

UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2014, First-Place Non-Fiction Winner
By Seth Walker
Death of a Grandmother

First the mind, then the pain, and then the echo—

From *Death of a Fish* by Adam Gopnik

My grandmother died 10 years ago or so. She died to give me the chance to put all the nonsense away. Her last words to me were: “I never got it either”. It is a line that haunts me. It makes me think before exploding at pretentious people at funerals. It keeps me from spending money I don’t have on fancy restaurants or women I don’t know.

She was a practical woman. She died in San Jose, California, was born in Texas, and grew up in Amarillo. Her maiden name was Tullis (although I’m unsure the spelling). I remember the pictures my mother has of her tall farming father. She is Viking or French-Belgian or something.

And so we are prisoners to the past: cannibals. I eat people, their thoughts and their dreams. We are light reflecting off of one another—the vision eaten by the eye.

But watching a person die isn’t like anything else. The contortions, the restrictions like a Philip Larkin poem. For some it may be peaceful, but it looked painful for my Grandmother. Of course, there is finality to it—an ultimate peace—but even the painkillers don’t seem to make it any less horrible; they just destroy the ability to vocalize it somehow. In my memory, this is what my grandmother dying looks like to me: restricted, confused, but embracing of death. I think the

embracing part came from living alone for so many years after my grandfather passed away.

My grandparent's house is distinct. It has a smell like cut grass and has an automatic garage door. It is a fort. It has a sturdy, thick, two-part, lockable, wooden gate mediating the garage from the house and separating the enclosed backyard from the street—filling the entire doorframe within the wall. In the garage, it had wooden, 3 dimensional reindeer made by my grandfather. It is a solidified barracks, disguised as a residential-copy-house. The house is on a corner spot, so two sides you face the street. There is a stoop to a small side door on the corner that no one used much and a large entryway on the left side when you're looking directly at the house from the main street on the right side. There is a large chestnut tree in the front yard that drops spiky balls on the cut grass.

The streets are flat and mostly straight. The streets are hot. You can easily fry a snail with a magnifying glass or watch it bake after a car or a shoe has crushed its shell. I think that's where part of the smell comes from: snails. It comes from snails, shrubbery and a specific kind of tree (maybe chestnut trees). It also comes from the yellow paint, the sidewalks, and the high wooden brown fence.

The backyard is a sanctuary: the semi-shaded yard, statues, chimney, and small tree, separated from the cool, covered cement leading up to a sliding glass door. This is where my grandfather told the same story all afternoon before he died: on the unfolded lawn chairs with thick rubber covered cushions. It's not that that the story was long enough to fill a whole day. It's that before he died, that day, he

kept telling the same story over and over again. I'm pretty sure I didn't mind then, and I'm sure I don't mind now. The story is about him travelling with the football team as the manager. He didn't play on the team but travelled with them on trips under the title, "manager". To some, the story might seem lame—the fact that my grandfather wasn't on the team, kind of weak—but I love that about my grandfather. He didn't have to be anything. His patience was eternal. He was tall, handsome, wore glasses and was quiet. He had thick, sun spotted hands and a twinkle in his green eyes. He was a co-manager of a carpet store. He'd draw floor plans. He worked on airplanes during the Second World War (and so did my grandma). He could take you to the park. He'd walk with you over blocks of uneven, cracked sidewalk, arriving at the monolithic playground: huge tire contraptions chained together and sprawling green grass. I love my grandfather.

My grandfather kind of let my grandmother run things before he died (at least from our perspective). My grandmother was kind of like the house: solid, indestructible, unassuming, and full of sections that had to be respected and kept. She snored like a dragon. She was a dragon. She'd was thick and had been curvy when she was young. She called her grandchildren 'Poopsy' and 'Y'all' and had arthritis. Her fingers bent at a 45-degree angle from the rest of her hands. She would rock and pull herself up to settle onto her clubbed arthritic feet after a hot sunny day at Santa Cruz beach (out of the backseat of her shiny, brown, cream-soda colored four door Honda). Your hair smelling like sand and salt: you were damp, dried out, pink and tender from the sun and the ocean. You'd dug for sand crabs and

disregarded broken topped sand dollars. You'd Frisbee-d, footballed, tubed, body surfed, and swam. You'd ate ice cream and listened to my mother talk about how clean of an eater my father is. I am half California Viking. I am descendant from Erik the Red.

My mom still cries sometimes. I think she must be lonely somehow now that her parents have passed on. There is no more metaphorical buffer for her against death. She and my aunt might be next on the list.

My mom has sandy brown hair (although it has some grey now). Her name is Cindy Lou. She has green eyes. She was a cheerleader. Her graduating class was probably bigger than my whole high school. I guess my Dad stormed the yellow fort in San Jose and brought her back to Canada, to the cool clear waters, and mountains of Fort St. James. The stories of his battles with my grandmother are legend. He was skinny, dark, dashing and maybe impulsive—not blonde, solid and indestructible. I think sometimes my mom worries that we'll never fully appreciate the other life she came from. Sometimes though, a line is drawn, and you have to choose between one life and another. In the end, my father's was chosen; maybe not deliberately, but there was a choice made: to pick huckleberries and fish in Stuart Lake.

If to die is to be reborn and death is our greatest fear, what do we have to fear?

In Genesis it describes the fall of a man for a woman. In modern English, you might say, it is easy to loose yourself catering to a woman's needs or wishes—easy as it is to loose yourself in the fascination with your own ego or lust for money. I

hope young men have the privilege of listening to Jim Morrison sing *Love Her Madly*, Johnny Cash sing *Walk the Line*, or Billy Corigan sing *Thirty-Three* (and that if they don't understand those songs, that someone will explain them). When they listen to *Love Her Madly*, they should know that the piano accompaniment played by Ray Manzarek is traditionally known as the Funeral March.

After Genesis was written, and before my grandmother died, there was somebody. She'd been to Europe. She had the Mars Volta's *Deloused in The Comatorium* on double silver painted vinyl. In Penticton, if you were a certain age, people would warn you about her. She wore see-thru cotton dresses over bikini bottoms downtown. She liked being topless at some beaches. She was rebellious.

Some would say you can't really blame her. Her single mom had raised her after divorcing her father for cheating on her while she was pregnant and newly married. He's high up in the powers of police education in Vancouver. At the time of the divorce, he had all the lawyers and money on his side. Luckily, the mother found someone to work pro-bono in her defense. Nevertheless, this experience and outlook was passed down to her and may account for her view of men. Apparently, she'd been raped in her early teens. Of course, not everyone wants to live happily ever after in a monogamous relationship (or if they do, they don't know it yet), but I guess we have our differences.

After the relationship is ended, the money spent, and the apartment gone: time shifted. The news about my dying grandmother comes to a van delivering phone books in Vancouver with my friend Spencer. That Van is smashed on the way to the shuttle.

I wonder if I should go to the doctor. Shall I have them set upon me with screens, chemicals, drugs, and charts? Yes; I will not resist.

In my memory I'm standing beside my Grandmother's bed as she is dying. The hospital bed they've put in her room and the sheets and blankets seem all pastels and whites. There, in my mind, I'm thinking about something. I'm thinking something philosophically fundamental: that chasing things at the wrong time, out of desperation, or out of sacrifice can leave you empty handed, and although that isn't always bad, it can be painful. It's like basing arguments on references that don't exist or betting on a poker pot when your hand isn't quite good enough. Sometimes you must wait for the right arrangement. Of course, the essential movement of making decisions is not eradicated, but the movement is more strategic, more thoughtful, and more trusting. It is not the faith of desperation; it is the faith of surrender.

Surrounded by the solid, indestructability of that house and of my grandmother, I know this to be true. I know I want to know the difference between the compromising *for*, and the sharing *with*, other—the difference as Jesus says, between sacrifice and compassion. Not that there aren't hard things to go through (like loosing my grandmother), but I think I'm choosing to build my house upon a rock you might say.

A Strong Fajian woman turns my grandmother over.

My grandmother passes away.