

The Milk Spot

There is a little white mark painted across the center of the middle fingernail on my right hand, like I had been careless with a bottle of white-out. My dad calls these “little white lies,” as if they are the unavoidable evidence of the untruths one is hiding. A friend says they’re called milk spots, and signify a mineral deficiency in the body: calcium maybe or zinc. I’m inclined to believe they are merely evidence of injury, however small, like a bruise or a scar. This is because I know the cause of that particular one. I pinched my finger while quietly re-folding a hide-a-bed in my grandfather’s room at the hospice center. That was the day he died.

On that early-June day, cool for summer in Delaware yet still humid to my skin, my grandfather was very much faded and hardly resembled the man I’d known my whole life. His breathing was slow and labored even with the assistance of an oxygen mask; his face sallow, eyes closed sans spectacles. We took turns holding his hand, singing softly and whispering in warm tones, communicating love and support for him to let go when he was ready. It was all at once normal, overwhelming, and strange with waves of emotion crashing through each of us as we prepared to say goodbye to a beautiful human so central to our lives.

Even in his last days, my grandfather demonstrated strength of character. He touched every life he’d ever contacted, directly or indirectly. He had a heart bigger than anyone I know. If compassion can be measured by the number of lives one man touches, my grandfather’s can’t easily be quantified. A numbers man, however, I’m sure he’d calculate an exact figure for this, and even so, would undoubtedly underestimate in this particular matter, divulging his humility. The pride he carried was simply that he had a hand in others’ happiness. His wealth grew from his unhesitating generosity, even when there was little to go around.

The evening before he died, a priest came to bestow the Last Rites. Through the prayers, he absolved my grandfather of all of his sins. In that moment, a thought rang clear as a bell: “He has none!” Sure, he was fond of using the word: “damn,” but only in

the context of a squeaky door, or in regard to the team currently beating the Phillies. And although I will never know the deepest parts of his heart and mind, I can say with confidence, even using Old-World Catholic theology, it would be a challenge to define his life as sinful.

As his only granddaughter, our relationship was both traditional and full of love and openness. His fondness was illustrated by the photograph of me, age 4, he kept by his bedside. From the day I was born, our cross-country relationship consisted of frequent phone calls, cards, letters, drawings, packages and at least once-yearly visits. He was present for as many of my big life-events as he could, beaming with pride at high school, college, and graduate

school commencement ceremonies. He once told me I was so pretty I’d have to “beat the boys off with a stick,” and even showed me this cricket-bat-like stick he kept in the closet for this purpose. My brother and I grew up swimming in his backyard pool, chasing fireflies, watching thunderstorms, making peach ice cream, and shucking corn.

As I came of age, I fell into the traditional role of women in my grandfather’s life. While my brother would chat with him about baseball, the stock market, or real

estate, our relating was mostly about whether I was safe, healthy, happy, had enough money, and if my ’95 Honda civic was running well. I know, without a doubt, that my grandfather believed me to be strong, intelligent, beautiful and capable of anything I desired, as he always encouraged me to follow my dreams; and yet I don’t think he ever fully understood them. Still, his support was unwaveringly consistent and full of love. Even in times he knew I was struggling, he urged me never to give up, advice I hear echoing in my head to this day.

The little milk spot on my middle fingernail is both a sign commemorating my witness of my grandfather’s last breath, and a measurement of the passage of time since that day. Although I miss his phone call pep-talks, and get teary thinking he will not be at my wedding or perhaps meet a great-grandchild, his deep love and pride for me is ever-present. One day soon I will clip my nails and that little white reminder will be gone, but memories of how greatly my grandfather shaped my life will always remain.

