

POPPIE'S GOODBYE  
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A kitchen knife protruded from Poppie's chest.

The hammer was still in his hand. A sharp odor of exertion and fear tinged the air.

He was lying there in his bed, still conscious, blinking at Mom and me as though surprised, and perhaps guilty that we had found him still in his body. His solitary escape gone awry.

It was Mother's Day. One year to the day since my grandmother had died.

We had rushed over because of one of my Mom's premonitions. The night before, she had warned her two sisters that they shouldn't leave Poppie alone, not when Oma's death was so fresh in his mind. But the sisters hadn't listened—said my mother was overreacting. Too often she had been the prophetic but disbelieved Cassandra. She was the middle sister. The gypsy.

Of course, the sisters had reason to doubt her. Sometimes my mother did crazy things. Yelling fits where glass ashtrays and black iron skillets flew past like Morrigan's ravens. The targets had usually been men escaping out the door. She often told me that men couldn't be trusted. But with Poppie it was different. She loved him in the same way he loved her.

We were family, no matter the years and anger between us.

For a long moment none of us moved. I stared from the knife to my grandfather's agonized expression. His gray eyes were watery, but clear. He held my gaze for several heartbeats as though willing me to understand his pain. And his decision. He was finished with life and wanted to go on to whatever happened afterward.

Find Oma. Find peace.

My insides were suspended between fight and flight, leaving me empty, emotionless. I couldn't breathe.

It was Poppie who broke the silence. “Get her out of here.” His voice was weak but still gruff. That was always his way.

I didn’t argue as Mom shoved me mechanically out of the room. I heard her dialing the operator and then her sisters. Her voice was a haze of calm, covering a deep well of rage. It might come out eventually, but not until everything was over. That’s how it was in our family.

I ventured through the house, wondering what happened before we arrived. The world looked different when death was near—the vivid clarity I remembered when, at five, I had nearly drowned. Instead of struggling to the surface, I had stared down in fascination at the alien creatures of the river bottom. Until Mom pulled me out.

I had started going to church then, by myself. I wondered about God. I wanted to know.

Mom didn’t like it there. Too many judged her.

But I wasn’t old enough yet to be condemned. I soon realized, though, that God wasn’t in church. To me, God was in the streaming ray of the sun, in the humility of gratitude, and in the tears of forgiveness.

In a haze, I wandered two steps into the bathroom. I froze. A heavy black clot of blood had congealed in the toilet. An old green towel lay on the floor, thick with scarlet ooze and vomit where he had tried to wipe up the mess. The air tasted metallic and sour.

I imagined Poppie standing with his eyes fixed on the mirror as he did the hammering. I saw him staggering from the bathroom to his bed with that handle jutting from his chest, having finally succeeded in driving the blade deep enough to reach the pain inside.

I touched nothing, but everything left its impression.

The sound of the ambulance could be heard long before it arrived. Poppie was still alive when the medics carried him out on the stretcher. Mom drove us to the hospital. I think he died en route.

We never spoke of Poppie's death. Not the warning signs. Or Mom's premonitions. Or the deed itself.

I think now that it was a fitting end. Poppie had always carried a tool in his hand. As a young man, he worked on hydro projects such as the Panama Canal and the Grand Coulee Dam. When the big dam projects were over, he became a master carpenter.

While I knew little of his skills, I saw them evident in my mother. Unlike other mothers who excelled in the kitchen, mine preferred a skill-saw to a blender. She built redwood decks that outlasted the old houses they surrounded and giant retaining walls with French drains that held her beloved pampas grass. She even convinced her sisters to help her build Poppie's redwood coffin.

A week later, at the funeral home, I refused to go in and sign the inside of the lid with the rest of the family. I didn't want to see Poppie's dead body. I wanted to remember the life in his eyes, that ever-swirling love, anger, and confusion. I wanted to remember how he looked at me that final day. His lesson about the anguish of regret and loss. Poppie's goodbye gift.

I remember he cried only once that I ever saw, six months before he died. My church youth group took small Christmas trees decorated with handmade ornaments around to the widowers. Even though he wasn't a member of the church, I asked if we could take one to him.

When we arrived unannounced, he was still dressed in his old red Pendleton robe though it was early afternoon. The troop of young girls took over his house, setting up the tree, putting out decorations, plying him with hot chocolate and giggles. He sat hunched in his overstuffed lounger, watching, as silent and wary as a caged stray. I thought maybe he was angry. But when we packed up to leave, he stood and hugged me, a trickle of tears falling down his grim, wrinkled cheek. Even dams crack and tumble over time.

I didn't cry as I watched the redwood box lowered into the ground. Neither did I stand with the rest of the family. Six months earlier, on the day he had cried, I knew it would be his last Christmas. But it was our secret.

I never have cried for him, not even now more than thirty years later. I understood. Dam building runs in our family.