

A Curious Inheritance

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# A Curious Inheritance

MIKE INGRAM

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, RELATIVES insisted I looked like my grandfather, but I never paid them much mind. When you're young, everyone thinks it's their obligation to find resemblances: to one parent or another, to a long-dead uncle, to a laundry list of more distant relations you've never met or even seen in photographs. When I was seven or eight, apparently I looked enough like the actor Ricky Schroeder that people would come up to us at restaurants. Some just to note the likeness, but others because they actually thought I was him. Which was ridiculous—he was seven years older—but I guess everyone was still getting the hang of syndication.

Once, at a TGIFridays, a Russian woman with a giant helmet of blonde hair wrapped me up in her fur coat and told my parents she was going to steal me. Another time, a man walked right up to our table and bit into a wine glass. He chewed it up and everything, then just stood there, smiling, blood trickling from the corners of his mouth, until finally a manager came and whisked him away.

My clearest memory of my grandfather—from life, rather than pictures—is the back of his balding head, which sticks out over the top of his favorite recliner. We're in Pensacola on vacation, and my grandmother is hustling us out the door to church. I want to know why my grandfather doesn't have to come. He's yet to say a word all morning, even to acknowledge us swirling around him in the living room. "He watches his church on the TV," my grandmother says. "Now come on. Let's don't try to be late."

I WAS IN THIRD GRADE WHEN MY grandfather died, and his was the first funeral my parents allowed me to attend. I had nightmares about it later,

his face waxy and overly made up at the viewing, the odd chemical stench the flowers couldn't mask.

Afterward, we went back to my grandparents' house, and I asked my mother why no one seemed sad.

"It's complicated," she said.

But what was so complicated? He'd been hit by a drunk driver who jumped the median in the middle of an afternoon. In the living room, relatives and strangers were picking over the carcasses of casseroles. Quivering jello molds looked like dessert but weren't. "I loved grandpa," I said.

My mother patted me on the head, which always annoyed me. "I know you did."

I WAS A GULLIBLE CHILD. I BELIEVED IN Santa Claus until I was ten. Each night before bed I prayed fervently, convinced bad things would happen if I forgot to mention someone I knew who might be in need. At church, during the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed, every time I yawned I thought it was God sending me a rebuke: *That's the part you haven't been doing right; time to buckle down.* I used to think Posterity was an angel, or one of the saints, someone who took an interest in the small details of our lives, like a personal scrapbooker.

I also believed all that stuff the church told us about God's plan, how each of us had a calling. Those lessons were divine confirmation of what my entire generation had been hearing from our parents and teachers: all of us were special as snowflakes, we could do anything we set our minds to, the world was out there vibrating with potential energy just waiting to bend to the force of our particular wills.

THE CLEAREST IMAGE I CAN CONJURE up of my grandfather actually comes from a photograph. I must be a

freshman or sophomore in college, and this time we're in Pensacola to help my grandmother sort through her things. After a lengthy campaign by my mother and her sisters, she's finally admitted it's no longer safe for her to stay in the house. Her memory's going; she forgets to eat; she has dizzy spells. An episode of vertigo on the way to the grocery store scared her badly enough she's stopped driving.

The photo I'm thinking of now, I must have walked by it hundreds of times. I always assumed it was my mother's brother, Donny, who died years before I was born. But this time my mother sees me looking. "I tried to tell you," she says. "Everyone tried to tell you."

In the picture my grandfather is roughly my age, and the resemblance is eerie. We have the same hairline, the same jawline, the same cheekbones, the same eyes. I'm old enough at this point I've heard the stories, or at least enough of them to be wary of the likeness.

"See?" my mother says. "He was handsome when he was younger."

WHEN I WAS A KID THERE WAS concern in the family I might turn out to be gay. My mother denies this, though I know it's true. "No one was concerned," she says.

My father was in the Navy, and he spent long stretches at sea, so I lacked a steady male influence. Until I was five, my best friend was a girl. I had a lisp for which my parents eventually sent me to speech therapy. My favorite movie was *Grease*. One Christmas I wanted an EZ-Bake oven. You get the picture. Whenever we visited Pensacola, my uncle would try to teach me to fight. My grandfather tried to teach me to shoot guns, and when he took me out to lunch he instructed me to order Rob Roys instead of my usual Shirley Temples. He took me to Kmart and the hunting

store. He bought me cowboy boots and taught me to eat a cowboy breakfast, which was steak and eggs. Sometimes on our visits I'd hear my mother and grandfather yelling at each other in the kitchen, late at night when I was supposed to be asleep. But if I asked my mother about these fights the next day her answers were vague. Sometimes kids argue with their parents, she said. It's nothing for you to worry about.

I have this memory of sitting on a stack of phone books and a barstool, my grandfather sneaking me sips of his beer. I have a memory of my grandfather guiding me through a crowd at the dog track. But are these actual memories? They feel too much like stock images, scenes from movies about problematic men. Though recently my mother admitted at least some of those fights were because he'd taken me out to run errands and come home drunk.

MY MOTHER DOESN'T LIKE TO TALK about the past. I can tell she doesn't see the point. She's not one to root around back there and reminisce. So I've had to pick my spots. I've had to learn which questions to ask, a project complicated by my inability to admit why I want to know so much about him in the first place, as if giving voice to my suspicions might make them come true.

HE WENT BY FRANK, OR D.F., AND IF anyone called him by his given names—Doris or Francis—he was ready to fight. Maybe those names gave him a chip on his shoulder from the very start.

By all accounts he was an intelligent man. "Too smart for his own good," my mother says. She doesn't know what dreams he had for his life, only that they didn't come true, which turned him bitter. Actually, *dreams* might be the wrong word, because a dream is something you acknowledge to be far-fetched. My grandfather was the kind of guy who tallies up all the breaks other people are getting, the good luck that falls into the laps of the less-deserving, which to his mind was nearly everyone. He nursed his disappointments. He kept his grudges in his pocket like coins, taking them out each night to turn them over in his hands. He sharpened his intelligence into a weapon, which he wielded against whoever had the bad luck to be around. He was a lousy drunk: he couldn't hold

his liquor, and after a few drinks he'd get sloppy and mean.

These days, we'd call what he had anxiety, or depression, probably both, but in those days they called it nerves. My grandmother referred to his

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## He kept his grudges in his pocket like coins, taking them out each night to turn them over in his hands.

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episodes as freakouts, and more than once they landed him in the hospital. His medicine cabinet was like a pharmacy. If one doctor wouldn't give him what he wanted he'd curse him, add his name to the enemies list he kept in his head, then move on to another.

Like that old photograph, I'd seen my grandfather's razor strap plenty of times, but I was in my late teens before I finally figured out what it was. He kept it hanging on the back of the door that led from the kitchen to the garage. Apparently Donny got it the worst, being the oldest, and the only boy. Sometimes he'd even volunteer for it, taking the blame for something his sisters had done just to spare them. My Aunt Marilyn was next in line, and she was mouthy, which made it worse. She's *still* mouthy, which is one of the things I love about her. My mother was several years younger, and by the time she came of age he'd slid so far into himself he didn't bother beating her. Not that she had it better, exactly, but it was a different kind of suffering.

Once, when my mother was a little girl, the family dog was sick, and my grandfather marched all the kids out back, pistol in his pocket, and made them watch as he put him down. Another time, he was cleaning a shotgun at the kitchen table and forgot to unload it. The spray of tiny holes in the cabinets survived through my own childhood, survived into family lore. Apparently my grandmother had been just a few feet away doing the dishes. He was drunk so often my mother wouldn't bring friends by the house. Once Donny was old enough to drive, my grandmother sent him out at least once a week to search the bars and drag his father home before he could do anything

too stupid. He took offense easily and he couldn't fight for shit, an unfortunate combination.

It's a childhood I can't really imagine, a childhood that makes me feel guilty about my own childhood, which was idyllic by comparison. My mother, if she got fed up enough, would sometimes take the flyswatter to my legs, or she'd break off a tree branch, but she never drew blood, and she never hit me until I bruised. My father hit me only once, and I was seventeen by then, and I had it coming.

At a Thanksgiving dinner once, my mother and her sisters were piling on, recounting my grandfather's past cruelties, and suddenly everyone looked to my grandmother, who was sitting at the head of the table. I was in high school by then, and I wondered what they expected. For her to join in? Or to chastise them for speaking ill of the dead? She folded her hands in her lap and studied them. Finally she looked up and said, quietly, "He wasn't a very nice man."

LIKE MY GRANDFATHER, I DRINK. I tell myself everyone drinks, or all my friends do, anyway. When we meet it's for drinks, and after readings, concerts, we stay out late and wake with hangovers. It's only recently I've begun to realize not everyone lives like this, at least not into their middle thirties. Even those friends, I'm not sure they drink at home, by themselves, nearly every night. I'm not sure they've ever taken down half a liter of bourbon in a single sitting, in front of the television. I'm not sure they've swerved into the furniture and bruised up their shins and ankles on their way to bed. Every few months, I'll make myself quit for a week, or two weeks, but then I'll ask myself: What exactly is this meant to prove?

Like my grandfather, I have a tendency to nurse my disappointments. I'm thirty-six, and life has not turned out the way I'd hoped. I no longer have delusions of grandeur, the way I did as a kid, but I thought at the very least I'd have a stable career by now, one that was arcing toward some recognizable destination. I thought I'd live in a house, rather than a rented apartment. I thought I would have published a book, at least one. I thought I'd have a wife, maybe children. I thought I'd have enough money to take a vacation each

year, to save for my eventual retirement. There are nights I sit alone, in a favorite chair, the way my grandfather used to sit alone in his favorite chair, and it's hard not to get lost in the past, all those forked roads where things could have gone differently. It's hard not to follow the voices in my head to all the dark places they want to lead me. It's so easy to look around and conclude that a lot of people have merely lucked into their success, that plenty of successful people aren't even that smart or hardworking. It's so easy to give in to bitterness, its warm embrace.

OUR FAMILY HISTORY IS LITTERED WITH close calls. My great grandfather worked up a prototype for a manual transmission but he couldn't get the money and paperwork together for a patent. I always assumed this story to be invented, a bit of familial apocrypha, but a few years ago some distant relation dug up the blueprints and had them printed on coffee mugs. My great grandfather also sold off a patch of land out in the country, in a town called McDavid, but since he didn't bother to retain the mineral rights he didn't see a penny when the new owner found a wellspring of natural gas. Another relative, an uncle several times removed, did the exact same thing one state over, except in his case it was oil. My father, in his twenties, almost got out of the Navy and went to work for IBM. This would've been the late '70s, when the company was first sinking its energies into personal computing. My mother's cousin, Timmy, choked on a peanut when he was four and was clinically dead long enough he never recovered. His parents were religious people and they wouldn't let the doctors pull the plug, so he lived like that for nearly fifty years: unable to talk, unable to walk or even stand, unable to eat or breathe except through tubes. We visited their house in the country every now and then and he always freaked me out, propped up in the middle of the living room and making little gurgling noises, machines whirring all around him. Every few minutes his mother would dab away spittle from the corner of his mouth with a handkerchief.

I'm sure on occasion our family luck has run the other way, too. Donny, my mother's brother, when he was a soldier in Vietnam, he bent down to tie

a shoelace and heard a bullet whiz just a couple inches over his head. Though it's a stretch to call Donny lucky, since a few years after returning from the war he died of testicular cancer, which the doctors misdiagnosed until it had spread into his blood and his bones.

I offered once, to my mother, that her brother's death must have contributed to my grandfather's depression, to his tendency to drink and disappear inside himself. "I'm sure it didn't help," she said. "But he was already an asshole long before that."

WHEN MY MOTHER GOT MARRIED SHE didn't invite my grandfather to the wedding. My uncle Ronnie, her brother-in-law, walked her down the aisle and gave her away. Though my grandfather showed up, just before things got started, and he slipped fifty bucks into my mother's hand. "For the reception," he said, grinning like he was a big man, like he was in charge. My mother says if she hadn't needed the money so badly she would have thrown it back in his face; she would have wadded it up and shoved it down his throat. By then she hated him, and that's not a word my mother uses lightly. When I was a kid, if I ever said I hated someone she'd say hate was a strong word, I should really consider what it meant before using it. But she'll freely admit now that she hated her own father. It's something she's wrestled with, because like her mother she's a Christian woman, and the church tells her she's meant to forgive. She's meant to pray for her enemy, and for the soul of her enemy once her enemy's dead. But she can't bring herself to do it.

MY MOTHER SAYS SHE SAW MY GRANDMOTHER lose it only twice. The first time was when Donny died. The second was a few years later, when my grandfather ran off to Texas with another woman. He didn't give her any warning, he just put in for a transfer at the Navy Yard and disappeared. For a while my grandmother didn't know what to do. There wasn't much in the way of savings, and at any rate he controlled the bank account. My mother was in college at the time, and she wanted to drop out and come home, but my grandmother wouldn't let her.

Eventually he came back, several months later. Just showed up unan-

nounced on the doorstep, shaking and blubbering. He'd drunk and pilled himself into a state and got himself let go from his job. The other woman left him. My grandmother drove him to the hospital, where he stayed for several weeks, and afterward they went back to living together, another fifteen years, until he died. I asked my mom once what compelled her to stay with him. Did she just not believe in divorce? Was it a religious thing? My mother said she'd asked the same question. My grandmother told her he was her responsibility. If she didn't take care of him, she said, nobody would.

HERE'S THE QUESTION, WHICH I'M SURE is obvious by now, but I've avoided it for so many years it seems important to acknowledge it explicitly: What are the limits of genetics? Male pattern baldness, I know that comes from your mother's side, and there was nothing I could do to escape it. When I was in college my mother insisted I only had a widow's peak, though I pointed out to her that a widow's peak doesn't move. Alcoholism, too, that can get handed down, and I've got it on both sides. My paternal grandfather is also a drinker, occasionally of the fall-down variety. My parents drink a few glasses of wine in the evenings, and sometimes my father will pour himself a bourbon after dinner, but I can't recall a single time I've seen him visibly drunk. My mother I've seen tipsy on occasion, but it only makes her more affectionate, and maybe a tad sentimental. She'll hug you too much, and she might get a little weepy.

My mother and her sisters, they have this joke about their family's *dysfunction*, which is a word they learned from talk shows in the '80s. "Our family was totally dysfunctional," they'll say, pretending to be guests on *Phil Donahue* or *Oprah* or *Sallie Jesse Raphael*. "And look at us, we turned out fine!"

That's not the joke. The joke is what comes next, when they each start twitching their shoulders, only slightly at first, so slight you might not even notice it, then the twitching gets more violent, little by little, until it looks as if they're approaching full-blown seizures. I've seen them do this twelve or fifteen times and still it makes me laugh. The trick is in how subtle they can make those initial twitches, and how long

they can carry it off without bursting into laughter.

It's only recently I've realized this isn't only a joke, but a kind of mission statement, an assertion that one can escape the snares of both nature and nurture. The culture of therapy popular when I was growing up insisted the privations of childhood could explain the hang-ups and shortcomings of one's adult life. "My parents didn't love me properly" became something of a mantra. Therapists were even known to hypnotize their patients to unlock repressed trauma that might account for their problem behaviors. My mother always scoffed at these explanations. "Oh, just get over it already," she'd say to the television. "Get on with your damn life."

As a teenager this attitude struck me as simpleminded, even heartless, a close cousin to the belief that poor people were to blame for their own poverty, that a little moxie and elbow grease were all a person needed to rise above their circumstances. But I can see now that her attitude was really just a pragmatic one. It was a belief that worked; it was a belief that *had* to work.

WHEN I WAS YOUNGER I WAS MEAN TO my mother. I can admit that now. My father was away for months at a time, so my mother was often left with the day-to-day tasks of raising me. She'd graduated college but she didn't work, except to occasionally substitute teach or volunteer with juvenile delinquents, activities which I refused to see as work, at least not real work. My father had a master's degree in nuclear engineering. I thought he was smarter than she was. I thought I was smarter than she was. I can see now how patronizing and wrongheaded that attitude was—misogynistic, even—but I often talked down to her; I used my own budding intelligence, sophomoric as it was, as a weapon. Even as a teenager I knew how to be cruel; I knew how to find a person's weak spots and exploit them. These days we mostly get along, and when we argue it's just the usual stuff—religion, politics, the fact I'm in my middle thirties and still unmarried. But occasionally I'll get out my knives, especially if I've been drinking. I'll make her cry, even though doing so makes me feel terrible. As a kid, too, I felt guilty after our fights, and I'd cry alone in my

room, remembering happier times, wondering why I couldn't be a better version of myself.

A few years ago, visiting my parents at Christmas, I came downstairs one morning and found my mother finish-

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**"Oh, just get over it already," she'd say to the television. "Get on with your damn life."**

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ing up a late breakfast. She'd already taken the dog for a walk, and my father had already left for work. She looked up from her yogurt and pointed out the obvious. "When you drink like that you get mean."

I don't think she evoked my grandfather that time, but other times she has. "It's the Magness in you flaring up," she'll say. It's a joke, but also it's not.

MY GRANDFATHER OWNED A HOME. He had a wife. He had four kids. One of them died, but like my mother says, he was unhappy long before that happened. What was it that he wanted from the world? What was it that he expected?

Nearly all of us drift into lives that are smaller than the ones we imagined. We either make our peace with the limitations of those lives, or we don't.

MY MOTHER ADMITTED TO ME THAT she fantasized about killing him. She'd come back home to look after my grandmother, after an accident that nearly killed her. My grandfather was driving when a semi plowed into them. He walked away virtually unscathed, but my grandmother was airlifted to the hospital. She was in the ICU for a month, a regular hospital bed for weeks after that. The doctors said it was a miracle she survived. My grandfather was unwilling to lift a finger. He rarely even visited the hospital. That morning he was hung over as usual, demanding in his whiniest tone that my mother cook him a hot breakfast before she left to be with my grandmother. My mother says she stared at the skillet, stared at the back of his head. She thought: *He'd never even see it coming.* She thought: *It would probably be better for everyone.*

"Not that I actually would have done it," my mother says. We're in the car. It's summer. We've just visited my grandmother at her assisted-living facility, where the doctors can't decide whether to call her condition Alzheimer's or dementia. Usually she can at least remember who we are.

Instead of whacking him with the skillet, my mother cooked him extra bacon, and she poured the grease onto his eggs. The doctor had warned him about cholesterol: all that drinking, all those pills; his heart was basically a bomb waiting to go off. But he ate with relish. He licked his lips. He sopped up the grease with his toast. My mother only smiled and asked if he might like to have seconds.

I INHERITED MY GRANDFATHER'S nerves, too, though now the doctors have more precise terms for the condition which a few years ago nearly turned me into an agoraphobic. I was making myself sick. I couldn't control my racing thoughts. I'd always been a worrier, but this was something more.

Bourbon could calm me down, temporarily, or several glasses of wine. A doctor prescribed Xanax, and with a couple drinks in the evening: heaven! But then I'd think about my grandfather, near-comatose at night in his chair, in front of the television, and that image was enough to get me to a therapist who gave me homework assignments I mocked until I realized they were actually working: make small talk with two strangers a day; take a thirty-minute walk; when you feel yourself getting anxious write down all your negative thoughts and force yourself to answer them rationally.

It turns out it's nice to go for a walk in the late-afternoon sun. It's nice to ride your bike through the streets of your city, weaving through traffic, feeling the wind on your face. It's nice to meet your friends for dinner, or a show, to share a few laughs. It's important to remind yourself how nice these things are. It's important to remind yourself how many people have far less than you do and still manage so much happiness. Sometimes I'll make a list, even though it makes me feel silly: I have my health. I have a job I enjoy, teaching writing to college students, and even if I never have much money I manage to get by.

Even if my attempts at writing haven't garnered anything like the adulation I once hoped for, there's pleasure in the attempts, because putting words on paper turns out to be the only way I know to make any sense of my life. I have friends. I've had my share of girlfriends, probably even more than my share, and if my bed is empty at the moment it only means I can stretch my legs. If my friends are often busy with their own lives, with spouses and careers and children, it only means I have more time to write, more time to read, because time itself is a blessing, even if it can also be a trap, a black hole to sink into and disappear.

THAT ONE TIME MY FATHER HIT ME, IT was my senior year of high school. He'd finished command of a nuclear submarine and had moved on to shore duty, which meant he was suddenly home full time. My mother tended to bear my cruelties, and she refused to give me the satisfaction of seeing how badly I upset her. But my father put his foot down. Your mother's going to bed nearly every night in tears, he told me. You can either shape up or I'll drive you down to the recruiting station.

"You're full of shit," I said, and that's when he put me on the ground. Thank God he did it, too, because I needed to be humbled. I needed to be humbled again and again, and I have been.

ALL OF US WILL BE HUMBLLED BY LIFE. All of us will fail. The only question is what we'll do with those failures, how we'll annotate them in the ledgers we keep of our own lives. You can commemorate them, like those roadside plaques in the South of my childhood, the ones that reminded me that my people were once on the wrong side of history. You can collect them, like coins, and take them out each night to polish and admire them. There's a pleasure to be had there—believe me, I've done it—but it doesn't get you anywhere, at least not anywhere you want to live.

I COULD SAY THAT I SEE TRACES OF him in myself, that it's an inheritance I have to work against, but that isn't the whole truth. I gravitate more toward sadness than anger. I can't imagine ever hitting a child, or even an adult. Unlike

my grandfather I'm more than willing to admit my own role in my various failures. The world is unfair. He wasn't wrong about that; anyone can see it. But I'm not convinced the world is conspiring against me. I know the world doesn't owe me anything. It doesn't owe me success, and it sure as hell doesn't owe me happiness.

The truth is, my grandfather was really only a peripheral figure in my life. I saw him maybe twice a year, and he died before I was ten. My father, who's made so few appearances here, is a good man, a kind and generous man, and maybe that's the happy ending in all this, that not only my mother but both her sisters married good men, loving men, men who knew how to raise children, or were at least willing to put in the effort to figure it out. Despite what those daytime talk shows would have us believe, not all patterns have to repeat themselves.

Still, there was the afternoon I visited my grandmother on what I quickly realized was one of her bad days. There was this searching look on her face that scared me, even before she called me Frank.

"Grandma, it's me," I said. "It's Michael."

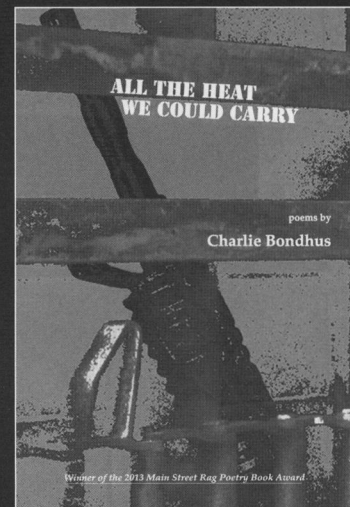
But she was in some place where she couldn't hear me. She kept asking where I'd been, and did I know how late it was? If I didn't quiet down I'd wake the children.

If this were a piece of fiction I could invent a moment of poignancy. I could allow her to go on believing I was her long-dead husband, and in that disguise I could apologize for everything I'd done, all the messes I'd made and foisted upon her. But this is real life, and in real life I'm a coward. I rang for the nurse, and I got out of there as quickly as I could. I never again went into her room without my mother as a buffer.

It would be too easy to say I see him in me, because that's not the whole truth, but it is a part of the truth. All I can hope for is to learn something from his example. We all live lives that are smaller than the ones we imagined for ourselves. We all have our demons. We all have our share of regrets and failures. My grandfather never made peace with his, but I'm trying to make peace with mine. I really am. Every single day, I'm trying. □

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