

Letters from my Grandma's Boyfriend

My grandma has a new boyfriend. When she walks over to the white windowsill in her nursing home apartment and stares at the framed photographs, I know she is about to tell me about him. There are two photographs, both taken in August of 2016, four months before my grandpa died. In one, my grandparents sit in wrought iron outdoor chairs on their back patio, a space that I always imagine dotted with chocolate easter eggs melting in their jewel-toned wrappers. My grandma would hide these easter eggs and nobody would find them for months, not until the summer heat muddled them into distorted spheres.

My grandpa has become one of these chocolate eggs in my grandma's mind, and she keeps trying to find him before he can fully melt away. Anxiously, she asks me where he went, and I tell her he died, and she tells me she knows that. She tells me she knows he is in the columbarium at our church, and I am amazed that she can remember the word "columbarium" when most other words have long since slipped her mind. She knows that my grandfather is in the columbarium, but she wants to know where the young man in the black-and-white photograph she keeps in her purse went. She takes out the crumpled picture and shows it to me. She picks each of her pink acrylic fingernails off of her hands as I tell her that the man is my grandpa and he died, and she is shocked that he died so young. But he grew up, I tell her. He grew up, he grew up, he grew up and he died.

But today, my grandma is happy because she has a new boyfriend. She smiles sheepishly when she tells me about him.

"Now, I wasn't planning on getting a boyfriend, but I did. Your dad is going to croak when he finds out," my grandma tells me, laughing. She's wearing her black leggings and a cheetah print top with four different long Kendra Scott pendants draped around her neck. Her loose earlobes hold two pairs of drop earrings each because she forgot to take one pair out before she put a new pair in.

"My boyfriend, he called me. And he just got a coaching job out in Western Kansas and wants me to move out there with him. I don't want to go unless he can get us a nice house, one with a real bathroom," she tells me.

I've heard my grandma forget words before. We have played long games of CatchPhrase as I try to guess what white powdered substance she ate and didn't like. Flour? Sugar? Salt? Protein powder? Surely not cocaine, but I guess it anyway because I desperately need to laugh. I guess which relative she's referring to when she can't remember their names. I've listened to my grandma tell me she is younger than her daughter because she does not believe in being over sixty. However, I have never heard my grandma tell a made-up story with such conviction, such earnestness. Not even a glimpse of confusion in her eyes.

"He sent me a photograph of himself," my grandma says, and she pulls a black-and-white picture out of her purse.

The photo is of a man around my age, young with white-blonde hair and a German nose. It's my grandpa. The back of the photograph has my grandma's handwriting on it, explaining that the photo was taken in Utica, a small town in Western Kansas where my grandpa taught and coached the first year of their marriage.

"That's my grandpa," I tell her, a little relieved that she hasn't actually started to date some man who wants to move out to Western Kansas.

"No, that old man is your grandpa," my grandma says, gesturing at the family photo on the windowsill. "This is my boyfriend."

New details are added to the story every time my grandma tells it, a hazy image coming into focus. One day, she tells my mom and me that her boyfriend wants *her* to coach *the girls!* She is incredulous. I ask my grandma if she has ever played basketball, and she tells me of course, even though I know that isn't true. One time, she tells my aunt that she needs to come to the nursing home so she can meet her new boyfriend before they get married.

My grandma tells me she got a piece of mail from her boyfriend. She holds up an envelope. It's a letter from the Bethel College alumni mailing list, something asking for money. My grandparents, parents, and siblings all went to Bethel, a little Mennonite school that will receive most of my grandpa's land and money.

"He's a senior at Bethel College, you know," she tells me.

My grandma is ninety-two. My dad asks her if she feels strange dating someone who is seventy years younger than her.

"Actually, I'm a year younger than him," my grandma tells my dad.

"That would make you younger than your youngest grandchild," my dad tells my grandma.

"Yes, I am," she says.

Having a conversation with my grandma in this stage of her life requires a lot of trial and error. It's like the movie "Groundhog Day," reliving the same conversation over and over again, and we get to choose a new response every time in an attempt to find the right one. Today, I'll remind her that her boyfriend is a version of my grandpa that no longer exists. Yesterday, I asked her more questions about this boyfriend. Last week I smiled and nodded. Should I try changing the subject? Act surprised, as if I've never heard this story before? Lie? Tell the truth?

My grandma says she and her boyfriend have a special way of communicating. He can get a hold of her, she says. He sends her pictures. He writes her letters. It is not surprising to me that alumni association letters from Bethel have become holy, but sometimes I wonder if my grandparents do have some divine form of communication, something that I could also hear if I had lost enough of my common sense to know how to listen.

The worst day with my grandma is when she begs me to help her find her baby. She is in tears, holding up a photograph of her and my grandpa soon after the birth of their first child. I tell her that the baby grew up, that she's my aunt and she visits all the time. I tell her that the baby is a grandma now, that she is married with children. Again and again my grandma tells me she knows who my aunt is but she wants to find the baby, and I do not know how to explain to her that the baby is gone and a seventy-year-old woman is in her place. She does not believe that infants become adults and adults become memories. The more I try to tell her where the baby went, the more I can't believe it myself. I wonder where the young mother in the photograph went, where the young father went. Sometimes aging seems more outlandish than a grandmother who is younger than her granddaughter, or a boyfriend who communicates through old photos. Sometimes I want to let myself believe her stories, to lose this devastating rationale that I developed as I grew up and that will probably dissolve as I grow old. When my grandma tells me she wants me to meet her boyfriend, I'm not pretending when I say I would love that very much.