



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2009

Article 3

1-1-2009

My Grandfather's Swing

Sara M. Harenchar

Gettysburg College

Class of 2009

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury>

 Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Harenchar, Sara M. (2015) "My Grandfather's Swing," *The Mercury*: Year 2009, Article 3.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2009/iss1/3>

This open access nonfiction is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

My Grandfather's Swing

Keywords

creative writing, non-fiction

Author Bio

Sara Maria Harenchar is a senior at Gettysburg College. She currently holds the world record for consecutive episodes of Golden Girls watched in a single sitting. Although birth records at a well-known Pittsburgh hospital would seem to strongly suggest otherwise, Sara has managed to convince dozens of friends that she is the illegitimate love child of Ernest Hemingway and Aretha Franklin. Sara's passions are traveling and shopping, peculiar hobbies indeed given her profound lack of funding. Her future plans include a career in editing and publishing, a vocation certain to insure continuance of a post-undergraduate Bohemian (read: indigent) lifestyle.

My Grandfather's Swing

My bare feet dig into soaked black dirt as I grip the sunflower vines like tree branches. Strands of my brown hair brush the edge of a blooming yellow flower and I peek into its dark, round face. The sun's rays penetrate the golden petals that feel thin and crisp on my little fingers, and I hide behind the tall maze of yellow bursts, waiting for Grandpap to find me.

My grandfather was a gardener. Anything that he touched grew; gardening seemed to be his calling. I once heard my Dad say that his father could have thrown grass seed over his shoulder, and a putting green would have grown there. Grandpap's flowers were always vibrant and full, his tomatoes deep red, gigantic in my childish hands. I used to play in a row of sunflowers that crawled up the side of my grandparents' house, and that's how he gave me my nickname, "little sunflower."

At the end of the sidewalk next to my grandparents' house was a shed-like structure with no walls, covered by a roof. This little porch was just big enough to hold a hanging bench swing, an old chair, a rusty grill, and some gardening tools in a wooden box. When I think of my grandfather, the bench swing is the first place I remember. The bench rocking back and forth, the rusty chains pulling the wood as it creaked with old age, my grandfather whistling softly as I drifted off to sleep. Sometimes he would sing to me. It was always the same song:

"You are my sunshine / my only sunshine / you make me happy / when skies are grey, / you'll never know dear / how much I love you / please don't take my sunshine away..."

Daisytown is what Appalachian people call a "coal patch town." My father was born there, and was named Steven after his father, although my grandfather's name was spelled Stephen. As a child, my grandfather had been given the nickname "T.B." after his little sister tried unsuccessfully to say "Stevie," mispronouncing his name. It stuck with him for life.

My father lived in Daisytown until he was eighteen years old. Daisytown sits at the top of Moose Hill, in California, a town in Western Pennsylvania. Moose Hill is steep, about half a mile long, and at the bottom is a cul-de-sac where my Dad used to wait for the bus as a kid. At the top, Moose Hill becomes the divide between two neighborhoods. To the left, small rows of houses begin to appear, forming the small three or four street neighborhood where my father lived. A basketball court with broken chain nets lies across from my father's childhood baseball field, where he spent every summer day until my grandmother called to him from down the street. His neighborhood was called Crescent Heights, which sounds like an upper middle class housing plan for white families, but the name couldn't be further from the truth. My father never went on a family vacation until he was married, and he usually got an orange for Christmas.

On the other side of Moose Hill, to the right, was a small group of bigger houses, where the steel mill and coal mine bosses lived. Crescent Heights was home to the workers. On "Crescent", as everyone called it, all of the fathers were workers in the steel mill or the coal mine. The town was racially equal, and my father grew up with African American and white friends. In 1913, when the houses in the neighborhood were first built, all of

them had red shingles, since shingles could be bought in bulk for a low price. Even as the houses changed, Crescent Heights maintained its nickname, "Red Hill."

My grandfather paid one American dollar for the house on Crescent, which was already owned by a cousin in the family. It sat at the top of a steep set of concrete stairs which started on the street, passed over a ditch, and reached a sidewalk at the top of a hill of grass which was basically at a ninety degree angle. The hill of grass was almost impossible to cut because it was so steep.

When I would run to the top of those stairs, my Grandfather would be sitting on a tiny slice of wood he had laid on the steps leading into the house. That piece of wood was his seat, where he would relax after work, where he'd hide when he got angry. I always thought of it as his throne. My father has a similar habit for these same situations: he sits in a folding chair outside of our garage.

I remember first glimpsing my grandfather as I reached the last step, his weathered skin glistening in the sunlight, his long Slovak nose and his deep wrinkles standing out as he smiled. He consistently wore the same brown boots unlaced, grey socks that crept down his ankles and dark blue corduroy pants which he had made into shorts with a fishing knife. He usually wore shirts that my Dad had given him once they were worn out. Sitting on the piece of wood, my grandfather would be crouched over, arms on his knees, his pale blue eyes peering out from under the rim of his beaten, dusty Atlanta Braves hat. His fishing license was constantly attached to the hat with a safety pin whether he was fishing or gardening. My cousin Jamie had given the hat to him, and I can't remember ever seeing him without it on. It was one of the only presents he had ever kept. His typical response to gifts was always something like:

"What the hell did you buy this for?"

Not because he didn't appreciate them, but because he knew the money could have bought something for somebody else. When my Dad refuses to serve himself first at the dinner table, which I think is polite, my mother disdainfully says, "You're just like your father."

I remember lying on the swing as my grandfather sang, looking up at his eyes, wondering how they could be so blue. My brother, Justin, has those same eyes, even bluer than my father's. Grandpap's left eye was so blue that it was almost white. He had gone to the eye doctor once for a routine cataract surgery, and the surgeon made a mistake, detaching his retina and leaving him with a mottled eye. Even as a child, I always found it unbelievably beautiful.

My grandfather kept a batch of flowers growing inside of a tire that sat in front of the porch. The flowers hugged a statue of Jesus that Grandpap had placed in the center. When people ask me the first thing I remember about my grandfather, I tell them he was a Christian man. I tell them he really got Christianity - maybe because he didn't grow up in the church. Maybe because his Mom died when he was eight years old and he only made it to sixth grade after repeating every grade twice, and still managed to lead an exemplary life. One Sunday, when my father was about seventeen, my grandfather decided to go to Mass with the rest of his family, and he never stopped going back.

Inside the little porch, behind the swing, was a giant, black oil barrel. It was old and rusty, and always full of rainwater. My grandfather would use this water on his garden. He never liked to waste anything, so instead of turning on the hose, he'd take a little bucket

and dip it in the big barrel, watering his flowers with rain. I always thought this practice was one of holiest things about him, and I think God noticed. I think that's why his flowers were so alive, his tomatoes so red, so massive.

The side of my grandparents' house was lined with sunflowers and marigolds. When my mother plants flowers outside of our house in the spring, sometimes I hear her talk to him, and I wonder if he hears her.

I think the reason that I remember the bench swing so vividly is because that's where I watched my grandfather. Where I watched him live and move, whistle and wait, sing and plant, laugh and grow older.

The porch and the swing were old and wise to me, like my grandparents. I felt safe on the wooden swing, safer than I have felt for most of my life, passing in and out of sleep as my grandfather hummed. I remember the wind chime ringing softly as the breeze touched it and the bench rocking slowly back and forth. Sometimes Grandma would sit in the rickety kitchen chair across from the swing, drinking lemonade. The cushion on the swing was weathered and worn, and every time I stretched out on it, I began to drift off to sleep. I was usually awakened by warbled music coming from the ice cream truck at mid-day. I'd jump off the swing, run to the bottom of the stairs, and wait there with a quarter.

When I slept at my grandparents' house as a child, I woke up to the sound of a rooster, not an alarm clock. Sometimes I would spend early mornings and afternoons on the swing just sitting with my grandfather, holding his rough, dry, beautiful hands. He did then and still feels to me like a saint, but an accessible one, without all the images of halos and gold.

He worked in the coal mine for eleven years and in the steel mill for twelve years. One day, he got steel in his eye at work, and had to take a few weeks off. When he returned, he had to have a routine physical. The doctor told him that he had basically survived a silent heart attack and had kept on working. The majority of his arterial passages were blocked. That day, the doctor told him he couldn't work anymore, and that he would have to go on disability, something my grandfather found shameful. My father remembers that day because he was there with him at the appointment. After hearing what the doctor said, Grandpap walked outside of the office, sat down on the front steps of the building, and wept into his hands.

My grandfather always carried a walking stick, since loose dogs were abundant on Crescent. He used to walk up to his garden at the top of the backyard, up another steep hill. I never saw that garden, which my father says was about the size of a football field, since by the time I was old enough to remember, my grandfather couldn't walk up and down that hill very often anymore. He used to grow tomatoes, lettuce, onions, peppers, and corn up on that hill. After the doctor told him he could no longer work, he started collecting aluminum cans as a hobby, exchanging them for money. He put every cent from those cans into the poor box after Mass.

When I was eleven years old, my grandfather started getting chest pains in his heart, and finally decided to go to back to the hospital. He had always been stubborn about seeing a doctor. When he arrived, the doctors realized his arteries were 97% blocked. He had a choice: he could have an operation that day, or he would probably die in a few weeks. My father walked up to the room where my grandfather was laying in bed and asked him if he would like to try the operation. He only nodded his head to indicate a "yes,"

since he was hooked up to several machines. The doctors said it was a miracle he had lived with his condition so long.

My grandfather was seventy-two years old, and he died on the operating table that day. When my father came home from the hospital to tell us the news, I didn't really understand. It was like the power had gone out while I was alone in the dark.

"You mean I won't see Grandpap anymore?" my little brother, Justin, asked.

"Not for a little while," my Dad said as his voice broke. He sat down on the bed with my Mom, my brother, and I. We all cried for a while, then.

My grandfather's swing is where I began to dream. It is where I learned how beautiful the state between sleep and waking is, where I learned how to sing, how to whistle, and when to listen to the breeze. By watching my grandfather from that swing, I learned that loving God means loving the earth and other people.

I learned how to make flowers when all you have is dirt.

Sometimes when I dream, I'm on the swing with my grandfather, singing, and as we get up to take a walk I see a path forming in the grass before us. He takes his walking stick in one hand and my hand in his other, leading me towards a row of tall, golden sunflowers, blooming into bright light.