GOODBYE, GROSSMÜTTER

Grandmother began talking to spirits after Grandfather died. She spoke to them in her native tongue, a mix of German, Hungarian and Croatian. The conversations sounded to me argumentative and filled with passion and I assumed she was railing with Grandfather or simply talking to herself about her lot in life. I hesitated to interrupt.

One afternoon as I sat reading at the kitchen table I overheard her shouting louder than usual in the living room as though distressed and called out to her, "Grandmother, are you okay? Do you need some help?"

"Nein," she answered. "I am talking with people from der Old Country."

When she spoke to the rest of us day to day, she added to her mix of languages with what I came to call Low Missourian. This was after a linguistics class in graduate school where I learned the word *sprachgefühl (a feeling for language)* and found I had a finely tuned ear for dialects and pigeon English. Grandmother's English was fine when she wanted it to be. In all cases she rolled her r's. She was a petite pretty old woman who sometimes could shock me by blurting out a crude word or expression.

I was eleven years old. That was when I first took turns sitting with Grandmother after school until Aunt Ann came home from work at the IRS. This is how I learned to revere the old.

A neighbor, Mrs. Heisburger, watched her after Aunt Ann went to work at six in the morning. Aunt Ann had divorced her alcoholic husband early in their marriage and, bound by Roman Catholic custom, remained single thereafter. Her vocation, my aunt said, was to care for her parents. Even upon hearing her story as a younger boy who was just discovering the world I felt sad for her. Why? I thought. Why miss out based on life because of religious bullshit?

My mother cared for Grandmother after Mrs. Heisburger fed her a lunch of soup or stew, bread and wine. Grandmother napped then in a chair in front of the living room window, her daily routine after Grandfather died.

In summer, the living room window was shaded by lace curtains and an adolescent maple tree that covered the grass with the ragged patterns of its leaves. In winter, Grandmother insisted that the lace curtains remain open until after dark. The

maple tree branches that time of year were chocolate brown and barren. She wanted as much natural light on her face on the gray days as she could have. I think the view, as stark as it was, served as a companion to her in her loneliness and shared its grim solace for loss.

Grandmother's name was Paulina, after the apostle, Paul. Like Paul, she was wise in many ways; like Paul too, I found as I moved towards manhood in the late 1950's, unwise in others. Myself, I have never been attracted by denial or guilt. I do not believe in wearing hair shirts and have no intention of sparing myself any joy the world has to offer.

After school, I walked to her tiny bungalow on Liberty Street from the public bus stop eight blocks away. My mother kissed Grandmother on the cheek and left to prepare dinner for the family. Auntie Annie came home at 6:30 p.m., depending on the weather and the bus service from downtown.

The kids on the block called Grandmother the "old German lady." Before Grandfather died and she was still able, she served the neighborhood children homemade oatmeal applesauce-raisin cookies at the kitchen stoop.

"Hello, granny," the neighborhood children shouted and giggled through the screen of the kitchen door. "We smell cookies."

"Okay, mein kinderkind," she said smiling in the kindly way of someone who had known hunger, opening the door wide enough to hold forth her colorful china platter from the Old Country. "Have some."

One of my chores was to help Grandmother into the bathroom. After Grandfather preceded her into the afterlife and she talked to his spirit, she shriveled into a thin, white haired urchin of a lady in a tattered robe sprinkled with pink daisies and buttoned down with a white lace collar. I could almost encircle her biceps between my thumb and forefinger. She complained each time I walked her to the toilet.

"For godsakes, Villiam, I fear you are in for a stinker," she complained each time.

"It's okay, Grandmother."

"Ach, nein. My grandson takes me to the potty."

I sat on the edge of the tub propping her up with my hand against her shoulder. The bathroom had a frosted window. I could see sunlight but not the backyard where it

faced. During these moments, I cracked it open, summer and winter, to save Grandmother further embarrassment.

“For godsakes, what have I come to?" she often complained.   "I can’t take a crrrap without my grandson watching me, smelling me on the toilet.”

“Forget me, Grandmother," I told her. "Pretend I ‘m not here."

When she was finished, I offered her a washcloth with soap, another for rinse and a dry hand towel.

“Oh, my got in himmel, Franz,” she said to my Grandfather’s spirit. “What has become of us, we two.”

By the time I reached her house and after my mother left, she wanted to hear the details of how I spent the day and, when I became a teenager, about my girlfriends. I thought she might be getting a little nutty from old age.   She often asked me for more detail than I wanted to give her. Even so, I knew she would eye me in her peculiar way if she thought I was holding back. I was now the one to be embarrassed.

I was enchanted by a girl from the public school down the street, perhaps because public school girls kissed more freely than the girls at my Catholic school and they let us feel them up.

One afternoon Grandmother asked, “Villiam, do you kiss her?”

“Yes, Grandmother.”

“Und, does she let you inside her blouse?"

“Yes, Grandmother.

She covered her mouth to hide a grin.

“Just like Franz,” she grinned proudly, I thought, in the direction of the spirits. “With your fingers or your lips?”

I began to sweat and was silent a moment. I couldn't believe her question, such a private one coming from an old German lady.

“My fingertips.”

“Does she stiffen to your touch?”

Again, blushing and sweating, I said:

“Yes, Grandmother.”

I felt the perspiration running down my neck from behind my ears and wanted to run away. I should probably have said no and taken my chances.

"Und below?"

I bowed my head.

"Yes, Grandmother."

She made a grim face.

"Ach nein, grandson. You do not want to put a young girl through all the pain and suffering. She vill have no friends. Believe me, you do not want a family at such a young age."

"She's not a young girl, Grandmother," I insisted. "She's two years older than I am." I was fourteen then.

"Even so. She might have a veekness. What is her name?"

"Charlene."

"Aha! I knew it. Der name of an slut."

She reflected, looking up to the ceiling.

"Pretty?" she asked.

"Well, sort of."

"Her family. Do they have some money?"

"A little. They work for the government."

"And the mother?"

"She drinks a lot of highballs in the evening."

"Does she cavort?"

"I don't know. I don't think she has time to."

"Humm. Still not a good sign. I mean to say again the girl might have a veekness."

I changed the subject. I was writing an essay on refugees, part of a history class. I was serious about my essay due to the Hungarian Revolution in 1957. We professed to be Germans from Austria during the Austria Hungarian Empire but there was also a hint in family conversations that we were more Hungarian than German. I felt a romantic connection to the young people in the revolution. I read my essay to her. She closed her eyes and listened intently without interrupting. She frowned and sighed.

“I will tell you one day what the world must know about refugees. I will tell you one day the truth about the Old Country.”

She never did.

“Villiam,” she said changing the subject. “I know one thing. When my hands are cold and sweaty I am having a blude pressure. I will have a glass of red wine.”

Grandmother listened to the St. Louis Cardinals baseball games on her dusty radio, the same radio where we listened in our childhood years to “The Shadow Knows,” and “Fibber McGee and Molly,” sitting at grandfather’s feet while he nodded on and off. After Grandfather died, Grandmother had Aunt Ann pile photograph albums on the small ornate coffee table in the living room. While she listened to the game and dozed, I sorted through the albums. From this I learned we can know old people more deeply by looking at the photographs taken of them in their youth.

In one black and white photograph Grandfather is standing in a wheat field just before harvest, probably somewhere in Austria, next to a young woman dressed in a long-sleeved white blouse buttoned at the neck and a straight white skirt down to her ankles. There are slivers of clouds behind her against the mountains. She is not looking at the camera but into the distance, her hair pulled back into a bun, her unblemished skin shaded, a longing expression in her eyes. No doubt the young woman is Pauline, grandfather’s wife or wife to be.

One of Grandfather’s photographs was taken with a group of men standing in a semicircle in front of a red brick bungalow with a stone porch that appears to be in Kansas City, Missouri where we lived. They are dressed alike in gray trousers and white shirts, the trousers held up by suspenders. Their mustaches are thick and dark and their look is defiant. Grandfather thrusts out his barrel chest, looking intense and determined. We called him the “Bull of Steinberg,” after the village where he was born. He was a justified draft dodger, escaping from Austria to avoid a lifetime of military duty under Kaiser Wilhelm in 1903. The daily wage fed to cannon fodder in those days was a small flagon of wine and a loaf of hard crusted bread. After escaping to America he drove a tea wagon pulled by a horse in an older section of Kansas City where he and Grandmother settled.

It is told that his children – my father and my aunts, Ann, Martha

and Elizabeth – when they reached high school age, implored him to shave his bold mustache because their classmates laughed at them for being the children of immigrants. Reluctantly, one day when Aunt Martha came home from school weeping at such an insult, Grandfather stood up from his worn massive easy chair and strode directly into the bathroom to shave it off. Afterwards, in the telling of the family legend, he became silent and moody for having been shorn of his manhood. Later that night he stumbled home drunk from a neighborhood tavern.

There was another story of humiliation. As he was loading his wagon at the warehouse one of the men who worked there offered him some chewing gum. It was the first kind gesture they made to him, an immigrant who still spoke poor English and dressed in Old Country work clothes. Unknown to him, they had fed him laxative gum and halfway through his route he messed his pants. Not knowing what to do he hurried back to the warehouse to park the wagon and was met by the same crowd of workers who had tricked him, laughing and pointing. When his children found out they too laughed and he stormed out the front door not to return until just before bedtime. He stood there in a drunken rage and pointed a thick finger at his foolish family and shouted:

"If you ever laugh at me again, I will throw you naked out onto the street and will never let you back into this house!"

He shouted these words in a voice his children had never heard from him and shivered at the memory of the sound. From then on they either avoided him or spoke to him only in quiet reverence.

As for Grandmother, she was jealous of other women. She sewed cutoff shorts for grandfather to wear in his old age in the humid summers of Missouri but insisted he stay in the backyard so women passing by could not look at his sturdy, handsome legs. She kept looking out windows to see where he was. Grandfather sometimes strayed into the front yard without her knowledge to water the flowers. That seemed his only physical activity, watering flowers with a hose, pinching the hose to make a spray. He took his time at it.

I was there when she caught him at his mischief. She yelled through the kitchen door screen in their native language.

“Franz, what are you doing? That is verboten. Strrrictly verboten,” she shouted, shaking her finger and rolling her r’s more roughly than usual.

Grandfather, who may or may not have been hard of hearing, pretended not to hear her and kept watering the flowers. After she closed the kitchen door, I saw him laughing to himself, gesturing to unseen people around him. She would not speak to him for the rest of the afternoon. To her, it was as though he was standing naked, mocking her, watering the flowers and looking around for an audience, laughing to the neighborhood, though there was no one in the neighborhood outdoors.

I cut my grandparent’s lawn in the summer and shoveled their sidewalk in winter. Grandmother rewarded me with lunches of German specialties. Until she was in her seventies, she brewed her own beer in large crocks Grandfather smuggled from the Old Country. She also used the crocks to ferment sauerkraut. When the grapes at the farmer’s market were to her liking she made wine. The crocks were decorated with bas-reliefs of peasants romping at festivals, lifting their Steiners, men courting women, revelers playing mandolins and flutes. Today, she might have gone to jail for pouring me a large beer with my lunch. I often stumbled home afterwards. My older brother, Francis, claims her beer must have been twenty proof.

Her house smelled of bread baking in an old-fashioned oven and I loved to smear chunks of her bread with freshly churned butter from Bicklemeiers, the local Germany grocery, and watch it melt over the crusts onto my plate. The cold beer perfectly complemented a braunschweiger sandwich with sliced sweet onions, thick cheese and hot mustard. In the winter when I finished shoveling the walk she spoke to me softly through the kitchen door, “Come in, grandson, come in from der cold. Have some soup, have some vine.”

She sometimes served me liver dumplings in a delicious chicken and onion broth, more bread and her own recipe of headcheese in a turkey broth gelatin. From her I learned not to follow recipes. Like her, I invented my own as I cooked.

Before my mother stopped having children (she produced eleven; two of them died) she and Grandmother cried together each time she announced another pregnancy. “Marie, what will you do?” Grandmother cried. Then she would turn to my father with fierce, bitter eyes.

“Henry, for crying out loud, tie it in a knot.”

“Mother, please. Not in front of the children,” he said.

I could tell Grandfather didn't like my father. He deliberately needled him. By then, Grandfather seemed to have descended into total goofiness. His teeth were black nubs and he laughed to himself at whatever was said. He suddenly switched from Grandmother's beer to Budweiser. He sat much of the day in his chair sipping from a single giant-sized Budweiser can and smoking Lucky Strikes. I couldn’t tell if he was goofy and deaf or just pretending. On Francis’s sixteenth birthday, candles lit on the cake my mother baked, he leaned forward and asked him out of nowhere:

“How many birthdays, grandson?”

“Sixteen, Grandfather.”

“Aha! Old enough to get your veenie vet,” he laughed to one side and then to us.

“Dad, please,” my father stomped his foot. “Not in front of the children.”

Grandfather insisted that the end of his fields in the Old Country were so long they stretched over the horizon.

“Ach Franz, you stinker, you,” Grandmother laughed. “Ha! Ha! But they were only three feet. Ha! Ha!”

I was in my sixties before I learned that Grandfather had been quite an exceptional young man. Why no one ever discussed his small but important achievements puzzled me. An old document surfaced in our family's belated search for our history. It said he spoke five languages, not only high and low German, but Serbian, Croatian, Hungarian and passable English. People in our ethnic neighborhood brought him letters and legal documents for translation. The document about him was in the form of a memorandum. It said he was one of the four founders of the local Catholic church, in its day one of the better known Catholic churches in the city. I suspected there was more to him than the old timers wanted to tell. The mystery of his life in the Old Country remained a secret.

Once I made the mistake of asking Grandmother about his youth. She scowled and stiffened a bit. "Ach but Villiam, you is a strange one. You see things that isn't there." I don't know what she thought I had seen or heard about Grandfather — gossip I suppose --but her strange distant look of foreboding frightened me.

When I was about five years old — I remember the time period exactly because that was when I was enrolled in first grade — my father cracked. He paced the house, hand to forehead. I didn't realize he had cracked until I was old enough to babysit for Grandmother. It might have been money troubles from having too many children but he worried about everything. He always bragged he wanted to have twelve apostles, all of them saints. Yet, when he was up to five children, he worried out loud that he couldn't make the house payments. Every time we children talked back to him he stormed six blocks to the church to cry on the monsignor's shoulder. The monsignor was a crabby old man who did not like children so he counseled my father to beat us more often. The doctor at the assisted living center where my father lived in his final days told us he was a non-medicated manic-depressive. To us, he was just a mean and crazy. In my older years I have learned about people who have broken brains. I have learned that my father and those like him are just sick people who come to believe they have nowhere to turn.

My father fought with everyone. He fought with Aunt Ann and Aunt Martha. He fought with Grandfather and Grandmother. He only had a few friends. Most people seemed not to like him. They hurried off when they saw him coming.

He called me, "that brat," because my mother often tried to shield me from him when he attacked me. He was in the Pacific when I was born and did not see me until I was almost a year and a half old. My mother told me I screamed whenever he came near me and would not let him hold me for several months after his return. On one occasion he tossed me so hard back into the baby bed I caught a blue knot on my forehead causing the two of them to fight for days before they reconciled.

Grandmother called him an old grrrouch, rolling her r's more than usual. The older I was, the angrier he became. He chased me through the house to catch and beat me. When he finally cornered me, he shouted and pushed and pummeled me with his fists. I held up my arms to deflect his blows and shouted, "You're crazy! Stop it! You're crazy!" which angered him all the more. What he hated the most was when he spotted me reading in the middle of the day. He punished me if I did not get all A's on my report card but he couldn't stand to see me sitting on the living room couch reading a novel rather than a school book. He quickly found a chore for me to do outside, raking our

small yard again and again, polishing the dining room floor or sweeping the last of the snow off the sidewalk.

Unlike many of the men in our low income neighborhood, he had never been in combat. After a few years aboard ship, he was assigned to a navy post office in San Francisco. Most of my friend's fathers suffered from shell shock and often drank until they passed out. I never understood how they could afford to live in their small poorly painted bungalows. Some of their wives met several afternoons a week after the housework was finished and they got drunk too. I could hear them cackling together and shouting insults back and forth about their husbands. Their kids invited me into their kitchens now and then and I was disgusted by the stacks of dirty dishes and foul odors rising out of the unkempt sinks and piled trash.

I say these men suffered from shell shock but I was never really sure. I only know that whenever I saw them their hands were shaking and their faces twitching. When my father encountered one of them after church or at the grocery store he would end the conversation by patting them on the shoulder and promise to pray for them. When they were out of earshot, he would turn to me with a grim expression and mutter, "Shell shock from the war."

Arguing, quarreling, debating – my father with Aunt Annie, Aunt Annie with Aunt Martha, my father with Aunt Martha, Aunt Elizabeth — ran, I decided, through the family genes. During these blowups Grandmother and my mother would sit mournfully, wistfully, in silence as the rest of the family sniped at one another. Through the chaos Grandfather sat quietly sipping from his ever-present oversized Budweiser can, smoking Lucky Strikes, and gazing into the smoke with what I thought was a slightly knowing smile as he exhaled. Supposedly deaf, he could have been thinking anything. I figured he was only amused over the cantankerous nature of his family.

After Grandfather died, my father and his three other sisters bickered endlessly over his intention to will the house to Aunt Ann as a reward for living with and caring for them. Aunt Ann was as surprised as anyone when the gift was made known. The only sibling who remained silent was Elizabeth. She had married into a wealthy family and lived at a distance and kept repeating, "I could care less. I could care less."

“Come with me, Marie, onto the porch,” Grandmother would say to my mother when the endless debates began. “Come with me, grandson, out of all this commotion.” She shuffled onto the small screened in porch with a bent mouth.

“Franz," she said, looking up to grandfather's spirit. "Listen!" she would say, pointing to the living room. "Not even cold in the ground and already dividing our furniture, our dishes, my mother’s broaches, her necklesses."

She turned to my mother and me.

"Let us go to the porch mein kinderkind and swing. I have no peace in life. I cannot rest a moment without my own children fighting over our remainders."

Grandmother's mother — great-grandmother, Mara — presented another family war zone. At sometime in her childhood a relative visiting from Germany had confided to Aunt Annie that Mara was a "chew" who had converted to Catholicism to avoid detection during the pogroms and to find acceptance in her husband's family. And looking at photographs of my father and my aunts as small children I came to a similar conclusion before I ever heard the rumor. I learned later that many Eastern Europeans had dark complexions but it seemed to me that my father and his sisters also seemed to have the stereotypical nose that is seen in anti-Semetic cartoons about Jewish people and an expression in their eyes that spoke of having witnessed a catastrophe.

"She was not a Jew. We have no Jews in our family," my father insisted.

"Oh, yes she was," Aunt Anne stood firm, wagging her head back and forth self-righteously. "Like it or not."

Despite her conviction, Aunt Ann joined my father in making fun of Jews. They would hold their noses, say "Oi yoi yoi," and then laugh as though it was the funniest sound they had ever heard. Joked about black people too. I am unable to repeat those horrible words and jokes to others. Making fun of people in that way has never seemed humorous to me. It makes me sad.

At age eleven, in addition to shoveling snow, cutting grass and running errands for old people, I began to caddy at one of the wealthier golf courses in the city. My father could not control me as much. I hid part of my earnings. I could pretend to be at the golf course waiting for a loop when I was out exploring the city on my own. By the age of fourteen I had enough money hidden away that I could buy a few items for myself.

He questioned me about them. How could I afford Ivy League slacks, be the first kid on the block to buy the Elvis Presley Forty-Five record, "Don't Be Cruel"? My Bermuda shorts? Did I steal them?

"Tell me the truth, damn you!" he shouted, shaking me when I swore it was with my own money.

I smiled to myself. I had learned to lie even before then at an early age. That was the only way I could dodge my father's craziness. I hid my money in a plain white envelope under the tray in the top drawer of the buffet in the dining room where he kept his pocket change in a wooden tray. Anyone could have spotted the envelope if they had lifted the tray and opened it. Bright as a white cloud against a blue sky. My stack of dollar bills converted by then into tens and twenties were hidden uncovered in an envelope under his pocket change! Ha! Ha! Good for me! A little irony, a little justice in my life.

He seemed to be the most angry over my Ivy League slacks.

"What's a matter? The clothes we buy you not good enough? Do you have to be a big shot and show off?"

"These are the style now," I told him.

"Style? We are not fancy-dancy. We are peasants from the Old Country. I've been thinking too. How you dress. You're not going queer on me on top of it all, are you? Are you?" he said, jabbing me in the chest with his index finger. "Are you a queer?'

"No, Dad. I am not a queer. I like girls and girls like me."

"Then why do you want to dress up like a queer?"

"Ivy League slacks do not a queer make," I said calmly. "It's what kids wear now. To dances and such."

"Then tell me this. Why do I always see you hanging around with Keven LeBlank? Kevin LeBlank's a queer isn't he? Isn't he?"

"No."

Kevin LeBlank was as queer as queer gets. An obvious swish. We started walking to grade school together because he lived four doors down and liked to hang out with us. Later we rode the bus together to high school. My friends liked him as much as

I did and they were otherwise a heartless bunch. I wasn't about to snitch on him. Knowing my father, the self-righteous prick would have called Kevin's father and bawled him out for raising a queer and dirtying the neighborhood with his filth. I don't think Kevin even knew much about gay sex and less about getting any. Back then being a queer was the worst thing you could be. You could rob your mother; you could shoot a policeman. But one thing you could not do was be a queer or be thought of as a homo or a pervert.

My father stuck his head in my face. He said:

"He acts like one. His voice is high and I used to see him skipping along with the girls on the way to school. He walks funny. He wears silk bandanas and ribbon bracelets. Limp wrists." My father mocked him. "All those frills on his shoes instead of regular shoe laces. Cries like a sissy. Afraid to fight. Let's everyone push him around. Hangs out with the girls and kisses their ass."

"Kevin's Kevin."

"A queer, eh? Do you ever let him, you know…" He wouldn't say the words in front of my mother.

"No," I said. "I wouldn't like it."

"Don't you ever let me catch you," he said, limping his wrist, stomping out of the room. "Homosex'als lose their souls and are doomed to hellfire."

Grandmother, too, was puzzled by my Ivy League slacks.

"Villiam, what is this? A belt in the back? How will you hold up your britches?"

She was shocked too when I arrived one hot summer day to cut the grass in Bermuda shorts and long socks. She stared at me in silence through the kitchen screen door for a long time, then said:

"For gotsakes, Villiam. You looks like a sissy."

In the summers while Grandmother napped, I went down to the basement to keep cool. I sat on an old wobbly wooden chair spotted with faded bird droppings that my grandfather had kept in the backyard. I inhaled the aromas of beer, sauerkraut and rhubarb fermenting in crocks. The upstairs smelled of dying; the basement of another time I was not part of. The sweet, musty smell of the basement reminded me of Grandmother's photograph as a young woman in the wheat fields of Austria.

As she aged, Grandmother spent more time in her chair looking up into the maple tree. She protested less when I took her to the bathroom. She only ate small portions of her lunch. Broth, toast and a little wine.

"Franz," she said to my Grandfather's spirit in a more heavily accented voice. "We had such beautiful trees over there. And der pines. Der mountains."

My father came home angry one night after work and for no reason attacked me for reading a book while my mother was setting the dinner table. We had a fistfight. He shook me and flung me against the living room wall. That was it. We fought through the house knocking lamps off tables. We rattled the plates in the dining room buffet cabinet. In the kitchen our ruckus jarred the light fixture loose and it shattered in tiny crystals on the floor. My mother begged us to stopped. When he cornered me between the refrigerator and the basement door I waited for an opening and swung as hard as I could, hoping to knock out some teeth, busting his lip instead. I hit him hard in the eye. He pulled me away and we wrestled back through the dining room. I lifted him by his shirt collar and clocked him on the side of his nose, knocking him backwards onto the living room couch. He lay for a moment covering his face with both hands. The couch looked like a murder.

I turned and ran through the kitchen and out through the sunroom, a back porch my father glassed in with old storm windows to beat back the swirling storms from the Kansas plains that spun into Missouri. It was dark and I wandered through the neighborhood for hours not knowing what to do next. I was too young at fourteen to live on my own. My friend's parents, even knowing about my father's outbursts, might have let me stay the night but they would have called him early the next morning. During my long walk I kept saying to myself that all I wanted was just to finish high school, get a job, have a normal family, live alone in an apartment and be the hell out of there. I just wanted a little peace from that madman.

That first night I slept on what we called "the bum's bench" in the park down the hill. The temperature was still cool and not yet Missouri humid. The bench was under a large oak tree. I was comforted by the swaying of the branches and stirring of the leaves. The bench was made with wooden slats. I found them comfortable enough and slept until the morning light woke me. The overhang of the tree kept me dry from the heavy dew.

I decided to stop by Kevin's house but no one was home. There was a glider on the front porch. I thought I might use it later as a bed after lights out at his house. I walked from there to the golf course and made seven dollars carrying doubles in a foursome of men I had caddied for in the past. They liked me and that was a good tip. Called me eagle eye because I never lost a ball. By the end of the day I was hot, sweaty and feeling dusty and gritty. Tired too and a little afraid. I didn't know what to do next and worried about how my mother was feeling with all the chaos and upset. After buying a hamburger at Zesto's and a quart of watered down beer from the back door of Dirty George's Tavern on the Kansas side, then wandering the streets for several hours, I decided I might as well give in and go face my destiny. Just before dawn I climbed back into our house through a downstairs window. This was a window I kept open for emergencies with a sliver of wood. I pulled myself through it and into the bed I shared with Francis who rolled over and kneed me in the back from his troubled sleep with garbled words of, I am sure, some meaning to him, but of none to me.

Grandmother worried about Francis and I sleeping in the same bed.

"Does you touch one another, grandson?"

"No, Grandmother."

"Goot. Because that would be nasty," she liked to warn us.

Francis told me later in life that my father had repeatedly wailed to my mother, "Marie, my own son hit me." He then left the house for the church to tattle on me to the monsignor. I told Francis my father was a coward and Francis berated me for calling our father a coward, our own father, how did I know, and how could I? How could I blaspheme him? I didn't care. I stuck with my belief.

A man who beats his children then bawls about it when they smack him back to protect themselves is a coward. I learned about cowards later when I was firing at North Vietnamese soldiers inside Cambodia. Some men in my platoon slunk down and did not fire. They did not want to be spotted and shot at. They caused me to think of my father when he backed me into a corner in the kitchen and I battered him, his arms crossed over his face, battered him with my fists again and again, hoping to break his teeth. I remembered looking down at him on the couch, smiling cruelly, happy that I had taken

him down. This is how I learned that I too could be a bully. I did not want to end up like him and I regretted the glee I felt at that moment.

I also learned Grandmother was already asleep during the incident so my father sought sympathy from Aunt Ann but she didn't want to hear of it and locked herself in her bedroom until he left her alone. Francis confided that my father spent two hours the next morning showing his wounds to Grandmother, weeping, whining and complaining that I caused him to be late for work.

After I returned home and snuck back into my bed I slept and didn’t wake until early afternoon. It was the middle of June on a lovely Saturday morning, a fine fresh breeze lightly swirling the homemade white cotton curtains. The house was empty, mother up the hill with Grandmother, father back to the rectory of the church to weep and whine to the monsignor about his bad children, Francis off to caddy and my three sisters going about their usual summer play with friends, the morning dishes done, the furniture dusted. There was an old bath towel hiding the blood on the couch and a smaller one on the carpet.

I stared at the ceiling. I still hadn’t figured out my fate. My summer schedule with Grandmother that year was Tuesdays and Thursdays so I could be free to caddy, do yard work and earn money for my tuition at the Catholic high school. Being Saturday, I decided to walk up to Grandmother’s house to talk over my situation with Aunt Ann, a black eye still puffing out on the left side of my face, my own fat busted lip. Grandmother was napping on the old couch, my mother napping too, her head laying against Grandmother's shoulder. Aunt Ann was gone, her day to go grocery shopping at Bicklemeier's. I walked through the neighborhood looking for Kevin, for anyone to talk to. Finding no one I returned to sneak into the house to retrieve "The Sun Also Rises," by Ernest Hemingway so I could pass the time while I hid swaying and reading in the leafy branches of the large box elder tree in the backyard.   No one could see me there.

As the days passed, I didn’t know what to expect in the way of retaliation and punishment: whether no evening meal, a pounding, to be grabbed and shaken and thrown against walls. I quickly discovered my punishment was not to be physical or to deprive me of the few nights a week I was allowed to be out with my school friends. I began to come and go as I pleased.

Instead my punishment was silence. My mother no longer looked at me affectionately. I had unwittingly achieved the status of a man. My father and I passed each other as strangers do on the street, without words, without eye to eye, lost in our own stories.

That summer Francis caddied and worked in a deli slicing meat to save money for his first year in the seminary. My three little sisters seemed not to know one thing about the scene my father had caused. They played like the sprites they always were. My younger brothers didn't seem to know what to say and simply looked at me with a confused look of awe. After the brawl with my father, it was understood that I should eat alone on the sun porch. In effect, I had been banished. I was an outcast.

The banishment was a relief to me. From the sun porch at suppertime I could hear my father shouting at the others, correcting, complaining. Sitting there alone, I felt liberated from his madness. During my turns at washing the dishes, sweeping the sidewalk, raking the yard, I worked silently, mechanically, keeping to myself.

There was a sting, though, to my banishment. I lost my best friend. I lost Grandmother. She no longer was my ally. She only talked to me about her necessities.

"Grandson. I need to go to the toilet."

"Grandson, a glass of water."

"Grandson, a glass of vine."

No "Villiam" in her words to me. No jokes. No stories. No vine. No brew. No soup. No oatmeal-applesauce-raisin cookies.

She spoke only to grandfather's spirit in the maple tree in her own language.

"Franz, what has become of us? What will we do, after all?"

And often:

"Franz, vee could zee the veelds for miles. The mule? How long did he liff? The cows?"

One afternoon as I sorted through a photograph album on the divan and watched her slumped in her chair by the window, she woke suddenly and erupted into a tirade with the spirits. When she finished, she looked skyward in a quiet daze. As suddenly, she raised up and yanked her head back at me with the greenish hue of bile on her lips,

leaned sideways in her chair, raised a crooked index finger sharply, shook it at me and shouted:

“And you! Grandson. Swine! A son must never strrrike his father. Never! He once held you in his arms. He tooks you by der hand. He led you into the wheat fields. You had you on purpose. Yet, you strrruck him! You swine! You ungrateful dog! Your own father. He gave to you his seed, the seed of life. Mien own son you hit! Mein kinderkind. Mein boy!”

She sank down, exhausted. In the weeks to come she stopped eating and grew so weak and frail she was taken by ambulance to the hospital. AuntiAnn sat by her side. Aunt Martha visited once a day. Francis also. Elizabeth asked to be telephoned if Grandmother's condition worsened.

I have never been one to sit long by the hospital bed of a dying person. "Hello, goodbye. How you doing?" as little as that. I have no patience in sitting still. I see little value in watching someone die unless they are awake and are afraid or need comfort. In that case, I have no problem holding their hand or cuddling with them.

But Grandmother was not like that. She would take a kiss on the cheek but not a hug. She turned herself aside. Her face against the pillow was no longer the face of the merry old lady who served me a homebrew or a platter of sauerkraut, sausages and baby red potatoes or who handed out oatmeal-applesauce-raisin cookies to kids in the neighborhood. The blankets hid her puny bones; her body curled into a question mark. I put my hand within hers. It felt cold and moist. I thought about what it must feel like to die into the middle of the day with sunshine coming onto the bed through the window at four stories high in a blank hospital room with no maple tree, no wheat fields, no Franz, no mule, no cows.

On the final day of my visits with her, she may have sensed my restlessness. Her room smelled strongly of the brown urine in the bag hanging at the bottom of her bed. I was itching to see Charlene. Both her parents worked during the day at the Federal Building so their hours were set. They were regular in their habits, not parking in front of their house until around six o’clock in the evening. I turned fifteen that summer and knew where to buy rubbers. I loved being in the ambiance of Charlene's bedroom. It was immaculate yet cozy and filled with softness, a soft mattress, an old comforter, a chair

with an ottoman. She gave off the sharp tingling smell of the graphite in a lead pencil, a scent I relish to this day. Laying my head between the warm pillows of her breasts was to me being in the heaven pictured on one of the stained glass windows at our neighborhood church, full of butterflies and green hillocks covered with delicate flowers and sun rays.

I was not caddying that particular day, a Monday when the golf course was closed for maintenance. Charlene and I would have the afternoon alone to cuddle naked together and experience the amazement of the best thing this world has to offer. I could count on leaving her house safely by five-thirty. She was not a slut. I don't know what a slut is. Charlene was Charlene. That's how I viewed her. She was just a person like me, with likes and dislikes, feelings and wants. We didn't invent this mess. We just get to live in it. To me, people are people. People want to have lovers. They just want to have fun. That was my take on being with Charlene. Her parents kept a loose collection of rubbers in the top drawer of one of their bedside tables and refilled them often. Charlene simply collected a few before I showed up. Her parents never said anything about missing them.

I sat beside grandmother, impatient. She was dozing again.

“Grandmother,” I said. “I am going to leave now. I will visit you again tomorrow.”

After all, she was out of it anyway, I figured. She wouldn't know me from Francis or from the janitor.

Grandmother struggled under her sheets and blankets. She babbled.

“Mama? Mama?” she babbled.

She didn’t know me. I wasn’t her friend anymore.

“Mama? Mama?”

“Grandmother, I am leaving you now," I said. "The nurses will take care of you. You don’t need to get up to go to the toilet anymore. You have a catheter in you. They will bring you a bedpan if you need one. You have a diaper on.”

Grandmother dozed. I stood up to leave. She stirred, smiled lightly, spoke in a weak whisper.

“Villiam, are you off to see that young woman?”

"Yes, Grandmother."

She dozed, turned her head to the window. I meant to leave.

"Villiam," she said softly, smiling. "Come close. Come let me see what a stinker you have become."

Grandmother's head sagged to one side.

"Villiam," she whispered so faintly I strained to hear her.

"You are wise. I know this. Your father is going nuts. He comes to my deathbed haggling, complaining..." she said rather firmly. "Oh, he did this, he did that. She did his, she said dat. Mein got in himmel."

I covered her frail hand with mine and placed it on her left breast. I felt my hand grow warm over hers. I held it there a while. She seemed to have slipped back into a relaxing sleep.

"Goodbye, grossmütter," I said, afraid she might awaken and of what her final words to me might be and left the hospital room.

There was a park on the way to Charlene's house. The day had brightened with the sun streaming through a thin layer of clouds. I took a detour on the way and sat on my favorite hillside there watching the waving of the maples with their green and reddish leaves.

I already missed Grandmother. Even though I had the jitts at her bedside, I understood my kinship with her. It was more than our friendship and intimacy. Grossmütter was "der müütterland." She was the heart of our family.

I missed Grandfather with his black nubs of teeth and foolish, goofy laughter, his ridiculously large Budweisers, his Lucky Strikes, the seductive smell of swirling tobacco smoke. He was the spirit above us. Who knows what he had to endure as a young man in the Old Country? Who knows what he saw? Who knows what he had to do just to stay alive?

I came to feel a pang for my crazy father as well. I pictured him as a small darkish boy who could not speak English well, the angst in his face in his early childhood photographs, his fear of being laughed at for looking "chewish." Auntie Ann told me he did not learn to speak English until six years old and so fell behind in school. Even into middle age his old grade school friends teased and taunted him for being small and odd.

Grandmother was wise in one way. He gave me his seed. I loved to watch my mother and father polka at the church dances. Before he cracked, I could hear them talking and laughing on the front porch swing. My mother suffered his tirades. I missed her too. She had little time for me because of my other brothers and sisters. She had little time for any of us and was distant to us all. Too many kids in one house, I figured. I didn't know her, what she was thinking, what she felt about things. But for a few years after I started grade school, she read to me for a little while in the evenings. I knew I would miss reading with my mother.

Most of all, I missed myself as I might have been as a young boy in my homeland of Austria, a young boy in the wheat fields and in the valleys between the mountains in the Old Country before the wars, working a family farm, fishing in the rivers, hunting the stag, roasting the chicken and the pig.

On that hillside in the park, I thought I had solved the family mystery: the frustration, the anger, the constant bickering, the complaining, the cruelty to one another.

We were refugees. That was it. We had been driven out. That was our problem. We were driven out of our homeland by wars. We were a family in mourning, our traditions handed down through soups, homebrews and "vines." We were among the misplaced, the lost. We might as well have been in prison, in a camp with barbed wire fencing us in.

Even before I was a conscript in the Vietnam War, I never felt safe anywhere in my life, in any place, in any building, in any country. That was our problem. War had taken our birthright, our homeland. Our youth had been stolen and it was too far away and too violent for us to reclaim. How could we? The Old Country no longer existed. It was gone. Blown to bits. And here in America we were as out of place as circus gypsies sitting in an Anglican church pew.

We missed the mountains, the air above the mountains, the freedom of roaming in the pines with our one-shot rifles, the mule, the cows, the long tall fields of wheat, its heavy golden tassels lolling in the wind.

We missed the aroma of the bread Grandmother learned to bake in the Old Country.

From my perch in the park I walked slowly under the full trees in a

fine clean-smelling breeze to Charlene's house and knocked on the back door. She smiled at my smile and let me in.