The Art of Your Grandmother

I never met her. By “her” I mean my grandmother: the tall, complicated woman who gave birth to my father. She died of a brain tumor about ten years before I was born. I’ve heard it said that you hold fear in your stomach, sadness in your chest, and anger in your head. I suppose this makes sense to me now, how this might manifest itself. She lives on in a way, but she is also quite gone, painfully and gracefully remembered on occasion. Just as the soul leaves the body with its own secrets, so my grandmother left her family. All my life, she has intrigued me, I yearned to know her—such an important presence in my father’s life must have left some trace in me. But how can you know someone who has passed? There is human memory, but that is feeble and swaying; it can never be truly known.

A picture is worth a thousand words they say. So I stared at her photographs; sometimes I still do. She was graceful, somehow from her pictures I could tell. But whatever else I could image about her from her pictures was just that, pure fancy no true evidence. So I looked at her creations, my father, my aunt, my grandmother’s paintings.

Growing up, I would reach my arms high in the air and wait for someone to lift me upwards. I waited impatiently for my mom or my dad to bring me to their height where I would then proceed to touch every new object in sight. There was a particular spot on our wall at home that was textural heaven, but I wasn’t supposed to touch it even when brought to such thrilling heights. I always reached for it anyways. Brushing my hand across the rough, hardened splotches of oil paint on the stiff canvas is a sensation I can still recall acutely, though I don’t run my hands along paintings any more. It was many years before I fully grasped that these paintings that I loved to touch were created by my grandmother, Dorothy. That was her name. My dad and my aunt describe her as creative—*an artist*. She created oil paintings of mills, wharfs, lakes, oceans. Her work is characterized in two classes, bright and dark. She would cry watching the evening news. She felt deeply and sympathetically and in my mind this explains the pastel blues in the lake water, and cheerful greens of the meadows she painted. I try to keep in mind that my grandmother knew happiness.

She began painting in the mid-sixties and completed most of her paintings by the mid-seventies. She took classes and sold her own artistic knick-knacks in the breezeway of her city house. Her work has never been appraised. The modern day selling price of this style canvas would run about 150 US Dollars while the price of the oil paint (depending on quality) ranges from 30 to 200 US Dollars. If you asked my dad or his sister, they couldn’t tell you where she bought her supplies, where she took her lessons, or even the year each painting was created. They were children and then they were out of the house, details like this were imperceptible. As my father grew older he tried to spend most of his free time away from the house where Dorothy was sure to argue, or berate him for something he was lacking. The same went for my aunt, who cried frequently as she fought with her mother, steadily and forlornly accepting the fact that she couldn’t measure up. Terry, the other boy, my father and aunt’s older brother was the star of the cast that made up the Amund household. Beloved by not only my grandmother and grandfather, but by the world at large—his early death at the age of 36 sent the family into shock. Two years later, in 1979 Dorothy died. My grandmother knew great sorrow.

She grew up in a blue collar family in Mora, Minnesota in the forties and fifties. She was Dutch and her last name was Herwig. Dorothy had one sister and several brothers. I hate those men. That hated blood runs through my veins. When my grandmother was a teenager she was raped by her brother. Which brother did this to her is still uncertain. I think of her growing up in such a family and I envision something of hell. Her sister was raped by her father (it is assumed) and gave birth to a boy which was raised as her “brother.” From such a family Dorothy emerged. My grandmother knew cruelty and incest.

My grandfather met her and fell in love with her; he fell into the kind of love that you don’t fall out of. She was tall and intelligent—the valedictorian of her high school class. She had dreams and aspirations for her education. She became a mom of two at the age I am now. She knew love and yearning.

I see all of these things in her paintings. These are the things she carried. The weight of the canvas is perhaps a pound, maybe two. The layering of oils is about three coats deep; the layering of emotion is fathomless. There is one painting that stands out amongst the rest. It is the image of a humongous wave crashing violently into a large rock outcropping. The spray of the water is at the height of perfect suspension, the sun glistens off each drop, and the blue sky stretches in and out of the water. There is relief in this clash. I used to think she imagined this collision, but then I learned that she painted it from a photo my father took. I now understand why it is my father’s favorite painting of hers—she finally deemed his work worthy. Her works hung in her house and ours—kept within the family, just like the secrets.

Dorothy’s paintings do not include many people, and the only two paintings that include them are young children. The brush strokes are solid and thick. The colors are bright and hopeful, there is love and innocence. The dark paintings are without life; the sky and ground blend into a brown, grey mash. The lonely sailboats drift without sails, the painted wharf reeks with abandoned disgust. These are painful pieces that make me reach towards those chunky splotches of dried paint. I want to hug my grandmother. I hug my father instead. These are the patches on our family quilt which we understand, like Maggie, serves a purpose other than decoration; we seek understanding just as one might seek to cultivate the perfect patch of grass for a baseball field.

These paintings are not extraordinary, my grandmother was talented, no doubt, and painted with a steady hand, but there are blemishes, flaws one must overlook. The colors often clash, as though they weren’t properly mixed or they don’t naturally blend. My grandmother was a complicated woman; she caused a great deal of scarring and pain in her family. It is hard to look beyond this. The weight of the things she carried was certainly a burden, yet she carried so many beautiful blessings…now we carry them. Her paintings are—to me, my grandmother. I know nothing else. Therefore, they are sacred to me, just as all her happiness, her sorrow, her pain were to her art. I may hang them on my wall, but every brush stroke paints my history in its oily trail.