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Stories of Betsy

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Stories of Betsy

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DePauw University
Honor Scholar Program

Class of 2018

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Sponsor

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Committee Members

In my favorite picture
of Grandma,
she wears a tulle gown the color
of evergreen trees.
The full skirt hasn't been smoothed
or arranged,
but she poses all the same ó confidently
casually ó as if to say
something I wish I could hear.

I've been taught that pearls are classic,
elegant. My Grandma
wears two tight strands above her collar
bone. Her hands
hide behind the blue, orange, and red
blossoms of the bouquet
she holds at her waist, but I imagine
that they look like mine ó
pale, slender, clammy, long-nailed, veiny.
I hope they look like mine.



“Unless you confess your own *emotional stakes* in a story, why
should a reader have any?” – Mary Karr (97)

Sifting through the Pieces~

About eight years ago, I went with my family to Louisville to attend the funeral of my Great Uncles Charles Schmidt, one of my Grandma Betsy's brothers. I didn't remember Charlie, but I still cried the whole time. Funerals make me think of all the people I know who have died. In this case, it was my Grandma Betsy. I was twelve years old, and my Grandma had been gone for a little more than four years. My family attended the funeral for Charlie, the cemetery service, and the lunch for family and friends afterwards. The whole time I watched tears run down the freckled cheeks of Uncle Charlie's red-headed granddaughters, and I felt bad. I was crying just as much as they were, and they probably wondered who the heck I was. Throughout the day, I had also been watching someone else, an older woman. I watched her because she looked like my Grandma Betsy. The way she moved and talked was so familiar to me, even though I really didn't remember her. When I asked my Mom who she was, she told me the woman was my Great Aunt Dorothy, my Grandma Betsy's only sister. My Mom urged me to talk to Dorothy, but I was too shy. I ate my food quietly and watched her from a distance. After lunch when everyone was visiting, I mustered the courage to approach Aunt Dorothy. Fighting back even more tears, I sat down next to her on a couch and asked, "Can you tell me a story about my Grandma?"

What an out-of-the-blue question! She must have known who I was or quickly figured it out because after gathering her thoughts for a few seconds, she began with exactly the story my heart was seeking. A few months ago, I asked Aunt Dorothy to re-tell me the same story.

“When I was a senior,” she begins, “Betsy was a freshman.” Aunt Dorothy tells me that it was the time of the year for girls to campaign for “Basketball Queen,” which I assume is homecoming, and to her surprise, she was nominated.

“One of those girls,” she recounts, “her dad owned a jewelry store. . . I knew I didn’t have a chance.” Aunt Dorothy continues, “But then one morning, I got to school and saw that there were posters over all three floors with my name on them!” Aunt Dorothy tells me that my Grandma had gotten all of her “freshman friends” together to make posters and had put them up early one morning before school. “And ya know what?” she says, excited, reminiscent. “I won it.”

So was the power of my Grandma Betsy. I love this story, but it doesn’t surprise me; my whole life I’ve heard accounts of my Grandma’s generosity, spunk, and toughness. From parish priests, bank tellers, grocery store cashiers, elementary school teachers ó I’ve heard wonderful words about my Grandma. She was everyone’s favorite. I love her, too, but I also only knew her for eight years. There is so much more to Betsy than what I know firsthand, and that’s why I chose to focus this project on her.

I have many emotional stakes in this project. I miss my Grandma and love her, but I also feel the need to record this history for the family I still have and the relatives I will gain in the future. Of course, I also want to learn about her to have a greater context for the world I come from. Whatever I set out to do in this project, it was important for me to do it right. In other words, the stakes are high when the work is difficult, and discovering truth about the life of someone who has died isn’t easy. Painting an inaccurate picture of my Grandma would be worse than painting no picture at all.

*“Since anybody’s handling of the truth derives from her nature,
and I know nobody’s nature so well as my own, I feel obliged to
detail my own practice” (Karr 21).*

In a way, I started this project eight years ago, and now, Iøve picked it up again. I will turn in a òcompletedö thesis, but this work is unfinished and truthfully unfinishable; there will always be artifacts that Iøve missed or passed by, relics of Grandma that I didnøt recognize or couldnøt find. There will also be stories that never reach my ears. The people that Iøve spoken to about Grandma Betsy lived a lifetime with her. They have endless stories and anecdotes, and though I spent hours at their dining room tables listening to what they had to say, I have not, will not, hear everything. Painting a complete picture of my Grandma Betsy is impossible.

A partial picture, of course, can be constructed, but then comes the next question: Is the story an authentic one? Whose story am I telling, after all? For lack of a better term, how do I *market* this work? Is it a story of my Grandma, or is it my Grandma ó as told by others and put in the voice and context of my choosing? Thatø a lot of filters that the information must go through between my Grandma Betsy and the finished product. Am I suggesting that the people Iøve interviewed havenøt been truthful? No, of course not. I am a firm believer in absolute truth, but when it comes to people re-telling their experiences, there is truth to what they each have to say, even if some accounts seem contradictory. For example, one big issue I dealt with in this project was the use of the German language. Uncle Louis tells me one thing, and Aunt Dorothy tells me another. What do I do with that? Well, at first, I became very discouraged. Did I have to scrap the whole German language concept in total? How was I supposed to reconcile two very decided,

contradictory responses to a question that I considered simple, linear, one-faceted? The answer didn't come with a change in the information but rather in the way I viewed the information. I realized that there could be two very true, yet different sides to the same story. After all, I was asking Uncle Louis and Aunt Dorothy about each of their childhood experiences to try to decipher that of my Grandmother . . . it only makes sense that their responses should or could be different. Settling my inner discord over the language controversy was only one of the lessons I had to learn throughout this project.

"The idea that the looker affects the sight is taken for granted in every field of scientific enquiry today, but one needs to be clear about what it does (and does not) mean. It does not mean, 'everything is subjective anyway,' so that no clear or truthful statements can be made" (Robert Hughes, qtd in Karr 173).

I've also had to come to understand that what I set out to do is not what I've done. My investigative goal was to discover who my Grandmother was, to find puzzle pieces and snap them all together in a pretty puzzle that I could share with others. I've had to realize that my ability isn't in putting together a complete look into my Grandma's life. Rather, it's in creating. My Grandma isn't the one telling the story. Even the family members I've interviewed aren't always the ones speaking. Instead, they give shape and fuel to the narrative that I create. I decided who to interview. I formulated the questions to ask and worked the responses into a narrative that lives in the order, context, and voice that comes from me ó fourteen years after her death. The questions that I've most craved the answers to are the ones that make up this work. In this way, the story is as much mine as it is hers.

With that knowledge comes a great sense of responsibility. My motivation to embark on the journey through this project stems from my desire to know my Grandmother and to discover ways in which the two of us are alike. However, I never meant to tell *my* story. The spotlight is intended to shine always on Betsy May, but Iøve learned that telling about her life requires including descriptions of place and voices of others; it necessitates explanations of my family ó not only because Grandma is dead, but also because that is what she lived for. In fact, objects and places are so important to this narrative that they often become characters themselves ó like my Grandpa's attic and my framed favorite photo of Grandma.

No, Iøm not telling the pure story of my Grandma. But Iøm not telling solely my story either. Iøve listened to collective accounts and attempted to give them all a voice. Together, My Grandpa, Aunt Dorothy, Uncle Louis, my parents, and even my Grandma have collaborated not to put together a finished puzzle, but to create an incomplete, original painting of our beloved Betsy.

"There's a big, almost-capital-S Story of a whole book . . . and then there are smaller stories or anecdotes . . . If you let yourself tell those smaller anecdotes or stories, the overarching capital-S Story will eventually rise into view" (Karr 148).

My Process~

When I began this project, I wanted to interview anyone who had ever interacted with my Grandma. Sound like a lot? While I knew that wasn't possible, I still wanted to talk with pretty much everyone in my family ó all of Grandma's siblings, children, and grandchildren. I don't know if I ever explicitly stated this desire, but my thesis advisor must have seen it in me, because she encouraged me from the start to narrow my list of possible interviewees. At the time, I didn't understand why, but now I realize the wealth of writing material that can come from just one interview. Many stories can emerge from one person or one conversation. The few people that have helped me with this project by sharing their memories of Betsy have made possible the capital-S Story that Karr speaks of. I imagine that in many works of fiction and nonfiction, the author has an idea of the capital-S Story before he or she begins. In my case, however, the process of writing was *about* discovering this Story. This work is presented in small sections based on the interviews I held and the anecdotes that were shared with me because they ó along with photos and artifacts ó are the puzzle pieces that come together to form a more complete view of my Grandma.

I knew right off the bat that I had to interview Aunt Dorothy. This project began with her that day of Uncle Charlie's funeral, and I wanted her to continue to be a part of it; she had to hold more treasures like the story she shared with me eight years ago. Besides Aunt Dorothy, I thought it would be most helpful to get another view at Grandma's early life. For that, I went to Uncle Louis. My Grandma had four brothers, Bernie, Louis, Charlie, and Johnny. Bernie and

Charlie have died, but between Louis and Johnny, Louis is the one I remember most. This wasn't a particularly scientific method or nor was it without fault. Of course, the information Uncle Louis gave me was useful and interesting, and I'm so glad to have spent a few hours talking with him. However, to get at what my Grandmother's young life was really like, I would have been better off if I had spoken to Johnny. I realized while I was interviewing Louis that he was about eight years older than my Grandma Betsy, and he was away in the military for much of her childhood. At some point during my two hours with Uncle Louis, I realized that while he was a great resource for the context of my Grandma Betsy's family, he wouldn't be that helpful at answering specific questions about *her* childhood. That was my first oversight, and I probably should have realized it sooner, but that's what happens when you don't really know that much about your family. This came to my attention when almost every question I asked him about her got turned back on him.

Once I asked, "How was she in school?" And I got the response "Oh, I did alright," followed by a lengthy unrelated story. At first, I just thought it was because he's an old lonely guy with basically no one to talk to but his wife of sixty-nine years, who has heard all his stories one hundred times (her words). I even wondered if he was very hard of hearing or even self-centered. But I've settled on the idea, true or not, that he really didn't know the answers to many of the questions I asked about Grandma. I'm glad that he responded the way he did or rather than becoming sad or quiet. That was something I'd worried about before going over to their house. Johnny, however, was present and was closer to my Grandma's age. Interviewing Johnny is still something I can and very well might do; as I said before, this project is largely unfinished.

Perhaps the most obvious interview choice is my Grandfather Asil May. He lives just down the road from my parents in the house that my Dad and his siblings grew up in, and I see

him often. As her husband, he is the best fount of knowledge about my Grandma. I had one formal interview with Grandpa, but he appears in the story other times ó like at the White Steamer Diner for breakfast or at his office ó when my Grandma becomes a topic of conversation. The other people who told me about their experiences with Grandma are a few of my cousins and aunts/uncles who shared their memories with me at our Christmas Eve gathering. A whole book could be written about my Grandmother from my parents' stories alone, but for now I've included the anecdotes from these loved ones ó maybe because I can hear my parents' stories much more easily. Some of the most valuable experiences I've gained from working on this project are the hours and conversations I've shared with family members who I otherwise would not have spent time with. My primary goal was to learn about my Grandmother, but these people are my family, too, and their stories are important to me. I got to hear about my Uncle Louis' time in the military and how he didn't take off his boots for 219 straight days of combat. I got to sit with him and his wife Mary Ann and sip on homemade blackberry wine ó for which there is no written recipe, only the hand-me-down habit from my Great-Grandfather Adam, after whom my only sibling is named. I got to reconnect with my Great Aunt Dorothy, who keeps one of my senior pictures above her television in the living room, and through her, connect with her granddaughter Grace Waggoner and son Steve who provided me with the Schmidt family ancestry information. From that data, I was able to pinpoint exactly which of my ancestors came to America from Germany ó information that my parents and cousins don't know but have always wanted to find out.

As far as my method for interviewing, I always met with my family members in person. That was mostly because my Grandpa, Uncle Louis, and Aunt Dorothy are very hard of hearing, and speaking on the phone isn't comfortable or efficient for them. It also helps me set the scene.

There is so much of a story that comes before the actual narrative begins. In this case, of course, the entire capital-S Story has taken place many years ago. To get as close as I can back to my Grandma's life, I need to give the context about the things that were the most important in it. This duty I feel to include context is often why I choose to set the scene in some of the sections. In the story I tell about how my Grandpa explains my Grandma, I begin with breakfast at the White Steamer, and it's a few pages before I even get to the scene at his office where he's reading to me the hairdresser plaque. I felt the need to include the setting and conversation at the White Steamer because it says something about who my Grandpa is ó he's a man who goes to breakfast at the same place every morning with his two sons who he works with at a business he started. I live in Washington, a town with a greasy old diner on Main Street, where I can show up for either breakfast or lunch and see at least three family members each time. Knowing about my Grandpa and my town is important because my Grandpa and my town were huge parts of my Grandma. This is where she lived; this is who she loved. The same is true for my descriptions of Jasper, the city where she grew up. For me, Jasper embodies my Grandma's history, and I have history with it too. Place, setting the scene, describing the characters ó these things were important to me as I wrote. Not only did they help me get to the telling of the story, but they also ended up providing the context for it.

I recorded the audio of each interview on my phone, but I also took notes. Before the interviews, I would write out questions that I definitely wanted answers to ó such as "How did you two meet?" for Grandpa and "Did your family speak German at home?" for Uncle Louis and Aunt Dorothy. I left space between each question to scribble notes as I listened to their stories. I told them in advance that I would have questions, but I encouraged each family member to go off on a tangent or to tell any story about Grandma that came to mind. Using both the audio

recordings and my written notes, I constructed the different sections. In most cases, I wrote notes or reflections as soon as the interviews were over and I had left. I have found that this is the best practice when interviewing so that you lose as little information or feeling as possible. The greater the time in between the interview and writing, the more difficult the writing process and the less authentic the results.

Throughout my writing and interviewing, I met bi-weekly with Professor Benedix, my thesis advisor. These meetings were indescribably helpful for my brainstorming about the shape of my work. "There's a reason why you've done it this way," she would tell me often. She encouraged me to "let the thing be what it is" and to look for meaning and purpose in my motivations. Her assistance through this process, as well as feedback from my reader Conner Gordon, has been indispensable.

Another helpful resource is the book *The Art of Memoir* by Mary Karr. Karr gives the foundations of nonfiction memoir writing in a truly engaging way. She is honest, funny, and smart, as I hope to be in all of my work. Not only has my list of books to read increased significantly from all the memoir examples she gives, but her writing has also motivated me throughout this project and provided concrete advice about details, truth-telling, revision, and voice. Karr says that memoirists "live or die 100 percent based on voice" (35). She explains that voice needs to be evident from the first sentence, and it should be consistent. This was a little difficult for me, as my piece is formed from the voices of many people. Ultimately, however, I am the one typing each word onto the page. I found that I wanted to tell scenes in which I was using direct quotes in the present tense. The present tense makes readers feel more directly rooted in the scene. Because of this decision, there are some sections or parts of sections that are told in present, and some that are told in past. This is intentional, and I hope that puts readers into

the experience rather than taking them out of the Story. My voice could also differ in each of the sections because the interviews and experiences happened on different days with different people. My voice is stronger and spunky when I write about my Indiana home, but I am a little more subdued when speaking about my Grandma's illnesses and nostalgic when talking about Christmas traditions. Moreover, my poetic voice is distinct from the voice of my prose in that it is more wistful and a little more repetitive or searching.

While this is a nonfiction writing project, it is also one that includes poems and photos. There were times when I didn't know what to write, when traditional narrative just wasn't coming, or my idea well was pretty dried up. In those times, I found it easier to continue working by writing a poem or searching for a photo or other tangible object with a connection to my Grandma. The favorite picture of my Grandma became sort of a theme or recurring object throughout this process. I have this picture, I don't know much about it (where/when it was taken, how it ended up in my hands), but I want to know; I want to fill in the blanks. In a sense, that longing represents my whole project, my overarching desire to paint a picture of my Grandmother, not a complete picture, but one with fewer holes than before. In addition to poetry and pictures, I turned to objects such as my Grandma's checkbook, a big stack of letters she wrote to my Grandpa in 1954, and other miscellaneous items in my Grandpa's attic. I found the checkbook, with its swirly blue pattern and checks that read "Betsy May Beauty Shop" probably six years ago in my Grandpa's house during a family reunion. I'd wanted to take it then; he probably hadn't looked at it in years and didn't need it anymore. To me, though, it was a treasure. But I couldn't bare just taking it or asking to take it, so I hid it in my Grandma's enclosed porch-turned-beauty shop that's now storage. This year, at the family reunion, I went back and got it. Sifting through pictures, report cards and diplomas, checkbook pages and letters

represents my process as well. I have, in effect, been mentally and physically sifting through all sorts of stories and artifacts, trying to piece them together. Without pictures, poetry, and tangible objects, my work would most likely be less interesting and less authentic.



From the very beginning, there were topics that I knew I wanted to write about, such as my Grandma's love for Christmas and her medical struggles. To me, her holiday spirit and near-constant sickness are the two most lasting impressions of her. My work thus began to divide itself into categories, or sections, separated by photos and poems. My committee member Conner Gordon suggested an organizing technique that proved very helpful. Per his advice, I printed each photo, story, and poem and laid them out on the floor. I began with all the pieces in rows and then started sequencing them from the beginning, choosing which stories felt right. There were some that I felt needed to come before others; for example, the story of my interview with Grandpa (when he gives me the letters) comes before the section where I talk about one of the letters. I was also careful not to leave the description of my Grandma's sicknesses until the very end because I did not want my project to conclude on a tone of sadness. Since my Grandpa knew her best, I put his description of my Grandma toward the beginning, and the section about Jasper is the part most unlike the others is rooted in the middle. After all, it gives context to most everything around it.



There are photos of Grandpa's house (the attic, kitchen, boxes), and I've included these in between many pieces of my writing to convey my process of sifting through memories and artifacts throughout. Once I ended up with a big ordered circle of printer paper on my dining room floor, I was able to put it all together in the correct sequence in my computer. This method allowed me to visualize the order and play with it more easily than I would have been able to on a screen. Conner also gave me advice about which pictures and poems to pair with which stories so as not to seem repetitive. Some pictures I felt just had to go near each other, such as the photo of the hairdresser plaque with the story of my Grandpa reading it to me. I want readers to see the plaque, as I did, and then have it read to them as well. Other pictures are spread throughout the piece to foreshadow certain stories, such as the picture of the letters. Of course, the favorite picture of Grandma that is referenced in three poems comes at the very end with no caption or connected story. It is the story, and it speaks for itself.

I decided to add captions to most of the photos because I had quotes from my interviews that I didn't end up using in the narrative but that I still wanted to include in some way. The quotes don't always go directly with each photo; however, they are all about my Grandma, and they give more insight into her personality from the people who knew her best. I think that they are special because they draw attention to the words, which don't get lost in prose. For example, it really stood out to me that my Uncle Louis called my Grandma "a pistol." What does this mean to me? It means she was strong-willed and didn't take any crap from anyone. What does it mean to someone else? I'm not sure. I don't even know what it really meant for Uncle Louis. And that's precisely why I chose to include the quotes. I am interpreting the words that interviewees give me in every other space in this project, but beneath many of the photos, I let the words speak for themselves. Uncle Louis, Grandpa Asil, and Aunt Dorothy talk directly to

the readers, as they did to me.

There are many reasons why I chose this topic for my project. I wanted to do work that I considered valuable and enjoyable, I wanted to improve my writing, and I have a deep desire to learn about my Grandmother. Moreover, I felt that I had a duty. If history isn't recorded, organized, and saved, it goes away, and I don't want any of my family's history to disappear. I didn't like that when I asked my parents and other family members questions like, "Who came over from Germany?" they didn't have any answers. In a way, I dubbed myself "family historian," and everyone seems to be ok with it. My Grandpa, when I spent a few hours at his house talking about Grandma, even asked me to see if I can get the ancestry information for his side of the family from his brother Dudley's wife who lives out in Cumbuck, a turn or two from some old church he expects to know the name of. It's funny, but also telling; I'm not the only one who wants history to be recorded. Maybe the time and energy to do the work is rare, so when I presented myself for the job, I got more responsibility than I initially intended. There is somewhat of a disconnect between my family members in how they view their dedication to family history. On one hand, I have my Grandpa telling me that he enjoyed talking to me and that none of his kids have showed much interest in the family history. On the other, I see my Dad setting up a chair in the basement next to the old passed-down stove he got from Grandpa so that Grandpa can sit next to him and watch and talk while my Dad works on it. I don't see much of a difference between this act and what I've done, except that I've explicitly told Grandpa: I want to hear your stories.

I have not spoken to every still-living person that my Grandma knew, sorted through every picture of her, or read all the letters she wrote that Grandpa gave to me. Whether I read them all tonight, open one a week for the next sixty weeks, or give them back to my Grandpa

mostly unread, these letters aren't in the best shape, and I don't want their contents to be lost forever. No matter what I decide, I'll scan and save them and get them back to my Grandpa soon. "Maybe I need to read those," he said the morning he gave them to me. If remembering her is important to me, I can't imagine how important it is for him.

My Grandma wrote these letters, and my Grandpa saved them for more than sixty years. Those facts alone motivate me to continue writing of my journal, my prayers, poetry, this project. Throughout this process, I've learned that not only am I obsessed with discovering things that people close to me have left behind, but I'm also intent on leaving something behind, too. This project has really been one of organization of sifting through stories and figuring out how to best put them together. There are and always will be pieces missing, but at least for me, the picture is a little more whole than it was before I began. It's a painting not only of my Grandmother's life, but also of my life and the history of my family. My desire to uncover these ideas, words, and physical possessions of my Grandma's feels like a natural one, a thirst that most people can relate to. So I will continue to write, about my Grandma and about everything else. Maybe tomorrow or half a century down the road, my granddaughter or someone I don't even know will read about my experiences and look for truth, explanation, or just a story to tell.

*"None of us can ever know the value of our lives, or how our separate
and silent scribbling may add to the amenity of the world, if only by
how radically it changes us, one and by one" (Karr 218).*



öBets was a lot like mom. She could work you under the table.ö

ó Aunt Dorothy



What Is A Hairdresser?

A HAIRDRESSER is a complexity dedicated to beautifying hair; she bends it, bleaches it, tints it, tones it, washes it, waves it, teases it, combs it. She cuts it, conditions it, curls it, rinses it, shapes it, straightens it, pins it, and sprays it . . . which naturally makes a woman beautiful. She is a pixie — Joan of Arc with sore feet — Florence Nightingale in a white uniform and brown fingernails. She is a businesswoman, a professional, a mother and a wife.

At one time or another her hair has been red, brown, black or blonde . . . and maybe all these colors at once. She can always "Squeeze In" just one more customer but is constantly one-half hour behind her booking schedule. Her lunch "Hour" is about 8 minutes, usually spent discussing new products with her salesman. For lunch she generally has coffee, a cigarette, and occasionally a doughnut. She works Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and attends Beauty Shows on Sunday.

TO HER CUSTOMERS she is a Psychiatrist, Psychologist, Psychoanalyst, Advice to the lovelorn, Tax Consultant, Marriage Counselor, Fashion Coordinator and just plain friend.

IN HER SALON she is stylist, financial wizard, cleaning woman, stock clerk, receptionist, purchasing agent and very, very tired.

Sometimes marriage and a family take her away from her profession but just wait 'til those children grow up a little and she is back in the salon behind her styling chair doing the things she loves best. To her, hair dressing is not just a job, it is an emotion. Although she is paid for her services, her greatest reward comes when her customer turns in her styling chair, caresses her new hair style, and says . . . "I love it"

COMPLIMENTS OF

LaMaur

INC.



“She was as much a Mooser as I was. Everybody liked her;
she had a big personality.”

ó Grandpa Asil

Grandpa's Betsy ~

Every weekday morning, my Grandpa Asil goes out to breakfast with the two of his sons who work with him at the gas business ó Mayø LP Gas ó the liquid propane company that he started in 1964. Everyone who works there is a member of the family. My Dadø three siblings work there, but his brothers Mark and Rick are the ones who go to breakfast with Grandpa. They roll up to the White Steamer every weekday morning, without fail. Itø the staple greasy diner place with tiny booths and red bar stools. Itø been open for longer than anyone around can remember, and the people who work there know all the regulars. The White Steamer is on the corner of 1st and Main in Washington, right by a dentistø office and a Sherwin Williams. Further down the street is a yoga studio, a coffee shop, and the townø recently-resurrected movie theater. The Steamer is famous for its thin greasy steak burgers with cheese and sautéed onions, along with its chocolate milkshakes.

When I achieved something in middle school, my mom would take me there to get a cherry coke. Her three brothers, Phillip, David, and Paul Jeff also eat at the Steamer every weekday, but they come in from the fields around noon and join the lunch crowd. My friends and I would see them sometimes when we ran down 1st Street from the back of our high school to eat burgers and fries on our thirty-minute lunch period. All these memories combine to make the Steamer a sacred spot.

When I was home one night to interview a profile subject for my nonfiction workshop course, I didnø have a lot of time to spend with my parents. I planned to leave for school again the next morning, and although I was going to be home soon for Thanksgiving, I asked my Dad

if he wanted to go eat breakfast with his Dad and brothers the next morning. We talked about it briefly before going to bed, but the conversation seemed to come to rest at the realization that we'd have to get up pretty early because my Dad had a meeting at work, but we really weren't even sure what time they would be heading to the Steamer. I went to bed and didn't think much about it, but my Dad ended up waking me up the next morning to ask if I still wanted to go. My Grandpa is eighty-four, and I know my Dad thinks often about spending as much time with him as he can. I was exhausted, but I told him I would absolutely still like to go, so I got up and dressed as fast as I could.

When we arrived at the Steamer, it was around 7:45, and we saw my Uncle Mark's black May's LP Gas pickup parked right out front on the one-way. It has a bumper sticker that reads, *Got gas? We do!* Uncle Rick was out hunting that day, so when we snuck up to the table, it was just my Grandpa and Mark. They were halfway through their meals, but my Dad and I squeezed into the little booth with them and ordered our food. We both got scrambled eggs with hash browns, but I got mine with cheese. Dad ordered some toast too, and we shared a short stack of buttery pancakes. Grandpa had used up all the little packs of grape jelly, so Mark stole some off the bar for my Dad to spread across his crusty bread. I've never seen two men eat more grape jelly in my life. It makes me smile and laugh to look at some of the eating habits my Dad has and trace them to my Grandpa Asil. I guess my Dad can wash root beer barrels down with a Pepsi because he comes from a man who puts syrup on his cornbread and can down a whole dessert sampler at every family get-together. My dad doesn't drink coffee, though. When I ordered a cup for myself, out of the corner of my eye I saw my Grandpa's silent nod of approval. He smiled even bigger when an old man in the booth next to us teased him about having breakfast with a pretty young lady.

We talked about the gas business, about Thanksgiving coming up, and about my nonfiction writing project about Grandma. At some point during the meal, my Grandpa said he had something he wanted to give me for my project. He said he'd set it aside weeks ago in an envelope with my name on it, but he'd just kept forgetting to give it to me. He wondered if I could stop by this morning before I started back for school to pick it up. I said that I would, of course.

The area where my Grandpa lives is just outside the city limits, but still closer to downtown than Walmart is about a mile down the road from my house. It's called Licksillet. I have no idea how the names like Licksillet, Cumback, and Possum-Holler (where my mom grew up) came to be, but I do know that I like them, and I hope they stick around. Licksillet these days is made of up my Grandpa's house (where my Dad grew up), the gas business, my cousin Keith's, Uncle Mark's, and the plot where Uncle Rick's used to be. It's also the site of our family above-ground pool that my Grandpa maintains so we can all use it. The "Licksillet" sign outside my Grandpa's house on Highway 57 marks the territory.

When I packed up and was ready to head back to school, I stopped by and parked in front of the big tree outside the trailer that serves as May's LP Gas's office. In the middle of a work day, I knew I'd find most everyone there. Sure enough, Grandpa was sitting on the other side of the counter with my Aunt Jan. He was in his work shirt, a long-sleeved blue and white striped button-down with *Mays LP Gas* embroidered in bright red thread over the left chest pocket and *Asil* on the right. As always, he sported navy work pants and brown boots. Sometimes I think it's crazy that my eighty-four-year-old Grandpa gets up and goes to work every morning, but then I remember that working is what he loves, and if it's his time to go, I'm sure he'd rather it happen when he's out and about than when he's sitting on his couch at home. He's a worker, alright.

And Aunt Jan is a talker. She asked me about my project and started showing me pictures above the file cabinets. There is one of my cousin Lexie and I in our middle school soccer uniforms standing by the May LP Gas sponsor sign at the field. There are a few of Grandma and Grandpa together, of Jan and her sons, and of the rest of the family. The frames were dusty, and she brushed them off and blew at the glass-covered faces. Then Grandpa asked me to sit down.

I took one of the brown swivel chairs next to him as he slid a glossy piece of paper out of a big white envelope with my name written on it in his sloppy capital letters. It said "HAIRDRESSER FOR RACHEL."

"This describes Betsy to a T," he declares. I look at the paper and realize it is a color copy of a plaque that Grandpa showed me at our family reunion in August. He must have forgotten, but I let him explain it to me all over again. I am grateful to have the copy. He reads the first paragraph:

"A HAIRDRESSER is a complexity dedicated to beautifying hair; she bends it, bleaches it, tints it, tones it, washes it, waves it, teases it, combs it. She cuts it, conditions it, curls it, rinses it, shapes it, straightens it, pins it, and sprays it . . . which naturally makes a woman beautiful. She is a pixie – Joan of Arc with sore feet – Florence Nightingale in a white uniform and brown fingernails. She is a businesswoman, a professional, a mother, and a wife."

As he reads to me, he drags his big index finger across the page, invisibly underlining the words. It is sweet, almost as if he is reading a storybook to his little granddaughter, only I am twenty-two now, and this story is real. I don't know if I'd call it a twang or a drawl, but my Grandpa articulates in a southern style that to me seems slight but would probably be considered

a thick accent by my Chicago-native friends. He speaks in a light, descriptive voice and his repetition of the word *it* stands out to me. My Aunt Jan speaks up and says that she always remembers her mom having brown fingernails because of the hair dye. Grandpa shakes his head to agree and continues:

“At one time or another her hair has been red, brown, black or blonde . . .”

He pauses, looks at me and raises his eyebrows. He flashes a smile when he reads the word *red*. “Well, she didn’t do any of those other colors . . .” He reads on.

“She can always ‘Squeeze in’ just one more customer but is constantly one half-hour behind her booking schedule.”

“That is so true,” he adds. “I always scotched at her because she’d schedule appointments for the noon hour, and she would always say she had time for somebody else. I think sometimes people played her.”

“Her lunch ‘hour’ is about 8 minutes, usually spent discussing new products with her salesman. For lunch, she generally has coffee, a cigarette, and occasionally a doughnut. She works Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and attends Beauty Shows on Sunday.”

“Some days she wouldn’t even have her coffee,” Grandpa says. “She’d just sit on the edge of her chair, have her cigarette, and keep working.”

“To her customers she is a Psychiatrist, Psychologist, Psychoanalyst, Advice to the Lovelorn, Tax Consultant, Marriage Counselor, Fashion Coordinator and just plain friend.”

He laughs and nods his head when he reads the "Advice to the Lovelorn" part.

"You wouldn't believe all the stuff people would tell her," he says. "But they really trusted her, and she liked talking to them." His light, steady voice continues.

"In her salon she is stylist, financial wizard, cleaning woman, stock clerk, receptionist, purchasing agent and very, very tired."

At the words "purchasing agent," I think about Grandma's checkbook that I recently found and took home from Grandpa's after the family reunion. It has a beautiful blue and white squiggly pattern on the outside and the checks read *Betsy May Beauty Shop*. Grandpa says she always worked herself too hard.

"Sometimes marriage and her family take her away from her profession but just wait 'til those children grow up a little and she is back in the salon behind her styling chair doing the things she loves best. To her, hair dressing is not just a job, it is an emotion. Although she is paid for her services, her greatest reward comes when her customer turns in her styling chair, caresses her new hair style and says . . . 'I love it.'"

Grandpa finishes his reading and again repeats, "This just describes her to a T." When the phone rings, I remember that I'm in the office and it's a work day and I have to go back to school, but I try to soak up every last feeling of being a little girl whose Grandpa was reading to her about her Grandma. Aunt Jan answers the phone, and after a little more small talk with Grandpa, I thank him, take the copy and hop in my car to head back to school.

When I think about Grandma Betsy, the first things that come to my mind are her favorites, as I remember them: Christmas, the color purple, shopping. I think about her tomato

dumplings and the puff peppermints she kept in the kitchen, and I remember visiting her in the nursing home and hospitals. But I never think about her being a hairdresser. I have always known that she was a hairdresser, of course, but for some reason it never stuck out to me. Maybe that's because my mom cut my hair, and by the time I was around, Grandma was mostly too sick to be working. My cousin Lexie and I would play in the Beauty Shop, which was a closed-in porch just off the living room, but I don't think I ever saw Grandma in action in there. That's why it's so striking to me that when I ask my Grandpa what Grandma Betsy was like, he responds by handing me these words. They were mounted on a plaque that was probably included as a gift from a supplier, and I'm sure there are hundreds of old ladies across the country who have the same dusty plaque in their attics with the exact words my Grandpa just read. All the same, he knew her best, and for him, this was Betsy.



“I couldn’t get away from her; she was gonna make sure of that.”

ó Grandpa Asil



{ Her mom was a good cook . . . that's why I kept going back. }

ó Grandpa Asil

My Indiana Home~

I've had family in Indiana since before it was a state. In fact, my family members have been living in Daviess County since 1815. However, Dubois County is special to us too. I was born there, in Jasper, and spent every week day there until I was almost five. In Jasper while my Mom was at work, I went to a daycare run by the one and only Janice Wessel, who with her German background, kept the house stereotypically sterile. My Mom used to joke that she would have eaten off the floor at Janice's 'cause it was just that clean. I don't remember much about the cleanliness of my Grandmother's house, but when I visited Aunt Dorothy's a few months ago, I was shocked at how the old woman who lives all alone keeps everything spotless. There is a place for each picture and knick-knack, for every prayer card and piece of china 'cause and there is no clutter or dust. I live in a small sorority room with two other girls right now, but I'm hoping that when I have my own place, I'll notice the "German-cleanliness" gene coming out in myself.

My maternal grandmother, Sarah Feagans Flint, was Irish. My Mom says she didn't "keep good house." My family has always emphasized the cleanliness of our German relatives. As kids, my friends and I got a huge thrill out of discussing our heritage. Most of us are some combination of German, Irish, Dutch, and English. We spoke of our countries of origin as if they were something to brag about. But what did any of us know about any country other than the United States? I started to wonder several years ago when we will just start calling ourselves "American," with no tag-on like "but my family is from Germany" 'cause and I still wonder. How many decades post our ancestors' immigration until we become a people of our own? Is that even what we should strive for? I'd like to think that my cleanliness is characteristic of my

German heritage, but I am more believing that it's just a preference I've developed rather than a trait passed to me from one of the countries I came from.

Although it is seeming increasingly irrelevant in explaining my behavior or personality, knowing about my heritage is still very important to me. What is it about any of us that we long so much to understand our background or even one very far in the distance? In my opinion, it has to do with belonging. We want to belong to a culture, a movement, a people. But we also want to belong to the cycle of ancestry, of legacy. We want to be on the timeline. We learn about our family members of the past to understand more about ourselves, and I know that is true for me with this project. My whole life I've had people telling me that I am like my Grandma Betsy or that I look like her or act like her, or even hug like her, says my Dad.

I know that my Dad has always wanted to connect with his German heritage. The truth is, what was dying out for him and his siblings is basically dead and gone for my brother and I. Dad probably would have liked for us to have studied German, but no one in our family still speaks the language, and our small high school in Washington of only eighty students offers no other language than Spanish. There aren't any German classes at the public high school in my town either. My brother and I are both proficient in Spanish, which makes a lot more sense since it's widely spoken in our hometown and is the second most-spoken language in the country.

Between the two of us, we've visited China, France, Spain, Portugal, Peru, Colombia, Mexico, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Canada, and Ecuador or but never Germany. I think I would feel more at home in almost any Spanish-speaking country than I would there. When my family decided to host a foreign exchange student, my Dad was really hoping for someone from Germany, but instead, we spent an exciting year with a girl named Monika from Slovakia. All of this is to explain that although, like my Father, I wish to have a connection to the German

culture, I really don't.

. . . I don't even like sauerkraut. If it weren't for spellcheck, I would have misspelled the word. Nonetheless, I delight in a good German fried bologna sandwich, with ketchup or like the ones my babysitter Janice used to make for me in Jasper. My Dad thinks that bologna, hot dogs, and sausages are disgusting, but I think he secretly likes that I eat them.



“She won a big console with a radio. Your dad got it out of the box and put it together, and she put records in there and we danced in the living room. She was still on the mending side from some therapy in Evansville.”

ó Aunt Dorothy

German Roots and Blackberry Wine~

Louis Schmidt is my Great-Uncle, one of my Grandma Betsy's older brothers. He's ninety-four now, and if my Grandma were alive, she would be eighty-seven. I always remember liking Uncle Louis growing up. I'm not sure what my brother and I liked about him so much because we didn't see him very often, but for whatever reason, he was memorable. He still is; Uncle Louis may be in his nineties, but he looks great. In fact, he reminds me of my Dad. They have the same mouth, and the similarities in their facial movements and speaking mannerisms are, to me, undeniable.

When I ask Uncle Louis if he has ever been to Germany, his response is "No, and I don't care to go." That answer shocks me. I'm so used to my Dad talking about how cool it would be to go to such a beautiful history-rich country – one where our ancestors lived and worked before they decided to travel to America and start a new life. I decide not to press Uncle Louis. He had traveled a lot during the war, and I thought maybe that was the reason. Plus, he's ninety-four. I don't imagine he'll ever be traveling far from Jasper again.

I also visit Aunt Dorothy, my Grandma's only sister. She was born two years before my Grandma. We talk for hours in her little dining room in Vincennes, and I make sure to bring up the German language. When I had spoken to Uncle Louis, he told me that the whole family spoke German.

"It was English at school," he had said, "and German at home." He emphasized the word *German* and stuck his pointer finger out in my direction. I started to develop a picture of the

bilingual working-class household of my ancestors in my mind. It made me smile that the setting was the city where I was born. However, when I bring the language up to Aunt Dorothy, I get a different answer.

“Oh, we didn’t speak German,” she says to my surprise and momentary horror.

“Oh, really?” I respond. “Uncle Louis told me you all spoke German at home . . .”

“Well, we didn’t – not the kids,” she says. “Dad would speak on the phone to his clients sometimes in German, but we spoke English. I don’t really ever remember mother speaking it much either.”

For a while, I fretted over these mixed responses. Which information was true? I was inclined to believe Aunt Dorothy because she’s seven years younger than Louis, but he’s still pretty sharp. I’ve since concluded that although it sounds odd, they’re probably both telling the truth. Louis and his brothers worked with their father a lot. Since the business language was German, they probably spoke it way more than the girls did. Louis was also the second oldest, and when he went away to the military, I’m sure a lot of things changed. He said himself when he got back that Johnny’s (his youngest brother) attitude appalled him. He said he’d have to teach Johnny lessons about how to talk with respect to their dad. I think it’s possible that over time, the language norms in the family could have evolved.

It’s not surprising to me that the girls’ lives might have been significantly different from those of the boys, either. While the young men had paper routes and outdoor chores, the girls were taught household work by my Great-Grandma Caroline. However, that didn’t stop my Grandma Betsy from spending ample time in her favorite place, the garden.

As for Aunt Dorothy, Louis reveals, “She never went outside.” He shakes his head, raises his eyebrows.

“But she had an allergy,” butts in Aunt Mary Ann, his wife.

“Yeah, yeah. She had an allergy,” he repeats, like it’s a time-old tale.

Aunt Dorothy later tells me of herself “I much preferred to stay indoors, but I had an allergy.” She nods her head up and down, and I do the same. Even in their 80s and 90s, they all still act like siblings.

The interview with Uncle Louis and Aunt Mary Ann was the beginning of this project’s official process, and I was nervous. My Aunt Jan had called one of their daughters the night before to tell them I was working on a project about Betsy and that I’d probably be contacting them. However, they don’t hear well over the phone, so one day when my Mom and I were in Jasper, she suggested that I just go over to their house and knock on the door. I had never been to Uncle Louis’s and Aunt Mary Ann’s (as far as I could remember), but I drove past it every time I came into the city. My Mom asked if I wanted her to come with me, but I thought that I should go alone, and I am glad that I did, because keeping Uncle Louis on the topic wasn’t easy. I dropped my Mom off at the public library and drove over to the house. There was a screened-in porch with a house door on the inside that was wide open. I knocked “hard” several times on the porch door. I even opened it up and yelled, “Is anybody home?” a few times. Then I decided to try the front door. It swung open when I knocked on it, but I pulled it shut again. I thought of the other open door off the porch, but I really couldn’t bring myself to just walk into their house. What if they didn’t recognize me? They’re both in their nineties after all, and a stranger walking into their home could send either one into cardiac arrest. No, I couldn’t risk it. I already felt bad about not calling first, but according to my Mom, that’s just what old people do.

Finally, I decide to try the home number my Mom had given me. My Aunt Mary Ann answers the phone. I explain who I am and that I am outside by the porch. Can I come in and

visit a while? It takes a few tries before she understands that I am actually already standing outside her door, but soon she comes over to let me in. I brace myself. I know it sounds ridiculous because they're my family, but I still sort of feel like an intruder. I remember my Mom's warning before I left her at the library:

“Mary Ann is stern,” she'd said, “but she's great. Just a no-nonsense German lady, so be prepared.” At that time, I couldn't picture Aunt Mary Ann in my head, but as soon as I saw her, I remembered. She *was* stern – not in the sense that she was rude or mean – she just spoke plainly and directly, without any fluff in diction or countenance. Although I consider myself quite the opposite, that was OK by me.

“Oh, did you knock?” Aunt Mary Ann asks.

“I did, but . . .” I make a *don't worry about it* gesture with my hand and shrug it off.

“Well I had the mixer on, so that's why I didn't hear you,” she defends herself. I remember the heads up from her daughter about their deteriorating hearing, and I tell her I am sure it was the mixer.

“What are you making?” I ask.

“Oh, just some cookies,” she responds, “but I'm in a good place to stop.” She offers me a glass of water, and we sit down to talk. Soon, Uncle Louis makes his way into the kitchen and sits down with us at the dining room table. I sit at the head of the table with Louis on my left and Mary Ann on my right. Above Louis's head is a framed depiction of the Last Supper, and a cream doily rests in the middle of the wooden table. After talking for about an hour, Uncle Louis starts telling me about my Great-Grandpa Adam's blackberry wine. The next thing I know he is at the fridge pulling out a decanter filled with the sweet red-violet juice and offering me a glass. *This stuff can get ya*, they both repeat. *So, don't drink too much since you're driving home*. I take a

slow sip and let the wine slide down my throat where it leaves a soft fruity finish. I don't drink often, but I would if I always had that wine. The three of us finish it off together.



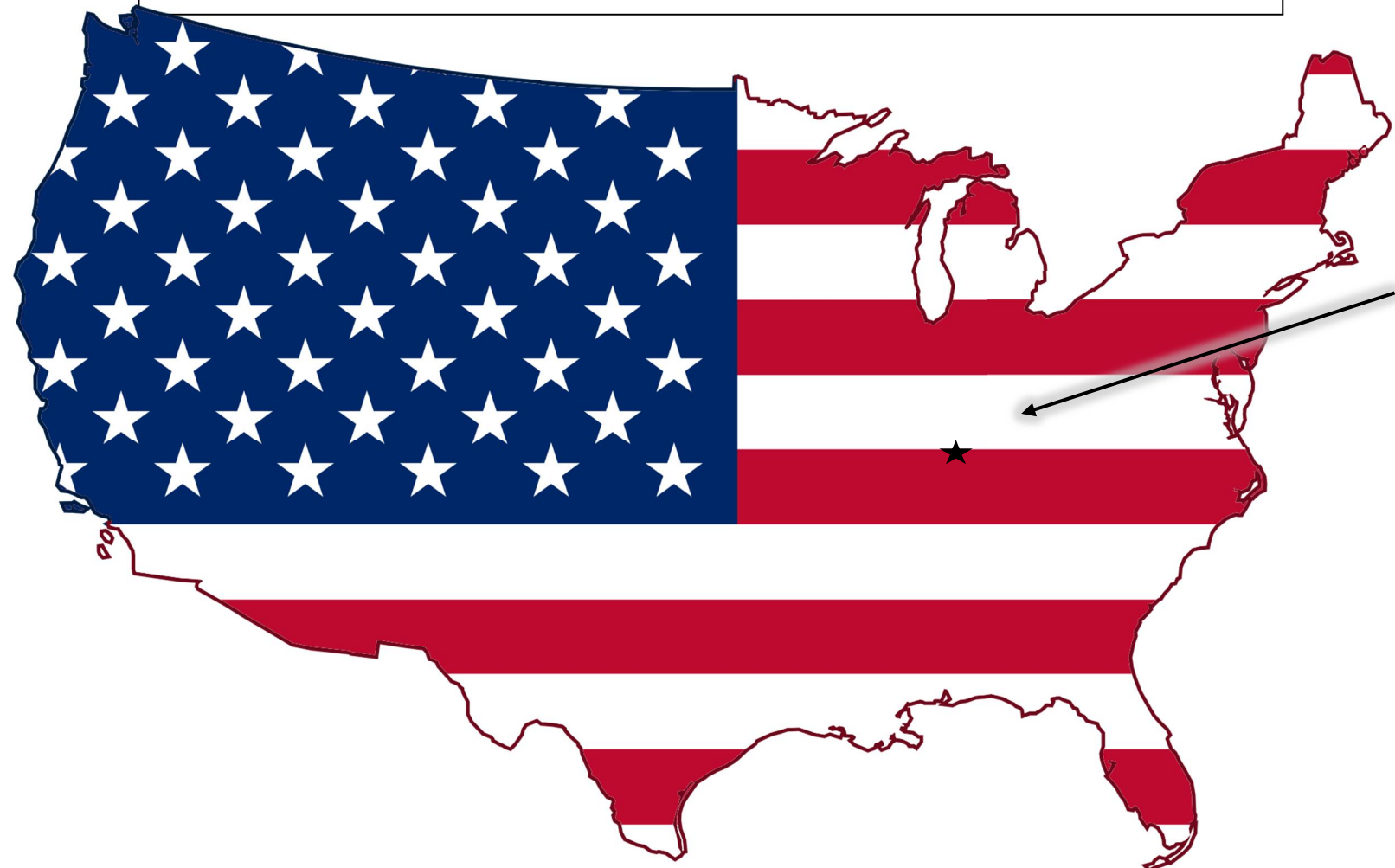
{ öShe was a pistol.ö }

ó Uncle Louis

“The Foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was Jasper . . .”

Revelation 21:19

In 1847, 85 people from the village of Pfaffenweiler, Germany, set sail on a 52-day trip aboard the *Tallahassee* for America. They settled in Jasper, Indiana, which was founded in 1830 by the Enlow family, English-Americans from Kentucky. From what I've read, the name of the town was to be Eleanor, after Mrs. Enlow, but she chose the name *Jasper* from her Bible instead. I'm not sure why such a large group from Pfaffenweiler came to southern Indiana, but some reasons for German immigration to America at the time were to escape the potato famine (Lang 138), high taxes, and extensive required military service (139).





I found an excerpt from a letter sent from Indiana to Germany in 1846 by a man named Johann Wolfgang Shreyer:

A man with a large family acts in the interests of his children by coming, even if the greatest part of his belongings must be sacrificed for the journey . . . If a man does not wish to undertake the journey on account of advanced age or for some other reason, he can do nothing better than to help his children emigrate to America, and the results of this emigration will surely be so valuable that the younger descendants will thank the ancestor who has afforded them the blessings of this land (141).

Many of the same last names can still be found today in both Pfaffenweiler and Jasper. They include Baumann, Beck, Brucker, Blattmann, Daeschle, Eckerle, Eckert, Erb, Georg, Kiefer, Kraft, Lang, Schmidt, Schuble, Steinle, Stenftenagel, and Zipfel (Jasperindiana.gov).



“She was my maid of honor. Till the day
I got married we shared a bed.”

ó Aunt Dorothy

Jasper and Pfaffenweiler established a Sister City partnership in 1985. Since then, there have been many trips back and forth so that residents of the two communities can get to know each other and the places they live. Residents of Pfaffenweiler have come to Jasper for multiple Sister City anniversary celebrations, often during the annual *Strassenfest* (öStreet Partyö). During the 30th anniversary of the partnership, citizens of Pfaffenweiler surprised Jasper residents by performing a special song for them in English.



We come from Pfaffenweiler
with famous good old friends
we say Hello and Guten Tag
we are glad to shake your hands.

Oh oh oh . . .

Refrain -

Jasper forever
the friendship never ends
to celebrate the partnership
we always stay good friends.

We took the plane across the sea
to spend some time with you
let us meet and greet and dance and laugh
for that we say Thank you

Oh oh oh ...refrain

The mayors we have had in 30 years
were Fritz and Dieter Hahn
Jerome and Bill, now Terry Seitz,
oh how the time has gone.

Oh oh oh ...refrain

The Gutsell, Baumann, Kiefer,
Scherle, Eckert, Eckerle,
they are names we have that you have too
what a lovely history.

Oh oh oh ...refrain

Matthias came to Jasper
as a young and single man
he worked and met a pretty girl
the endless love began.

Oh oh oh ...refrain

Saint Joseph and the Eckert Mill
remind us of the start,
we wish good health and lots of luck
from the bottom of our heart.

Oh oh oh ...refrain

Ein Danke Schön and thanks a lot
for your warm hospitality
we are glad to have such lovely friends
you and he and she.

Oh oh oh ...refrain

(jasperindiana.gov)



Jasper High School



This Certifies That
Beatrice M. Schmidt

has satisfactorily completed the Course of Study prescribed for the
Jasper High School and is therefore entitled to this

Diploma

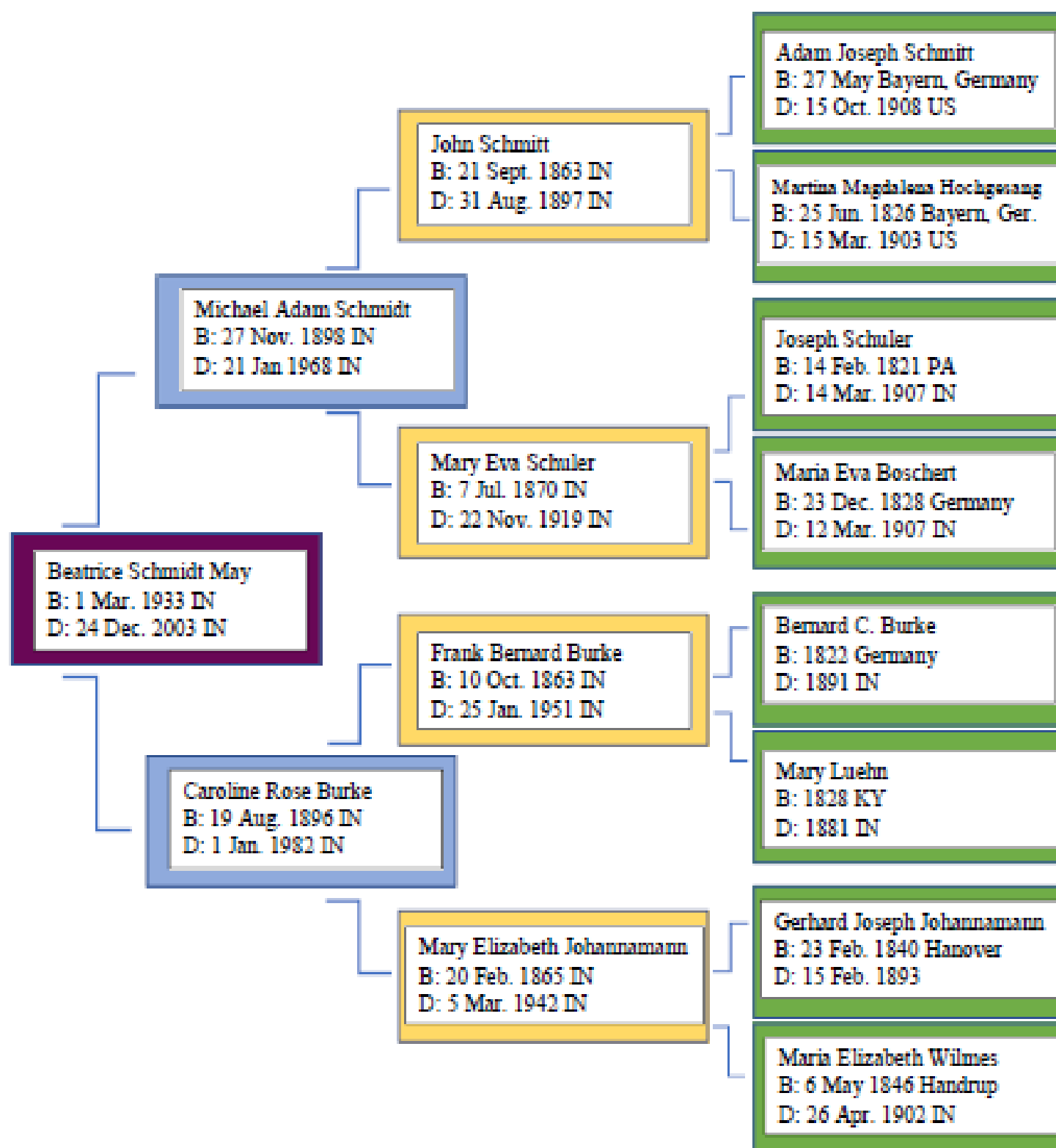
Given at Jasper, Indiana, this 23rd day of May, 1951.



Bernard Gallagher
Superintendent
Claude Miller
Principal

Claude A. Grunelo
President
O. Arnold Kemp
Secretary
Dwille Elliott
Treasurer

WELCH-CHICAGO





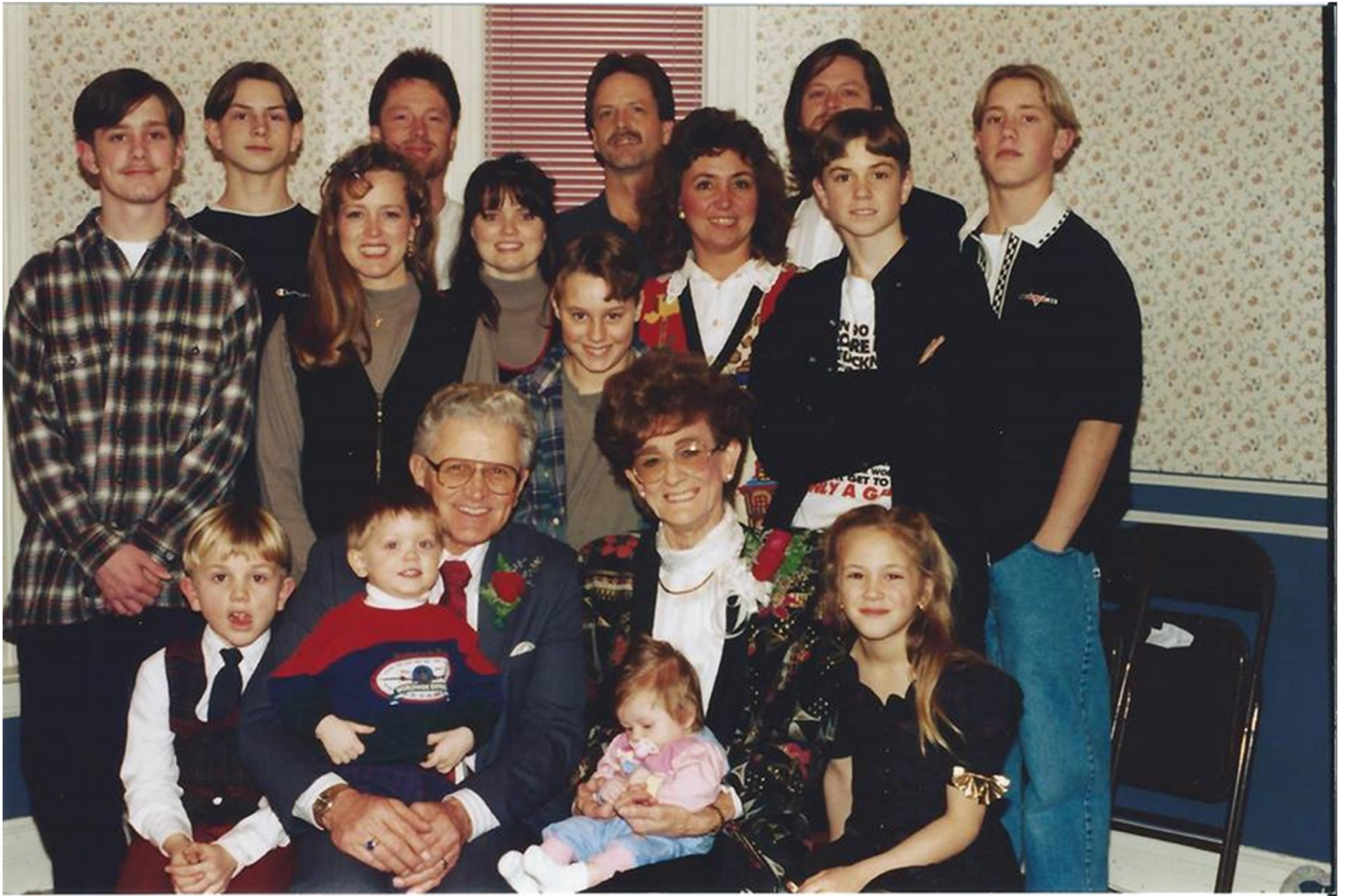
{ I remember Louis going after Bets and I
with the dish rag.ö }

ó Aunt Dorothy }

Schmidt is my Grandma Betsy's maiden name! My Great-great-great Grandfather Adam Joseph Schmitt was born in Ansbach Bayern Germany in 1823, but he came to America at some point before 1863. His son, John Schmitt, was born in Indiana that year. Adam Schmitt died in Jasper in 1908. He was my Grandma Betsy's Great-Grandfather. No one I ask seems to know why the spelling of the last name changed from Schmitt to Schmidt between my Grandma Betsy's grandparents and parents, but a few of my family members mentioned that they'd always heard it was because there were so many Schmitts in town that they needed to differentiate!

Adam Joseph Schmitt was not born in Pfaffenweiler, and I have no way of knowing if he came over with the group on the *Tallahassee*. However, he was born in Ansbach Bayern Germany, which is also located in the southern part of the country, about three and half hours from Pfaffenweiler.

The word Pfaffenweiler can be broken up into *pfaffe* and *weiler*. The former means father or priest and the latter means village. The first recorded account of the village is from the year 1094. Today, it has a population of 2,600 people, and Jasper is home to about 15,500. Pfaffenweiler is known for its vineyards and stone quarries. This immediately made me think of Jasper's beautiful Catholic church, St. Joseph's. St. Joe's is a massive sandstone Romanesque church whose dark green roof with red cross patterns stands out in the city. It was built between 1867 and 1880. My Grandma Betsy and Grandpa Asil were married there on January 26, 1956. I don't know if Pfaffenweiler was known for its wine in the nineteenth century, but it is today. Of course, that made me think of my Uncle Louis making my Great-Grandfather Michael Adam Schmidt's family homemade wine recipes. I wonder how close the formulas are for what they're making on *Winestrasse* (Wine Street) in Pfaffenweiler and what Uncle Louis is fermenting in his basement.



“She always kept her left arm down so people wouldn’t
grab her around the side.”
ó Grandpa Asil

Christmas spirit swells inside my Grandma's living room.
I know where the little jar is ó filled with puff peppermints
I grab two. This day is anticipation,
the day before Christmas. The gifts
waiting to be unwrapped and claimed before Mass,
where the church bells will toll for baby Jesus and for Grandma

This day is most special for Grandma.
She's stashed away money for months, her living room
holds people who she's raised to go to Mass
and to smile at the scent of peppermints.
She's the real gift
not just during the season of anticipation

As a child, I anticipated
Christmas villages, brought to life by our Matriarch, Grandma.
My family's gifted
at celebration, a Christmas-craze we learned in Grandma's living room
where garland and lights in peppermint
colors swirled around glasses of green punch, brightening an esteem for Christmas

The deep-throated tones of the organ at Mass
announce the end of anticipation
for now, as do the scraps of red paper that pepper
the floor after we open all the presents from Grandma.
Full of dumplings and soup and smiles we sigh; there is no more room
for pumpkin pie, although Grandpa has a gift

for eating dessert, a gift
for keeping Christmas
alive, even when it moved out of his living room
maybe out of his heart, for a while, the anticipation
lost for his wife's favorite day, Grandma

lost too, in a way. But he still smells like peppermints

And Aunt Jan began refilling the jar of puff peppermints
the whole family refilling the heart of Christmas, the gift
it really is, it really was, even when Grandma
died that Christmas
and hope is back, or maybe never left. Appreciation
for all we embrace ó breath, life, room

for peppermints in our stomachs, parties in our living room.
Realizing the gift that living is, we anticipate
this holiday. We make Grandma proud at Christmas.



{ öShe didn't eat right, smoked, wore herself out.ö }
ó Grandpa Asil

“Seein’ about Her”~

My Grandma found a mole on the inside of her thigh in 1969. It bothered her and bled, but she økept lettinøit go, puttinøit off,ø says my Grandpa. In the same year, she developed pain in her hip, so she went to the doctor for that and mentioned the mole. The doctor knew right away it was cancerous, so he removed it along with some swollen lymph nodes.

øWe really didnøt understand that much about moles and cancer,ø my Grandpa says.

Aunt Dorothy tells me that the second cancer was in the lung. It was a year later, 1970, and Grandma had a cough that she couldnøt get rid of. Some x-rays at a TB clinic over in Vincennes showed a tumor in her lower left lung, so they took it out at the hospital in Evansville.

øIøll never forget,ø Aunt Dorothy says, øthe night before the surgery, they took a family picture.ø

Grandma made it through the surgery, but it was a long recovery. Grandpa stayed down there with her and slept either out in his pickup or in the lobby, and the kids were at home with the babysitter, Irma.

øI came home once,ø Grandpa says, øand Jan came runninøout and said, -Dad, Irmaø sick in bed and I been takinøcare of her for two days. She was thirteenøø He laughs and shakes his head. Grandpa ended up calling Irmaø son to come get her, but since it seemed like Jan could handle things on her own, he left the kids alone when he went back to Evansville.

øI communicated with Jan over the phone, and she got the boys off to school . . . she had to grow up quick.ø His tone is lighthearted, maybe a little proud. Meanwhile, Grandmaø temperature was up to 105.

“She just sweat the bed wet,” Grandpa says. “I made 52 trips to Evansville with that side,” he adds, referring to her left side where the lung had been removed. “She went through hell.” He says it just like it’s an everyday fact, not as though it’s an idea to dwell on. Apparently, Grandma didn’t dwell on it much either; from what Grandpa tells me, she really kept going with that bandaged side.

“There was a Moose convention,” my Grandpa says, referring to the Moose Club he’s a part of, “and she really wanted to go, so I thought *well, you’re gonna hurt if you’re here*, so I put a bunch of pillows around her in the pickup and took off.”

Another Moose event was at a skating rink in Bicknell. “Course, Betsy loved to roller skate,” Grandpa says. He worried about her skating around and getting hurt, but she insisted on going. He made sure to let everyone know to be careful around her and not bump into her, though.

He continues, “Anyway, that’s when I fell and broke my left wrist.” He chuckles, talking about the irony in the situation. Although funny to look back on, the incident was less than ideal considering my Grandpa had to work, and he was left-handed. The two, however, devised a solution. “Betsy was kinda crippled too, but anyway, she rode in the truck with me, and she’d shift gears and I’d drive . . . she’d make out my tickets and we’d go haul gas” his grin widens. “We worked together.”

In 1972, Grandma had another lung surgery followed by a hysterectomy. The breast cancer, Aunt Dorothy tells me, was next. Grandma had her left breast removed in 1985.

“I didn’t think she’d pull through that,” Dorothy says. She goes on to describe how my Grandma got blisters in her mouth and throat from the chemotherapy. My Grandma was so miserable, that she said she wasn’t taking one more treatment; she said she’d rather die. Dorothy

continues, "So the doctor refused to be her doctor, and she never took another treatment. She was fine after that."

But she wasn't really fine. Although the mole, lung, and breast with the cancer had all been removed, the other lung was damaged, and my Grandma's smoking habit was not helping.

"The doctor took that pack of cigarettes and threw it in the trash and said no more," Dorothy tells me. "She drove Ace crazy."

My Grandpa confirms. "For a little old skinny thing she was wirey," he says. "She'd smoke a cigarette instead of eating a sandwich." His tone becomes more stern. "And I couldn't break her. I did everything I could to get her off those cigarettes except divorce her . . . and I even thought about that a few times," he says. "But I couldn't." Grandma ended up on oxygen and gradually went downhill.

"One doctor told her she could go back to smoking one every now and then and I thought *shit no*. He thought she wasn't going to live very long anyway, but she did," my Grandpa says.

Aunt Dorothy adds that Grandma Betsy was considered an anomaly for many doctors. "She was a good study for them," she says.

Grandpa agrees; "she just wasn't supposed to be living."

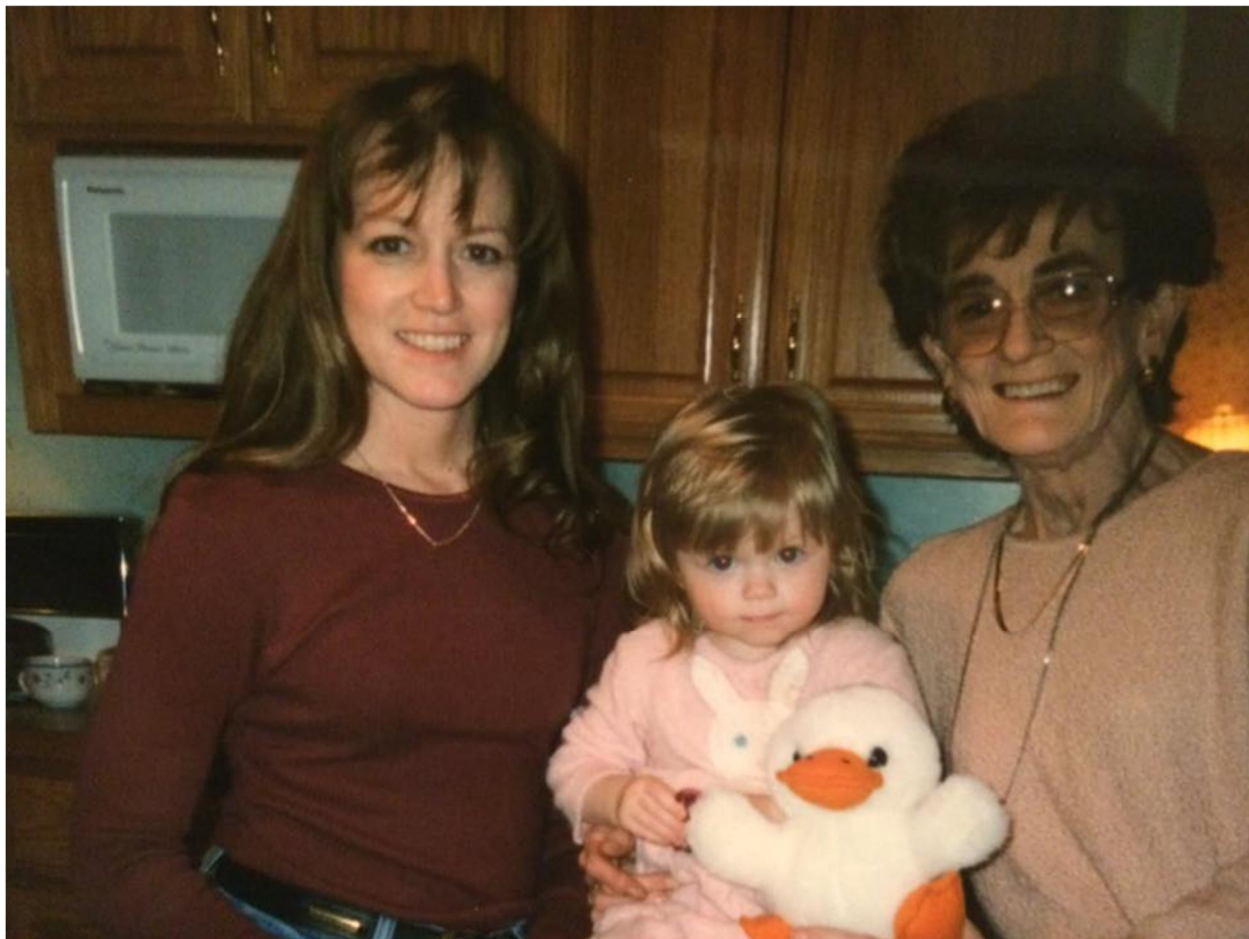
Eventually, Grandma got back to her regular smoking habits, but Grandpa told her she'd quit when she couldn't breathe, and she eventually did. "Because she had to," he says. "She just couldn't get her breath anymore. It's just amazing how that stuff can control people." I think about my uncles and cousins who smoke every day, and I wonder what goes through my Grandpa's mind when he sees them with a cigarette. It must be infuriating.

Aunt Dorothy tells me how she used to go over to help my Grandma take a bath. "Ace just didn't have the patience," she says, adding that she'd do my Grandma's makeup and hair for

her, too. "Course, she was all bones, so I put a towel down in the bath tub for her to sit on and help her get in. She say, "oh, this feels so good." She really enjoyed that bath."

What amazes me about these stories is the ease with which they are told. To my Grandpa and my Great Aunt Dorothy, these stories of pain that break my heart are just a part of life. They were all there, and they handled it; they lived through it because they had to.

"Ten years of my life went by so just lost so soon about her," Grandpa says, but he doesn't seem the least bit upset or regretful. "A lot of ambulance runs, oxygen, and breathing treatments . . . but I still got everything she used here, all ready for me," he breaks out laughing, even though he and I both know he's mostly serious. Way to lighten the mood, Grandpa.



öI remember horsing around dancing at the Moose and dancing
with her out on the sidewalk in Cannerton . . . She still enjoyed
life when she was sick.ö

ó Uncle Louis

When I call my Grandpa on the phone
his girlfriend answers. It's
annoying but I'm thankful
for her. She's his ears
She's his ears and his company now
that Grandma's gone and
she's his someone to go to
Two Brother's Café with on
Sundays and to bring him crisp
red apples on work days
because he's too old for work days

I call my Grandpa on the phone because
I want to know can I come over
can I pick his brain about Grandma
When I hang up I have a date the next day
a date with my Grandpa

The next day brings inches of snow but I
still make it to Grandpa's
He has his work coat on and his
rust-orangey gas gloves and he
thinks I won't drive in weather
like this but here I am

My project is less important
than my ability to listen
my ability to listen to whatever
he has to say whatever he wants
to say whatever words he
hasn't said in ten years

Ten years and the house hasn't changed
much, just more cluttered but
pictures of me and my brother and the
other grandchildren covering the big
kitchen wall still look out over the dining
room table now peppered with papers
and envelopes and pill bottles

I try to remove my snowy shoes but
Grandpa says not to bother
they'll dry he says, so I
clear myself a workspace on
that cluttered kitchen table, get out
my shovel and start digging

The beginning of the story? He
asks and I nod. I expect
to have to lend him my shovel, I
don't understand how an 84-year-
old man can't remember what he
wore yesterday but knows with such
certainty the price of a polaroid taken
at the Rustic dance hall in Jasper, 1954

Two hours later he's taking me up
to the attic where my dad
slept as a boy, taking me
to the chest he built as a railroad
apprentice, taking me to the
letters inside it written by my Grandma
a Grandma younger than me, letters
no one's seen but him
and now me

He left his cane downstairs
now on hands and knees sifts
through boxes with his
granddaughter. On the way down, his
hand clutching the rickety fake
iron rail, mine
holding 60 letters made
of gold, he tells me it'd be
alright by him if I
came back sometime soon



“Bets never did like housework. She always loved her
flowers. She worked in the flower gardens.”

ó Aunt Dorothy

Grandma Betsy's Day~

Christmas is the most exciting time of the year. I write this as if it's scientific fact! But for me, it really is uncontested. I remember being taught in school that the most important Church holiday (and therefore the most important holiday in general) is Easter because it commemorates the gates of heaven opening to all of humankind. I get that, but the reasoning I used at the time (How can Jesus die and rise if he was never born?) still seems pretty convincing. I'm sticking with it.

I may have inherited my love for Christmas the way I inherited my Catholic faith, but both of these loyalties have been personally confirmed in my heart, and I have my Grandma to thank for both of them, as she was my only Catholic grandparent and my very own Mrs. Claus. I've come to appreciate the Christmas season with what I can hope is at least a sliver of the spirit and enthusiasm that my Grandma Betsy embodied. She loved poinsettias and fraser firs and those intricate Christmas villages that go beneath the tree. My cousin Lexie and I would always sit at the tree's base in the corner of Grandma's purple living room to watch the mini ice skaters glide across the glossy model pond. It was magic, and it was only at Grandma Betsy's house.

The whole family gathered at Grandma and Grandpa's for dinner every Christmas Eve ó after Mass, of course. I don't remember much about the food, except that we always had Grandma's thin tomato dumplings. It's the kind of dish that, all sentimental value stripped away, probably isn't all that remarkable, but if someone tried it and said that to me, they'd be in for it.

After dinner, we'd all open our presents. Each of us would have drawn a name at

Thanksgiving of a person to bring a gift for at our Christmas get-together. Lexie and I would always try to rig the system so that we'd end up with each other's names. We also had the Grab Bag, a tradition started by my Grandma. She bought \$5.00 gifts for months for family members of all ages, and then she'd wrap them sloppily in funny holiday paper, toss them in a big bag, and walk around the room like Mrs. Claus letting each of her beloved children and grandchildren pick a present. Once everyone had a gift in hand, the 3-2-1 countdown signaled the OK to rip into the wrapping paper and discover what was inside. Sometimes it would be a movie or tool, others it could be a nose hair trimmer or Barbie doll. The beauty of Grab Bag was that there was something for everyone, and we could all trade with each other as many times as it took for us to be satisfied with our prizes ó except for Grandma; her gift was to sit back and enjoy all the laughs and smiles of the people she loved together in one place on her favorite day. She enjoyed giving gifts so much that each person even had two or three special presents from her ó on top of the gift exchange and the grab bag. Some members of the family complained that others only came for the food and the gifts, but my Grandma was unmoved. *That's just fine* she would say. *As long as they're coming.* Family time together was worth the money, the cleaning, the cooking, and the arguing with my Grandpa over all the shopping.

Grandma Betsy died on Christmas Eve in 2003. Breast, skin, and lung cancer couldn't take her, but emphysema finally did, on the morning of her favorite day of the year. She was in the hospital in Indianapolis, and my Grandpa and all their children were able to be there when she died. I'm thankful for that. Many people think it's awfully sad that we lost my Grandma on Christmas Eve. That year, it really was. My parents sat my brother Adam and I down to tell us the news. Adam, nine at the time, had a solo at the children's Mass that night, and he was still able to get up and sing it in front of a packed congregation ó nearly all of which loved my

Grandma and were mourning her death. That was the last year we had Christmas Eve at Grandma and Grandpa's house. Now, it's just Grandpa's house, and the whole family meets just a mile down the road at my parent's house instead.

We've been meeting every Christmas Eve since Grandma Betsy died, and that makes the anniversary of her death a joyous one ó a time when all her family are gathered together on her most favorite day. I don't think she could've gone on a better day had she chosen it herself. My Aunt still says that some of the cousins only come for the food and the presents. It's true ó we have a massive buffet of soups and meatballs and, of course, Grandma's tomato dumplings (made by my Mom). We even have a dessert bar filled with pumpkin and apple pies and dirty pudding. But my Dad, after announcing it's time for "Grandma Betsy's Grab Bag," says that's just fine with him. *As long as they're coming.*

My Grandma Betsy and the Christmas season have given my family so much more than gifts. But the truth is that my Grandma was a shopper, and she put a lot of work into the special presents she bought for her loved ones. That included hoarding money outside my Grandpa's knowledge and accidentally getting locked inside malls after hours. This past Christmas Eve, I decide to ask a few family members about their favorite gifts from Grandma. For my Uncle Mark, her youngest son, it's easy.

"She bought me a leather jacket and leather dress shoes that I still wear today," he says. Before I could respond, he stuck a foot out and pointed down toward the floor. Leather dress shoes, fifteen or more years later.

My cousin Michelle remembers all the cute outfits with matching jewelry that Grandma bought for her, and Lexie recalls always matching with me. She and I got twin baby dolls with clothes and accessories that matched our own.

“I still have them,” she smiles. We reminisce on a time when, visiting Grandma in a nursing home one Sunday after church, we’d told the nurses we were twins. Our coordinating Mary Kate and Ashley red skirts and blouses made our story believable – until my Dad spilled the beans.

Speaking of my Dad, he mentions receiving a men’s manicure set from Grandma one year.

“I remember thinking, *what a silly gift*,” he says. “It’s been at least twenty years ago, and I still use it today – thinking *mother always knows best!*”

The oldest cousin, Craig, always got to pick out the clothes for Brent, Brian, Keith, and Jake at the Buckle. Apparently, they always hated that he knew their gifts before they did.

To know what to get for Uncle Rick, my Grandma’s oldest son, she would ask him for a list of things he would like to have.

“I’d write down TEN things for suggestions – she’d buy them all!” he laughs. That doesn’t surprise me.

My cousin Jake shares that Grandma gifted him a gold necklace on one of her last Christmas Eves.

“I wear it basically every day as a reminder of the values she taught me,” he says. “Jake’s two little boys have both ripped the chain from his neck a time or two, and one Christmas, his wife Dziana even had it repaired and re-gifted to him. Jake doesn’t mention any specific values, but they aren’t hard to guess. Grandma’s heart was with her family, with giving and loving and living every day, even though she’d been dying for years. Jake doesn’t know that I recently heard a story about him and Grandma from Aunt Dorothy, Grandma’s sister. She told me that she was visiting my Grandma one day when Jake stopped by the house.”

“He said, ‘Hey Grandma, how’s it goin’?” she recounted. “He was kind of milling around, and Bets could tell he wanted something.” Dorothy said that Jake had a flat tire and needed to go get a new one, but he didn’t have the money and his dad didn’t either. “So she got right up and went into her shop to her bottom drawer,” Dorothy continued, “and way in the back she pulled out an envelope and gave Jake the money he needed.” *Don’t you tell Asil about that money* she’d apparently told Dorothy. After all these years I wouldn’t be surprised if we haven’t yet found all of Grandma Betsy’s money stashes. I continued talking to Jake about his necklace, which he’d pulled out from underneath his grey sweater to give me a look.

“I’ll give it to Theo one day,” Jake says, referring to his oldest son. Now *that* will make Grandma Betsy smile. I know he’s talking about more than the necklace.



“She was a lively squirt . . . she was lively
all her life, really.”
ó Uncle Louis

Gifts from Great-Grandpa Adam~

Thinking about my Grandma's love for Christmas reminds me of the rest of my interview with Aunt Dorothy. When I am sitting in her dining room, I ask her about the holidays at the Schmidt house growing up, and she says, "We *always* had good Christmases." She said her father "struggled and was stern, but he just went all out for Christmas." Hearing that makes me smile. I can't imagine my Great Grandpa Adam, but when I try, I think of him as a tough old man, not as someone who lives for making Christmas special for his family. It's comforting, however, to know that this Christmas spirit goes back even before my Grandma. It's more deeply engrained in my family than I thought! Dorothy tells me that her father would come home with bags of oranges and sacks of candy and nuts. One year, he even hired the man across the street to play Santa Claus for Bets and John. "Dad gave him a glass of wine," she recounts, and again, I am not surprised. I get that excited feeling that comes when a little detail is repeated in different contents. If there's anything true that I gain from this process, I know it'll be that my Grandpa Adam was known for his wine.

My favorite picture
of Grandma comes with me
to my thesis meeting. It sits
upright in the chair next to
my professor and I;
the two of us analyzing
a PowerPoint template until
something in the conversation sparks
both sets of our eyes to peer, for the first
time, over the top edge of my computer
screen at her. At my Grandma
in the wooden rectangle propped
up in the chair across from us. We're
accidentally sitting in a circle,
the three of us, in the basement
of the English building where the identity-
-in-question pipes up and insists
I get to be a part of this, too



“Their wedding day was icy and cold. I was pregnant, and the doctor said I shouldn’t travel, but I said *I’m not missin’ my sister’s wedding!* They guys never took off work, so I went myself.”

ó Aunt Dorothy

A Date with Grandpa~

My Grandpa has had a few "girlfriends" since my Grandma died. I say "girlfriends" with quotes because it feels weird to just say *my Grandpa's girlfriend*. At what point do we become too old for those labels? Anyway, a woman name Margaret has been his companion for the past several years, and that's been such a wonderful thing for our family. We like Margaret; she made a point to get to know everyone in the family early on, and she makes fantastic oatmeal raisin cookies and homemade apple pie. She's part of the family now, even though the two aren't married. The best thing about that is that my Grandpa has someone to pass the time with. Their lives haven't completely merged; they still have their own houses, feel no desire to marry again, and go to their own separate churches. However, Grandpa always picks her up for breakfast on Sundays and she comes to all the family events and even watches football at my parents' house on Sunday afternoons. My Dad says Grandpa doesn't want to get married again because "he's still in love with mom." Another great benefit of having Margaret around? She's Grandpa's ears.

"Hello?" she answers his cell phone, and I'm not surprised. Even if he knew how to use it, he probably couldn't hear well enough to have a good conversation.

"Hey Margaret, it's Rachel," I say.

"Oh, hi there," she responds, and I hear her asking my Grandpa in the background if he wants the phone. She stays on.

"How's everything going with you?" She asks.

“It’s good,” I say. “I’m on break and classes don’t start for another three weeks. But I’m working on my project about my Grandma, and I’m wondering if Grandpa has some time in the next couple of days to help me.”

“Oh, alright,” she responds, and I hear her relay the information to my Grandpa. I work through Margaret, the girlfriend-secretary, to set up a time to go to Grandpa’s to talk, and when I hang up the phone, I’ve got a date for the next day.

When I wake up the next morning, I realize that the yard is full of about four inches of snow and it’s still coming down. But Grandpa’s house isn’t far down the road, so I get dressed and turn on my Jeep to warm it up. By the time it’s defrosted and I’m able to make it to Grandpa’s, I’m about ten minutes late. I park in his square driveway to the left of the basketball hoop and make the trek to the door. Just when I’ve reached the carport that houses his red work pickup and black Cadillac, he comes out the door in his big winter coat, gloves, and boots.

“And where are you headed?” I tease him.

“Well, I wasn’t sure if you’d make it out in this weather or not,” he responded. “I was just going down to check on things at the office.” The office is the trailer on Grandpa’s property where the May’s L.P. Gas business is run. Technically, my Grandpa, is still “in charge,” but I’m pretty sure he’s mostly handed things over to my Uncle Mark by now.

“But come ahead in,” he says, opening up the door for me. I stoop down inside the door in the narrow hallway with dark wood paneling to untie my shoes, but he tells me not to bother.

“You sure?” I ask. “They’re pretty wet.”

“Oh, they’ll dry,” he answers. I don’t really know the rules here; since Grandma died, we don’t make it down to the house much anymore. Instead, Grandpa comes over to our house for dinner and football games. I imagine his house is sort of his sanctuary where he can have

everything just as he likes it. The place hasn't changed much in ten years, or maybe more. The long skinny hallway leads to two bedrooms and the house's only bathroom, where my Grandma's magnifying makeup mirror still sits to the left of the sink. To the right of the bathroom is the staircase to the attic where my Dad and his brothers slept. To the left of the bathroom is the kitchen with the wall of framed faces of children and grandchildren and one of those tables that has extendable ends. Off the kitchen is the living room, whose windows look out to highway 57 and the "Licksillet" sign is the name for this little community of my family members. The side porch was closed in decades ago to serve as the Betsy May Beauty Shop, where clients would come to have their hair cut and styled by my Grandma. Now it's storage.

My Grandpa and I head into the kitchen and sit down at the table. The beige tablecloth with burgundy and gold flowers matches the cushions on the wooden chairs where my Dad and his siblings reluctantly ate their ring bologna growing up, and the table is filled with papers and envelopes and checkbooks and pill bottles. I clear a little space to set down my notebook and explain to my Grandpa that I'd ask him some questions, but he should feel free to tell any stories or go off on tangents. Then I hit him with a big one right off the bat.

"So, I don't know where you and Grandma met," I tell him.

"How did we meet?" he asks.

"Mhmm," I nod.

"Well," he begins, pronouncing the word like *whale*, "by accident."

Grandpa said he'd been "going with" a girl named Mary Clark, but she stood him up one night to go to Jasper to dance when they were supposed to spend time together in Washington.

"I didn't dance," he tells me. So he decided to drive over to Main Street to see what was going on and ran into two friends whose car had overheated.

“They said, ‘we have some girls up in Jasper, and if you’ll drive us, we’ll buy gas and stuff,’ so I didn’t have anything else to do,” he said. “I didn’t run around up in Jasper like some of them because that’s what they did up there was go to dances.”

They stopped in Ireland, a tiny two-stoplight town between Washington and Jasper known for its fried chicken place, which was apparently started by my Great Grandpa Adam’s cousin, to pick up some beers from the back door of a convenience store.

“Course, we were underage,” he looks at me and grins. He says that when they got to the dance hall, he smuggled in his beer underneath his coat, and then he laughs, widening his smile and squinting his eyes. Grandpa was apparently looking for Mary Clark when one of his friends introduced him to my Grandma.

“I remember offering Betsy a drink of warm beer, and she said no, she wouldn’t take it,” he says.

Grandpa decided to go back to Jasper the next week and take his two best friends, Jerry and Burk. The three of them sat at a table in the dance hall at the Schnitzelbank because none of them danced.

“So after the dance, they was going to teach us how to dance,” Grandpa says, referring to my Grandma and her friends, the Geisler girls. “Back at Betsy’s house, she got out her records and pushed the living room lamp back and chairs over, you know, and they was going to teach us how to dance and dip . . . Burk ‘bout knocked the light over,” he chuckles, and I laugh with him.

Grandpa says he asked Grandma where her parents were, since it was the middle of the night, and they were making so much noise in the living room. Apparently, they were just asleep in their bedroom. He raises his eyebrows and looks at me.

“You just didn’t do that here in Washington,” he says. I think to myself that it isn’t a

Washington thing, but probably more of *him* thing, because my father probably wouldn't have allowed it either. "They always said if she was home they wouldn't have to worry about her, but if she's out, they'd be worryin'."

The next week, when the guys made their third trek to Jasper, Grandpa's friends set him up on a blind date with a woman named Marlene.

"She was just all over me the whole night," he says. "Even in the car she'd have to sit on my lap instead of sittin' in the seat." The group was persuaded by one of the band members to pay him for a polaroid picture, a new thing at the time, and Grandpa was the only one at the table when the man came to deliver the picture and collect his money.

"Marlene had her arm around me and I thought *oh damn anyhow*, so I thought that's my picture, I paid for that picture." So he stuffed it in his coat pocket, took it home, and cut Marlene out of it! I laugh with him when he tells me this story, but secretly I feel a little bad for Marlene.

Jerry and Burk wanted to go up again the next weekend, but Grandpa stayed home. He didn't want to go out with Marlene again.

"Jerry come back and told me that Betsy'd sent word with him that she wanted to see me. I didn't want to cut in on Burk; he'd had a date or two with her, but she said she wasn't goin' with Burk no more and she wanted to see me. So anyway, that's how I got started goin' with her."

His phone rings, the kind of generic, super loud ringtone that old people use. He clicks the green button to answer but pauses before saying *hello?*

"Damn telemarketers," he says and hangs it up. "So that was 1954 I guess, because we got married in '56." Outside, it looks like it did on my Grandparents' January wedding day, I imagine. When I ask if they had a big wedding, he says, "Well, those Jasper people always want

a big wedding.ö I think I got that gene. My grandparents had their reception at the big Rustic dance hall that's since been torn down, but St. Joe's massive stone church, where the ceremony took place, is still Jasper's prized landmark.

öWith all the planning and getting ready for it and everything, Betsy ended up sick in bed,ö he says, öso Mary Ann, Louis's wife, and I were running around getting cakes and stuff and stuff ready. Betsy just got out of bed the day before we got married,ö he laughs. öShe'd been sickly all her life. Never did take care of herself.ö He pauses before continuing. öAnyway, we had sixty chickens, and there wasn't a piece of that left.ö

Grandpa says that everyone wanted to dance with my Grandma, the bride. öHer feet had swelled from dancing 'till I had to take a knife and cut her shoes to get 'em off.ö

I ask a question next that my mid-twenties hopeless romantic heart can't wait to hear the answer to. öDid you ask her to marry you?ö Grandpa pauses.

öUhh . . . I don't know I guess we just started talking about it. No I didn't get down on one knee and propose to her,ö he admits, laughing from his belly. They bought a ring together, he doesn't remember where. öShe picked it out,ö he says.

öDid her family like you?ö I ask him, and he replies, öWell, that was another thing,ö starting in on a new story. öCourse they were close to town, but they had the farm; Adam raised hogs and Betsy'd milk the cows . . . I told everyone I went to Jasper to find me a rich wife, and I found one of the poorest ones up there.ö He breaks out again in laughter, leaning over the table and raising his eyebrows at me. My Grandpa, the jokester. In the past few years he's laughed more than the twenty-two years I've known him. öBut yeah, I was a farm boy, you know, and Adam, he liked me. I'd take tools and fix his lawnmower; he wasn't much of a mechanic. Her mom didn't think I could do anything wrong.ö

He starts another story about picking some roses to take to my Grandma by saying, "I wasn't too into that romantic business." Apparently, my Grandma didn't react that much, but her mom did, taking the roses and putting them in a special vase. "I thought *shit, she thinks more of me than Betsy!*" he says.

When I ask Grandpa if the family spoke German, I'm hoping he can be the tie-breaker. He said they would some, but mostly they'd do it to tease him.

"It was interesting listening to her dad on the phone," he says. "He'd go back and forth between German and English talking to those Germans up there about hauling coal." My Grandpa knew the phrase *Ich verstehe nicht* ("I don't understand"), and he often tacked *Leck mich am arsch* ("Kiss my ass") on the end of it when the family was speaking German around him. "They quit talking German then," he says with a wide grin.

Grandpa continues that Grandma didn't speak very much German, but he recalls multiple occasions being in hospital waiting rooms with Amish patients: "They spoke a different lingo than Jasper," he says, "but she could tell what they was saying and they didn't know it." My Dad and his siblings told me that a few times when Grandma was sick with really high fevers in the hospital, she would only speak German. But Grandpa doesn't remember that. How do our minds decide what to keep? For some reason, my Grandma's mind decided to guard a part of her German heritage, to hold onto it even without her knowledge. I don't know what it means that the language came out at such a dire time for her or what it means that my Grandpa doesn't remember it. Maybe his mind has decided it wasn't worth saving, or maybe he never knew.



{ öShe always liked to tease.ö
ó Aunt Dorothy }



I don't know where my favorite picture
of Grandma came from.

Who did it belong to before it sat next to
the novels on my white desk?

What was the occasion for the dark
green princess gown?

Grandpa and Aunt Jan have guesses of
Johnny's wedding, or maybe Charlie's . . .

It must be something that I was gifted
after Grandma died.

I would write a letter every day, run
laps around Licksillet, if
it got all my questions
answered.

But that's not the way it works.
With all the holes and missing
pieces, there's one blaringly apparent
fact that I cling to

The woman in the photo is my Grandma.
Colors swirl together on paper to give
a glimpse into her life's picture
simple, honest, real.
Complete



öWe hung it on her nursing home and hospital doors so peopleö
know which room was hers. *Just keep hangin' on weö say.ö*

ó Grandpa Asil

Asil D. May, Rural Route 4, Washington, Indiana~

“Bets” Schmidt, 443 S. Arlington Ave., Indianapolis, Ind.

When I visited Grandpa, he gave me a stack of letters that Grandma wrote to him in 1944, the year they met. She wrote to him from Indianapolis, where she was living with her brother Bernie and attending beauty school. When Grandpa told me about all the letters she sent him, he paused and then said, “You know, I think I know right where they are . . .” Then, he led me to the attic. I was surprised when he climbed the stairs so well and didn’t have his cane. The attic has three small sections to it, and it’s where my Dad and his two brothers slept growing up. For decades since, it’s been storage. There are things from the boys who lived there – like an old bed frame, report cards, and basketballs. But there are also things of my Grandma’s, like her wheelchair and some oxygen tanks that never got used. Grandpa leads me into the little room to the left of the staircase and to the wooden chest he built when he was an apprentice for the railroad. Kneeling down on the dusty green carpet, he unlatches the chest and pulls out a stack of old envelopes – blue, beige, and yellow. They’re crinkly and stiff, but the date can be clearly seen on all but one letter, and each has a purple 3 cent United States postage stamp in the right upper corner. My Grandma’s cursive displays my Grandpa’s name in the middle of each envelope.

When Grandpa tells me how faithful Grandma was about writing to him while she was away, I ask a question that I assume has an obvious response . . . “Did you write her back?” But

instead of the reply I'm expecting, my Grandpa looks as if that idea never crossed his mind.

“Well, I don't guess I did,” he says. I am dumbfounded.

“She wrote you all these letters, and you never wrote her back?” I press.

“I don't think I ever had her address,” he defends. When I look down, I notice that most of the letters are just signed with “Bets” in the top left corner, but there are at least five that have the address of her brother's house. I don't say that, though; I just think to myself that all men are the same and that my Grandma was a trooper. She was pretty much the one who made this relationship happen in the first place, and then she carried it through long distance, too.

I've been carrying these letters around for a while, but tonight, I decide to finally dig into them. The first thing I do is separate the letters by month – February, March, April, May, June, and July. Then, I put each month's stack in chronological order. The letters are so dusty that my black jacket ends up covered in little specks that pepper the table and my lap, too. There is one letter whose envelope is ripped over the time stamp, so all I know is that it was written in 1954 on a Monday night (Grandma specifies the day of the week in her letter). Because I don't know the date, I decide to read that letter first. It's addressed to Asil D. May, Rural Route 4, Washington, Indiana. Instead of dotting her *i*'s, my Grandma makes little circles. The letter is sent from “Bets” Schmidt, 443 S. Arlington Ave., Indianapolis, Ind. She makes her capital cursive *S*'s the way my Dad does. They look proud and sophisticated.

This first letter makes me even more irritated at my Grandpa. The second paragraph reads, *I'm still looking for a letter from you. I believe you forgot about me.* And of course, my mind goes immediately back to the conversation I had with my Grandpa about him not replying to the letters. One of my friends suggests that maybe he *did* write her letters, but they're just too heavy and he didn't want to share them with me. I'll entertain the idea, but I'm doubtful. I guess

he also could have written letters but forgotten about them.

My Grandma goes on to tell my Grandpa that she's coming home on Friday, and she hopes to see him. She even gives him her exact arrival time. She writes, *I'll get there about 5:38 Friday. I'm taking the 1:15 bus & so I'll get home for supper. I'm hoping to see you there Friday night.* I wonder if he went . . . I bet he did. Either way, things obviously worked out between the two of them. Another interesting part of the letter is as follows: *Well Ace, I'll see you soon & believe me I've really missed you & and I'll prove it when I get home.* That last part sent my sorority sisters into a laughing fit. One says she's sure that the context back then was completely appropriate, but I'm not going to assume anything . . . Another sister chuckles and reminds me that I wouldn't be here if it hadn't happened. At the end of the letter, my Grandma tells my Grandpa not to work too hard (which is what everyone is always telling him), and to remember: *I love you & want to see you. Bye till Friday – all my love, “Bets.”*



I would like to offer a special *thank you* to all of those who have made this work possible.

Beth Benedix

Amy Welch

Kevin Moore

Louis and Mary Ann Schmidt

Dorothy Waggoner

Asil May

Jasperindiana.gov. City of Jasper, Indiana.

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