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Millville

In 2019 I lost the last place I called home when my grandfather died. It, and its inhabitants, had been the star our family orbited around for nearly sixty years. I experienced more than my fair share of upheaval in life, but Millville, New Jersey, had been the one place I could always come back to that had been a steady constant for as long as I could remember. Now everyone is gone, and there is no reason to go back and nowhere to rest our heads if we did. The last life lesson of many that Millville would impart upon me was that some loss is inevitable and permanent, even the gravity that once pulled generations to a small town in south Jersey. Entropy is inevitable. While it chokes me up every time I think about it, there is nothing sad about Millville or the indelible mark it left upon me.

At the crack of dawn, I burst from my bed and out of the hideously orange room with the towering, garish Gauguinesque paintings adorning its walls. I quietly toddled down the flight of stairs and passed the cherrywood Grandfather Clock, scampering towards the cozy family room of the grand house I was visiting for the first time. I had only lived in apartments, and my mom's parents lived in a small split-level house. This four-bedroom, two-story home, located in a verdant shady neighborhood in Millville, New Jersey, was enormous and demanded immediate exploration! A naughty three-year-old with an untamable personality, I may have been the most curious (nosy) human being alive. The house was silent as a spider in its web, and I had free rein. The only other living being awake was Duke, my furry conspirator. As I rifled through the

room's contents, careful not to rouse an adult, I hit pay dirt! There, in a small drawer, was a black permanent marker. I was never allowed to play with permanent markers, just crayons. "What could I draw on?" I thought to myself, looking around at my options. A pristine canvas called to me from across the room. Elatedly, I beelined to it and started scribbling away with total abandon. Suddenly, I heard a shrill, furious voice calling my name, and I was dragged away from the snowy couch, now covered in great black slashes. Mommy was mad! It was clear that I was about to get a spanking. Then another voice, steady and tender, called out, stopping Mommy cold. I had never heard such a soft voice command immediate attention like that. There stood my savior, a petite "old lady" with a head of poofy golden hair, holding a lit cigarette. She took my hand, led me up two steps away from a livid Mommy, and sat me down on a chair at the kitchen table surrounded by sea-glass green and white checkered walls.

Mrs. Fisher was my Mommy's boyfriend's mother. Without an iota of judgment about my mom's wrath, or my "artwork" on her brand-new sofa, Mrs. Fisher calmly assured Mommy everything was just fine. She kindly asserted that the marred furniture was salvageable. After teaching me how to make glue by mixing precise proportions of flour and water (in hindsight, a risky move after what I had just done) and giving me macaroni and construction paper to play with, she went to work with a bucket of sudsy water and a towel. She refurbished the furniture to its original glory after long hours of scrubbing and refused to let my mom or "Glenn" (what I called Dad back then) punish me for my actions. I played blissfully with flour-scented glue and the funny wall-hanging "doghouse" with hooks from which hung little wooden cut-out canines with names on them. Little did I know at such a precious age that this was the moment when I learned what it meant to be given unconditional, selfless love from someone who was not of my blood or that as the years went on, I would be calling Mrs. Fisher, "Grandma."

The windows were down on the Chevy Monza on a balmy summer day as we traveled down I-95 to our annual summer vacation in Millville. Mom tossed out her stinky Newport, opened the solid metal glove box, and pulled out a cutting board, a block of muenster, and a cheese knife with a forked-tongue-like notch at its tip. Usually a welcome sight, I could care less; all I could think about was getting to south Jersey. I had been told in no uncertain terms that we would pull over if I asked, “When will we get there?” one more time. I crackled with anticipation, but even at the age of six, I knew when to pick my battles, and I kept my trap shut. After all, I knew I could get away with being mischievous when I got to Millville to visit the Fishers. Mrs. Fisher, the gentlest woman I had ever met, was exceedingly permissive, and Mr. Fisher, always smelling of pipe tobacco, was aloof. Rubbing my hand against the claret fabric of the Monza’s interior, a self-soothing act I’d performed since I was a baby, I fell into sleep. I awoke from my nap, tasting the pungent scent of New Jersey – chemical plants and marshlands. We were finally close. I almost asked when we would get there again but caught myself just in time.

We parked on the crowded street by the Fisher home. As we lugged our bags out of the car, I saw the whole gang; Carol and John, Mark and Debbie, Lee, and of course, Mr. and Mrs. Fisher. Before we could step foot over the threshold, John, with his ubiquitous camera in hand, eagerly lined us up in front of the bay windows that ran the length of the front living room. The azure glass figurines and tiny bottles I longed to get my hands on were tantalizingly close, just beyond the windowpanes. Alas, they had to wait as I stood still, saying “cheese” for the traditional yearly family picture. When that tiresome task was over, I darted away to gather the juicy wild blueberries from the bushes at the edge of the woods abutting the backyard.

Later, as Mr. Fisher fired up the grill, Glenn, John, and I went for a walk on rough trails carved into the undergrowth of the forest behind the house. As we moved deeper into the woods, there was a crackling of brush and a flash of movement. Glenn was faster than lightning as he snatched up a sleek black four-foot-long rat snake by the back of the neck, beaming proudly as he proffered it to me. After a while, I let the beautiful creature go, and we carried on. We arrived at the inviting lake as the sun beat down upon us. Glenn stripped out of his clothing and dived under the crisp deep-indigo water. I was not going to miss out, so I followed his lead while Uncle John sat on a downed tree at the lake's silty bank. When we had sufficiently cooled down, Glenn and I donned our sun-warmed clothing and headed back to the house to enjoy an early dinner.

It was critical to check for ticks because South Jersey had a big bloodsucker problem, but I did a half-hearted job and wolfed down my food so I could go back outside and play in Mr. Fisher's rock garden. It sat mid-point between the Fisher's screened-in porch and the Beck's house next door. There was always something to catch, crawling or slithering under the boulders of varying sizes and shapes - some so heavy I had to strain until my face hurt before I could get them to budge. Knowing that I was fascinated with rocks and kept a meticulously cataloged collection of them at home, Mom called out as I left the house that I was not to remove stones that resided within the boundaries of Mr. Fisher's Garden. The din of voices coming from inside faded as I skipped down the little walkway that was always streaked with sparkling ribbons of slimy slug trails. Before arriving at my destination, however, I caught sight of a glint of coppery light coming from the grass beyond the rock garden. I scrapped my original plan and followed the metallic shimmer to the base of a colossal tree. There lay a rock about 6 inches long and two inches high, but it wasn't just any rock – it was a *fossilized-copper-rock*! Its craggy top looked like it had been rubbed with monarch butterfly wings and the sides flared out to form miniature

mesas. The undersides of the flattened protrusions were stippled with what looked like honey-colored dewdrops flowing into a teeny-tiny cave system. I squatted down to pick it up and was stunned by its excessive weight. It was a small rock compared to the ones in the garden; I wondered how it could be so heavy. My whole body started humming with desire. “Technically, it's not in the rock garden,” I thought as I staked my claim. Grabbing the heavy rock, I brought my lustrous booty inside, ready to beg for it if necessary. Mom didn't buy that I had just found it at the base of a tree, so she asked Mr. Fisher to come and inspect my fossilized-copper-rock while I scratched at a persistent itch in the middle of my back. He was baffled. He had never seen it before and said he would have remembered something so exceptional. Mr. Fisher, seeing the unadulterated joy on my face, persuaded Mom to let me have it. That night, as Glenn tucked me into bed, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that life was full of simple wonders and limitless possibilities which should never be taken for granted. I fell sound asleep with my fossilized-copper-rock at my beside - and a tick burrowing into my back. I would find out a few years later from a geologist that the rock wasn't a fossil nor copper, but it was covered in pure 18 karat gold.

Our annual family pictures outside the bay window in Millville became increasingly crowded as the years passed, and the Fisher family – my family – flourished. So much had changed in the eleven years since I had struck gold. We lived in Houston, Texas, where we had moved when I was in the fourth grade. I had lived a lifetime here. Mom contributed to the expanding family by giving birth to my brother, Mr. Boo, sixteen years and nine days after I came into this world. It was difficult to fathom that I'd be walking across the stage at my high school graduation ceremony in three days and heading off to New York City in the fall. Mom, Dad, and Mr. Boo were packed up and ready to move to the new house in Maryland after my big

day. Soon, I would never again set foot in the home I grew up in. The magnitude of the tectonic shift my life was about to take was overwhelming.

My thoughts turned to Grandma as I drove up to our freshly painted ranch-style house in “The Armadillo.” My 1985 Ford Escort had been lovingly named after its doppelganger, the armadillo groom’s cake in the movie *Steel Magnolias*. Grandma was always on my mind these days. The impetus for my parent’s move to Maryland, a mere two-hour drive to Millville, was her recent stage four ovarian cancer diagnosis. Grandma had been so busy taking care of everyone else that she never took care of herself until it was too late. Cancer had spread like a flood, ravaging her body. When I stepped out of the air-conditioned car, I hustled past the two sentry-like holly bushes flanking each side of our door. It was already oppressively hot and so muggy that it only took a second to feel as drenched as you would in pouring rain. Our phone was ringing as I opened the door. A visceral feeling of dread came out of nowhere and hit me like a Mack Truck, drawing me up short. An unwelcome thought flew into my head as I approached the phone, “it’s going to be Grandpa with grave news.” I sucked it up, took the phone out of its cradle, and pressed “talk.”

Mom and Dad walked through the door not long after Grandpa told me that Grandma was dead and asked that I have Dad call him back. I felt hollowed out; I had never known anyone who died, especially not someone I loved beyond any measure. As Dad talked to Grandpa, Mom handed me a wad of twenties and directed me to go to the mall to pick out a graduation dress. A dress that must also be suitable for a funeral. We made it to Jersey the following morning and went straight to the funeral home in Millville for the viewing. There was a pall of silence despite the crowd. Everyone was there except the younger cousins. I approached my grandmother for the last time through sheets of briny tears, touched her soft crepey hand, and said goodbye. I walked

straight out the door, across the parking lot, and up a small hill. I sat in the grass and pulled out my pack of Camel Wides. I lit a cigarette and took a long soothing drag. I couldn't go back in and see the most beneficent woman in the world lying stiffly in a coffin. How could someone so genuinely *good* be taken away from us? How could Millville ever be the same without her? A pandemonium of thoughts, feelings, and questions was flying through my head. Yet I sat there still and quiet, alone on that hill, lighting one cigarette after another with tear-soaked fingers. No one bothered me until it was time to bury her.

Of course, Millville was never the same without Grandma, but that didn't make it bad or deficient. Life went on. Roles changed. A once reserved Grandpa stepped up and filled the hole Grandma had left in our lives. He ensured Aunt Lee didn't miss a Special Olympics or social event; he made the beds when his kids, grandkids, and eventually great-grandkids would visit. Sometimes we would swarm the house en masse; other times, it would be one family tree branch at a time. I forged a wholly unique bond with Grandpa. As the oldest grandkid, I had the luxury of having more time with him. I would drive to Millville several times a year, alone or with a friend or lover. Grandpa and I would sit for hours talking about life, past and present, while he had his Seagram's seven with ginger ale, and I drank beer. I would learn that the Japanese had occupied America in World War Two, on a tiny Alaskan island where Grandpa was deployed shortly after the war ended. There he would play the glockenspiel and nearly freeze to death in an icy hellscape. He started telling me he loved me when I would visit, something even Dad had tried to get him to do without much success. He wasn't over the top about it, but he said it – and I feel that love glowing in me still. I married, moved back to Texas, and had my own kid. Every year I brought my family to my beloved Millville, and Grandpa was always waiting at the door when we arrived, just like he had been for decades. On my last day in Millville, I saw him buried

next to Grandma. I didn't need to sit on the hill alone; I stood with the family, accepting that death is a part of life. It may eviscerate me, but I would go on until I didn't, and that's okay.

After his funeral, we took our last group photo together in Millville, this time just the grandkids and great-grandkids because there was no room in the frame for "the kids" anymore.

There's a big two-story house with a pool, a dilapidated tree fort, and a winding driveway in Ijamsville, Maryland. Troves of creatures can be found in the surrounding woods. Grand mountains and majestic rivers are a stone's throw away. And breathtaking beauty greets the family as we all converge there on holidays, special events, or just because. The doors are always open; the beds are made and waiting. Great big windows run the length of the long living room, where guests gather for photos outside before we are allowed to leave. There, Momma dotes on the kids, and Dad is quick to say he loves everyone. Ijamsville is my daughter's favorite place to visit. It feels like a steady constant in her life; it feels like home. And just like that, when a supernova takes out one solar system, it seeds the next. In time, I will take up the mantle and purposefully generate a gravitational force for my family, sharing the gifts bestowed upon me in a small Jersey town called Millville.