the two caskets, paid my respects to Greta, then turned my attention to Max.

It doesn't matter what I said to him—to either of them—it really doesn't.

Not what I said, but what I did. Maybe that matters.

I took a mousetrap out of my pocket—a mousetrap I found in his workshop that morning, from a box labelled **MOUSETRAPS**—and I slipped it inside the breast pocket of his navy blue suit.

The sun was bright as we exited the church, like walking out of a movie theatre in the afternoon, and the drone of the interstate hummed all around us. Carmen put a hand on my shoulder as we neared the car, ready to drive to the reception.

"Did you put something in with him?" she said. "You did, didn't you?"

"Maybe," I told her.

She looked at me from over the roof of the car, standing on her toes and straining for eye contact. "What was it," she said. "What'd you put in?"

"Embrace the unknown, Carmen," and gave her another quiet smile as I got in the car. "Embrace the unknown."