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## What Love Looks Like, As I Recall

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*What Love Looks Like, As I Recall*

Now my grandma was a teacher, went to school in Bowling Green,  
Traded in a milking cow for a Singer sewing machine.  
She called her husband “mister” and walked real tall with pride,  
And she used to buy me comic books after grandpa died.  
—John Prine, “Grandpa Was a Carpenter”

I am standing in a funeral home in Wichita, Kansas, looking at my grandmother’s face. It appears fuller than it did when I last saw it. When she was alive. Her gray hair is styled more formally than usual. Only her glasses look the same. Behind the lenses, however, her eyes show none of their usual sparkle, the way they seemed to twinkle when she made a joke or heard or read an insightful comment—or listened to me play my guitar. I am a junior in high school, and I have no clue how I’m going to go on without her.

I look away from my grandma’s coffin, and remember a scene from seven years earlier.

She and I are sitting in my bedroom. Just the two of us. I’m holding my guitar, preparing to play the latest song I’ve learned for her. I’m in the fourth grade. When Grandma heard I wanted to learn to play the guitar, she helped me buy my first one, a Gibson hollow body sunburst. Grandma has just arrived at our house a few minutes earlier and has said a quick *hello* to my mom and dad. After hugging me, she has whispered in my ear that she would like to hear a song, right now. I decide to play a song by Roger Miller called “King of the Road.” I like the song because of its bouncy melody and clever lyrics. Only after I’ve begun singing does it occur to me that the song has some lyrics a church-going, Bible-reading woman like Grandma might not approve of—not to mention bad grammar.

Trailers for sale or rent  
Rooms to let...fifty cents.  
No phone, no pool, no pets  
I ain’t got no cigarettes.

....

I smoke old stogies I have found  
Short, but not too big around.  
I'm a man of means by no means  
King of the Road.

I sing the lyrics the way I've learned them, and Grandma doesn't seem to mind. In fact, she smiles throughout my performance, and when I finish, she applauds as if she's just been privileged to hear the most amazing of child prodigies.

"I think you've gotten lots better, Gary."

"Thanks, Grandma."

"I suppose your mom's about got dinner ready. Want to play one more then we'll go?"

"OK," I say. "Here's one I just learned by The Rolling Stones: 'I Can't Get No Satisfaction.'"

\* \* \*

I have a black and white photo of my grandpa holding me on his lap. He is wearing a white shirt and red suspenders and smiling. He holds a cigarette in his left hand. Since he died ten years before my grandma, before I entered school, most of what I know of him comes from family stories and photos. From the stories Dad told about him, I gather he was good man who loved his family. These stories also gave me the idea that he was a bit gruff but had a good sense of humor. One story held that if Grandpa were eating dinner and the salt shaker or pepper shaker proved to be empty he would throw it on the floor or on a nearby sofa. I suppose that meant Grandma was supposed to fill it. His profession was house moving, a blue collar one, though he owned his own company. I envision him as a self-made man, rough around the edges, not formally educated, but with a good heart and solid character. I think this partly because of the stories I've heard about him but also because I doubt Grandma would have married him had he not been that way.

\* \* \*

I sleep over at my grandma's house every chance I get. My older brother doesn't come. It's just me and Grandma. Once in awhile, Grandma has to call my parents in the middle of the night because I can't breathe well. Except for those times, stays at her house are joyful occasions.

\* \* \*

This is my earliest memory of my grandmother: she and I are walking from a motel to downtown Tucson, Arizona. My mom has brought me to Arizona

from Kansas to see if the dry climate will help relieve my severe asthma and allergies. I am four years old. The day before, the three of us went to a street fair, at which my favorite attraction was a saddle perched on a fake pony. Kids could sit on the saddle and pretend they were riding a bucking bronco. The pony didn't really buck, but you could use your imagination and your parents could take pictures of you. If the photo was cropped just right, it looked like you were riding a real pony. The next morning, I'd begged my mom, asking if we could return to the fair so I could sit tall in that saddle one more time. Mom didn't want to go and said she thought the fair had probably closed down anyway. Grandma felt sorry for me and said she would go with me to see. She could tell how badly I wanted the saddle to still be there. When we arrive at the scene and see nothing but Arizona sand in the area where the fair had been, I cry. My grandma holds me close, assuring me we will find a real horse to ride soon.

\* \* \*

My grandma and I are alone at her house. We are both reading. Grandma is reading her Bible and taking notes, preparing for the Wednesday Ladies' Bible class at her church. She's a member of the same denomination as my family but goes to a different congregation than we do. I am reading from *Reader's Digest Condensed Books*, which I've found on her green bookshelf. In addition to the Bible, Grandma reads *Reader's Digest* religiously. Her favorite feature is called "Improving Your Word Power," which gives several alternate definitions for words and asks the reader to select the correct one. Answers are provided at the end of the quiz. As a result of this practice, as well as her reading of poetry and fiction, Grandma has an impressive vocabulary, which comes in handy whenever we play Scrabble together. Scrabble is her favorite board game. It's my favorite too, not because I win, which I never do, but because when I play I get to be with my grandma. Whenever I go to my grandma's house, she doesn't do something else while I watch TV. We do stuff together. Even if it's reading different books, it feels like we're doing it together.

\* \* \*

My mom adores my grandma. Mom has pretty much adopted her as a mother to replace her own, who died when Mom was young. She calls her "Mother Tandy," and those words are spoken in reverential tones in our home.

\* \* \*

I am spending the night at my grandma's house. I am in the back bedroom by myself, getting ready to go to sleep, when I hear a scratching on the window screen. I immediately assume it's a burglar trying to break into the house. I

approach the window cautiously, and sure enough, in the darkness outside I see the silhouette of a person and begin to tremble—until I realize that the silhouette is shaped exactly like Grandma.

“Grandma!” I yell. “You scared me half to death.”

Through the window screen, I can hear grandma chuckling to herself. She comes into the house, laughing.

“I don’t know what on earth possessed me to do that,” she says.

“I can’t believe you did that. I was so scared!”

“Well, I figured someone who likes ghost stories as much as you do wouldn’t mind being frightened a little bit.”

As Grandma embraces me, though she tries to suppress it, I can feel her body still vibrating with laughter.

\* \* \*

I have a big desk in my faculty office with lots of shelves. On the shelves are memorabilia from 24 years of college teaching and 12 years of corporate work. Among the five- and ten-year service-award plaques and the gifts from former students, sits a small photo of my grandma. It’s framed in imitation bronze. The photo itself is very faded, but her features are still clear, especially her eyes. As with most jobs, some days are better than others. On the days that aren’t so good, when I’m coming off a bad class session or when I’m second guessing myself about a departmental decision I’ve made, I take the small photo off the shelf and look for a moment into my grandma’s eyes, eyes that never fail to greet me with acceptance, approval, and love.