My Grandmother

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Her name is Hazel Cadnum and she is eighty-seven years old. She was born and raised in the state of Ohio, has lived her entire life there—an Ohio that at the time of her birth was little more than open spaces, forests and farmland; an Ohio whose first factories had sprung up along the banks of the Cuyahoga River not much earlier than a generation before her birth—and the story I have to tell of her involves not so much the location of her body in time and space as the influence of her humanity on my mind and heart—far more important co-ordinates, as far as I'm concerned. I don't know much about her early life, nor do I feel I need to. She lived on a farm no doubt (who didn't back then?), had chickens and cattle to feed, chores to do, maybe one or two nice dresses—and yet the outward circumstances of her life don't much concern me here, for what I want to investigate is her inner world. She was always a supremely happy person—an inextinguishable joy burned in her eyes from the time she got up in the morning until the time she went to bed at night—and though she lived her life tenaciously, was not about to go gentle into the dying of any light, good or otherwise, her daily actions were comprised of the most exacting gentleness, the finest example I have ever known of a human being at peace with herself. I'm reminded in thinking of her of a passage in John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography,* for I feel it so accurately defines my grandmother: "Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself the ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way." The happiness of others, the improvement

of mankind. My grandmother improved mankind by the simple fact of her presence, faced life graciously and uncomplaining, never thought nor spoke ill of anyone. There were only two kinds of people in the world whom she could not abide: spiders and snakes. To this day she has a mortal dread of these two creatures, an aversion most people find forgivable, but aside from this her record is spotless. I write about her now because her influence upon my sensibility was, more perhaps than any other single factor, what led me to become a lover of books. Which is ironic, because my grandmother was and is not a "literary" person, has lived most of her life not at the university but on a farm, and yet she comes from a time and a place where people had a respect for the language, where syntax had not yet been splintered into ten-second tracts and mortgaged out to the networks to ensure the propagation of the latest pestilence—Froot Loops or Allstate or Bob Hope or GM's latest disaster. When I read today, particularly work that touches or moves me deeply, I am reminded in my heart of my grandmother: it is her face I see when I turn out the lights; it is her voice I hear in the dark; it is the faintly stale odor of her living room in Valley City, Ohio that comes back to me again and again, the stale odor of old folks' living rooms everywhere. There are few enough reasons for the circumstances in our lives—most of what we take for fate is actually happenstance turned on end—but there is a definite reason I think almost daily of an eighty-seven-year-old woman three thousand miles to the east.

The reasons go back many years. To tell you the whole story would be to trace the entire history of my family, how my father and mother met, how they married, how they got on in the years before my brother and I were born—none of it very pertinent to the matter at hand. Suffice it to say they met and married. My father got out of the service after serving in the Philippines in World War II; my mother, the youngest child of four, stayed at home with Grandma and Grandpa and helped around the farm; and after the dust had settled and the bodies had been counted and the dog tags swept into one huge mound—after Nagasaki and Dresden and Auschwitz—my mother and father took themselves to a justice of the peace and got themselves married. In Ohio, in places like Brunswick, Chagrin Falls, Hinckly, Medina, Twin-

sburg, Valley City, life was almost too quiet. In ten years we would have Korea, Elvis Presley, television; five years after that Gidget would go Hawaiian, the silly girl. But for now things were quiet. It was a lull, the proverbial calm before the storm. What does the human species do in such a lull? It makes replicas of itself.

I was born in 1954, three years after my brother. We were raised on a steady diet of *Captain Kangaroo* and Wheaties, which may help to explain a lot of things. We lived in a suburb of Cleveland, about an hour southeast of that City of Light, and year after year as I grew up I listened to the Cleveland Indians lose on the radio. Occasionally I'd watch them lose on TV. After a while I only read about them losing in the paper the next day. Our neighborhood was so WASPish, so gentile, so lily-white, I can't recall meeting a single black person or a Jew until my early teens. I was what you might call sheltered. The most traumatic event in my life at this time was for one of my guppies to die, an event which should not have affected me as devastatingly as it did: there were three hundred and thirty-three left.

In 1959 my mother took ill, an illness lasting some five years until her death in 1964. I should tell you—for reasons which may or may not become apparent in a moment—that I had originally intended to write this account without mentioning my mother, without reaching into the family closet and pulling out a few convenient, well-dusted skeletons; but I find that her life and the life of my grandmother, however different they may have been in their own particulars, however unalike they may have been in the specific, were so inextricably woven, so entangled in the to and fro of grief and wonder and regret and the momentary bittersweet victory turned suddenly, sourly, and without warning into defeat, that I cannot speak of one without speaking of the other. In 1959 my mother was diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic, a malady as capricious as the wind but a thousand times more deadly, a malady which has, like cancer, the unique ability to fracture and destroy whole families—and it felled her like a small tree. Each time she fell the doctors picked her up and pumped her full of electroshock and Thorazine (she came back to us scarred but functional, a frail willow ready for new felling), and it was in these picking-up times that my brother and I took the hour-and-a-half drive with my father to my grandmother's house in Valley City, Ohio. To

grandmother's house we went, but as for myself not without the usual wordless goodbyes and a tightening sensation in my gut that told me something was terribly, terribly wrong. Someone was about to get hurt, I sensed, and I didn't want it to be me. It wasn't, exactly. But Grandma was always there, her apron surgically attached in those days it seems, and when my father swung the car into her gravel driveway and my brother and I burst from the car doors like a couple of greyhounds after the fleeing rabbit, she greeted us with open arms and open Frigidaire. My father would leave us there for a week or two, sometimes three, and after several of my mother's breakdowns and several drives through the quiet, cool countryside of northeastern Ohio, past cider stands and old barns and miles and miles of cornfields, I began to see that Dad was using Grandma's house as a place of refuge. I didn't begrudge him that; at the time we needed a place to hide. Instead I took it to me as my home away from home.

Let me tell you about her house. The immediate impression is one of incredible cleanliness. Above all else the Bible-thumping frontier mothers impressed upon their daughters the lesson that cleanliness, my dear girls, is next to Godliness. Grandma apparently learned her lessons well, for her house was always spotless. There was a large black-and-white television in the living room, and across the room, facing the television, sat a matching chair and sofa, circa 1900. On the arms of this chair and sofa were those little lace doillies you find all over the furniture of the midwest. I'll never forget those doillies, damn them, because I could never do anything on that chair short of just sitting there without knocking at least one of them to the ground. In the back part of the house were two bedrooms, one bath, and—a must for my grandmother—a huge kitchen. She loved to cook, whipped up portions so huge they toppled off the fronts and sides of our plates, bounteous rations we wolfed down as voraciously as any farm kid or half-starved piranha. Around the back of her house she kept a garden where she grew just about everything: corn, tomatoes, beans, peas, carrots, onions, beets, radishes, cucumbers, green peppers; blackberries, boysenberries, raspberries, strawberries, etc., for her pies; and her prize crop, rhubarb. My grandmother grew more rhubarb than the rest of the entire state of Ohio. For years

half the United States' G.N.P. in rhubarb came out of her garden. And every summer day, it seemed, she had fresh rhubarb pie cooling on her windowsill, a pie so sweet and sour, so tangy, it made the glands in the back of your jaw weep for joy and the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end.

In 1964, though, a taste more sour even than my grandmother's rhubarb pies came into my life: On February 10th, unable perhaps to see anything ahead but more electroshock and more Thorazine, more wind and toppling and getting up and falling down, more terror and uncertainty and doubt and pain, my mother took her own life. For a long time afterward no one said anything. Everyone came to the funeral; everyone wept openly, myself among them. Afterward, though, it was as if an open gash, an unhealing wound, stretched from one end of my family to the other, scarring my father and my brother and I permanently, and even so much as the mention of this gash, particularly while driving through the desolate February landscape on the way to my grandmother's house in Valley City, Ohio, was enough to prompt the salt from the road—somehow, I didn't know how—to creep up through the floorboards of the car and sting the wound of the person who had said it. Everyone walked on eggs. Grandma C. said nothing, simply went on being what she had always been—a pillar of strength—and baked and stirred and fried more furiously than ever, as if the way to a child's ailing heart was through his stomach. The attempt was not wholly unsuccessful: gradually I returned to my curious self, asking questions about anything and everything (except my mother), until somehow, miraculously, as if a curtain had been lifted, February became March. It was at this time that my brother took to walking in the woods, a habit he's continued to this day; walking, I didn't know where, but with a determination that grew stronger and stronger as the season progressed, as spring came on, until suddenly it was April, and the walks stopped, and the snow melted, and the fields gave off their steamy heat, and the traffic on the highway in front of my grandmother's house beat by with maddening regularity, each squeal or squeak of rubber, each click of a studded snow tire on that sheening asphalt runway counting out the minutes and days and hours and months of lives spent trying to forget. We all

wanted desperately to forget, to get back to the normalcy of homework and spring flowers and Vietnam on the TV every night, to find oblivion in the simplest activities of daily life. It was in May of that year that I saw something I shall never forget.

Around back of my grandmother's house, half-hidden from the highway and just to the right of her garden when you looked out through the kitchen window, stood several clotheslines from which she hung wet sheets in the warmer months of spring and on through summer into fall. She had an electric dryer as I recall, but she preferred, maybe out of some deference to her mother's training in a day before there were such things as electric dryers, to hang her sheets by hand and let them dry by wind. On the morning I'm speaking of it'd rained the night before, dousing the garden and the lawn beside it with a fair share of water, and the sky, shifting from grey to indigo to pink to azure with the rotation of the earth that morning, had the sharpness and clarity of a thin sheet of ice skimmed from the top of an Ohio ditch. I ate some cereal, my brother went across the highway to throw rocks at some horses, my grandmother went about the laundry. The sunlight streamed through the kitchen window, catching the dust motes in the air, charging them with light, while in the living room the TV droned on—some blather about filthy old American lucre: *The Price is Right* or *Jeopardy*. Finishing a half a box of cereal, I got up, walked over with my bowl to the kitchen sink, turned on the faucet, and looked out into the yard. It was then that I saw what I want to tell you about.

I'm not very adept at describing significant moments in my life. They crowd in upon me and demand that I get everything right—that the lighting's just so, the proper perspective drawn, the faces somewhat in focus—something like taking a picture or writing a poem, two things I have never been very good at. That morning my grandmother stood beneath her clotheslines, a basket of wet sheets in her arms. She set the basket down, picked up her first sheet, a white one, and reached up carefully, straining slightly on tiptoe, clothespin in teeth, to attach the sheet to the line. A wind blew out of the north, coming in off Lake Erie seventy miles away, billowing the sheet up and away from her as she tried to secure it; the sun, still low on the horizon and so bright it hurt the eyes to so much as look in its direction, shone through her hair, turning the

silver-gray there to near-white. For a moment she became frozen, suspended in time and motion, and the entire attentiveness of my being focused on her. She was caught in a spot of time and everything sped up and at the same time slowed down. Then abruptly all motion ceased. My nine-year-old mind raced, sought wildly for explanations—but what's to be made of a sixty-eight-year-old woman hanging wet sheets on a clothesline in mid-May? I was incapable of answering that question at the time—maybe still am today—but in looking back I suppose her image there spoke to me of the repetitive nature of our lives, of the fact that our living here is couched in ceremony and ritual, in repetitive patterns which, though they plague us with their continuity and insistence, are nonetheless one of the reasons we survive as a species. We need this continuity to survive. "Every person who had ever lived," Thorton Wilder writes in an essay discussing *Our Town,* "has lived an unbroken succession of unique occasions. Yet the more one is aware of this individuality in experience . . . the more one becomes attentive to what these disparate moments have in common, to *repetitive patterns.* A little further on in the same piece Wilder states, "It *(Our Town)* is an attempt to find value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life." Small events. I suppose what I'm talking about when I describe how my grandmother hangs wet sheets on a clothesline is small events, but I also want to make clear to you just how much larger that event became in my mind. In that split second of what might be called, rightly or wrongly, pre-cognitive awareness (I have always felt that for me cognition began in adolescence), the ritualistic repetitiveness of mankind came home to me with incredible force. We require the accomplishment of the smallest tasks, I discovered then and hold to still, to assure the believability in a larger future; we start with the minute and work up to the infinite. As I studied my grandmother on the lawn that morning, watched her reach up to her clothesline, watched the sun come through her hair, saw the wind tug at her sheet, I became blinded by the brilliance of the sun and had to turn away. It came to me then, in what was perhaps my first intelligent observation of human life, that she had washed and dried other sheets; that her husband, the grandfather I never knew, had died of cancer on sheets she had scrubbed by hand and hung to dry on different

lines; that she had cleansed the linens of my mother for years on end until that young woman left home to commit the ultimate repetition—to give a couple of children to the earth and then, though not in the usual way, to die. And now there were other sheets to clean and dry, other linens to fold and put away. I watched her for a second and then the moment released her and she became a sixty-eight-year-old woman hanging laundry on a line.

I rinsed out my bowl, turned off the faucet, put the milk away, and went into the living room. I turned off *Jeopardy*. For a long time I sat on Grandma's sofa and played with one of those doillies. Then, for only about the third time since my mother died, I wept.

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The years have a funny way of taking the edge off things. A year after my mother died my father remarried, my stepmother and he had a couple of daughters, and in 1969 my new family and I moved to California, leaving behind a slew of aunts and uncles and cousins and second cousins and, of course, my grandmother. We went back to visit in 1972, stayed a couple of weeks; I went back in 1978 by myself to attend the wedding of a friend. Grandma still lives in Ohio, though she sold the house in Valley City several years ago and moved in with my aunt. A month ago, upon the occasion of a business trip to the east, I had the opportunity to see her again. It'd been five years.

I flew into Boston on a Friday morning in mid-September, rented a car at the airport and headed north toward New Hampshire. Why New Hampshire? The answer is that every autumn my grandmother comes to New Hampshire to visit her oldest daughter (my aunt) and her son-in-law (my uncle) to spend six weeks in a New England easy chair and watch the World Series and see the leaves change color and fall and watch winter come in upon the land. She was to arrive the next day: we were to drive down and meet her in New York State.

New Hampshire is always lovely, but loveliest, I think, in autumn. On the way to my aunt and uncle's house I drove past Lake Sunipee, found it deserted and lonely, not a single boat out. It was just after Labor Day—late summer or early autumn, depending on your frame of reference—and though the leaves hadn't begun to change yet, most of the tourists had returned to

their homes to await the arrival of the wind and rain—to pick their gardens clean and note the passage of a few woolly bear caterpillars scurrying for cover and cocoon. In a matter of weeks several of them would return to see the colors, then dash back to those same houses to install storm windows, re-coil the garden hose, and cast a sidelong glance at the woodlot.

The next morning, at seven o'clock sharp, my aunt and uncle and I piled into their new Saab 900 (not a turbo), pulled out of the driveway and headed off across southern New Hampshire and Vermont. We stopped for breakfast, had coffee and juice, and after a leisurely six-hour drive through so many towns I can't remember any of their names, arrived at our destination in New York at three o'clock in the afternoon. An hour later my grandmother arrived.

I haven't told you much about the way she looks. I won't tell you much now, except to say that she was smaller than I remembered her, less mobile, and that she stooped over and needed help when she walked. She looked at me for the longest time, perplexed, and didn't know who I was. I told her and she seemed puzzled: How had I gotten there? And why hadn't someone told her I was coming? Why hadn't someone said something? The answer of course was that someone had, but that she, in her old age, had forgotten. She forgets a lot of things now, and yet she's fortunate enough to be surrounded by a loving brood who elect to do the remembering for her.

We had dinner together. She ate light: coffee, jello, a few crackers. After dinner we took a drive past one of the New York Fingerlakes. She didn't say much, seems content to sit and watch and listen now. We drove for half an hour or so, then went back to our motel room.

We went to bed early, all four of us—my grandmother, myself, my aunt and uncle—in one motel room, in three different beds. Somewhere in the middle of the night I woke up. I don't know why, but I didn't open my eyes immediately. I lay there for a while and listened to the sounds around me: to the air conditioner, the whirr of traffic on the highway, the drip of a faucet, the tick of a clock. Across the room I could hear my grandmother breathing, the steady, rhythmic, inward and outward flow of her breath—the simplest of our repetitions but the most vital. I kept seeing her in

my mind, reaching up to pin that large white sheet on the clothesline behind her house in Valley City, Ohio; and though she was younger, stronger and healthier in the picture I had in my mind—her hands more able to grasp, her feet more capable of navigating the land unaided—she was also the same frail, significant woman who lay on that bed just now on the other side of the room. It brought back to me the incredible fragility of us all—as a people, as a nation, as a planet. I stayed awake for an hour or two, blinked once or twice, then went back to sleep.

"On the whole," Joan Didion wrote a few years back, "I am able to take a very long view of death." I, too, take the long view, do not coddle or entice the beast, but I think a lot about what kept me awake that night in a strange motel room three thousand miles from home. It was, of course—as it always has been—my grandmother.

As the shadows came through the window that night and the faucet dripped on, I questioned the darkness. Shouldn't our lives be full, not of darkness, but of light? And why should the presence of an old woman's teeth in a glass above my head set my mind to wandering? Won't we all be in that ben soon enough without thinking about it, our own teeth in a glass, our own bedclothes disheveled, an air conditioner droning on and on to keep the elements out? We should all be so lucky at such a time to be surrounded by those who will tend to the needs of our second infancy as we have tended to theirs in the first. We should all be so lucky, but so few of us are.