The Quiet Man

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Furniture covered the floors of my grandmother’s house. Homemade tables, bookcases, worn sofas, art deco chairs, corduroy recliners. Their placement had no rhythm of feng shui, no consideration for room-to-room travel, no thought. They were merely dropped in their place on the day of arrival and there they remained to fulfill my grandmother’s purpose of un-emptying the house.

Seven days a week, my grandfather sat in the plaid orange and green recliner that leaned, crooked, against the corner of the wall. It faced the television that was situated less than two inches away from the front door across the room. From the recliner, he watched football games and the local news until my grandmother, as matriarch of the house, took the remote and turned the channel to the shows that she faithfully followed—General Hospital, Murder She Wrote, Lifetime’s Movie-of-the-Week. He never stood up to defiantly leave the room, he just held tight to the arms of the chair and clenched his jaws that were packed full of chewing tobacco, his only connection to masculinity since she had banned his pipe smoking years ago.

He never spoke to me. I found him restlessly quiet and grew bored with him until his flannel shirts blended into the recliner and I forgot that he was
there. For years I rollerbladed through the house and barely missed running over his toes. I leaned against his legs when my grandmother and I sat in the floor to play Chinese checkers. At Christmas, I covered his socked feet with shreds of wrapping paper as I opened my gifts. He never spoke a word.

Like all of my cousins, I grew up and moved away. And like most of my cousins, when my grandfather had a stroke I didn’t come back as soon as I should have. When I did, the furniture was gone. No more eclectic mesh of dated fabric and wood that proved that I had been there, my father had been there, my father’s father had been there.

A metal hospital bed sat in the perfect center of the living room correctly perpendicular to the wall. And he lay in it, as quietly as he had sat in the recliner. His eyes moved slowly back and forth, back and forth, as my grandmother glided across the living room in her walker back and forth, back and forth. The left side of his lip drooped and he whispered almost inaudibly, “Waaa-eer”.

My grandmother rolled across the kitchen linoleum and showed me how to mash my grandfather's dinner. When we were done, the banana resembled baby food, and I wondered if I would always think of my dying grandfather when I fed my future children.

I propped his head up into the crook of my arm and fed him one teaspoon full at a time. At that time, if I had experienced holding an infant, feeding it, being locked in its gaze like I was the only person of importance in this world, I would have felt comfortable in their sameness and their consistency
to the cycle of life. I wouldn’t have moved my eyes away from the constant gaze of his. I would have touched his bald head for the first time or searched his face for my imperfections, like my nose or the dent in my chin.

That night, his kidneys stopped working, and all of the other organs followed. The ambulance took him away to die in a more modern room. The family followed behind in a procession of pick-up trucks and minivans.

In the hospital bed, his bright blue pajamas shone apart from the sterile pale, white sheets. We surrounded him, and listened to his slow breaths that seemed to hang in the air. No one in my life had ever died. I couldn’t imagine the concept of not existing. It was unnatural to me and I felt guilty that it seemed like such a science experiment, to watch someone die. But as we circled the bed and heard the loud breath that wasn’t followed by another, it felt tribal. I held hands with people who shared my blood—whom I hadn’t seen in years—and cried because we had lost the elder of our tribe, not because we had seen him die.

At the funeral, we made quiet comments about his suit, the casket, how good the make-up looked on his face, but our eyes were on the droop of his mouth that still remained open. The funeral director, who had buried twenty years worth of old men, stood on the corner of the stage crying.

I got to know my grandfather during his funeral. He lay in the coffin in a gray suit I’d never seen him wear as someone else told pieces of his story.
When he was just a teenager, he had reluctantly become a farmer after his father died. He wore suit coats over his overalls. He married my grandmother the day he was shipped off during World War II and didn't come home until his leg was burned while he was fueling a plane. He had piled his children onto the orange and green recliner every night and read them Keats.

The past nine years, I have felt my grandfather lingering quietly. His shoes and flannel shirts still reside in his closet and the recliner was carried up from the basement and positioned back against the wall. Alzheimer's came to my grandmother, and brought him back to life for her. He is young again and he sits in the recliner thinking to himself and reading Keats while her eyes blankly stare at the TV screen. If I want to visit with him, I know that he will be there, both in the house and in her mind.

Because of my grandfather, I have fallen in love with Keats. His soul-baring love letters to the wishy-washy Fanny Brawne. His passion to stay part of the living, to write it all down, to be known. I imagine my grandfather was like him once. Before the furniture came.