

An Hour Like This One

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1

Fifteen feet away, through the open door of the room my grandfather liked to call his "study", the room in which he spent much of his time and kept most of his clothes, I can see my eighty-seven-year-old grandmother sitting on a black Naugahyde recliner. She is dressed in a blue silk blouse and gray pants and – if it's possible to strike a pose while sitting on a black Naugahyde recliner – her posture is prim, her dignity manifest. Her hair – dyed every other week by her caretaker – remains the light golden brown of her youth.

And yet, something is awry. I'm standing here and she's staring into space. As if she hasn't seen me yet or heard me come in, is still waiting for me to show up even though I'm already here, in the front hall of the apartment on Kalakaua Avenue, suitcase in hand.

Making a mental note to adjust her hearing aids for her in the morning, I step into the room.

Now she looks up. Face pure confusion, weak blue eyes quavering – until recognition comes like a sweet memory, and she smiles and calls out my name.

2

The night he died, my grandfather got up from his side of the bed and shuffled around to hers. She looked up and saw him there in the darkness. He mumbled something about his leg hurting, and then his heart gave out and he fell on top of her.

3

They were married for sixty years. For the first thirty they lived a grand life: at one time or another my grandfather was president of Standard Oil's operations in Panama, Colombia, Brazil, Cuba, Spain, Argentina. There were enormous apartments and houses, servants, cars and drivers, trips abroad; money was made and spent, powerful people known and dined with, attention paid and received. It was in many ways an unlikely life for a dentist's daughter from Rutland, Vermont and the son of a Kansas City pharmacist. But it was the life he had imagined for them.

They were an odd, if fitting, combination: Tippy, who never believed in herself, and Don, who never doubted himself – or if he'd once doubted himself, never looked back on that self. I have never heard a happy story about her childhood, but I used to hear many, from him, about his. The unconscious link between these stories was that even from earliest boyhood his happiness was tied to a vision of himself as a dashing man of action who looked good and didn't sit around, the sort of fellow who could never be stopped once he set his sights on something. It was a vision so vivid that it carried the weight of fact; in his own mind there was no question, no doubt, that he would make his mark on the world. This was the Big Picture, the overall game plan, and my grandfather was a man for whom every occurrence in his life was taken as confirmation of the game plan. As a boy, he used to tell people that he was saving up his money to buy a pony-skin coat and a candy-striped suit (hot commodities back then, in Boonville, one can only surmise). And at sixteen, when the coat and suit had failed to materialize, he and a couple of pals bought an old Model A Ford and struck out West, driving from Missouri to Wyoming, where they spent the summer laying rail and living in an abandoned boxcar.

These are the really good stories, the ones that make me smile. No hubris in these stories, just a boyish confidence. He is, in these stories, someone you might recognize. As he was ten or so years later when – a student by then at Harvard Law – he met a beautiful, sublimely meek Smith graduate named Mary Burnham Pond. This story he must have told me

dozens of times. A story no longer innocent exactly, but still charming: how that first night, following a party at the D.U. house, they all drove around Cambridge in someone's car, so many people along for the ride that Tippy (Mary's nickname) ended up sitting on his lap. How that very night he asked her to marry him -- no, not asked, *told*: I'm going to marry you. Anyway, the story goes, she laughed.

This was his story. I have never heard it from her.

There's another story that I never heard from her. Before that night in Cambridge, before the D.U. house and the ride in the car and the seat on the impressionable lap of Don Carlos Dunaway, my grandmother had been in love with another man, his name now lost. She thought she would marry this other man. She thought so right up to the moment he jilted her and broke her heart.

Which led to marriage and the grand life.

4

Like most patches of bad news in my grandfather's life, the reasons for his firing by Standard Oil are murky. Though it's safe to say that personality was the lead factor; that what had early in his career been accepted as a dynamic, gung-ho, straight-shooting business style, over the years came to be seen by the Head Office as arrogance, recalcitrance, and rudeness. More and more he was thought of as a difficult man to work with, a loose canon. So they called him back to New York. And then, with shocking quickness, it was over for him at Standard Oil; they didn't even give him a pension. And though he eventually found other jobs in the oil business, by his mid-fifties there was no more work, and he found himself prematurely and somewhat bitterly retired.

Which brings us to the Second Thirty Years of my grandparents' life together, when for a while they lived half the time in Circeo, Italy, because it was lovely and still cheap, and the other half in a one-bedroom apartment on the Upper East Side, just a few blocks from where I grew up. I used to see them often, played shuffleboard and handball with my grandfather in Central Park (in those days he wore a beret; he also, I remember, cheated), and when I was

seven my family spent a vacation in the Circeo house ("villa", my grandfather called it), which was made up of three connected small structures, each one a perfect circle.

Then they sold the house in Italy and bought in Manzanillo, Mexico, a thin-walled condo near a beach club where, if you were old enough, you could pass the day drinking beer in a bar submerged in the pool.

My grandfather, however, didn't drink. Since his retirement, he had begun to rely again on the bizarre, improbable Christian Science teachings of his Missouri childhood. The hard-drinking and abrasive businessman had become a sober, God-fearing former oilman. In his quick blind fall from the stratosphere of power and expense-account luxury, my grandfather had been transformed into a man who couldn't bring himself to spend a dime on anyone.

It was during this period that I first realized that my grandparents had no friends. I must have been about twelve. I didn't know if they'd ever really had friends, but when, a few months earlier, I'd written a twenty-page biography of my grandfather for a school project, had interviewed him extensively and heard firsthand accounts of all the highlight-reel parts of his life, the lavish trips and big deals and derring-do, golfing with Sam Snead and dining with the Somozas (my grandfather, it must be said, had no real sense of irony – or, for that matter, of history) – well, back then it had certainly seemed to me, a boy, that the man who'd lived that life must have had more friends than he knew what to do with. Now, older and necessarily better acquainted with the more virulent strains of ambition, it seems to me quite possible to say that by the time my grandfather reached middle age he had no instinct left for friendship; no memory, even, of what it once had felt like.

It's strange, but what I recall most distinctly about those years in Mexico is that the roast chicken my grandmother served for dinner (her specialty) didn't taste a thing like the roast chicken I'd grown up eating in their apartment in New York: these birds were hairy and scrawny and sad, as if they'd run a long way just to be killed. My grandmother seemed to understand this. The

expression of apology that was almost always on her face held the still sadder suggestion that no one was to blame, this was just how things were.

After dinner, the three of us would sit reading: my grandfather with *Barron's* and the *Wall Street Journal* (his wildly speculative investments in the stock market had become – and would remain until the end of his life – his compulsion), my grandmother and me with novels. Tippy was suffering from cataracts, and held the book so close to her face that it hurt to watch her.

5

My first night in Honolulu, I'm woken at 3 A.M. by a loud clattering noise coming from the kitchen. I stumble out of bed in my underwear, sweaty and drugged by jet lag, to find my grandmother in the kitchen, unloading the dishwasher in her nightgown.

"Nonna," I half-shout, because I've noticed she doesn't have her hearing aids in.

She looks up at me as if we're two neighbors running into each other at the post office. "Oh, you're awake too?"

She goes back to unloading dishes.

"Well..." I say uncertainly. "Goodnight."

I'm heading out of the kitchen when she pauses, anxiety twisting her face. "You'll help me tomorrow, won't you, dearie?"

I walk over and kiss her cheek, hold her. "That's why I'm here."

6

We begin next morning. A box of extra large trash bags and the day stretched ahead, hot, a Kona wind blowing. We enter my grandfather's study, one entire wall of which is closet, with sliding wooden doors. Built into the middle of the closet is a set of drawers. Hanging on either side of the drawers are perhaps two dozen brown garment bags in brown and black, sturdy bags from another era, and a couple of white, quilted multi-hangered bags for storing suits. It's

all very orderly. There are paper notes pinned to the bags, written in pencil in my grandmother's hand.

I unzip one marked *Winter Suits*.

A few feet away, my grandmother slides open the closet's other door and begins pulling out white and blue shirts on hangers.

Gently I stop her. I tell her how I'd like to go about the job of sorting through my grandfather's clothes: I'd like her to sit on the black recliner (actually, in the room there are two black recliners, identical, lined up side by side, bought used and on sale by my grandfather, his very favorite furniture) while I take each item out of the closet and hold it up for her to see. Possibly I will try things on. Then I will fold the clothes and put them into piles for keeping, or garbage bags for giving away to the Church thrift shop. It's more efficient if I do it alone, I tell my grandmother who, seated obediently now on the black Naugahyde recliner, responds with a nod. She seems calm enough. But beneath the surface I can sense her panic. She's afraid we will run out of time. Afraid that when this day is done, and then the weekend, when Monday comes and I have to return to New York, that her husband's clothes will still be here, hanging in the closet. She is also afraid that they will not be here.

Though in many ways, I realize, she is better prepared for this task than I am. Better prepared for the clothes, I mean, more aware of the inventory. Because I have never seen most of these clothes before. They are clothes from the First Thirty Years, and the man who bought and wore them was a man I'd heard much about but never known. He was a storybook figure, debonair, free-spending, hard-drinking, a mover and a shaker, a fellow smack dab in the center of the show, leaving his mark.

No one I'd ever met.

The man I'd met, the man I knew and loved, the man who bought milk on sale and taught me to cheat at shuffleboard, the man who'd sit all day in his car on a hot New York street reading the newspaper rather than lose his parking place – that man lived perpetually in the sub-tropics and wore cheap

white shoes and cheap slacks and white belts and Polyester shirts. For the last thirty years of his life. That man was my grandfather.

He owned eight cashmere sportcoats, sixteen winter sportcoats in a variety of patterns (checks, houndstooth), ten winter-weight wool suits, ten summer-weight wool suits, eighteen pairs of pants, forty-two shirts from Locatelli in Rome, eight overcoats (Burberry, Aquascutum), four raincoats, two silk tuxedos with additional Palm Beach jacket in white silk, one wool tuxedo, thirty-two pairs of handmade Italian shoes (ostrich, alligator), forty French linen handkerchiefs, twenty-eight pairs of dress socks, and three cashmere bedjackets.

For thirty years, he never, ever, put on anything that wasn't custom-made.

7

None of it fits me. Everything is too short, too wide. One after another, I try on the sportcoats and watch the sleeves rise inches above my wrist, and my grandmother's face sags with disappointment. The little room begins to grow crowded with black garbage bags bellied out with clothes. Finally, I haul the bags out to the front hall and pile them by the front door.

Returning to the study, I discover my grandmother standing in the closet pulling shirts and pants off hangers. I ask her to stop but she can't. Her hands grasp and touch her husband's clothes. Her voice trembles. "So beautiful," she murmurs, holding a cashmere jacket. She sounds as if she's crying, but isn't.

She turns to me. "Can't you wear it?"

I can only shake my head and tell her I'm sorry.

8

When there's nothing left on the hangers I go through the drawers. Here are cheaper things, the things I remember him wearing: terry cloth, Rayon, Polyester. At the bottom of a drawer filled entirely with Fruit of the Loom

underwear I find five crisp twenty dollar bills, folded in half and held together by a paper clip. I hold them out to my grandmother. She stares at the bills as if she's never seen money before. Then she takes them. She puts them on his desk without looking at them. She says she thinks it might be money she'd taken from him – bits of change left over from the tens and twenties he'd dole out to her for errands – and he'd stolen back and hid. Or maybe not. She doesn't really know.

9

By mid-afternoon, we're out of garbage bags. I walk a few blocks up Kalakaua Avenue to the market to buy some more. I am gone fifteen minutes at most.

My grandmother is standing in my room when I get back. My suitcase is completely empty. I look at her and she smiles uncertainly.

She has stuffed every last one of my things into the trash bags with my grandfather's clothes, destined for the Church thrift shop.

10

Tonight at dinner she's herself again. We sit at the little table that belonged to her grandmother and eat food made by the caregiver and even drink some wine, and we talk for two hours straight. All subjects are within her grasp tonight, and the reality of our conversation leaves us both feeling refreshed. It's hard to describe this sweetness. Often since my arrival I've seen her suspicious of the world around her, quick to feel jealous or patronized, convoluted in her gratitude for the good deeds others do. But now, for some reason, she is free of all that, she is clear. We talk about common, familial things – my mother, my uncle, my brother's new child, my becoming engaged to the woman I've been dating for five years. My grandmother asks me about the novel I'm writing, and manages to remember, unprompted, the name of one of my best friends from high school.

It lasts two hours. The caregiver has gone home, and we are alone and tired. We say goodnight standing outside my room, in plain view of the

mountain of garbage bags piled just inside the front door. She sees them but says nothing.

What is there to say? The job is done. All that's left is for me to take sixteen bags of clothes to the Church first thing Monday morning. I will get her a tax deduction and make my grandfather proud. Then I'll pack up my own clothes and head to the airport for my flight back to New York.

In the meantime the bags will sit here. In the meantime it's getting late, and I can see the fear creeping back into her eyes.

11

The next day she comes and goes. Though I've explained to her half a dozen times that her trip to see my brother and his family in San Francisco isn't till next month, twice I've found her in her room packing her suitcase for the plane. And though I've also told her that today is Sunday and all the shops are closed, she insists on going to the hairdresser's, to get her hair done for San Francisco. She asks me to accompany her.

It's just a few blocks' walk along Kalakaua Avenue. The sun is shining as it almost always is in Diamond Head. Joggers circle the green expanse of Kapiolani Park. I hold my grandmother's arm and we walk slowly. I'm wearing shorts but she is dressed in long pants and a long-sleeved blouse, perfectly. Halfway to the hairdresser's it comes to her that today really is Sunday. The hairdresser's will be closed. Her eyes fill with tears and she tells me that she knows she's crazy. I tell her that it's not true, she's fine, but perhaps my heart isn't in it. I can see that she doesn't believe me.

We walk to the hairdresser's anyway, and find it closed, and then we walk back.

12

In the afternoon, I sit at my grandfather's desk writing a list of all the clothes we are giving away. My grandmother sits quietly on the recliner behind me.

Suddenly, apropos of nothing, she blurts out:

"I don't want you worrying about my getting married to some man who just wants my money."

I reply neutrally, "Well, independence is important."

"It's not that I wouldn't like a good roll in the hay," my grandmother adds sweetly.

13

Sometimes when she's here, I mean really here, present, I feel overcome by a love for her that's inseparable from the sense I have of how absolutely vulnerable she is, of what it must be like to be her now. Without desiring it, without exactly knowing why, she has reached an intimacy with her own anxieties that is deeper than anything I know. She is too aware of what frightens her and of what, every minute, she is losing.

14

My last night. I wake sweating towards three AM and once again there's no breeze. The lights from the hotel next door are glaring, and my room feels like a cage. I get out of bed and open the door tentatively, wondering if my grandmother will be awake. But the light is off in her bedroom at the end of the hall, and I turn the other way and walk past the kitchen and into the spacious, dark living room.

It is no cooler here. The windows are closed, which is how my grandfather insisted on keeping them when he was alive. As he got older, he used to say that he could never get warm. He floated different theories about why. It was poor circulation, he said, or cool blood, or sensitivity. Whatever the cause, he was always cold. Even in Mexico. Even in Hawaii.

I open the windows on both sides of the room, pulling the levers and watching the frosted glass slats open like gills. A breeze trickles in, not enough. I unlock the heavy glass doors that lead to the terrace and slide them open and step outside into a beautiful moon-filled night that is, finally, cool against my skin. The terrace is large, perhaps fifteen feet deep, ringed with

plants and flowers. Beyond and far below is nothing but ocean, the shivering sound of waves rolling in over the reef, close to shore. Far out, a cruise ship sits at anchor, its lights dimmed. I can smell the flowers on the terrace. There is everything to see.

And I think about what my grandmother told me at dinner this evening. That she has seen him.

It would have been an hour like this one. She woke from the thin veil of her sleep and saw my grandfather coming in through the window of their room. He wore an old nightshirt that billowed in the breeze. He seemed at peace, she said, not in need of anything, not in a hurry. He seemed happy to be where he was. And she was not frightened.

**John Burnham
Schwartz
Brooklyn, NY**