

## Boy's Life

Spring has the energy that propels children into summer, where it is exhausted. Our block is filled with this energy, flowing down the streets on bicycles, scooters, hippityhops, and roller skates. The energy surges in me and every other child. It fills the day. It tugs at us if we sit still too long, urging us into the open. It surrounds us; we ignite in laughter, motion, burning. I am one of those that burn; I am nothing but fuel.

During a pause between hot dogs, bath towel capes, and big wheels, I read an issue of *Boy's Life*. Glossy children with white smiles doing courteous deeds. I read articles on good citizenship, whittling, CPR, and how to tie ties. But mostly, I just look at the pictures.

The house is empty, except for sunlight and the shadows from trees ducking into the windows, left over bread crust from sandwiches, a few flies on the ceiling, my mom and my grandpa. Grandpa lies in bed or sits in a wheel chair. Sometimes he uses a walker. He moves in silent desperation. Sometimes I pass his room and he is asleep, sitting on the toilet, long bony legs, all the muscle gone.

Once in a while we give him a ball that he tosses to us. The ball falls out of his hand; we find it and hand it back. Usually, when he looks up at me he does not recognize who I am. Sometimes he thinks I am his son. Often, he wakes up lost and mom has to comfort him until he settles down.

His name is Bert Clyde Roseberry. His twin brother was called Wert Claude Roseberry; they were very close. My grandpa lived in West Virginia, in a shack, growing tobacco. Later he was an engineer, with overalls, an engineer's cap, and a red lantern to signal the trains. He worked at Buckeye Steel, guiding cauldrons of flowing steel and pouring them into molds. Finally, Grandpa had a farm, raising sheep, chickens, pigs, and a horse.

When he lived on the farm, grandpa sat in a fat chair with an enormous wad of chewing tobacco in his cheek. Spitting the juice into a can that sat beside the chair, he would fill it by the end of the day. I never looked into the can. He never spoke to me; Grandpa related more to his little dog that occupied his lap constantly. When he would go outside to feed the animals, the dog would follow.

His transition was abrupt to me. It was as if someone had scraped him clean. Mind and body had thinned and could no longer stand on its own. A man once full, he began to empty. It had gotten to the point that grandma could not take care of him, so my mom became his caretaker. She fed him, bathed him and put him to bed.

Grandpa is in bed a lot now; his breathing is too shallow for him to move. Life moves faster than his mind can understand. Reality is a blur. This day is too much for him so he sleeps. Mom is still busy though, supplying us with lawn darts, turning on the sprinkler, explaining why the cat is not a toy.

I am trying to kick the can. I wait 'til the kid who guards the can has his attention drawn to another kid. I act like I am running away. When he takes after the other children, I quickly turn around to kick the can. I miss, but he doesn't tag me. We don't have a can; it's a milk carton.

I come into the house looking for KoolAid, or something that will stain the floor if I spill it. I have a cherry mustache that will last a summer. I can feel the breeze move across my top lip, wet with KoolAid. Children are screaming laughter; I smile, wondering what may be going on. I can feel the energy pulling me back outside, into the games, pretend worlds, and my mother screams. Mom is screaming...mom is screaming? "Allan! Allan, watch grandpa, I'm calling rescue." I run past her as she runs to the phone.

I stand alone in the middle of his room; the curtains are drawn open and thick light pours in over him. Body trembling, hands flailing, mouth open. I can hear the sound of him gasping for more time. His mind becomes aware of the presence of death. The rumor is passed from cell to cell, causing fear, then panic. The cells begin to riot. His mind succumbs to the innate terror. He is a boy, dying with eighty-five years of memory; just yesterday he was me.

His soul recedes, leaving behind a vacuum at his core. Mouth wide, lips curling over gums, breathing in endlessly, filling the void with all the life around him. The day rushes into emptiness, and is crushed, extinguished. All I can hear is his breath, which is no longer a whimper but a loud hungry need for life.

My feelings are caught and are swept away into the nothing. I am pulled toward him, taking his head in my hand. I lean in and place my mouth over his, open my lungs and sacrifice my breath. Breath which is life. The eternal silence that touches me frightens me. He consumes my innocence. I open myself further and empty myself into him. What has been left behind in him is vast and endless. Everything I give disappears into him. There is so little of him left, he is almost gone. I pull away, tripping backwards.

He is far away, isolated, afraid. I want to pull him back to me, but can't. I begin to yell, first to where he lay, then beyond. "I love you! I love you, Grandpa, we all love you!" My voice leaves the room, fills the house, empties into the yard, down the sidewalk, and across the street. I want my voice to enter his body, follow his mind, discover his soul and hold him, comfort him. I want him to know that he leaves loved. I want the words that will complete his life to be "I love you." I want this to be his last understanding.

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But life is done. He is dead. Everything is still. The old man is gone. The boy is gone. The room is empty and silent.

I am pushed aside; the paramedics arrive and take him away. Everything moves faster. Reality is a blur. My sister and I are taken to a friend's house. I am not there though; I am still coming back from somewhere else. The rest of the day passes quickly. In seconds I am back home wandering around numb.

Outside, spring is gone; the day is over, the streets are empty, doors locked, and windows closed. All the energy has been used up. There is nothing but darkness outside. The house is dark and hollow. Family has gathered; they sit in the kitchen, quiet, holding onto each other. The light from the kitchen draws the shadows long. They wrap around me.

I come to stand in his room. I notice the ball he played with, picking it up, cradling the toy in my hand, staring at it, lost. I need breath. I approach the empty bed and carefully climb into it. Something of myself has slipped into the vacuum, leaving the emptiness that will take everything to fill. My grandmother quietly comes into the room. She cannot see that my eyes are open, watching her. She thinks I am asleep, Grandma moves closer and in dark silence covers me. I am gone. There is no longer a boy here. Whatever is left breathes deeper than most.

