

An Imperfect Past

Mathilde Anne Hungerford

Andersons

William Harvey Perkins + Barbara Isabella Bond
 |
 Barbara Jeanne Perkins — June Perkins
 +
 Robert Anderson — Davenport Jackson Karo — Gustave Karo, Jr.
 |
 Robert Lochridge Anderson, Jr. — Sally Anderson — Anne Anderson — Patillo Anderson (?) — Barbara Anderson — Jeanne Anderson — Mathilde Anderson + Thomas Hungerford — William Hungerford — John Hungerford — Deborah Hungerford

Barbara Perkins Hungerford — Mathilde Anne Hungerford — John Ives Hungerford

Hungerfords

Clarence Ives Hungerford + Helen Taylor Hungerford
 |
 John Ives Hungerford + Lura Hayward — Carl Hayward — Wyman Hayward — Mary Hayward — Suzanne Hayward

Lura Schlegal + Eugene Hayward
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Introduction

My family loves to talk. Everyone loves to tell stories; their stories, other people's stories, everything. When I was little I loved to listen, to hear Granddaddy recounting one more time the different wounds that earned his purple hearts, his voice rich with wine a deeper color than the beribboned metals, to hear Dad laughing over Uncle John beating on Aunt Deborah.

I met my family through experience, but I learned my family through stories. As I grew I heard more and more stories, anecdotes dropped along the way, eavesdropping on conversations by the parents, trading information with the cousins. And as I grew people were more willing to tell me what I could not have understood when I was younger. Granddaddy's drinking, Mom's boyfriends, Dad's bad grades in high school were all gradually revealed.

My mother went from Mom to person to woman with a history, someone who once had been young like me, with crushes on boys and homework. Once, when I was fourteen I fell head over heels for the twenty year old son of my boss. He was in the marines, a loud, muscular, tattooed young man who seemed to me the quintessential male. Needless to say, Mom was a little concerned over our friendship, and one day mentioned—in response to a shrieked 'you don't understand'—that when she was eighteen she was engaged to a twenty four year old marine who abandoned her. I was floored. I forgot all my teenage angst as I grappled with the idea of Mom being a brokenhearted eighteen year old. Or in love with someone other than my skinny, academic Dad.

As I grew older, moments where family members were thrown sharply into focus occurred more frequently, and I became conscious of my shifts in perspective. I began to seek out stories which defined my family, especially ones which drastically changed my understanding of the person. Those stories scared me, too; when I found out about Granddaddy's abusiveness I wanted nothing more than to forget it.

But those stories also helped me comprehend familial interactions, my parent's responses to me, to their siblings, and in extension some of my behavior.

It's an unsettling experience to catch yourself acting like your parents. As much as I'd like to imagine myself as emerging, perfection embodied, totally separate from any other person in the world, I am far more like my parents than I will ever admit. My dad's anal retentive side, which I mock so joyously, has snuck into my wardrobe, where my shirts are divided by color and my underwear organized by type and quality. When frustrated or anxious I clean, just like him. My doing dishes is a sign of psychological unrest just like Dad's anxiety-induced laundering of clothes. I love strangers, morbid humor, and making people laugh, just like him. I hate having my head touched as much, if not more, than he does, though he and I both play with our hair while reading.

Mom's in there too, in my discomfort with my body, my lack of athleticism, my almost sinful love of reading novels, my preference for sneakers above any other type of shoe, my love of good clothes which sits at odds with my lazy style of dress. She cries when she fights, a trait I also inherited but then mercilessly beat out of my system. We are both klutzes and extremely forgetful, a near deadly combination. We both suffer from mild spells of depression, and when we are reading the rest of the world disappears.

Although many of those similarities can be chalked up to genetics, watching my family interact and hearing about their past explains so much more than denoting it as genetic expression. When I was in the early years of high school Mom and I clashed a lot, and she often threw the word “slut” in my direction, without real cause, since I didn’t even kiss a boy, or even spend much time around them. I hated that word, and fumed at the injustice until Aunt Jeanne took me aside one day and explained that that’s what Granddaddy used to call them all the time when they were at home, that the word meant something different to my Mom and she made assumptions based on my dress and outgoing nature that really had nothing to do with me. Again, it was strange to be considering my mother as another person, fallible, with her past sometimes intruding into our present.

So I decided to officially collect some of the stories, to try and piece together in some way some of the bigger stories that helped shape my perspective on my family and, by extension, myself. This suited my loquacious family beautifully. Actually, once I got people talking it was almost impossible to shut them up. The stories kept piling on top of each other, every one told with a new twist or interpretation as the teller tried to give me the full truth. Each story seemed to have different levels; I heard things about my grandparents that neither of my parents knew, about dead great aunts and uncles, whom I’d never met, that my grandparents didn’t know. The Hungerfords and Andersons (especially the Andersons) leapt wholeheartedly into the venture. And suddenly I had an incoherent collection of stories about two families connected through me and my immediate family. There is no chronological thread here, but their organization reflects in some way how I look at the stories, their interactions and how they make me think of

other stories as well. I being to understand my family more, who they are as people, and sometimes, in extension, myself.

Granddaddy

Granddaddy, my mother's father, has always been the most talked-about person in my family. He is ever-present at family gatherings, often even in ones on my Dad's side of the family. People who don't know him well or have only heard the stories admire him deeply, while within the Anderson he is both demeaned and deified. His stories were the first family stories I heard, and he, as a real figure and a mythic hero, resides in some of my earliest memories.

My first memory of Granddaddy is from a knee-high, grass-green perspective. I am wandering across the lawn at my aunt's wedding. The sky, so far above, is a blue that puts to shame any mere words you might use to describe it, and I remember everyone in white. I trot across to Granddaddy, clambering onto his lap with complete confidence in a warm reception. Cake smeared on plates set at chin level tempts me from the table and I lean comfortably against Granddaddy's bulk.

I have no recollections prior to this moment, but from my remembered comfort and the expectation of welcome it is obvious that I am comfortable with my mother's large father. He is warm, affectionate, entirely safe.

As I grew up my idea of him changed from this safe being to a hero, someone who had suffered and saved in WWII, which was the focus of most of his tales. If he had been drinking at all, which was usually the case since before I can remember, he would break out his war stories. Some I only heard once or twice, but others grew up along with the pack of grandchildren, becoming legends. Our family tells them to each other over

and over, relishing the story as though for the first time. People rush to tell non-family, embellishing the stories and reminiscing as though they had been there.

I first heard 'The Granddaddy Story,' the one that people tell if they're going to tell a story about him at all, from my mother,. He was a scout in the marines during World War II, a big Southern boy with huge ears and slicked back brown hair. Bobby Anderson, I'm sure, would have been fairly popular among the other boys. A drinker and a talker, I'd imagine he was always ready to do something stupid.

As a scout he would forage ahead, looking out for ambushes and safe routes and so forth. A while into the service, after the completion of his training and some time into his active duty he began having a recurring dream. In the dream he was in a forest, standing on a path facing an embankment around which the path curved out of sight. And in the dream he always knew that around the bend meant death, not just for him but for all the troops behind him. He had this dream over and over again, waking up in a cold sweat, knowing that they all were going to die and it was going to be his fault.

Then one day, while scouting ahead of the troops on an island in Japan he came across the same bend in the path from his dream, curving away into the fatal unknown. He sat down and had a think, trying to figure out what to do, the same sense of certain doom pervading the scene even in his waking moments. He decided to go up the hill, and came around to overlook where the path led. On either side of the path, hidden in camouflaged bunkers that would not have been visible from the path, Japanese troops were crouched in ambush.

Granddaddy crept back to his men and they circled around from behind and napalmed the bunkers. Granddaddy described hearing the rounds exploding inside the

bunkers from the heat as the Japanese were baked alive. If he had not had that dream there would have been no way to know that there was an ambush ahead. Indeed, everyone would have died. He was a hero.

August

One August night my Aunt Jeanne, my Mom's younger sister, her husband Mike, my parents and I were all on Aunt Jeanne and Uncle Mike's porch, enjoying a few drinks to the dusk songs of the crickets. Granddaddy came up as a topic of conversation, as he often does, and Aunt Jeanne started to tell of how she was reading at the table, she and Granddaddy sitting waiting for the food Grandmummy was cooking at the stove. Granddaddy asked her a question and she didn't respond immediately. So he reached over, grabbed the back of her head and slammed her face against the edge of the table, bumping her head from chin to nose to forehead in a muted, percussive triplet of skin and bone echoing against wood.

Nemo

A problem I struggled with, especially when I was younger and could not separate the stories from the people, was still loving people in my family who had done terrible things, like Granddaddy. I often invented pasts which excused behavior, or at least offered an explanation which invoked some sympathy. Later I was sometimes surprised that my fictional pasts were correct.

I always imagined Granddaddy must have had a hard childhood, a suspicion that was reinforced by descriptions of his mother, Nemo. A small, spitfire old woman, Nemo chain smoked cigarettes, lighting her new one with the still-burning end of the one she had finished, and a black coffee addict. And she was a bitch.

Of course, I hated the idea of his mother just being nasty by nature; when I heard my great-grandfather was her second husband I imagined her saddened by her lost first love. Surprisingly, I was sort of on the mark regarding her first marriage. Or at least according to my Aunt Jeanne, who loves filling gaps in my Anderson-lore. As Aunt Jeanne related over dinner, interrupting herself to mop up after her son's widespread and undirected use of ketchup, Nemo came from with a wealthy family, one which lost a substantial amount of money when her father died, but still had plenty left over. She was apparently raised as a bit of a princess, including a debut in Europe, during which time her brother 'managed' her portion of her inheritance. She returned to find his still intact and hers drained. He would literally roll cigars with ten, twenty dollar bills and smoke them in gambling halls.

Suddenly Nemo found herself poor while the rest of her family enjoyed their wealth. Then she met Gustave, who became her first husband. According to Aunt Jeanne, she really did love him. He was a marine in WWII, and after the war worked on airplanes. He died when the repaired Dehaveland he was testing blew up between Paris Island and Savannah.

Nemo's second marriage came of necessity, as Gus left her with no money. She married his friend Edward Patillo Anderson, who attended Washington and Lee University while Gus was at VMI. Edward was a drunk, and was also my great-grandfather.

Granddaddy grew up with this bitter, disinherited 'princess' as a mother in a lonely household. His two half-brothers would be picked up regularly by their wealthy grandfather and taken on vacations and trips while Granddaddy was left alone with his angry mother and drunk father.

Granddaddy's stories

It's a Monday evening, although an unusually warm one for March. In celebration of the eighty degree weather I am dressed in a long white skirt and white tank top, and Grandmummy, overjoyed at my rare nod toward femininity, wants to sketch me. So I sit on the couch, laptop perched on my knees, as Grandmummy puts pen to paper in a series of attempts to copy me. Granddaddy sits across from me in his chair, the few hairs on the top of his skull sticking straight up, occasionally swaying in some unknown draft. 'Tinoir—short for Petite Noir, 'little black'—arches outside the French doors, content to watch from behind the glass. Granddaddy is telling me his stories, an interesting test of all of our patience.

After a childhood spent moving back and forth between Savannah and Florida, which Granddaddy quickly recounts with no regard to chronology or comprehension, , Granddaddy left home to join the Marine Corps at seventeen, right after high school. The US had already joined the war. He enlisted in Orlando, went home for a week, and then took a train to San Diego, CA, where he went through boot camp and the old marine corps base. Then he was sent to Camp Elliott, between LA and San Diego, for basic training. Following training his division was shipped to Guadalcanal as replacement troops.

After Guadalcanal they had a rest period in Melbourne, and then were sent to the island New Britain. There they traveled up the island, regaining it from the Japanese, and trapping them at a port called Rabaul, which was on the far end of the island. Granddaddy's regiment stayed at Talasea, set up off coast at a village called Walapoy.

They ran patrols back and forth across the island, making sure the Japanese did not try to sneak out of Rabaul.

“That was a great job,” Granddaddy reminisces, hair still at attention. “The Japanese didn’t try to sneak out, and we got to know the natives. There were still tribes on the island, Melanesians.”

These Melanesians were cannibals. The slang term was ‘kanakas,’ “but you wouldn’t say that,” Granddaddy quickly says. “That would be like saying,” his voice drops, “‘nigger’ to a colored person.” Fortunately, the Japanese had been abusive to the Melanesians, which was quite stupid. They were at home in the jungle, and knew the island intimately. And because of the Japanese treatment, they were more than willing to help the Americans.

There were many tribes on the island, which is over a hundred miles long and about fifty miles wide, and each tribe was like a mafia family, as Granddaddy put it. Each tribe had a village, and there were originally no coastal villages because they were the first ones attacked. The tribes had no qualms about raiding and eating each other; if you weren’t a family member, you were potential meat. According to them, ‘long pig’ tastes good, like pork but better, and supposedly is easier to digest.

Once you were taken into a village and became a friend you were no longer meat. But if you were wandering the coast alone... “That was a problem; not for us, they wouldn’t try to eat someone with a machine gun. But Jack London wrote a story, true, about a trader who traded with a group on New Britain, and who was caught and eaten. The chief of the tribe really respected him, though, so he kept his skull and if he had a

problem he would take it down and discuss the problem with it. But like I said, that wasn't a problem for us."

They were on New Britain for a few months. The fighting at the other end of the island was "pretty messy." Granddaddy's first division was called in for an emergency process. There was a group called Grave Registration whose job it was to collect bodies of dead marines and bury them. When someone was killed, they took his dog tags, stuck them in a canteen, hung that around his chest, wrapped him in a poncho and buried him. In their haste after the fighting they buried them in a swamp, since much of New Britain is swampy. They wanted to move them, but Grave Registration was very busy so the commander volunteered First Division to dig them up, after which Grave Registration would rebury them. Granddaddy said that was hard; many of them they knew, and they were beginning to rot so they had to fold them into their ponchos to keep them from falling apart.

Meanwhile, the powers that be had decided not to send them to Liberty Port or to Melbourne to recoup, since they did not want to have to toughen them up again, but instead decided to send them to set up a port at Pavuvu, an island in the Russell Islands only a few miles from Guadalcanal. There they could rest between blitzes. The decision had been made by a group of men who had flown over the island, seen the coconut trees blowing peacefully in the breeze and though it looked like a paradise. Unfortunately, these coconuts grew on a long since abandoned coconut plantation, so when the men were unceremoniously unloaded and left on the island they discovered no roads, no real buildings, jungle, swamps, and three or so years of rotting coconuts. They had to build their own camp for rest—the building was their 'rest and recreation' time—and prepare

for the next blitz. Because of the isolation and poor planning, they did not have good supplies either, so instead of the much needed three hot meals a day they survived on heated up K-rations and a few abandoned cattle they found on the island. It was not a restful period.

Frustrated with my continual confusion over geography, Granddaddy gets up to find this book to which he keeps referring, talking as he wanders out of the room and out of earshot. Grandmummy frowns and drops her sketch onto the floor, turning for another sheet of paper. The picture is not really of me; every female she draws has the same “classical” form as Mom calls it, with more pronounced pot-bellies and more delicate joints. In her blue ball-point drawing I have waif-like shoulders and fingers, with a too-full tummy (I hope) and a too-small, pursed mouth.

Granddaddy returns with the book which he hands me. “It’s the official history of the first division, written for and given only to the veterans. I think it’s worth about \$600.” A typical Granddaddy-ism I think as I put the book on the coffee table. It is old, camo-green with its binding thickly reinforced with gray duct-tape. Whatever it was worth at first, its worth a lot less now.

“So we left Pavuvu, the land of ‘sunshine and beauty,’” Granddaddy continues, “and were sent to Pelelieu.” This island had a horseshoe of mountains at one end which wrapped around a large Japanese airbase, and then opened onto the beach. There was about 450 yards between the airfield and the ocean. When the US military did a fly by they assumed it was all sand and dirt, but the island was actually rock covered in topsoil, and the Japanese had been fortifying for 35 years. It had been a Japanese mandate after WWI, and they had spent the time tunneling, building caves, and setting up guns on rails

which could be rolled in and out of the caves which could then be sealed off with steel doors. The US military, however, from the aerial perspective decided that if they bombed thoroughly they would take out the main defenses and then the ground troops could clean up after them.

To make matters worse, the Japanese commander knew what he was doing, and would randomly pull his guns out of the fray so that the bombers thought they were hitting targets. Once all the Japanese guns were 'down' the ground troops were sent in, at which point the commander pulled the fully functional guns back out again and took out nearly three full waves of troops as they piled onto the island. Granddaddy was one of the first waves, which moved in under the gunfire. However, they were stuck on a piece of coral and probably would have been destroyed if a shell hadn't landed close to them and knocked them off the coral. "They saved my life," Granddaddy nods his head, chuckling, "and I am very grateful to them. It was not nice though. It was sad to see men trapped in amphibians which were burning and not being able to do anything. It was kind of unpleasant."

It took them all the first day to make it that 450 yards to the airfield. They dug in behind a ledge of coral, at which point the Japanese opened up machine gun fire. "I was leading the battalion off of the amphibians, which mean he had to sit back on the ramp to make sure everyone got down and then up off the beach, which was the worst place to be. The first wave got bunched up to the ledge, and the Japanese opened fire. "A young fellow of whom I was very fond, whom everyone liked, ran up past me. He panicked since it was his first blitz, and I reached out and grabbed him by the collar at the same

time,” Granddaddy reaches up with a thick forefinger and hits himself between the eyes “that he was shot through the forehead. It was a busy day.”

They worked their way up to the edge of the airfield. At this point there were shell holes in the cement, which the men used for shelter. There were about 2200 yards of paved airfield for the Americans to cross, and as soon as they reached the cement the Japanese launched an attack to push them back to the water. At this point, however, a few American tanks had reached shore. While the Japanese tanks were lighter and faster, the American tanks were more powerful. Granddaddy was in the front line, and a tank passed by to his right, crossing directly over a friend who had dropped down into a shell hole just in time. A couple Shermans, medium-weight tanks, pulled onto the airfield and they destroyed the Japanese tanks.

When the first Sherman pulled onto the airfield it was still buttoned up, meaning all its visual ports were closed. It came onto the airfield, obviously with a disoriented crew, and slowly turned and brought its gun to bear on the US troops. A man ran up and pounded on the hatch until the confusion was cleared. “They did a job on those Japanese tanks; every time that tank blew up another tank the guy who had pounded on them would jump out of his shell hole, run up and kiss and hug the tank, and then jump back in the hole. I remember watching him do that over and over.”

“In that situation, you sleep two in a hole during the night; one awake, the other sleeps. You find a shell hole or a fox hole, especially if there’s a fire fight, which means you and the enemy are active. You are just delighted to be there. The first 2-3 days are the worst, before you get used to stuff. At the beginning you always notice how close

shells are to you when they pass, then you don't notice unless they hit you. The first night was a quiet night."

The next morning the 1st or 7th regiment—he had three in his division, the 5th, 7th and 1st—on his left got stuck in the mud at the foot of craggy hills of coral rock. They were "losing people like popcorn; they lost so many they had to be relieved earlier than any others." Because of that pressure the rest had to get inland, and the officer said they had to attack across the island. Which meant crossing the open, paved airfield to the other side of the island to take the pressure off the trapped regiment. Granddaddy pauses. "We lost a lot of people. I had a water canteen blow off, though I didn't notice, had holes in my clothing. I became a company joke because a mortar round blew up by me and I was too preoccupied to notice I was hit. I was walking up with another man and we saw machine gunfire kicking up dust and dove into a hole. Eventually we made it to the other end and dug in; the Japanese still had the high ground but our position was at least better. It was about 110 degrees, which added to the joy of the process.

"Anyway, once things quieted down we scooped out a shower depression and started cleaning up. We had a good regimental surgeon—he was later killed- who had come up with us instead of staying on the beach and set up a Corpsman's center. I was cleaning off and started to really sting, you know, down there, and thought I'd been bit by something mean. So I went to the center to get it checked out because my buddy wanted to know what it was. The surgeon looked and started to laugh and pulled out a long sliver of shrapnel from my, well, my..."

I start to laugh. "From your penis?" Grandmummy snorts but stays bent over her sketch.

“Yes, my penis, and the doctor said, ‘Andy, you’re lucky this wasn’t tumbling. Get out of here.’” ‘Tumbling’ meant turning in the air, which, if the sliver had been doing so at such a high speed, would have churned his penis into mincemeat. “I didn’t get a purple heart for that. You only get a purple heart if you’re hospitalized. I didn’t get mine till later. That was the first of four times I was hit on the island.” Granddaddy leans back as he talks, two hands stretched out on the armrests.

Needless to say, it took a long time to reach high ground. After a certain number of days they were ostensible moved out of direct fire to rest, although there really wasn’t such a place on the island. His battalion was set up in front of a battery of 155’s. They would all be stretched on the ground asleep and the battery would open up and the concussion would throw them all up into the air over and over. In comparison, however, it was a restful place.

The hills, which were called the Seven Sisters, were all very high and pointy. Because they were holding the airfield the US troops had the Japanese hemmed in, but that’s when the advantage of the caves came into play. They would have to sneak up and take a cave by napalm and grenades since they couldn’t get in, and would slowly move up the caves, getting higher and higher, only to suddenly be attacked from behind because the Japanese had moved through the tunnels back to the lower caves and suddenly the US troops were trapped, caught in crossfire.

That was when air support factored in. The planes would land, refuel and rearm at the opposite end of the island, then take off up the airfield under fire. Their bombing and napalming was very “tight,” very precise, and hugely helpful. Since there was so much crossfire, however, any supplies for the troops had to be brought up by tanks.

By this point the island was a fly paradise. There were so many dead bodies and it was so hot that the flies were going nuts. “You would take a cup of coffee and skim your finger across and scoop off a bunch of flies. Don’t put this in your thing but everyone had diarrhea.” Granddaddy nods at me, and I promise him I won’t include it.

“We were under a ledge and the Japanese were above it and we’d throw up a grenade which would go over them and they’d throw one down which missed us. We weren’t doing much damage. Night came on and I had to go to the bathroom,” Granddaddy purses his lips and adopts his ‘faux-polite’ voice, “‘quite badly.’ It was quiet so I worked my way back down the hill a ways, got to a ledge stuck my ass over the edge and relieved myself. From below I could hear some loud angry yelling. I got back to camp and a few moments later a figure comes roaring up.” He had shat all over the Command Post.

The regiment on the left that had been stuck at the base of the hills had to be relieved soon after, since they had lost so many men that they were ineffective. The relief group, however, couldn’t move much. Granddaddy’s regiment relieved for a few days, then moved them to the left side to clear out holes and so forth. All in all it took about a month to take the island.

I pause, thinking about logistics. “Did you take many prisoners?”

“There were a few but not many. Not many. During combat there were really no prisoners taken. You won’t find this in the book but our battalion commander on Pele Lieu was in the fourth marine division on the Philippines when MacArthur surrendered them. You know the Death March? He refused to surrender, escaped with a few men, got a sailboat and sailed far enough for us to pick him up. He went to rest and recuperate and

then was sent back as our battalion commander. Before we went to the island he called us and said 'I don't want anybody left alive after you move in.'"

"Actually, I got my first purple heart on Peleliu. It was the first day; during the night actually, and another fellow and I were setting up a machine gun to plug up a draw. Do you know what a draw is?"

"A drawer?"

"Yes, it's when you have a valley in between hills."

"A dip in hills... a *drawer*?"

"A draw."

"D-R-A-W?"

"Yes. This fellow and I, it was night and they wanted to make sure Japanese didn't get through the hole at night."

"Wait, I need—"

"So we were setting up this machine gun and—"

"Wait, so you and this fellow—"

Grandmummy interrupts, loudly, "Bobby, WAIT, she's typing."

Granddaddy looks up from the handful of party mix he is eating and spilling all over his maroon turtleneck. "What?"

"Never mind Granddaddy. So you were setting up the gun?"

He mumbles something through a mouthful of party mix and continues. "We were setting the gun up next to a shell hole and they decided to send up a tank to back us up with artillery, I guess. In a situation like that, however, a tank like that draws fire like bees to honey. Some Japanese gentleman started shooting at the tank and we could see

five lines of machine gun fire coming towards us. We couldn't really move, and then there was a round of artillery that fell short, didn't hit the tank but blew up the shell hole on top of me and blew the other fellow into the air." Granddaddy begins to chuckle as he munches some more mix. "Neither of us could hear after that, and I the only thing aboveground was my head. So this other fellow looks up and sees my head with my mouth moving because I was telling him in no uncertain terms to get me the bleep out of there and he thought I was a dismembered head talking at him. We were both pretty well blasted. The Corpsmen dragged us out of there and brought us to the hospital. But neither of us were seriously injured so we got clothes off some corpses—they had a roomful at the field hospital of leftover clothes—and discharged ourselves and went back to work."

I take a moment to try and process what he has just told me, and decide that I can't. My world of laptop and warmth and stress over suddenly trivial things like my thesis and exams is incapable of incorporating bombs and dead men's clothing. "So your leg was your other purple heart?"

"Yes that was on Okinawa. We haven't even gotten there yet."

"I know but I just need a few stories to get you to where you meet Grandmummy. I can't write everything."

"So we were on Peleliu—"

Grandmummy: "She can't write them all. Tell her about your leg."

"That was on Okinawa. We went back to Pavuvu and then to Okinawa. We were going up to Shuri Castle—S-H-U-R-I—and we got stuck in heavy mortar barrage in an area with a lot of Japanese tombs. Do you know what a mortar is?"

"Yes." I pause, and reconsider. "It looks like a big shell, right?"

“It’s smooth bore, high altitude, portable cannon which fires a shell which looks like a rocket. You fire it by loading explosive pieces into the base; the number depends on how far you want it to go. The barrel points up and you drop the shell in and get your hand out of the way since it drops in and hits a pin which sets off the explosive. We took shelter on a flat area in front of a tomb, and they dropped a mortar among us. When they did it, they did it very accurately; it landed about three feet away from me. It blew one guy’s head off, blew both legs off another fellow, blew off one of my legs and part of my other foot.”

“How—what—how do you get out of a situation like that?” I look more closely at his crossed legs, deceptively healthy looking in their tan corduroys.

“The Corpsmen, “ Grandmummy answers, “the field doctors.”

“They came up and took care of us until it quieted down a little, then dragged us to a jeep and took us to the field hospital. We lost a lot of Corpsmen. They were good men; while we were dug in shell holes they had to be running around helping people.”

Grandmummy nods and looks at me. “A lot of them were conscientious objectors, people who didn’t believe in killing.”

Granddaddy picks up her nod. “They were good men. We lost a lot of them. So many that after Cape Gloucester they had to double the number with my division.” He pauses, and then says “I got decorated in Peleliu, put that in.”

“What’s decorated?” I ask; I had assumed the purple star meant being decorated.

“I was given a silver star.”

“What for?”

“Being stupid.”

“OK, so what happened after you took the mortar between the legs, you know, on Okinawa?”

“Well they took me to the field hospital. And the doctor told the chaplain I was dead, so he came and read me my rites. I wasn’t particularly religious at the time, but figured I’d take what I could get.” They kept him there for ten days to two weeks, basically waiting for him to die. They didn’t want to put him on a ship and waste space that could be used for someone salvageable. “I was never knocked out during the explosion, and never went into shock. The other fellow didn’t either. That’s usually what kills people, and we didn’t do that. They never understood why we didn’t.”

They eventually took him to the coast and put him on a hospital ship which took him to Guam, where he was operated on again at a field hospital. Originally he had been intermittently conscious, kept knocked out on painkillers and sedatives, but at this point they only knocked him out for surgeries, which they did one at a time because there was so much damage. “They’d pump me full of blood, feed me for a couple days, then go at it again.”

“What then?”

“Then they flew me to Hawaii and then to Oakland, CA to a naval hospital there, which was the west coast center for amputees. More of the same. Operations. Healing.” He smiles and puts his hands on both his knees. “I have a funny story for you. A young lady came into the ward to entertain the men. She must have been a professional stripper, and came to take her clothes off for us. Didn’t get very far; the nurses threw her out within ten minutes.” He laughs and I try not to imagine him looking at a naked woman.

“I was there for another month or two and then they put everyone from the east coast on the train to the hospital in Philadelphia, which was the east coast center for amputees, plastic surgery, so forth. And the rest your Grandmother can tell.”

“How long from when you were blown up till you went to Philadelphia?”

“I was in the hospital for two years.”

“How long till Philadelphia, though?”

“Well, do the math. I was blown up on May 6th, my birthday—“

“You were blown up on your *birthday*?”

“Quite a present, too.” Granddaddy says, and I am confused because he’s not being ironic.

Grandmummy looks at me, smiling wryly. “It got him out of there. The fighting continued for two months after he was blown up. It was hot when they arrived, right?” She turn to Granddaddy, who nods. I wonder how many times she’s heard these stories.

“Not that hot, only bombing and mortar for the first few weeks. I was there for a month, from April 1st till May 6th. You know it was the only battle in World War two where the commanding general of the whole army was killed in action. It was the end of the campaign, and he went up to check what was going on and got hit with an artillery round. Which was very sad, he was a good man. It was also the battle where Ernie Pile, that famous correspondent, was killed.”

“Really?” Grandmummy leans forward. “I didn’t know that.” I didn’t either, but that’s mostly because I don’t know who Ernie Pile was.

Granddaddy's war stories, everyone agrees, redeem him. Funny that his surviving a situation over which he had no control and about which, for the most part, he had no choice makes it impossible for me to hate in spite of what he did to my mother and her six siblings. And, in many ways, makes it hard for them to hate him, although most have never forgiven him. He's the huge skeleton in the Anderson family closet, except that he's hardly a skeleton, more an unavoidable presence that I notice in Anderson interactions more and more.

Dad

I think fathers tend to be ghosts, although you don't usually hear about their haunting their daughters save for stories of abuse or molestation. The typical story, time-honored, is of the boy trying to be (or not be) his father, struggling for love, coming of age, 'just like daddy.'

But I would say I'm haunted by my father. It's unfortunate that 'haunted' tends to imply bad things, because I'm haunted in a good way. But still haunted. When I was little I used to watch him shave his face at the sink. I'd always start out perched behind him on the toilet, but his back blocked my view of his face in the mirror, and of his face, so I gravitated to his right, in the way of the door, and watched. I loved everything about the shaving: the steam of the hot water running in the sink, the thick weight of the shaving cream, his authoritative flick and blow routine of cleansing the razor between swipes. I used to practice blowing off the razor, trying to be as loud as he. I never could. The most assertive thing I ever did was cut three parallel lines in my fingertip with the blades. Sometimes he let me 'practice' shaving with his electric razor; I'd press the non-bladed side against my eternally smooth cheeks and buzz along with its hum. The day I learned I wasn't ever going to shave my face—I was four—was shattering. I think Mom told me. But from, at least, this I gained a love, a passion, for shaving my legs. It's never been a chore. So I'm lucky there, I suppose.

Of course, a desire to shave my face isn't what has followed me through high school, across continents, into the bowels of Virginia. I can't really say any one thing shadows me. His love of philosophy, and my desire, from that, to love it and do as well as

he. A need to write well because he loves to read, is an English teacher, will talk with me for an hour over a paper if he's so inclined. When I hated life and school and myself sophomore year in college, our way of talking, when Mom wasn't there to make the conversation honest, was to discuss what I'd been reading. I sent him everything I wrote that term. And he'd write back with resources, people to talk to, return the document having used the 'track' tool on Microsoft to edit the hell out of it.

Not that Dad and I don't talk about other things. One of my favorite pastimes, is to make him laugh at something he knows he shouldn't laugh at, something that would get me in trouble with Mom for saying it and him in trouble for laughing and not for reprimanding me. If I do it over the phone he lets out this gritted-teeth laugh of my name, and I can see him exactly, shaking his head, red and grinning and tinged with guilt.

He loves to tell stories. When Barbara, John and I were little he'd tell us long drawn out sagas (lasting weeks) of Snapper Dog. Mom's stories were about beautiful horses, princes, what we wanted to hear. Dad's were convoluted sci-fi fantasies of unbelievably giant insects, other worlds, time vortexes, wolf packs. I remember Dad once drew out for a week Snapper Dog's swimming under water looking for a hole. When he found it I think everyone, including Dad, was relieved.

The first time I noticed that Dad really tells stories was when I went to Westover, the high school my sister attended, small, private Christian, where my dad teaches humanities and is the chapel chaplain, and my mom taught art. He'd get up in chapel, 9:07 every Thursday morning, and if he was the speaker I knew I'd learn more about my family. His favorite (I thought) was the story of when he got busted write FUCK on the blackboard in class. Dad was always the jackass, the class clown, and I guess in his day

this was a big deal. He had to take a note home to the 'rents explaining his sin. Grandma read 'Your son wrote the f-word on the blackboard today just as Ms. Such-and-such entered the classroom', turned to my father, aghast, and exclaimed "You wrote *Fart*!?"

Grandma has always been outspoken and fairly oblivious; when in public places she will stage whisper "Do you see how *fat* that man is? Why is he so *fat*?" and on in such a vein while everyone shuffles uncomfortably and the unfortunate target of her criticism stares ahead, puffy cheeks reddening.

Once, when we were in line at a bank, a young man two people ahead of us had three "x's" tattooed on the back of his neck.

"Why do you think he has those x's on his neck?" Grandma hissed, loud enough so that the man glanced over his shoulder, half smiling. "What do they mean?"

Have I been accustomed to this eternal commentary, I just shrugged and said in a normal voice "I don't know Grandma, why don't you ask him?"

"No, hush Annie, I can't do that." She was both shocked and amused, shaking her head. "Don't be silly." There was a pause. "But I just don't understand *why* he has that tattoo? What does it mean?"

At this point everyone in line was muffling chuckles and the man half-turned again. I leaned forward and said "Excuse me, my grandmother would like to know why you have three x's tattooed on your neck."

He grinned and said "You don't wanna know."

Grandma was pulling on my arm, whispering piercingly “No Annie, hush!” and once he had answered, she hissed “Why did you do that?” There was a pause as her flush faded. And then “What did he say?”

Her embarrassing inability to keep her thoughts to herself has caused family rifts before. Apparently at one point Uncle John, Dad’s brother, and his wife Linda almost filed for divorce because of Grandma’s total insensitivity. She doesn’t mean to be nasty or hurtful, she’s just oblivious.

She and I were standing in the kitchen once while I tried to do the dinner dishes, a job I eventually surrendered to her continual interference. As she dried she began to talk about Uncle John and Aunt Linda’s wedding. “Oh, it was so much fun. We had it in the backyard and it was beautiful and there was laughing and dancing...” She laid the dishtowel down and put away a couple bowls, hitting the cupboard with the soft part of her fist to pop open the earthquake-safe catch. “I think Bill wanted that wedding too, when he married Stacy, but it rained. I never knew why he married her.”

Stacy is the black sheep of the family, a neurotic psychopath (most of my family thinks) who lies continually, inserts herself into every event and starts fights, and has successfully alienated Uncle Bill from the family even though she has been living with another man for years.

“When he told me he was going to marry her, I asked him ‘Why?!’” Grandma said as she hung the dishtowel up. “He said ‘Because I can help her, Mom.’” At my shocked response to her question (something that would have definitely insulted Bill) she

simply gave me her 'I'm not apologizing for yet another thing I shouldn't have said because I don't know why I shouldn't have said it, only that it hurt people' look.

"Well, did you ask Dad why he married Mom?" I asked.

Grandma looked aghast. "Of course not! Why would I do that? It was obvious."

She shook her head. "The best thing Nancy did was divorce your father."

Nancy

I've always known that Dad had been married once before he and my mother got married, but it was just an idea in the back of my head. We were his world, of course, and nothing else really existed. In the tunnel-vision way that most children had, life prior to my birth had been forgotten and in fact, probably mostly fictional.

One day I was rummaging through the books in my parent's bedroom. I'm not sure how old I was, but it was after the addition had been built on our house since their bedroom in my memory is the same one they're in. I'm going to guess I was maybe twelve or thirteen, and decided to read all the 'big books.' I pulled a book, old reddish-brown canvas cover with frayed edges clutched in my hands, and flipped open to the inside cover. There in the upper right corner, written in neat, unfamiliar writing, it read "From the library of Tom and Nancy Hungerford."

There it was; her name, her handwriting, proof of her very real existence. Intrigued, I perused some of Dad's other older books to find that many had marker scribbles where "From the library of Tom and Nancy Hungerford" had been blacked out. What surprised me the most about that, other than finding that she really was a living breathing person who had absolutely nothing to do with me, was the fact that her and his name had been blotted out. Neither of my parents are particularly emotionally spontaneous (except for when Mom cries, which as time passes I've realized is a fairly regular, and often funny, occasion.). For someone to go through his books and methodically erase any trace of his former life seemed baffling to me. I couldn't imagine Mom doing it, just on principle, and Dad didn't seem the type of person to have that sort

of follow through, or anger or desire to have something eradicated. Of course, that had all happened when he was in his early twenties, and he was going through the shattering upheaval of being divorced by someone who had promised him forever.

A while later I stumbled across a Christmas photograph of Dad at his parent's house in California, mustached and clad in a thick wool sweater. Seated to his left, leaning comfortable against him with an easy smile on her face, was Nancy. They all looked cozy, comfortable, Christmassy.

Dad doesn't mind talking about Nancy. She's not a conversation nightly at the dinner table or anything, but he never had a problem with my asking about her. That assuaged many of my worries right away; if she were still a painful, long-lost-love type subject, references to her would be entirely unacceptable. On the other hand, I never learned too much about her, just that they married in college in Arizona and after they moved to Connecticut for Dad to attend Yale Divinity School she divorced him.

Once when Dad and I were driving on a father-daughter trip to Costco, and discussing arguing or changing for someone when he paused and said "When you get a divorce, you promise yourself that your not going to do all these things ever again. And then a year later you find yourself doing them again." It was the first time he'd mentioned the divorce, or insinuated any sort of regrets. No one had presented the situation like this, but I had always imagined it as a 'good guy/bad guy' situation. Which hardly any divorces are.

A few months later, when we were all in California again, Dad and his sister Deborah were in the front of the car as we ran to the grocery store, while I sat in the back.

He's the oldest and she's the youngest, so I always enjoy their friendly sibling rivalry and ribbing. After Dad leapt out of the car in his long-legged, overly-energized way, Deborah started laughing. Somehow the topic of 'Great Disappointments' (in reference to Grandma) had come up, and Aunt Deborah said "Tom got the divorce the same year that I came out to Mom. It was during the same summer, and we spent the whole time like 'Way to go. Shoulda just kept your mouth shut.' 'Yeah, well look whose talking.'" She pauses and shakes her head. "Mom almost couldn't handle it."

I think the reason that I was so intrigued by the idea of this 'other woman' was that she was a threat. Not in any Oedipal way, but as an indication of another time, when Dad may have been happy (happier?) and before me, before my brother and sister, before Mom. Why hadn't it worked? If she hadn't divorced him, would they have stayed together?

And, of course, it's a part of his past that I don't know and will never know. I won't meet this woman, I won't meet younger Tommy Hungerford, playing in the Mountains of Arizona, taking a road trip on a whim to Yale and a future of philosophy and another wife.

Grandmummy

I did not learn about my grandmothers until I was older. Other stories occupied my time, and when I was little I only paid real attention to the 'big' personalities, which also meant Grandma, my dad's mother, was always more of an entity of whom I was aware than Grandmummy, my mother's mother. That is, I was not very actively conscious of her when I was young. She was simply a grandmother that the grandkids noticed and loved, but in passing, since she was in the house, quieter, warmly affectionate as we paid her brief attention. The only thing that really caught me about her when I was little was her hair. She'd come up early in the morning, six or so, and usually I was asleep till after she'd put it up. But sometimes I would get lucky and see her, padding around in her worn, quilted dressing gown (she could never wear just a bathrobe), with her hair frosting her back in thick streams. It always looked so elegant, and made me, even at the uninquisitive age of five, wonder vaguely about her youth. I imagined her as one of those faded beauties, whose only reminder was her treasured hair which she took down and loved alone in her room, remembering in secret. Of course, a decade and half later I learned she hates herself with her hair down, and hides it away out of embarrassment, not nostalgic vanity.

Grandmummy loves it when I raid her closet. She used to sew a lot, when her hands still could handle needle and thread and hadn't sold out entirely to the gods of clay and canvas. We argue about her clothes sometimes, since she wants to save skirts for subjects of her paintings and sculpture while I want take them home with me to stay. But

it gives us a springboard for talking; she is interested in the latest developments in neuroscience, and theories in philosophy, and understanding what 'hooking up' means, and I love to talk about myself. It works marvelously.

Granddaddy putters around in the background, butting in and out of conversations he can hardly hear and barely pays attention to. They used to have an old beagle named Suzy, who's either my age or a couple years older. She was supposed to be a hunting dog, but when the hunter would throw open the back of his truck and release the panting, heaving, screaming mass of dogs ravening after the prey, he would see her curled up, still asleep, under the seat. Instead of shooting her, as many farmers in the area would do, he gave her to my grandparents and so for a while Grandmummy fed Granddaddy (she still feeds him) and he fed Suzy. She moved about better than he does really, sometimes even broke into a trot if affection or food is only a brisk waddle away. Once last year she got overly excited and, carried away in the heat of the moment, dashed around in a circle and then ran straight through the railing at the top of the stairwell to plummet a good eight feet to the floor below. Miraculously, the only thing seriously bruised was her pride.

Grandma's in her element in her studio, sculpting messily with homemade clay or painting. When I smell turps I think of her and her house, always slightly redolent. She used to continually ask me to pose for her, and finally I agreed.

It turned out to be a pleasantly frustrating experience for the both of us. I had a hard time sitting still, and when I finally did for any extended time I inevitably fell asleep. Grandmummy could never get my face quite right. "You're never this still," she'd say, wiping off yet another layer of paint with a stained rag.

I love watching her paint. Her studio is always a mess, littered with props and paintings, partially finished, lying thick against the walls, propped up against those heavy gilt frames of which she is so fond. She sits on a chair, perched on the edge, with her old jam jars of turps and linseed oil scattered around her paints and palettes on the table to her right. She uses a sheet of glass as her big palette, and holds a smaller wooden one in her left hand. Everything is almost immediately, if not already, paint covered. She mixes and scrapes and adds another dab from a wizened tube, adding a touch to the board which is infuriatingly invisible to the model. I made Grandmummy give me frequent rests so that I could go peer over her shoulder at me while she smudged a shadow under my chin, or a highlight into my hair.

In eighth grade I did a project on her. I decided that she might have some stories to tell, I was only a few days away from the deadline and she was the easiest contact. So I called her up and prepared myself for a story of a young woman growing up in America, falling in love and producing litters of Andersons. Clutching a Bic pen, wide ruled paper and the phone, I scratched out the bare bones of her story as she reminisced over the phone, shocked to discover that she had been a girl once, grown up, become a woman, a mother, someone beyond the soft grey haired woman who spends most of her days crouched over a canvas, smeared in oil paints. Nine years later I sat down with her and resurrected those stories.

Grandmummy's Stories

It's a Monday, a January night with all the dry, dead of winter and none of the muffling snow to ease the bitter cold edge. We are in Grandmummy and Granddaddy's little cottage which actually belongs to Aunt Jeanne and Uncle Mike. It's on the property where they lived when I was little, before they moved to their seventy some acres for a dozen or so years. If I look out their kitchen door I see, less than 100 yards away, their old house, big and white and better maintained now over a decade later.

Jeanne and Mike have renovated the cottage, insulating it properly, repainting, putting in French doors that would open to a back patio if there were one, redoing the tiny kitchen. That is where Grandmummy and I are talking as she prepares dinner. Three slabs of chicken breast have been sitting on the wooden cutting board all afternoon, cheerfully thawing in the room temperature of, as my friend Matt calls it, "between seventy and a hundred and fucking ten," and Grandmummy putters about in preparation.

She is wearing a white turtle neck under a long blue blazer which matches her just-above ankle-length pleated skirt with pinkish plaid at the hemline. Her hair is in its habitual bun, and although I can't see it I know there is just a touch of shakily applied makeup around her eyes. She picks up two dripping breasts and puts them in a plate which she pops into the microwave. "My father was William Harvey Perkins. Everyone called him Si when he was younger after a story about a Farmer Perkins, and then Harvey when he got older."

Harvey was born in 1894 in Germantown, PA, where he grew up. My future great-grandmother, Barbara Isabelle Bond, was born two years later in upper NY. Her

family moved when she was young to Germantown where the Perkinses and Bonds attended the same church.

Grandmummy chuckles as this point. "When Mummy was fourteen she saw Harvey and said 'I'm going to marry him.'" True to Barbara's word, they were married in 1918 in Germantown. Harvey was a doctor at this point, having attended Jefferson Medical School. He then joined the military as a doctor, but by the time he had finished training WWI was over so he was sent to take care of the wounded soldiers in Germany while Barbara stayed in Pennsylvania with her parents.

Barbara was studying opera with a retired opera singer, practicing for hours a day. Shortly after Harvey returned she was offered a job singing opera in Chicago. At the same time Harvey was offered a position in Thailand as a missionary doctor for the Presbyterian Church. So, in 1920 the couple went to Thailand. Their first child, my great Aunt Barbara-Jeanne, was born in Thailand in 1920. Her mother had to travel from Northern Siam where they lived to Bangkok for the delivery, floating down the river in a little boat, shooting rapids and poling along the current the entire journey.

In 1920 the Perkins returned to Pennsylvania, since every four years the missionaries were given a sabbatical from their work. During the year off Grandmummy was born, in June of 1925. Her parents couldn't agree on a name, and eventually settled on June, for the month.

Also during this year the Presbyterian Church was dealing with the aftermath of the Scopes trial, and told all of their missionaries that they had to swear a vow stating evolution to be untrue or they would no longer be allowed to work. Harvey refused. They

Church however, backpedaled and offered to allow him to maintain his position, which he again refused.

At this point the Rockefeller Foundation contacted him and asked that he start a medical school and hospital in Bangkok. He, of course, accepted and took his little family with him to England for a three month training course in tropical medicine at St Bartholomew's Hospital.

"My nanny used to take me out in a perambulator and walk me around Kensington Gardens," Grandma interjects at this point, pulling the whitened breasts from the microwave and dropping them into an iron skillet where they just fit, tucked against each other. "Queen Elizabeth's nanny and she knew each other and used to walk together. Elizabeth was my first friend!" She chuckles, adding color to the chicken with brown and red spices which are startling against the white flesh. "Of course, I was only three months old. She wasn't anything at that point, not in line for the crown since Edward was supposed to be king." I don't really know what she's talking about, but nod dutifully. "Then we went with Daddy to Bangkok in Siam for three years."

"Do you remember anything from Bangkok?" I ask as she smacks at me for trying to snatch a piece of broccoli.

"The only thing I remember is sitting at our little table with Barbara Jeanne—we had little wicker chairs and a table just around the corner from the dining room where the adults sat—and seeing Daddy's long legs and his saying 'June, chew with your mouth shut.' But I have always chewed with my mouth shut since. I've always been careful about that," she laughs "so that's something."

Harvey stayed for four years, but Babs (as he called Barbara) took the girls to Europe with her during his last year and put them in a boarding school in Switzerland while she studied opera in Rome with Caruso's teacher. The boarding school was in Lausanne, on a lake, and the Babs would visit on holiday, birthdays and random weekends. Grandmummy loved it.

At the end of that fourth year the family reunited in Pennsylvania, and then moved to Louisiana where Harvey worked as a Professor of Medicine at Tulane University.

When they first moved to New Orleans they stayed at a boardinghouse while looking for an apartment. The Andersons were another family in the same situation in the same boardinghouse, and Grandmummy became friends with their little son Bobby, who was about 5 years old, like her.

"I grew up in New Orleans. It was so much fun. Mardi Gras was not at all like it is now, not out of control. They had wonderful parades, and we all used to go around in a truck together." Grandmummy is stirring noodles as she says this, and I forget her words to watch her cook. Mom always laughs at how she cooks everything on high, and I see it now. The noodles boil over, Grandmummy lifts the lid and stirs them, the water recedes, she replaces the lid and they boil over again. Strange to imagine her young, in knee length dresses, riding around in trucks with young men.

"Grandmummy, did you party?"

She holds to her hand to her chest in mock astonishment. "Me? Never!" We both laugh, and I remember her crooked toe, a disfigurement she acquired at age thirteen when

she got drunk at one of her parent's parties and fell through a skylight, descending through a shower of glass to land at the feet of startled guests.

"We didn't date. Sororities and fraternities of the universities would have great dances, with orchestras, and boys would invite you as a date but no one went steady. You would dance with someone and other boys would cut in. And if no one cut in you were stuck with one person." She pours the pasta in to a strainer, raising her eyebrows and shaking her head. "*That* was humiliating...No one started to go steady until two years before the war started. It seemed like the dullest thing."

In 1940 Harvey was offered a job as dean of Jefferson college, and the family moved to Philadelphia. It was completely different to New Orleans, but parties were replaced with culture: music, theater, people who thought about things besides boys and alcohol. The second year they were there Grandmummy was a senior in high school and World War II began.

"I hadn't met that many people by then, but the summer before the war started I had my debut and there were lots of parties. It was wonderful." Four years passed before there were any young men around again.

Grandmummy enrolled at Bennet Junior College in Millbrook, NY as an art major for a year, and then Barbara had to earn her living. So Grandmummy enrolled at Philadelphia School of Occupational Therapy. She trained in an insane asylum like the one's Hollywood has made infamous, an imposing stone building with heavy gates and barred windows.

This was before anti-psychotic drugs had been discovered, and the patients were really nuts. "They used any method to keep people calm." Grandmummy pulls the skillet

out of the oven, replacing the two browned breasts with the third and final white one which she sticks back into the oven. "I remember walking into a long ward with beds set up along the walls, stretching all the way to the far wall, and orderlies were rolling an electroshock machine down the room, going from bed to bed." She dishes broccoli onto a plate. "Every patient in there was in some form of spasm."

Grandmummy hands me knives and forks, clear plastic handles slightly smudged with circles where the dishwater had evaporated, leaving behind its minerals. "They had kept one woman in a warm tub of water for two and half years trying to keep her somewhat calm."

"Did you get upset by any of this?" I ask, taking my plate to the table.

"It was upsetting, but interesting. I worked with the physically disabled later and that was harder. More tragic. With the mentally disabled it was sad, but I was always interested in the human mind."

She was still in training when Robert Anderson, her childhood friend Bobby, got the mortar between the legs in Okinawa and was sent to a naval hospital in Philadelphia. The Andersons called Harvey and Grandmummy and Barbara Jeanne went to visit him the hospital where he was to stay for two years.

"Was he hot?" I ask, trying to picture the reunion.

"No. He weighed 125 pounds; he was skinny as a rail." Grandmummy says this matter-of-factly, handing me Granddaddy's plate to take to the table. He has been dozing over a book in the chair just on the other side of the half-wall separating the kitchen from what functions as the dining and living room.

She and Barbara Jeanne invited him back to their house for a visit, something that became a tradition during his recuperation. He proposed the second time he visited. Grandmummy said no. She was dating other men who were coming back, and had no intention of getting serious.

“But eventually I decided he was what I wanted. “ Grandmummy pauses at this point, and looks down and then past my left ear, her hands stopping for just a moment before she dishes her own scant portion onto her plate. “We had a good time together. That’s why I married him.”

She means more to that than she thinks I know. Granddaddy got her pregnant, and Harvey took him for a ride in the car a little later and that’s why she married him. They did have a good time. Too good a time according to mid-1940’s standards.

They were married in Chestnut Hill, in Philadelphia, in 1949. Grandmummy was going to go back to art school, but didn’t because of her pregnancy and then life continued to intervene. It would be 15 years before she painted again.

Robby was born 8 months later and the family moved to Haiti when he was two months old, figuring they could live cheaply on Granddaddy’s pension while he learned to paint. Shortly thereafter, however, the Korean War started and they moved to Florida.

Five months later Grandmummy discovered she was pregnant with my mother, Mathilde. They were living in Sarasota, where Granddaddy’s family lived. Mom remembers living on a houseboat there, a fact which Grandmummy confirmed. “Oh, we lived all over the place.”

Over the next couple decades they had five more children, Anne, Barbara, Sally, Pat and Jeanne, as they moved up and down the east coast, to London, and back again. After

they returned to the states they stayed briefly in Connecticut, while my Mom was first working at Westover High School, where she met Dad and had all three of us children. “And then we drove down the coast and over the border into West Virginia and I said ‘this is it,’” Grandmummy said as we settled at the table. “And that was it. We’ve been here for 28 years.”

Her tale was interrupted at this point with grace, with eating, with Granddaddy asking for salt and then a napkin and then some water. Eventually we finished up and she resumed her telling as we cleared the table. Or rather, she cleared the table and I took notes.

Grandmummy’s mother, whom Granddaddy called Aunty B and the kids called Baboo, died in 1982, about 17 years after her husband.

“What was she like?” I ask, beginning to close my notebook. “Was she sweet?”

Grandmummy cocks her head, then smiles. “She was more interesting than sweet. She was very smart, but became senile as she got older. She became a Lewisburg character. She would go wandering and get lost and we would get phone calls from people telling us they’d found her and we could come pick her up.”

“What about your father?”

“Daddy was tall thin. I was very close with my parents. He was very handsome and loving, a hard worker. He was greatly admired.” She pauses and then smiles and laughs. “He was a ‘scholar and a gentleman.’” Which is funny, I realize, because that’s exactly how I would describe my father.

Grandma's Siblings

Inherent in anything my parents and their siblings, and certainly in anything my grandparents tell me is an assumption of my knowledge of my great aunts and uncles. Shady figures who did stupid things, they are most of them dead now, leaving only a legacy of incoherent anecdotes. Mom talks about Uncle Gus, who was stabbed through the skull with an unprotected fencing foil at age twelve, and lived to fifty. Dad laughs at Uncle Carl's crazy letters and unexpected appearances. For them to develop for me as people took a long time, especially when, as in the case of Grandma's brothers—my father's uncles—there are aspects of their lives she would rather not discuss.

Grandma never talked about mental illness when she talked about her brothers. Each instance was individual, unconnected to any of the others. No associations there. So it wasn't until I was on a walk with my Aunt Deborah when they were visiting me in Australia that I learned there might be more to the picture than bad luck.

Carl is Grandma's little brother. When they were all still in New Mexico he went on exchange to Argentina, and made good friends with a boy there. Carl came back, and a year or two later, when Carl was about 19, the boy came to visit on his way to college in the states. They decided to go into the mountains on horseback, since Carl wanted to show his friend around. Carl was riding on a horse he was training, which, as unbroken horses sometimes do, bucked him off and kicked him in the head. The Argentinean boy put Carl on the back of a horse and let the horses lead them home. Apparently Carl could still ride but had no idea what was going home.

Grandma was there for the summer when all this happened, but her story is all factual. I have no idea how everyone reacted when the boys first rode into the yard, Carl bloodied and dusty, vacant-eyed. Grandma said that her parents rushed Carl to a hospital in Dallas, Texas where he stayed for a month. He emerged feeling better, but permanently changed.

Here Deborah's story diverges from Grandma's. According to Grandma he went to college, got a degree, lives still in New Mexico and is 'weird.' According to Aunt Deborah, Carl was diagnosed with schizophrenia, a mental illness that is not brought on by head trauma, but to which one is genetically predisposed and usually starts manifesting in the late teens, early twenties. Using the generalized "they," Aunt Deborah explained that there was some speculation that Carl might have been showing symptoms prior to the accident and those have since been forgotten, or whether the trauma of the accident triggered something in him. Or maybe it just was brain damage.

"But." Aunt Deborah turned to me. We had reached a point where the path in the park ran parallel to Reid highway, and I could hear the cars whipping past a few yards away. "But then there was the incident with Wyman."

Wyman was the second oldest. Again, according to Grandma he was just fine. Went to college, was a fabulous violinist, joined the Navy Air Corps and became a career military man. He married Carol—I was never given a last name—in 1942 and they moved to Hawaii after the war. Carol apparently had mental problems, but again, Grandma never mentioned anything wrong with Wyman. Aunt Deborah, however, had different story.

One day while he was in college he was found wandering the campus, completely confused. He had no idea where he was, what he was doing. He didn't even know who he was. He was, of course, promptly sent home where he was diagnosed with amnesia. His parents kept him at the house, gave him odd jobs, and watched. As a year passed he began to say things that indicated he was starting to remember. Eventually he regained everything. As far as I know the issue was never really discussed in the family. My father hadn't even heard the story.

"And then there was Eugene." Aunt Deborah broke off the narrative to let a father and two daughters pass on horses, flies trailing in their wake. "But you know that story."

I did. Eugene, Grandma's oldest brother, had played polo in college where he was kicked in the spleen and had to have an emergency splenectomy. Anyway, he was in the ROTC all through college and when the US joined WWII naturally it was expected that he would be sent off immediately. However, since he didn't have a spleen the army refused to let him enlist. Eugene was shattered. It also didn't help that since he was in his early twenties, big and healthy people assumed he was a coward and would mock or spit at him in the streets. At the end of the war he got on a train to Seattle to visit some relatives and was never seen again.

"Of course, that's not proof of insanity. It's just not that stable a move. Grandma's parents spent quite a bit of money on detectives looking for Eugene. The FBI was involved. When they died we discovered they even left a chunk to him hoping that he'd turn up and claim it. Never happened. We all figured he went off to Canada, joined, and died in the war."

The conversation turned to other things, and we headed off from the park to home. But hovering in the background were missing uncles, and chromosomes that twist inside every one of my cells. It's never nice to hear that you might have some mental instability frolicking in your bloodstream. Or that your family has a history of bad luck. Grandma came out, all right, if you don't count having lost a baby brother with a swift kick in the head and an older brother who was just gone one day.

And again I meet an imperfect past, one that doesn't fit together at the corners as I had hoped. I always liked to tell the story of Eugene when I was little, but now it has lost its fun quality of being an interesting anomaly. When I connect it to the other stories, to the web of mishaps that the Haywards encountered, I wondered that her parents didn't fall apart themselves. And I understand a bit more Grandma's almost callous response to death, her matter of fact approach to Grandpa's cancer and death, her outspoken judgments about everyone. Another survival tactic, another adaptation in a world where things change too suddenly, where people disappear.

Stardust

Johnny always smells slightly of cigarettes. Everything about him is so familiar to me: his tall, rocking gate, his large leather jacket, his dark curly hair that always look thick and greasy in spite of his daily, hour-long showers. He has the lovely Anderson facial bone structure and a beautiful mouth that reduced some of my friends in high school to quivering bundles of pedophilic lust. He always looks slightly out of place, as though he stumbled into the world and can almost but not quite make sense of it, and this night was no different as he lounges at the table, waiting for his coffee.

Barbara sits to my left, just as familiar although I have not seen her for over a year. She is tall and slender, with pale skin that freckles on her perfect nose and Anderson cheekbones. Her hair is long and dark and thick and, if unpinned, curls into tight, tiny ringlets about which she complains but of which she is secretly proud. Her eyes are blue, although more grey than mine or Johnnie's, and she dresses carefully and tastefully: form fitting, expensive sweaters, jackets; subtle, elegant jewelry; always understated eyeliner and carefully applied mascara To see her without makeup is a privilege only the closely related, or the boyfriend, enjoy.

We are sitting in Stardust Café in Lewisburg, WV, having departed from Grandmummy and Granddaddy's cabin to spend some sibling alone time before Mom, John and Barbara all drive back up to Connecticut. Barbara flies back to Japan on Monday, and Johnny will head back to Kenyon College in a couple weeks. And I will drive an hour back to Lexington and the finish of my senior year.

We are discussing Mom's recent chrismation into the Orthodox Church. Always strongly religious, in the past year she has immersed herself in the Orthodox church, fasting, icon-kissing and all, and all three of us kids are uneasy. Barbara mentions this, and I say "yeah, but I can't say anything against it. Religion is the only thing that saved her, made her able to be Mom." They both nod, and we all think of Aunt Anne's blind, confused parenting, of Aunt Jeanne's lack of self-knowledge, of Uncle Pat's fear of reality.

Looking at Johnny blowing at the foam on his coffee, brow knit in steam-induced concentration, I am overcome by a fierce rush of love for my family. I love them so much that it's incomprehensible, inexpressible. Mom always says that family exists to teach you to love people you would probably never be friends with (Barbara and my bizarre closeness a perfect example of this statement). And it's true that we know so much about each other and yet I love them to the point of physical pain.

I have seen my sister at her worst, her most pretentious. She is the only person with whom I've physically fought, leaving her with a black eye and us with an equal relationship. I gave her her first vibrator as a going away present for Japan, have lost continually all my life to her in athletic competitions, watched jealous as she and John argue in a complex, tumultuous brother-sister development of a friendship in which he secretly really respects her.

As for Johnny, I bought him cigarettes in high school, was the first person he called Mom busted him with marijuana. I high-fived him over his first time, laughed at his arrest, lost sleep over him away at college with his heinous, manipulative ex-

girlfriend, call him drunk to tell him stupid stories and gossip with his roommate if he's not there.

How can they have all the history of our family in them, just like me, and yet be so completely different to me? How can our simultaneously parallel and divergent paths carry so many different meanings and results for all of us? How is it that every story tells so many different stories itself? I don't expect, really, to comprehend how all our pasts fall together, or to entirely know everyone in my family. I can only begin to understand how I am a product of a strange blending of all my relatives. However, in learning their past, which is also mine, I make it our past, connecting, through stories, two family histories that are already unified by blood.