

*Scott Sandler*

## Custer

Grandpère. It's French for grandfather. My grandfather's French. Actually, I wouldn't have to tell you he's French. You just look at him and you can tell. He's got the classic goatee. He wears a beret. He looks like a struggling artist. As a matter of fact, he is a struggling artist. Scratch that. He is an artist, a painter, but he's not struggling.

Most of the time he's sitting back in a gray reclining chair and he's eating strawberry yogurt off of a tray. He crumbles graham crackers into his yogurt. He has to eat soft food. Hard food hurts his teeth. Because of this, my mom usually winds up making two dinners. One for Grandpère, and one for my brother, who often complains that he is tired of food he can't chew. Dad says two dinners are a good idea—it makes for variety. "Besides," he says, "there's no reason we should suffer just because he can't eat right." The last time Grandpère tried chewing hard food, a crown came out. He didn't realize he'd lost it until after dessert. My mother had to dump all the trashbags on the kitchen floor. She was rummaging through the empty cereal boxes, leftover turkey, cans of dog food, and cans of orange and pineapple Crush, when my dad came in. He said, "Look at this mess." He said, "Jesus, how could you lose something straight out your mouth and not notice it?" I was going to stick up for Grandpère. I was going to remind everybody about how I lost my glasses and didn't realize it until fifth period, when I couldn't read the assignment on the chalkboard. I was going to say

this. Grandpère would have smiled and said, "You see." Dad would have said, "That was fifty dollars." And Mom would have said, "Why bring that up now, can't you see your father's upset?" My older brother would have given me a dirty look.

It doesn't matter how I would have reacted, because I didn't say it anyway. I always find myself saying things to myself, practicing what I should say, or must say, and then never saying a word. When I don't say anything, I stare off into space, turn on the TV, and don't exist.

My grandfather exists because he's got a goatee. He's French. He's got a trademark.

My dad's got a trademark, too. His anger. You always know when my dad's in the room. Even if you don't look at him, you can feel him. Just a few weeks ago, he threw Grandpère out of the car because he refused to wear his safety belt. When Grandpère came home an hour later, out of breath, coughing, and smelling of gasoline, Dad was already asleep. Grandpère still has the cough, and Dad has never apologized.

My brother exists as well. He, like everyone else, has a trademark. His name. Custer. Like the general. He meets people because they walk up to him and say, "Custer? Is that your real name?" My dad named him Custer after watching "They Died With Their Boots On" on KCOP.

Errol Flynn played Custer. Dad says that our Custer is just as handsome as Errol Flynn, even more. My mom was upset. She said Custer was a murderer. Dad said that he was a general, and that's what generals are supposed to do. Mom said that Custer was a loose cannon, out of control. Dad said that's what he likes about him. He likes him because he was out of control. People out of control get things done. They get noticed, get in history books. He told Mom that Custer, our Custer, would be in the history books, like Custer, the other one, was. He will get in the history books, and no one will fully understand him, because he won't be simple, he will be out of control.

Dad says that Custer and I are like the north and south poles and maybe he's right. I don't have a clever name like his. My name is Matt. I don't do funny things like Custer, either. Custer asked

Grandpère if he knew how to French-kiss. Grandpère laughed, said he was too old. Custer demonstrated it to us on his girlfriend, Julie. The whole family gathered around as if he were doing some sort of magic trick. Julie's face was red. Dad was on the floor, hysterical. He thought it was so goddamn funny that he was going to tell Karl at work tomorrow.

I'm not out of control, like Custer is. In my dreams, however, I'm a maniac. Like one time, Custer was slapping Julie around. I could hear her screaming, so I broke the door down, gave Custer a black eye, and kicked him in the nuts. Another time, I pulled her out of a fire. Another time, I saved her from a bullet, and got shot myself. She stayed with me in the hospital all night, brought me flowers, brought me candy, said she loved me. Most of the time, though, I have falling dreams. Y'know, the kind where you're falling, falling, and you never, ever, really hit the ground. I've heard that if you do hit the ground, you die. But that's not true, because just the other day I hit the ground, and nothing happened to me.

Grandpère is mixing the graham crackers in his yogurt when the phone rings. He is listening to Django Reinhardt. Django Reinhardt is a French guitarist. He has a trademark, too. He is missing two of his fingers. I think that his two missing fingers are more exciting than his guitar playing. Grandpère is listening to the music, smiling, and ignoring the telephone. For a minute, I think he's enjoying the ringing as though the telephone were just another instrument, playing accompaniment, adding to the sound. I pick up the receiver, and Grandpère says, "Can you get that for me, Matthew?"

I say, "hello," and Grandpère turns around and looks at me. His brown, copper colored eyes are magnified behind the horn-rimmed bifocals. He says, "If it's for me, I'm not here."

It's not for him. It's about the dog. She's gotten into the neighbor's yard and is digging up the lawn. I get Ruby and put her in my room. I shut the door so she can't leave. She whimpers. I pick her up and put her on my bed. I lie next to her and, hooking her neck with my arm, shove her head on my chest. She is growling. I clamp my hand around her nose and she is whimpering again.

Everyone is asleep when I wake up. I stare at the small green digital numbers—2:38 a.m. I turn on the lights, and see that Ruby has found a new spot, near the clothes hamper. She stretches her paws out, exposing her dirty nails, and then readjusts herself into a curled position.

I open my door and head out to the living room. Although I have lived in this house over ten years, I still feel uncomfortable with it. It's dark, but I can tell where each piece of furniture is: the four wicker chairs surrounding the parquet table, the counter with the liquor bottles lined like books in shelves, and the many pictures which my grandfather painted. My favorite one is "Tigers in Red Weather." Grandpère painted it after reading a Wallace Stevens poem. He says it represents imagination. He sounds like a teacher when he says this. The red weather looks like fire to me. It is the fire I pulled Julie out of, and it is the fire which burnt off Django Reinhardt's fingers.

I feel like I am in the middle of some museum that has been shut down for the night, and now, more than ever, I feel like I don't exist. I turn on the kitchen light. White linoleum is spread out before me. Stepping on the floor in bare feet is like stepping on a bar of ice. By the time I reach the pantry, my feet are numb. I pull out the Raisin Bran, only to find that the box's empty. I settle for some Spoon Size Shredded Wheat. I read the back of the box—"no added sugar, no added salt." It seems to take ten minutes to read the back of the box in order to get everything possible out of it. I look up the word "riboflavin" in the dictionary, and then go to bed again.

When I wake up, Custer's standing above me.

"Wake up, ya little shit. I need you to hold the ladder. I know you're awake, ya little shit. Wake up."

It's past noon and I'm holding the ladder for Custer, who overshot the hoop (and even the chimney). "I got it," he yells, and bounces the ball on the roof. As he is climbing down, ball in hand, I think I could kill him, couldn't I? I could pull the ladder out from underneath him. He would fall, crack his head open, and then I would exist. I would be known as the one who killed Custer. I would be thrown in jail, be wearing stripes, spit and swear a lot. Dad wouldn't want to mention my name because it would hurt too

much. I would be known as the black sheep of the family.

Custer hits the bottom rung and says, "Thanks, schmuck." I should have killed him when I had the chance. So many missed opportunities. He wouldn't have died, though, even if I had pulled the ladder. He would have instead made a fall-away jump-shot in mid-air, and he would have never hit the ground.

As Custer shoots from half-court, Julie pulls up. Julie wears her hair in a pony-tail, and looks younger than she really is. Custer bounces the ball to her, and she misses a shot. He laughs, rebounds, and lets her try again. She misses again and he laughs again. He walks up to me and says that I put on too much cologne. He says, "You smell like a girl." Julie says I smell nice. "He still smells like a girl," Custer says and grabs Julie by the waist. He starts to French-kiss her, and I go back inside.

Grandpère is sick. His face is all red and he is shivering. Mom gives him a glass of water and his bathrobe, which he pulls tight around his body. Dad goes to the store, gets a bottle of aspirin, and I watch as he gives it to him.

Grandpère spits the chalky, white, saliva-filled pieces of aspirin into his hand, and says, "I can't."

"Swallow, don't chew," my dad tells him.

Grandpère rinses out his mouth and tries again. He reluctantly puts the tablet on his tongue and takes a drink of water.

"Hold your head back," my dad tells him.

He holds his head back and, in a matter of seconds, he goes into his, now tiring, series of convulsions. He jerks his head back and forth like a cat does when it is plagued with fur balls. He spits into his hand again and his voice shakes when he says, "I can't."

Dad reaches for the bottle of Anacin. "I can't and I won't," Grandpère says.

"Fine," Dad says, and throws the bottle. It ricochets off the freezer, misses Mom's head by inches and hits the floor, scattering tablets all over the white linoleum. "Then you'll just have this goddamn flu forever, that's all," Dad says and goes into the living room. When he comes back into the kitchen, he is wearing his coat.

"Pick those up," he says, pointing to the floor. He storms out the back door.

Mom is on her hands and knees, picking up the aspirin and crying. She mutters something underneath her breath. It is at this moment I realize something. Mom doesn't exist either. I think Mom stopped existing when she gave in to the name Custer.