Stuff(ed)

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There are only positive feelings associated with the trips I used to take to my grandmother's house, so it is surprising to me that there I can recall nothing to distinguish one visit from the next. But perhaps that is fitting, since nothing about the place (or the woman for that matter) changed enough to be noteworthy. The stone cottage with the attached workshop and the barn out back had been standing there for more than two hundred years by the time I first set foot in it, and it wasn't about to start changing on my account. And my grandmother was much the same. A short, stout woman with a care-lined face, she never varied from my earliest images: Her face added no wrinkles, her bones resisted deterioration, and her long, grey hair remained firmly set in bun on the back of her head.

After her husband's death, the workshop's condition gradually moved from functional to cluttered, cluttered to packed, and the end result was a wall of knickknacks, furniture, and boxes. I never had the chance to see it clean. All I can remember comes from the brief walk down the space between the workshop and the kitchen's outside wall, the legs of tables and chairs protruding at all angles from the intricately woven conglomerate to my left. Cans of paint, lacquer, and stain lined the wall to the right, their lids rusted shut, left over from a time when there might have been room enough to use them. Presumably, the barn out back was in a similar state. I was never allowed inside the dilapidated red structure, which sagged at one end, and I can only suppose it was used to house the stuff which would remain unaffected if a roof fell on top of it.

Once in the house I always made went straight through the kitchen (which wasn't even useful for drinking water, as the water was drawn from an old well) and headed to the living room, in the middle of which was the ubiquitous grandmother's candy dish. Only it wasn't a dish so much as a large bowl, and instead of being filled with hard sucking candies, it overflowed with quality chocolates. And if at any point the level seemed to be dipping below the brim, it was promptly refilled with seasonal goodies. Only, they weren't the current season's; they were purchased in bulk from everywhere around town the day after a holiday, and given the amount she bought, this undoubtedly saved her a considerable sum.
My grandma was quite comfortable buying anything that caught her eye, and her eye never rested. A good deal was never passed up, and the bowl of chocolates was more for her than for her visitors (which were rare, at best). She did as she pleased, choosing what to eat with as much discrimination as she used in evaluating the necessity of her purchases. In fact, I frequently wondered how she remained so healthy and came to the conclusion that all the preservatives in the terrible food she consumed had resulted in some remarkable side affects. High fructose corn syrup must run through her veins, and I can only assume she her skin is comprised of starch and gelatin, leaving it unaffected by the birthdays that keep on coming. But her disregard for practicality was endearing, and to see her living the way she wanted made me optimistic. If that old lady could show such disregard for the judgments of others, so too could I. She was a role model.

And then the unthinkable happened. Without even asking my permission, she sold her historic cottage and began the process of moving herself into a retirement complex. Her new, three-floor condominium was caught unsuspecting by the sheer volume of stuff she brought over. Truckload after truckload transferred a tremendous number of things nobody had seen in years. Antiques emerged from the jumble that had probably been new when she bought them. But when I walked into her new home for the first time, I didn't see any of the eighty percent of her house that was full to bursting. All I saw was the living room and in the middle, a presentation of chocolate. The bowl no longer enough, there was another container, this one full of chocolate-covered raisins, and opened bags of wrapped candies with pieces spilling from them were strewn across the coffee table indiscriminately.

She had hidden away the mass of stuff from her old house quite thoroughly, though it did render all but a few rooms of the house unusable. We had to warn her well in advance of a visit, so she had time to clear enough space for us to sit, and only she was allowed in the kitchen in case a person unused to floor-to-ceiling clutter should take a wrong step and be lost beneath the ensuing avalanche. But again, I never saw the truly scary stuff. As it had been with the barn at her old house, there was much of her life to which I was not privy.

Based on the days I spent consuming candy in her living room and admiring my grandmother's enthusiasm for acquiring new things, I was sure my mother's childhood must have been the real-life equivalent of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. During one of the trips to the new
house, I inquired into the matter, eager to hear some tales of my mom’s younger years. So when she told me her mother bickered constantly with her dad, I was taken aback. And then I learned that at one point grandma had gone an entire year under the same roof as my mom without speaking to her as a punishment for getting her dad a soda after grandma had instructed him to get it himself. It was some time before I began to build a picture of what might have led that unfamiliar and unpleasant woman to become the grandmother who greeted us with chocolate and smiles. The one who stood outside waving at our receding vehicle until we could no longer see her. (And because I never saw her go back inside, I sometimes imagined she never went at all, but stood waiting for our next visit, unchanged by the elements or the passing of time.)

I never met the woman who picked fights with her daughters and husband. I’ve never known her to be sharp-tongued, though her infrequent sarcasm is a testament to her still-agile mind. But it isn’t hard to picture where that woman went. Her two daughters left to pursue collegiate aspirations, and the following year, her husband died in a car crash, meeting head on with a sixteen-wheeler while driving in the wrong lane sans seatbelt. So she was suddenly left with nobody to bicker with. She went from having too many tenuous relationships to none whatsoever. She was stubborn, though (you’d have to be to not talk to your own daughter for a year). So she began to replace the people she lost. I doubt she’s let a single good deal go by without adding to her collection, and it’s even more improbable she’s let an item escape her clutches once she’s bought it. So rather than let go, she packs it all in tighter.

Left to her own devices, she became completely self-reliant, and with that self-reliance came the confidence to buy and eat whatever caught her fancy. But then she left her cottage. Once able to look out the back window on a full-grown orchard she planted herself and the red barn which housed many of the things she cared about, she is now squeezed in by people who wait to see what crazy thing she’ll bring home next. And this has brought about the only change in her I’ve witnessed. Where she was once independent and uncaring, she is now left worrying what they neighbors will say. Their gossip has started to mean too much.

Losing her family all at once altered her very mindset, and while I can only see the results of this loss indirectly in the form of her overcompensation, the same sort of change is occurring with her recent change of locale. The topic of conversation is increasingly shifted to her “friends” spying on her, and her paranoia extends to the directors of the
retirement complex and their unreasonable requests and intrusive visits. When we leave the house to go shopping together, I notice she sets up behind us a sign addressing unwanted visitors: “Please Don’t Take My Things” is written in marker on a piece of posterboard she leaves in the middle of the room, right next to the table of chocolate. If the hypothetical intruders knew the significance of the items jammed into that house, they might indeed leave well enough alone.