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Grandfather

by Deborah S. Rochford

*Written in memory of my Grandfather, William Rigel Lawson,
and dedicated to my mother and her siblings, my fabulous aunts and uncles.*

I am not sure how I found the tiny flower shop, still hidden away behind a closed-down theatre. The last time I was here I struggled to find the perfect boutonniere for my prom date. I chose a white rose surrounded by a sprig of Baby's Breath all bound together with a silk ribbon of forest green. It complemented my dress perfectly; a floor-length chiffon skirt with patterns of green topped by a white bodice and sheer, white, full-length sleeves. Unfortunately my date wore a tux reminiscent of the petals on a Black-Eyed Susan. A gaudy gold tux was all the rage in 1972. That was the day I should have figured out that perfection is nothing more than a point of view. Between that distant time and the present I have gone to college, traveled the world, married, born three beautiful children (the oldest of which recently graduated from college), and attended my grandfather's funeral.

The shop is as small and cozy as I remember and still full of the sweet fragrance of freshly cut flowers. The trickle of the counter-sized waterfalls is soothing and gives the air a cool, moist feel. The woman behind the counter has a pleasant smile that emphasizes the fine net of lines at the corners of her eyes. She appears to be about my age though, unlike my own auburn mop, her hair is a luxurious coal-colored mane without a hint of gray. I examine her face wondering if I knew her once, but there is nothing about her that is familiar and she doesn't show even a flicker of recognition when we converse.

"Can I be of help?"

"Yes. I would like eight roses please."

She hesitates, appearing uncertain what to do.

"Is there a specific color or arrangement you were looking for?"

I have crossed two thousand miles from the middle of the country to the California coast, traveling stand by, my daughter and husband still an hour away from discovering the note I left on the kitchen table informing them of my whereabouts. Yet here I stand, not really understanding what it is I need.

"I guess I'm not really sure." I swallow past an unexpected lump in my throat.

"I want a bouquet to put on my grandfather's grave."

She nods waiting for me to speak further.

"He loved roses. He had a whole yard full."

A picture forms in my mind of my grandfather, a pair of pruning shears in his hands, stooped over a yellow rose the size of his open palm.

"He had different colors...colors like red and yellow."

I know what I want. I want roses like the ones my grandfather tended every Sunday afternoon. Roses like the ones he handed me as I trailed him from bush to bush.

"I would like a mix of colors but nothing like purple or two-tone roses."

The woman behind the counter smiles and nods, she is ready to spring into action now that she knows what to do.

"How about white, pink, yellow and red? Two of each?"

"Perfect." And I know it is.

"Give me about ten minutes..." Her voice trails after her as she heads through a door in the back of the shop.

*

I walk to the passenger side of the rental car carrying a bouquet of roses tucked into an unadorned, white vase. Fearing the vase will tip I pull several items out of my duffel bag and surround it on all sides as simple guardians for my humble homage. The day feels hot and I roll up the sleeves of my shirt which is more suited to the cool climate of the Midwest this time of year. I turn my face to the blazing sphere that gives our planet life. The sun floats in an unblemished, blue sky.

This is the sun and the sky of home. I'm glad I came.

I slide into the driver's seat and open a map to plot my course to the grave site. The name of the cemetery eludes me but it doesn't matter; there is only one such spot in Redlands. My hometown is built on a series of small hills and I meander until I find the narrow street that the map has promised will take me up to my destination. I begin to wind my way to the top, a slow journey through layers of memories—memories that, for reasons I cannot explain, still tug at my heart though it has been ten years to the day since my grandfather's funeral.

I wonder now, as I did then, how a man could live just short of eighty years and have so few people at his final farewell. I can picture my mother pointing out three frail, old ladies in the sparse congregation that my grandfather had delivered meals to on a weekly basis. There was a young man in attendance who introduced himself as the head of an organization dedicated to teaching illiterate adults to read, a cause my grandfather committed many hours to serving before he became too ill to leave his bed. Much of my extended family was at the funeral of course and they made a small crowd in and of themselves. But that was all.

My mother and I were among the first of the family to arrive at the chapel. While my mother greeted people I escaped to a wooden chair hidden in a corner of the foyer. I felt like an outsider; worrying that my family might feel I didn't deserve to share their grief. I had deserted too many years ago, fleeing the small town of my youth, and my family, shortly after graduating from college. When I was twenty-two the all-too-familiar landscape of home wrapped a chain so tight around my chest I couldn't breathe. Since then I've lived in many cities, both big and small, and traveled the world seeing sights my grandfather never laid eyes upon.

So, I sat in my chair the day of the funeral determined to figure out which cousin was which before I stepped forward and re-entered the lives of my family. My mother was one of eight children and I was the oldest of twenty-two grandchildren. Most of my nineteen cousins were in attendance, as well as my brother and sister. I assumed that the little ones clinging tightly to the legs of the adults and whining over the discomfort of bow ties and starched dresses were the children of my cousins, great grandchildren to my grandfather. As I surveyed the room I felt pleased to be able to attach names to most of the adult faces. The last time I had seen my cousins they were in their teen-age years.

My grandmother waltzed in later than the bulk of the family, dressed in black, her pumps lending a bit of height to her diminutive size. She was shorter than most twelve year old girls and weighed less by far. Her dark-brown hair was thick and wavy and cut short just as it had been when I was a child. She appeared to have changed very little. The lines on her face were a bit more pronounced, a testament to years of hard work and few luxuries, but she still filled the room with an unbridled energy that belied her age. From the pictures I have seen she was strikingly beautiful when she was young.

My grandmother seemed pleased to be the center of so much concern and attention. For several weeks prior to the funeral my families attentions had been on my grandfather as he dwindled away, first at home and then in a hospital bed. I imagine she felt ignored during that time. My grandparents were married for over sixty years and yet my grandmother frequently seemed to carry a heart full of discontent at the life she chose. She is smart, my grandmother, and must have chafed at the lack of opportunities available to her when she was a young woman. As I observed her from my remote corner of the room I wondered what would happen if she were to be granted one magical wish. Would she go back and alter her history? Change some vital decision along the way that would have set her feet upon a different path? I am certain my grandfather would not change a thing about his life, given the same magical wish. I believe my grandfather loved his wife until the day he died.

My grandmother did not notice me until I arose from my hiding place to answer the call of the funeral director. It was time to enter the chapel.

“Debs?”

I walked to where she stood, my heart aching, and kissed her cheek; it felt soft as old lace.

“Hello, Grandmother.”

“Oh my gosh,” she said cheerfully, “I haven’t seen you in the longest time. How long are you in town for?”

There we stood, dressed in black, about to enter a room where my grandfather lay inside his coffin, and yet my grandmother greeted me as if we were meeting up to spend the day together with a bit of lunch and then a walk down main street to window shop. I will never forget the dissonance that moment created inside of me.

“I leave this afternoon, after the funeral.”

Those are the only words we have exchanged in the past ten years. I remember turning away from her, this woman who had paid for me to attend church camp when my own parents couldn’t afford it and watched over me during long summer days while I practiced the dog paddle in her swimming pool. My grandmother, who whipped up the egg nog and passed out the fruit cake for my entire clan while we crowded around the Christmas tree in her living room every Christmas Eve, seemed unaffected, even jovial, about my grandfather’s passing. I could neither understand nor countenance it.

A car horn blares, and I tighten my grip on the steering wheel. The street I am on is a narrow, two-lane road and the driver of the car behind me is impatient. I pull over as far as I’m able and let the car pass and continue on to drive through a stand of eucalyptus trees that line the road like an honor guard. The pungent scent of eucalyptus surrounds me and fills my nostrils. The trees are tall and stately and the leaves slender. The trunk is the color of a pearl beneath the shedding bark. I’ve missed these trees. They are found all over California but cannot tolerate the cold winters in Wisconsin, where I live now.

Rounding a curve I pull over to the side of the road where a break in the trees allows me to view the valley cradling the town of my youth. I step out of the car and walk over to the retaining wall to get a fuller view. The hot, dry, breath of the Santa Ana wind lifts my hair and dries the line of perspiration collecting at the back of my neck. Unique to California, these winds start in the Great Basin between the Sierra Nevada and Rocky Mountains and travel over the Mojave Desert. From the desert they are drawn down through the inland valleys of California, and spilled out onto the coast. The Santa Ana winds extend the warmth of summer through the days and early evenings of fall.

My grandfather's funeral was in the fall. The Santa Ana kept company then just as it does now.

I walk back to the car and grab a bottle of water from my duffel bag. The sun is still high in the western sky and the afternoon is mine to spend as I choose. So, I walk back to the wall and take a seat to watch the sun bounce off windows in the town below creating dazzling sparks that wink in and out like distant stars. A stray thought, like a weed in a garden, invades my mind, *why did I feel so compelled to leave this place?*

I close my eyes and smell the familiar perfume of the eucalyptus and feel the warm caress of the wind, and let my mind journey back to the day we buried my grandfather.

When I entered the chapel that sad day I surrounded myself with the anger I felt from the exchange with my grandmother. I wore it like a royal cape, displaying all of the self-righteous indignation I could muster. Inside the chapel the voices around me quieted and were lost but the muffled sound of heels and hard-soled shoes on the worn, brown carpet gave proof of the presence of my family.

I joined the line to view the body. While waiting, I surveyed the unfamiliar chapel, looking for some measure of my grandfather's worth in the surroundings. The chapel was small and plain, filled from front to back with stiff-backed, oaken pews and little else. The scent of a lemon-based cleaner competed with the scent from a modicum of flowers placed here and there around the room. The coffin sat on display in the center of things, the heavy wooden lid ajar. Only the sun brightened the dull symmetry of the room, sending beams of light through high stain-glassed windows that bounced off the burnished wood of the coffin.

Coffins are deep. My first glimpse was of the white, satin lining; a shimmering corner and then a pattern of white diamonds. It seemed strange to think of my grandfather laid to rest on satin. He was a man with simple tastes. The morning newspaper and a cup of coffee started his day; a ball game on the television (with a different game on the radio) made for a perfect Saturday afternoon. His luxuries were family around him at Christmastime and a glass of eggnog. I'm certain he had never lain on satin sheets during his living years.

When I got close enough to see him, my first glimpse was of a silken strand of hair whiter than a snow-topped hill and the toes of his black dress shoes. Even on the hottest of summer days my grandfather wore hard shoes. Casual dress was always a pair of dark slacks and a button down shirt (usually some variation of white)—short sleeves in the summer and long in the winter. Formal occasions required a dark suit and a thin, dark, tie. The day of his funeral he was in church and church was always a formal occasion.

I still like to believe the suit he wore as he lay in his coffin was the same dark suit he used to wear when I sat next to him during Sunday service. I recall listening to him as he recited the Lord's Prayer;

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name...

The sound of his voice was deep and sure with a hint of the soft syllables and easy cadence of the south; my grandfather was born and spent his growing-up years in Goshen, Alabama. Often during those Sunday mornings my grandfather was chosen to pass the collection plate. He would walk the aisles with quiet dignity, putting his own dollar in before handing over the large silver bowl to the parishioners to fill. It was an honor to be asked to help with collection and so by extension, I, being his granddaughter, felt rather important that he was chosen to help so frequently.

When I got close enough to see him I felt relieved that my grandfather's face looked just as it always had. I was afraid the years I had been away had tainted my memory of him in some way. I found comfort in the long, clean shaven face, the bold nose and bushy, white eyebrows, the slight wave in his neatly-parted hair. He even had on his reading glasses though his eyes were shut as if he were dozing.

Of course I had seen him more than once with glasses on and eyes closed, with the buzzing of a ball game on the television and a book draped over his knee. My mother and I used to smile at the way he would sometimes doze off in the middle of a conversation in his later years only to wake up and continue on as if there had never been any lapse in time between one sentence and the next. I was sorry that I could not see the color of his eyes one more time for he had eyes bluer than the sky on a cloudless day.

There were differences too. Time and illness had shortened his stature and left him looking gaunt. His dark Sunday suit was overly large so that his body looked small and slight for someone who had been so large in life. His hands were spotted with age and bruised, the simple gold wedding band shining, in stark contrast, against the dark of his suit. My mother had remarked several times on the swelling in my grandfather's hands during his illness, and for her sake, I felt relieved that this was no longer so. Though no one said a word the presence of those in line, awaiting their turn, pushed at me from behind. I moved forward, my final opportunity to look upon my grandfather over. I spied my mother sitting in the second pew and joined her, taking my place with the rest of my family.

A gust of wind blasts me with a fine spray of dirt, pulling me out of my reverie. The sun is still well above the horizon but getting lower and I feel a superstitious unease about the possibility of being caught in a cemetery after dark. I grab my water bottle and walk back to the rental car, sliding into the driver's seat. Before I start I gently wiggle the vase holding my grandfather's roses to assure myself that it's stable and then check my map. I pull out onto the road, opening all of the windows so that the Santa Ana can fill up the car with its familiar heat.

As I drive my mind floats like a barrel among a sea of memories, finally settling upon a third grade field trip. My grandfather was a printer during his working years. There was a time when the printing of the daily newspaper relied on human hands to place the metal blocks of letters that formed words and thoughts. One warm spring morning my elementary school class took a field trip to the building that housed the *Daily Facts*, the town's only newspaper and my grandfather's place of employment. My grandfather was our guide through the room with the printing presses. I can still recall the distinctive smell of the ink and the heavy, solid look of the metal blocks of words and letters. The presses were running at the time and my grandfather had to shout to be heard over the noise. I stood amongst the circle of children smiling up at him, feeling that same sense of importance by extension that I did during collection on Sundays. He acknowledged me that day with a wink and a smile—enough to let me know I was his special girl, but not overt enough to show what he would have considered undue favoritism.

I have arrived at the cemetery. A rod iron fence surrounds the well-manicured grounds and the entryway is guarded by two heavy, square, limestone pillars,

each topped with a stone urn. As I pull through the gate I enter a world of serenity and peace. I park in a small, unpaved lot and retrieve the flowers from the floor of the car. Locking doors and windows behind me, I begin to wander the quiet road that winds through the cemetery through cool shade and bursts of sunlight. The Hillside Memorial Park Cemetery was established in 1886 and is full of mature trees. A plethora of Cyprus trees stand tall and stately throughout the park, their pointed tips reaching towards heaven, evergreens exude a sweet odor and oaks with massive trunks and spreading limbs seem like powerful, benevolent, guardians. There are eucalyptus trees as well, and many other types of trees that I do not know the name for.

The park smells of life; of tree trunks and flowers and leaves and grass. Insects form a constant background hum and a bird calls out every now and then. It is a good final resting place. A better fit than the chapel or the preacher that served my grandfather at his funeral.

I stop and stand beneath a shaggy evergreen. Frustration, intimately familiar, begins to climb out of the dark hole where I have shoved it, kept it buried away.

The day of the funeral we sat in polite silence as the preacher began his service. He was thirty-something and had a strong, sing-song sort of voice. He did a passable job for someone who knew very little about my grandfather. The preacher spoke of a house, verbally wandering from room to room attempting to turn the house into a home, trying to fill it with the life of a man he seemed to know little about other than that my grandfather smoked a pipe. There was no mention of ballgames or eggnog on Christmas or of the endless stacks of book that my grandfather read. The preacher did know that my grandfather had a degree in Journalism from New Mexico State University or that he played football during a time when the helmets were made of leather rather than fiberglass. Nor did he know that my grandfather was the type of man that once walked a mile and a half to return change to a grocery store clerk who had overpaid him, took meals to the elderly, and gave the gift of literacy to adults. The preacher did not mention that my grandfather was a good and faithful man, who lived his life according to his beliefs. He did not know that my grandfather loved to tend his roses or that church and family, were the heart and soul of his life.

A funeral is a sad occasion, a time to say good-bye and good journey to whatever may follow. But it is also a celebration of a life that was lived well and a time to remember with those who were close enough to have memories to share. It saddens me still that the preacher could not lead us all down those paths. I regret that I did not speak for my grandfather that day. I know the right to give a eulogy belongs to my mother and her family, but my mother and my aunts and uncles are, like my grandfather was, modest people, almost shy. They would have considered it presumptuous to speak in front of the family as if any one of them knew him better than the others. Yet, I also know that had one of them shared some memories of my grandfather, the rest would not have been resentful, only grateful. I wish I had shouldered that responsibility for them.

I am lost. The only time I have been at the cemetery was on the day that my grandfather was buried. A bench positioned beneath a magnificent oak beckons and I sit, carefully placing the vase on the ground near my feet. Closing my eyes I listen to the wind as I wrestle with the sadness that has come, unbidden, to cloud this day.

Try as I might, I cannot form a mental picture of the gravesite. My mind will not walk the paths of the cemetery. Instead I see images of the church I grew up in. Faded pink cushions that have a soft, velvety feel cover the hard oak benches of the pews. The chancel is raised with two choir boxes running parallel and facing each other, a pulpit in front of the choir box on the left and a lectern in front of the choir box on the right. Everything is paneled in medium-dark wood, polished and glossy and warm. The church smells of wood polish and the slightly musty smell peculiar to old buildings. Beautiful stain-glassed windows reach to the lofty ceiling.

The southern California sun is strong and bright but the nave of the church is always cool. The colored panes of glass filter the harsh rays, turning them into gentle shafts of amber and gold. I can picture my grandfather walking the carpeted aisles in his black suit and tie and sturdy black dress shoes, proudly carrying the collection plate. And I wonder, as I have a thousand times before, why my grandfather's funeral was in some non-descript chapel instead of in a church he knew as well as his own living room. The church where I listened to him recite the Lord's Prayer would have been the perfect place to bid my grandfather, farewell.

I pull my knees up to my chest as a rest for my chin and wrap my arms tight around my legs. I cannot change what happened in the past. I repeat this phrase over and over again, like a mantra, but am haunted by the knowledge that truly, I have no right to complain. Unlike the rest of my family, I was not there during my grandfather's final days to succor him while sickness whittled away his strength. Perhaps I should feel grateful that I missed the pain of watching him die but I know that old age and death are an inevitable part of life. My family kept a constant vigil when my grandfather was in the hospital and I feel comfort in the knowledge that he did not die alone. My mother and aunts and uncles sat with him for twelve-hour shifts, one sitting with him through the night to be replaced by a brother or sister through the next twelve hours. He was cradled in the love of those he cared most about until the very moment he died.

A gust of warm wind pushes at me and I see an image of my family standing at the gravesite. My uncles, each dressed in a dark suit, carried the coffin from the hearse with their characteristic strength and quiet dignity. I felt proud watching them; I know my grandfather would have felt proud of them as well. We wore the traditional black of mourning. The day was hot, the sky was a perfect blue and the sun was a bright ball of fire in the September sky. There were no trees over the grave to cool us and I remember the feel of the sweat trickling down the middle of my back. The Santa Ana raced over the hillside where we stood, warm but dry, cooling us through evaporation, soothing as a balm.

The mind's-eye image of us standing there, the wind blowing hair and dresses and suit coats fixes the gravesite in my mind.

The sun is lowering in the western sky, creating a thirty degree angle with the horizon. The birds are starting to voice their restlessness as evening approaches. The air temperature drops, just a bit. The fall in California is hot during the day but cools at night. *Good sleepin' weather* my grandfather used to say.

I am ready to continue my journey. I grab at my vase of roses. Missing, I knock the vase against the hard metal legs of the bench.

The glass shatters.

I jump to my feet. A sliver of glass bites into my hand and I watch as a tiny spot of blood wells up on the inner edge of my thumb. I examine the cut, pulling free a shard of glass. It stings but is nothing serious. My roses, however, did not fare well. The water from the vase has already been absorbed into the thirsty ground and the roses lay in an inelegant heap surrounded by the broken vase.

My eight perfect roses lay with bruised petals, beginning to wilt in the afternoon heat.

I bow my head. What the hell am I doing here? I don't really belong. The path I took at age twenty-two has taken me too far from this hamlet I once called home. With a heavy heart I take my not-so-perfect bouquet and head up the hill that leads to my grandfather's grave. It is near the top of a rise that gives fleeting glimpses of the town below through tree trunks that surround the cemetery grounds. I cross the street and walk up onto the grassy slope, meandering through the plaques that are placed in even, symmetrical patterns along the ground. When

I find his grave I kneel down and run a hand over the plaque, brushing away a few stray pine needles and bits and pieces of fall leaves that feel dry and scratchy against my fingertips.

Beloved Husband, Dad, and Grandad

William R. Lawson

1911-1995

You were strong, you were wise and you were loved

I place my battered roses on the small rectangle of metal and stone; scant evidence that my grandfather once walked this Earth. I sit down. A thought scampers through my mind that it is disrespectful to sit on the grass, in a graveyard. But I know that my grandfather would not take offense.

Eyes closed, I listen, straining to hear the soft southern cadence that helped to guide my youth.

But I cannot hear his voice, so I speak first.

I tell my grandfather about each of my children; Jason with his passion for the stage, Josh, the consummate storyteller, and strong, beautiful Natalie with a heart full of concern for those in need. My children surpass me, all three of them; they are my shimmer of light when life is dark and stormy, my hope for our world's tomorrows, my joy.

I hear a faint echo of my grandfather's chuckle; see his smile as he nods. Warmth and a sense of peace suffuse me. I know he understands the strength of my feelings. After all, the importance of family started with my grandfather—with my mother's family.

I hear the sound of leaves rustling nearby and turn to see a tiny, brown, bird hopping through the detritus that is beginning to accumulate as summer passes into fall. The wind is stronger now, more insistent, and bird song creates a cacophony of sound all around me. The sun is close to setting and I need to be on my way. My children and husband must be anxious to hear from me.

I bow my head. I have one more thing to tell my grandfather. I need to tell him about the funeral. I feel selfish suddenly, and loath to speak of it. What if he is disappointed in me for not being there when he was sick, for not speaking at his funeral, for not making sure his funeral was in the church with the soft pink cushions and beautiful stained glass windows?

Is somethin' wrong, Debs?

"The funeral, grandfather, the funeral wasn't what it should have been."

Silence.

Where you there, Debs?

“Yes, Grandfather, I was there. Everyone was there—grandmother and Aunt Pat. Aunt Judy drove up from San Diego, Mom was there of course, and Aunt Linda, Uncle Larry, Uncle Bill and Uncle Ronnie. Aunt Gerrie flew in from South Carolina. Their wives and husbands were there too.”

Were the grandkids there?

“I laughed. Of course! Even some of the great-grandkids. There are so many of us, we filled the chapel.”

Well then, I guess you can't really ask for anything more than that.

Was it really that simple? The details of the funeral didn't really matter—what mattered was that the people who my grandfather loved most in the world were there, to say good-bye.

“You're right, grandfather. It was perfect really.”

I ran a hand over the smooth metal of the plaque that marked his grave.

“I have to go home, grandfather. I love you.”

Love you too sweetheart. Tell Paul and the kids hi for me.
