Sugar and Spice in a Sailor’s World

by
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Part I

He used words like “cotton-pickin’” because he knew picking cotton was one of the most demanding jobs on earth and therefore the best explicative. He grew up poor. Very poor. So poor that he treasured an orange as a Christmas gift. He hadn’t even finished 6th grade when he decided that the family farm was more important to his family’s survival than a classroom. Despite his lack of formal education, his incredible work ethic earned him a spot as a deck hand on one of the giant, steel ships on the Great Lakes. By the time he retired, he was an esteemed captain.

I distinctly remember the image of my 7 year old and 5 year old younger brothers standing on the bathroom counter looking in the mirror and searching for anything that might pass as a tiny chest hair. My grandpa stood between them, bare-chested with billows of salt-n-pepper hairs covering his chest. I was under the impression, as were my brothers, that men were not men unless they had chest hair and lots of it. In that moment, despite my love for all things girly, I wanted to be a hairy boy. I didn’t want all the duties that went along with being a boy (e.g. mowing the lawn, shoveling snow, etc.) but I wanted to belong to the small threesome that could bond in special ways as they admired their chest hairs in the mirror.

My grandpa was a tall, hairy man, a man’s man, a sailor, and he cried. He wore the wrinkles of time on his face like a highway does after a hard, long winter. He had smoked as far back as I could remember; in fact, he had smoked as far back as he could remember. First, it was cigarettes. Growing up in the south around tobacco farms didn’t help him to kick the habit. He smoked pipes too. To this day, whenever I catch a whiff of pipe-smoke in the air, I am immediately transported to my grandfather’s lap. The tiniest amount of curly chest hair peeking above his red plaid, flannel shirt, neatly tucked into his khaki pants with a clean black belt between them. His hair ever so neatly combed to the right. A gleam in his eye and a giant smile on his face. Then there were the cigars that were always placed neatly in his shirt-pocket. Sometimes he would just chew on them and get the taste in his mouth. But when he finally lit it up, he really imitated the Murphy statue on his wall with the face of a weathered sailor, a Popeye-like squint, wrinkles outlined by his 5 o’clock shadow, and the face of a man who knew both hardship and laughter.

He smelled like cigars and Juicy Fruit. I distinctly remember the 16-hour drives from northern Illinois, over the Smoky Mountains, to the suburbs of Charlotte, North Carolina where he and my grandma had retired to. The land of red dirt. Although states separated us, they always made sure that we spent a good portion of our summer vacations with them. My two younger brothers and I took turns invading their comfortable retirement home on Lake Wylie near the border of North Carolina and South Carolina. Hours were spent roasting in the summer heat by the community pool as he casually watched over us on a plastic pool chair. If the 90+ degree, humid, Carolina heat ever bothered Grandpa, we never knew it. When our stomachs caught up with us, he and Grandma offered us endless supplies of Pringles, Mountain Dew, the best homemade tuna sandwiches in the world and of course, Juicy Fruit gum.

My dad told me that the time my grandfather missed being a father, he made up for being a grandfather. Working on the Great Lakes meant that he was gone most of the year. I’m convinced that he spent most of his time on the ship swapping stories with his shipmates. He always had a good story. Always. First, it was the story of our birth. In the time of Cabbage Patch mania, I was tickled pink when I was told that I was found in a cabbage patch.
My brothers, of course, had a more rugged story. They were fished out of the Des Plaines River in a picnic basket. I guessed that was why they loved to fish so much because I sure didn’t like it. Next, there was the Lizard-man. Ah…the Lizard-man. It seemed that every time we met Grandpa, he had a new, only-slightly-scary story about the scaly, half reptile/half human creature that never died no matter how many times he had his hand ripped off by a frightened teen-couple, slamming the door and putting the pedal to the metal. (He always seemed to grow that hand back.) There were stories about Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, Murphy, kids, the Lizard-man and mysterious, tiny wood creatures that could be hunted, but only at night. As a kid, time with him was magical.

I wasn’t the tom-boy, outdoorsy type, but my brothers and cousins loved hunting for lizards and all sorts of other weird, make-believe creatures in the woods surrounding Grandpa’s home. One year, he took my cousin, Austin, into the woods to find a kangaroo. It hadn’t occurred to my 7-year old cousin that kangaroos are not typically found in the southern part of the United States. Regardless, they set out on a kangaroo safari. After a few hours Austin, convinced he had seen a kangaroo, burst into the house to tell Grandma. The next day, the Charlotte paper reported that a kangaroo had escaped from a local zoo. To this day, I’m still not sure if they really saw a kangaroo or not.

When he wasn’t off hunting weird creatures or fishing with my brothers, he was taking me for walks or spending time with me and my Grandma at Heritage USA, a Christian theme-park of sorts complete with a mall, water park and animated dolls throughout the grounds. He knew I wasn’t a tom-boy and I think he respected that. Grandpa made me feel like a jewel most of the time and reminded me that, “girls are made of sugar and spice and everything nice.” Everything with Grandpa felt special. I think he actually enjoyed my pig-tails, pearls and tiny, black, patent purse. Perhaps, I reminded him of his first daughter who had passed at the young age of 4 or perhaps he just enjoyed the softness of a little girl in his rough and tough manly world. Nonetheless, I was a girly girl and he was my Grandpa.

Part II

The older I grew, the more I began to realize that the magic I had experienced with him as a little girl was getting harder to hold on to. I remember sitting at the dining room table with my brothers and grandpa, enjoying a good ol’ game of *Skipbo*, as was the tradition in our family, and trading little jabs at each other about who was going to win the game and who wasn’t. I don’t remember anything that was said during the exchange except my grandfather, being egged on by my two younger brothers, brashly saying, “You wanna see ugly?! Just go look in a mirror!” As an insecure pre-teen with body image issues, the words hit my heart like icicles falling from a skyscraper. I burst into tears and left the table. I was 12 and my grandfather didn’t understand the emotions of a girly girl turning teenager.

I think it was puberty that changed things between us. The truth was, suddenly, he didn’t know what to do with me. His story-telling magic didn’t work on me and I was no longer pacified by pearls and purses. My teenage emotions didn’t fair well with this weathered sailor and I found myself offended and hurt from time-to-time. But despite the fact that during my teenage years most of my time with him was awkward, I always knew that he loved me. Always. He found little ways to show me that he cared. For example in high school, I was a choir geek and although he knew next-to-nothing about music, except when he occasionally imitated Kenny Rogers, “You gotta know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em…” during our *Skipbo* games, I remember him asking me questions about what I was singing and where I sang. He made an effort to get to know the girly girl inside of me growing up.

Although we never reclaimed the closeness that we had when I was a child, I learned a lot about him the older I became. He wasn’t just my story-telling, Juicy Fruit gum-giving Grandpa. And, although my teenage years separated us in some ways, they allowed me to get
to know him more in others. He was the black sheep of the family in that he was the only democrat in a family of staunch, southern Republicans. (He loved Clinton, especially after the Monica Lewinsky scandal.) And he loved to push my Grandma’s buttons! I remember many heated discussions about politics and Rush Limbaugh. In fact, he could be a real stinker when he tried to irritate my grandma. One year he grew out his beard, a look which might have scared anyone away. (He was a very hairy man!) Grandma called him “mountain-man.” He laughed because it annoyed her. But, that was my grandpa: half story-teller, half stinker.

I also realized that he was a hard-working man, one of the hardest-working men that I’ve ever known. After Hurricane Hugo took down over 100 trees in their back yard, my Grandpa (and Grandma) worked to clean it up. When he was passionate about something, he was whole-heartedly passionate; when he decided to do something, it was nearly impossible to convince him otherwise. (Believe me, my grandma tried fervently to talk him into shaving that mountain-man beard!) Some might say that he was hard-headed. Maybe he was. I think he thought that he had to be in order to survive.

Part III

It was a hot and humid, rainy day in July when I got the call from my dad. It didn’t really hit me until I saw him quietly lying in his casket…I realized that I would never be able to regain the magic of my childhood. I burst into loud heaving sobs that resonated throughout the funeral home. A small part of me had held onto the hope that one day I would be able to regain that special magic-place with my Grandfather that I had experienced as a child…until I saw him in that casket. My uncle came, wrapped his arms around me and whispered in my ear, “If you cry a little louder, you might wake him up.” I chuckled. That’s when my hope was renewed. It’s true that I would never again be able to sit on his lap and enjoy listening to his stories. But the magic would continue in my memories of him.

He was a man’s man, I was a girly girl. He was the get-your-hands dirty type, and I was the sing-in-a-choir type. He wasn’t exactly the most compassionate grandfather to a girl with teenage emotions, but I think he did the best that he could with what he knew. We were two very different people. But despite our differences, he found ways to make me feel special, even when we didn’t know how to effectively communicate with one another. Somehow, he made room for all my sugar and spice in his sailor’s world, and maybe that’s why my time with him will always be remembered as magical.