

Because of Gramps

By Arianna Vann-Cook

Gramps. A 70-something-year-old Polish man who never says ‘I love you.’ Gramps, who wears thick horn-rimmed glasses, and has a wardrobe consisting of four thrifted flannels. I’m taller than him now, but I wasn’t always. As I grow he seems to settle, smaller and smaller. Not his personality, though. Every time I see him, he manages to get a chuckle out of me. “How long does it take to dig half a hole?” “There’s no such thing! A hole is a hole.” He used to give me these riddles, and when I was younger they puzzled me so. I now know each one by heart, so heavily ingrained into my memory that they will be passed down to my children, and their children, and so on. The rippling impact of his words is prominent.

Us kids are called the Rugrats. My cousins and I have some of our greatest memories centered around Gramps. Much laughter, many smiles, a couple broken bones, and a handful of perfect days. Of all the things we accomplished in those years, ‘bummin’ was my favorite. A term tailored by Gramps, and worn proudly by his great-grandchildren. This game, or way to pass time, was spent doing whatever we could. Driving down the roads of my childhood with no purpose or direction. Only us, together, passing time. Little did I know how precious it would be.

We played spoons at the dinner table, managing to knock a cup over every single time. Without question. Gramps only smiled, with the most mischievous grin he could muster. In fact, the only time he ever yelled at me was when I put my fingers on the window of his turquoise minivan-see, Gramps detests any form of disarray or imperfections when it comes to his car. And now, years later, after wiping down the windows of a car myself, I understand. Even though he yelled, I know he wasn’t really *mad*. How could he be?

Half of his life has been spent, quite literally, at the casino. He took me and my cousin up often, and with all of his comp money, we splurged on treats and useless toys. Maybe it was my imagination, but back then it truly felt like a place of wonder. We spent hours in the kids' play area, getting into trouble and climbing through the maze of jungle gyms. Under Gramps' watchful eye, my cousin managed to break her arm. We didn't know for 2 weeks until she got an x-ray because her arm was 'bothering her.' And that ended the play place era. It has since been torn down and replaced with an adult bowling area. Still, even with its sophisticated manner and brushed-up physique, I smile every time I see it. The drive is lengthy, and it's hard for Gramps to drive for long periods of time so we haven't been up in a while. But I still see him as much as I possibly can, soaking up everything he has to offer.

Through him, I learned the evolution of rock. He turns the radio up and quizzes me. "Who's this?" "Rolling Stones, 1969." "Very good." We gossip over the mansions and love life of Mick Jagger as we make our routine trip to Bayport. Downtown, through Dellwood, Stillwater, and finally, Bayport. He hums the lyrics, ignites my love for music, and we joke that he should be the frontman for the latest band with his inaccurate pitches and voice cracks. As we make our way to the river, we pause and see how fishing is going. Never once do we get out of the car and attempt to fish. Only observe. I learn about the currents, and about the memories Gramps made as a boy growing up in St. Paul.

His first job was slinging newspapers through his neighborhood. Getting only cents a day, he strode on his bike and dutifully delivered those papers as though it was a mission. He tells me about his motorcycling days, first girlfriends, and how he got to where he is today. Although he's retired now, he tells me how he would fish for a living if he could. It's hard to imagine Gramps as a kid, or even a teenager. I'm so used to him now, with a bad back and recurring dizzy spells, that it is hard to imagine him as strong and invincible as I sometimes feel. Even so, his sense of humor has stayed the same since then.

He never finished high school. As a matter of fact, he barely made it through middle school, and so he asks me to spell certain words, and "see how the stocks are doing" on the internet. However, he's quite savvy with YouTube. Every time I see him he makes it a point to tell me

about the latest episode of *Live on Patrol*, which is just as boring as it sounds. But I listen, and it makes me proud to know how proud he is of himself, simply working a tv.

I help him grocery shop when I can. As we make our way through the supermarket, Gramps helplessly flirts with cashiers and bumps into neighboring carts. “You better have cart insurance for that. Geico or Allstate?” Some laugh, others stare confusedly. Some even feel bad, thinking he is slightly deranged. But most smile, and at the end of the day, that is all that Gramps wants. As I carry the groceries into his house (still fashioned to the 70s), he always finds little projects for me to do. Most of them are simple, trivial even. But I think he just likes the company. And I do too. As a teenager who is supposed to fit the norm of being “cool” I have no shame in saying that my great-grandpa is my best friend. The coolest cat in town would be an understatement.

Gramps. I was always so scared to call him grandpa. Technically, I was a late arrival to the family. It terrified me to say the wrong thing, and be rejected from something I cared so much about. He never made me feel this way, though. Even with our differences, I felt valued and ordinary. I never gathered the courage to call him grandpa. ‘Gramps’ will do just fine. Gramps. A 70-something-year-old Polish man who never says ‘I love you.’ But I suppose he never needed to. It always showed.