

Dianna Calareso

The Man I Know

Five years ago, my grandfather asked me to write his memoirs. At first I was thrilled, and honored. We talked, tape recorded, and meandered through stories that included every name, address, price, and phone number he had encountered since his birth in 1924 - the exact words his father used to tell him he had to drop out of middle school to work in the family produce market; the price he paid for a corner stall when the market outgrew its original space; the number of miles he drove to pick up my grandmother while they were dating; the names of the people he worked with when the USDA sent him to South America to research their methods for produce and vegetation. His memory was incredible, and I was overwhelmed.

And then I stopped. I don't know why, but I wasn't as interested as I felt like I should have been. For a man with so much history, such stories, such obstacles overcome to be the man he is today, for this man I should have abandoned everything to write. But I didn't. I made excuses, I lagged behind, and eventually confessed that I couldn't do it. I was ashamed at my lack of interest, frustrated that I couldn't write the way he wanted me to, and confused as to how a creative nonfiction writer could turn away from a project like this. Five years later, I have finally figured out why I can't write the story of the boy with an 8th grade education, an honorary college degree for public service, and a reputation for generosity, charity, and honesty. The story of a man who has met with presidents, drove a bus so college students could go to church on Sundays, and served his country stateside in WWII. The man whose father was known as Don Paulo, whose mother died a horrific death in a fire, whose 9 siblings all looked to him for guidance throughout their lives. Why couldn't I write about this extraordinary man?

I don't know him.

A steadfast rule of good writing is to write what you know, and I don't know that man. I know the one who stayed up to watch the Red Sox game last night in a button-down shirt with a salad dressing stain, the one who goes to Market Basket every day so that my grandmother doesn't have to, the one who sets out my breakfast every morning: a bowl of Total raisin bran, half a grapefruit, glass of juice, cup of coffee, container of blueberries or strawberries. I never asked him to do this, but I've never asked him to stop. It's who he is to me, and I know him.

Perhaps if he had died before I was born, I might be more intrigued to learn about and write every detail of his life, a mystery that I'd be eager to solve. Perhaps if I only saw him once a year, or if I didn't know how to finish his sentences when he forgets his words...perhaps then his past would excite me more.

Knowing my grandfather so well, so intimately, so uniquely is a gift that not all grandchildren have - not even all of his grandchildren. As a child and teenager I saw my grandparents several times a week. As a young adult I lived with them for two months when I first moved to Boston, jobless and apartment-less, and I am living with them again, five years later, for my final summer in Boston before I get married. I know my grandfather. I know him so well that the other man - the man in the

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stories - is a stranger to me. My mother and her siblings might know that man more, growing up during his long hours at the market, important dinners and meetings, and endless phone calls from people needing or wanting his time. But I don't know that man.

This is the man I know:

My grandfather is 6'2", weighs himself twice a day, and is endlessly concerned with the food in the house. He winces when he stands up, and insists on doing the grocery shopping. He lets me drive now, and he takes a nap every day. He is forgetting so much that sometimes it makes me cry. He prescribes a bowl of ice cream for every physical, mental, or emotional ailment, and he reads the Bible every morning. He stays up until 11:00 or 12:00 every night, and wakes up early enough to set out breakfast for my grandmother and me. He hates mushrooms, Chinese food, and any trace of fat on his meat. There is always a stash of butterscotch candies in the cup holders of his car. He thinks my grandmother makes a better omelet than any restaurant in the world, and he calls her his "cha-cha girl." He told me he would have died without her, that marrying her was the best thing he ever did, that she is beautiful. He tells me not to nag my husband when I get married. When I was sick with tonsillitis and high fevers, he bought me boxes of popsicles. When I drove to New Hampshire to help my cousins with their baby, he gave me gas money. He taught me his favorite card game, Crazy 7's, and he beats me, saying, "No customer golf here, kid." Now he asks me to double check the points, and he often mixes up the scores. Sometimes he confuses the suits, playing a club when he has to play a heart. He watches Fox News, the Red Sox, Wheel of Fortune, and Jeopardy. I wrote out the directions for the DVD player, and sometimes he gets it right. He loves popcorn more than anybody I know, and he hates it when my grandmother interrupts his stories. When I sing, "Shave and a haircut...", he replies, "Two bits!" He has tons of sayings: "It's not the cough you're coughing, it's the coffin they carry you off in;" "Call me anything you want, but don't call me late for dinner;" "It's all in the cards." He believes in God, and he prays daily. He forgets that he's already asked me certain things, so I repeat myself. He went to visit a friend who has cancer, and spent two hours in the car, lost. When we go out, I drive his Cadillac, named "Big Blue," and he sings along to the music. He listens to old Gospel quartets, hymns, and love songs from the 30s and 40s. His favorite singer is Larry Ford. When he sings along, he moves his shoulders up and down to the rhythm, and he remembers every word. He has a full head of white hair, smooth skin, and a chronic infection on his leg that makes it painful for him to walk. He never complains. When he picked up my sisters and me from school, he always stopped at Wendy's for a frosty. He thinks I am wonderful because I laugh at his jokes, especially the one where he asks, "If your nose was on strike, would you pick it?" His handwriting is very hard to read now, and there is a mat under his chair at the table to collect the food that falls from his fork and mouth. We fought one day about the elevator at church I thought he should be using, and last Sunday he decided that he should be taking the elevator. He takes his coffee with cream, no sugar, and he knows that's how I take it, too. Every night he has a snack of cheese and crackers, because he has to take his medicine with food. He thanks me when I bring him a small bowl for the cherry pits, and the playing cards get sticky when we eat while we play. We usually eat while we play. This morning he brewed the coffee

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but forgot to add the water, and it burned. He gets frustrated with himself. He says that the day he stops making jokes is the day we'll know he's dead. I think he is afraid to die, and I think I'm afraid for him to die, too.

I know there are people who have incredible, wonderful, and inspirational stories about my grandfather. Part of me knows I should be thrilled to hear them, jot down notes, and spend all my time writing. But a larger part of me knows that I can't. Extraordinary or not, I prefer my memory of the bits of cherry on his face while he beat me again at cards to someone else's memory of how his company changed the produce business in Boston. If someone writes his biography someday, I'm sure I would love to read it. But until then, I'm content to write about the man I know, the man who just called to me from downstairs to tell me that the new pot of coffee is ready.