

The Water

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The car was parked. I stretched. Blinked. Grabbed my water bottle from the car door. Slid out of my seat, groaned and sidled to the front door, where Papa usually made a point of greeting me when I visited. As always, he was standing in the doorway when I arrived, so I hugged him and we squeezed hard and laughed about nothing like we always do.

Once inside the robin's egg front door I walked down the hall to Nana, and I wrapped her and the sweater she was wearing that she'd probably knit herself in my arms. She was much shorter than me, so I had to lean down into her short white hair, which seemed freshly trimmed. After releasing her and exchanging Good-to-see-ya's I wandered into the kitchen and set down my water bottle, whose location I forgot – as I always did - until I left. In her true grandmotherly way, Nana had baked in honor of the arrival of my sister, Rachel, and me, so of course I had to sample a cookie.

Eventually I'd go grab my suitcase from the car parked out in the driveway and we'd all chat about the weather and the deer over the strains of Frank Sinatra or another crooner who was *always* playing from the speakers in the living room, but whatever Nana baked always came first.

After I tore myself away from the chocolate chips and Rachel and I claimed rooms with our suitcases upstairs, the conversation turned to the water. You find out pretty soon when you visit Granbury, Texas that the thing people are most interested in talking about is the water. For most of my childhood the proud former Republic of Texas was in a dirt-cracking drought, but over the past year the sky had done nothing but rain and without warning we'd gone from too dry to too wet. Especially from Pecan Plantation, the neighborhood outside of Granbury where my grandparents' backyard extended through prickly pear and juniper to the Brazos River, I could see as clearly as a sunny day how the rain was changing things.

“Did y'all see how high the river was when you drove in?” Nana asked.

“Yeah, it's really getting up there,” I told her, and we agreed that the aging bridge that leads into Pecan Plantation – the one replaced several years ago by another built a couple

dozen feet higher – was bound to collapse at some point or another. I supposed pieces of it would just float away until it was gone, on down through the rest of the state, south of Arlington, where my grandparents met in high school, past Corsicana, where Papa was born on his family's own front porch, on to the Gulf of Mexico.

We all sat in the kitchen for lunch. I made my usual PB&J even though it wasn't a big enough meal for me, and I supplemented it by binging on Lay's potato chips and eating some of Rachel's sandwich. As we passed around the obnoxiously loud chip bag, Papa gave us the State of the Property.

"I don't know if you can see from here, but the lower level of the yard is flooded," Papa pointed out the window towards his private swamp, overseen by buzzards and angry clouds. "I tried to mow it the other day but the ground sucked the mower right into the dirt." I laughed at the thought and stole another bite from Rachel's sandwich.

It was just her and me on this visit, which was unusual. The last time I had visited Nana and Papa without my parents was in middle school, to get away for a week over the summer and help in the yard. Rachel figured it had been about that long for her, too. For one reason or another it hadn't been a high enough priority for either of us to repeat a parent-less visit since then. But suddenly things had changed. Suddenly we were about to be thousands of miles away for our next semester in college, and Nana was dying of cancer.

Look, maybe we should have expected the cancer; I knew logically Nana was getting older just like anyone else. I felt naïve for being surprised, but so recently Nana had finished several months of chemo for pancreatic cancer and was deemed cancer-free. I had thought we were out of the woods. But just a few months later, the doctors checked Nana's lungs. Suddenly my parents and aunts and uncles were researching hospice care.

She wasn't expected to make it to the summer. So before we were thousands of miles away from Granbury and Nana, my sister and I took one last visit to "see her while she's still moving around," as my Dad put it. Meaning: Nana might be stuck under the quilts she'd once stitched herself if we ever got to see her again.

After lunch I collapsed onto the bed I had fixed up in the loft and pulled out my phone. As a kid, I was encouraged and forced to spend time with Nana and Papa out of courtesy even if I would have rather been alone. It was always made clear to me that we were in Granbury first and foremost to visit Nana and Papa, and we shouldn't waste their time, food, and space

by not talking to them. I was supposed to tell them about me, y'know, make sure they were up to date. That's how I was raised to behave.

But from bed I decided to quickly check *Twitter*. Then *Facebook*. Then *Instagram*. Everyone was still downstairs. They weren't waiting on me per se, but I was on a trip specifically to spend some final moments with them. If I had gone down we could've had a conversation, just the four of us, but then I would've had to acknowledge that that may end up being the last time we'd all sit together in the living room, flapping our gums as easy as nothing. I had considered that visit a last chance to see Nana before things changed, but I couldn't help fear that they already had.



I ended up napping until dinner, at which we discussed Bob and his wife. Bob, the next door neighbor, came up because he was supposed to be moving out finally, closer to his family, but made a last minute decision not to sell his house and leave quite yet. Over the last two decades a steady stream of Wallace men had made their pilgrimage to Bob's to drink the scotch he had waiting in exchange for some small talk. He'd held onto his house so far, but not the scotch, which he'd already gifted to Papa. After dinner I joined the Wallace men who came before me by imbibing our drink of choice.

Later, while drinking scotch and playing bridge with my grandparents and Rachel, the storm came. The water poured down again, heavily, and a couple of times throughout our game the electricity almost folded on us. It stayed on, thank god.

Most Texans believe the weirdest thing about our weather is its capriciousness, but to me the thing that makes our weather truly unique is a thunderstorm like that one. They come around all the time in Granbury, but they just don't make 'em Texas-sized elsewhere. In Texas they blow your front porch swing around a full three-hundred and sixty degrees and sweep any critters from your well-tended lawn into a ravine -- assuming the flash flooding hasn't caused your neighborhood creek to overflow its banks. All of this is to say nothing of the tornadoes, which certainly made an appearance that night, tearing through Rowlett and Garland. Both of those towns were closer to my own house than to Granbury, but luckily my family was spared.

My family, like all Texan families, is bred with a certain callousness to storms. Lightning and thunder are two of life's processes as much as any others, like a racing pulse

or getting red in the face. I've even come to enjoy the storms a little bit for that very reason: I feel comforted knowing that life continues on fiercely during a storm. We shut the windows and I was willing to play cards by candlelight if I had to because dammit it was good enough for me that I was around to survive such a beautiful force. Maybe I'm just short-sighted, but I think it's only once the storm ends and the exhilaration subsides that anyone can truly understand the mess that's left behind.

My sister was raised the same as me, so she was unmoved by the storm blustering outside and before the evening ended we tried to make plans with Nana and Papa for the following morning. Nana vaguely agreed to go into town with us the next day, provided she wasn't too tired. After we talked, Nana and Papa went to bed.



The next morning the four of us were greeted by sunlight, and everyone was on board to go into town. I threw on a fresh shirt and the same pair of jeans I wore the day before (a little too warm for the day, but I'd make do) and after a brief breakfast with Drew Carey on *The Price is Right*, we departed.

I squinted through the window of the back seat as Papa drove. To get a feel for Granbury, you've gotta understand that the people there put a great deal of importance on history and legacy. We parked in their square, the first in Texas to be placed on the Historic Registry in its entirety, and hopped over puddles under the shadow of the one-hundred-plus year old Hood County Court House. A couple years ago Nana and Papa had proudly brought us on a tour inside the newly renovated courtroom, which was restored to its original look. The locally-sourced limestone and steel exterior got a facelift too, and the courthouse's window frames became a cheery, though not exactly complimentary, shade of crimson. Everyone was proud anyway.

We walked under the shade of the facades along the square, and I took as many pictures as I could of downtown Granbury. In the reflection of the Opera House windows I caught another glimpse of the courthouse, and I remembered that when the courthouse was made freshly new the local theatre troupe put on a reenactment of the Second Continental Congress right in the courtroom. Nana and Papa told me afterward the show was riveting. I missed that performance, though I'd been in town when men done up in traditional Cowboy

outfits had shot blanks at each other in the back alley of my favorite ice cream parlor. That place, Rinky-Tink's, closed up shop a few years ago. I was about thirteen when I found out they were leaving, and I sent an email to the owner wondering if the rumor was true. She said it was, but she gave Nana one of their ice cream scoops as a memento, which was passed on to me. Funny enough, I discovered I was lactose intolerant a couple years later.

We moseyed in a slow circuit around the storefronts, and greeted storeowners tidying up their wind-whipped signs and potted plants left disheveled by the previous night. One woman kindly invited us into her art gallery, which featured local artists. We worked our way through.

"I'll be darned, some of these trees are pretty neat," Papa leaned into a wire wall sculpture carefully twisted up and mounted in a back room. On the way out, he commented, "I'd buy one of those if the house wasn't full of art already. Don't think we need more right now."

He wasn't wrong. Papa had travelled all over the world as a Heathkit salesman back in the day, and he sent back all sorts of exotic memorabilia. During that time Nana got to visit England, her native country, with Papa, and over lunch the day before she'd shown Rachel all the guidebooks and travel journals she had kept from those days. When Rachel visited London while abroad, she could reference Nana's old materials.

These days Nana's travels are a little closer to home. The longer we walked the more tired Nana became, and it wasn't too long before we headed back to the house again. From there my sister and I gathered our stuff to head back home – there was still much more packing to be done before we shipped off for the new semester.

I found my water bottle and all the other carrion I'd left lying around the house. As is our custom, I hugged either Nana or Papa while Rachel hugged the other, and then we switched. During the embraces I made sure to tell each of them approximately when I'd return.

"I'll be back for Spring Break, I'm sure," I assured Nana and Papa.

"Alright, well have a good semester. We'll look forward to seeing you again," they said.

"Love y'all!"

"Yeah, love y'all!" Rachel and I said. Then, we got into the car.

When I was tiny, my whole family used to call out “Bye! Bye bye bye!” in falsettos over and over again through the open car windows as we drove away. Nana and Papa would stand in the driveway until they couldn’t hear us anymore, waving, and we would yell until we couldn’t see them anymore and then some.

I looked back out the window as we drove away. I don’t yell out anymore as we leave, but I always look back.

Nana and Papa weren’t in the driveway anymore.

As we drove out though, we crossed the Brazos once more. Despite the rains, the old bridge into Pecan Plantation hadn’t crumbled just yet.