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Lessons With Grandpa

Walking up the front steps to my grandfather's house, it always feels like entering into a different world. My family has always been quiet, reserved, but my dad's father has long seemed the exact opposite. As soon as we enter, silent and tired, finally finished with the 13 hour trial of driving from Vermont to Virginia, our travel worn bodies carrying loaded bags of belongings, he jumps up off his large, overstuffed couch facing the massive TV, which is loudly blaring black and white movies and the news, MMA fights and football.

Always football.

He walks over to us, hugging me, loudly and strongly, despite being almost 80 and under 5' 8". He was a star football player in high school and college, almost going professional before a career ending injury, and he still carries that brashness with him today. He immediately starts to pepper us with rapid fire, cheerful questions, about whether we took the D.C. ring road, or whether my dad had started eating straight butter, judging by the size of his gut, despite the fact that his was actually much smaller than Grampa's. The TV continues blaring in the background as we file upstairs to our bedrooms, filling the otherwise dark and sleepy house with the loud, brazen voices of sports announcers.

The next morning, Grandpa takes me out to the garage on the property to show me his "car collection" as he calls it—by that he means a small Nissan hatchback, and an old modified BMW—talking the whole time about plans for the latter. He opens up the garage door, and backs the car out into the driveway. The BMW could warrant a whole essay on its own, as it's such a strange machine. It started out life as an uptight, gentleman's sedan, but once Grandpa bought it about 20 years ago, he started modifying it, changing it, and now it's a strange amalgamation of a now rundown BMW, and many strange parts tacked onto it, like a wing he ordered off of Amazon, and the front splitter that he curbed backing out of the grocery store.

I've always had a deep fascination with this car, and it's how I actually learned how to drive a manual. Gramps took me to an abandoned mall's parking lot. We drove around in circles for about 2 hours, passing by the same incessant clumps of weeds peeking up through the cracks in the asphalt 100 times. I was thirteen, and I loved cars (still do), and the entire time, I kept stalling it, kept stalling it, Grandpa laughing the entire way. I remember his face, so close to mine, his strangely perfect false bridge flashing white in the hot Virginia morning light. Only at the end did we discover that the handbrake was partially pulled up, making it many times harder to drive it. When we came back the next day, it was much easier, and I shifted with flying colors. Grandpa was so delighted, he even ventured to teach me a crude heel-toe, using my heel to slow the car down while matching revs with my toe.

Later, Grandpa takes us all to the grocery store. Grandpa loves his food. He always claims he's on some new fad diet, claims he's started eating healthy and tells me to eat healthy like him. But after my latest visit, when I heard him claiming that his "buttery spread" was healthier than

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real butter, I knew what he was about. Gramps always goes for the carbs. He loves himself some raisin bread, white bagels, and all sorts of cereals. Interestingly, he has taught me to eat healthy, not by emulating him, but by seeing his habits and vowing never to emulate them.

He doesn't just take us to the grocery store. He makes it an occasion. He dresses up like a black Humphrey Bogart from the old black-and-white movies he loves so much, takes out his old BMW—otherwise reserved for his weekend joyrides only—and puts on his leather driving gloves. The moment we walk into that Whole Foods store, people are looking at him. He's charming the guy restocking the rolls, talking loud about some football game and looking back at me, so cheerful he could convince Ebenezer Scrooge it's a beautiful day, because the sun is shining, the aisles all around us are full of bread, there's just a few clouds in the sky, and a chance of meatballs.