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Tea Leaves

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Kerry Feltner
Honors Thesis
Sue Hertz
May 8, 2012

Tea Leaves

“I got another Americorps offer today Mom!” I said, knowing she won’t share my enthusiasm.

“Okay,” she said.

“Okay? Do you realize that I was picked out of hundreds of people?” I asked. “You aren’t even excited for me?”

“What about Fidelity?” she asks.

“I don’t want to do it,” I said. “It doesn’t make any sense for me. Why would I go into the financial industry? It’s like saying I’m good at ironing so I will be a maid. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Mom? Mom are you there?” I ask to the dial tone. I know she is not there. She has hung up on me. She has voiced her opinion clearly enough.

I hang up the phone and let my coffee grow cold. I sigh with the lingering steam of the cup, blowing air out like a monk, slow, with control.

This is not how I pictured my last few weeks of college.

*

Fourteen years of education have brought me to this point. The real world awaits me in a few short months yet I have not moved one step in the right direction.

Fourteen years of resume building: that summer in Europe, years of wind ensemble, soccer captain, lacrosse captain, Vice-President of the National Honor Society, four rigorous years of crew, articles for the school paper, volunteering at the animal shelter, frequenting the Dean’s List, etc.

This was not supposed to happen to me.

I set myself up for success in every area of my life and now I have nothing to show for it.

I got up and grabbed my jacket from the chair’s back. I tried to summon the flush from my cheeks to head south. I looked around at the coffee shop and saw that no one paid me any attention. An old man sat reading a dictionary and highlighting words in the corner. A couple were silent, heads down, texting on their phones. The purr of the blender drowned out my negative self-talk.

I still felt my embarrassment and hope that no one suspected what I did, that I had let my family down. I stepped outside and let the wind cover my face with my hair.

I felt helpless.

*

Writing has been in my life for as long as I can remember. I wrote journals, wrote letters and wrote stories about my family when I was young. It has always felt natural and I've trusted in my writing whether it be a simple thank you note or a personal journal entry.

I know that my passion lies in writing. But as my brother puts it "no one is going to pay me to write" right now. According to my family, the passions I have taped into for four years are not lucrative enough for a secure and fulfilled life.

All I've wanted is for someone to guide me in writing, someone in my family to realize why I must pursue this unknown, this world without a steady paycheck, this world without set hours.

I just need someone to understand me. It hurts me to know that my parents do not.

*

I walked home to my room, perfumed by the spring air. My mind was vacant.

I heard my phone begin to ring and wrestled my backpack off to answer it in time. It was my father calling. Today April 20, was my Granno's birthday. She would have been 93 years old.

"Yeah its too bad Ker," said Dad. "She actually shares this birthday with Hitler. Isn't that interesting?"

"Yeah," I said. *Makes sense*, I thought. She had not been kind to me growing up.

I got back to my room and continued to think of my late grandmother, Barbara Feltner. She had died 12 years before and the most thought I had given her since then was an acknowledgment here or there that yes, I did have grandparents at one point but they were all gone before I knew them. I never had focused in on this grandmother, my father's mother.

I had been compared to her from a young age. She and I shared athleticism, a sense of humor, and dark eyebrows. We both could, as my father puts it, "call a spade a spade." We each had a knack for bringing bringing people down a notch and seeing through a person's facade. I was the constant reminder to my family members of how Granno used to be before her two strokes, before her gradual decline.

I did not think there was anything grand about her. We did not get along.

I sat down in my oak chair and began to write about her, inspired by a nagging memory. My cursive handwriting met the page, unleashed and aggressive as I thought of this woman whom I

had never liked.

My memories of her were never warm.

*

If there is one thing I hate in this world, that thing is beef stew. I loathe the meaty cesspool of broth where carrots, onions and cow squares gallivant together, sloshing around a large pot, guided in a swirly path by a wooden spoon.

“You better finish every spoonful,” my Granno said. “There will be no waste in this house.”

I am five years old and have been staring down at the clumps of charred meat for what seems like an eternity, willing them to disappear into John Paul’s mouth; my grandparents’ sheepdog (named for the pope). He is just as eager for this transaction to take place.

I glance furtively across the table at my mother, who has miraculously managed to finish two full bowls of my Granno’s festering concoction. Granno, the keen observer that she is, views this completion as a request for more and happily fills my mother’s bowl for round three. My mother meets my glance with a look that can only mean, “good luck.”

I’m done for.

“You are not to leave the table until you have finished young lady,” Granno said. “And don’t count on dessert if you can’t manage to finish your main meal.”

I manage to force down two bowls of sludge in two hours. I put down my spoon.

I make two decisions, effective immediately: 1. I will never eat beef stew again. 2. My grandmother is not one to be trifled with.

If my Granno were alive today, she would be the tender age of ninety-three. I remember her as a white-haired woman with thick, black eyebrows, which were darker than the shoe polish my Pop used to polish his footwear, always keeping them “looking sharp.” Granno’s gait exuded a palpable confidence that demanded respect. Her requests were always fulfilled. After bringing eight children into the world, the woman did as she pleased.

I could never understand her. My father, always talked about her as being a funny, pithy woman who had a vast network of friends, but I always viewed her as a crotchety old lady whom I could never seem to oblige.

I wasn’t frugal. I didn’t set the table properly. I did not appreciate her meals that she worked so hard to cook,...and cook and cook, until whatever it was on the stove turned to gristle.

I didn’t know her. I was a child.

By the time I came into her life, she was losing herself. With each family visit she lost energy, just as I was gaining it.

I never felt that I could be myself around her. When I visited her, I went from a chatty, happy girl to one that only spoke when she was spoken to, never making direct eye contact with her dark brown eyes. She was a woman who had varicose veins, wrinkled hands and a severe tone.

*

My phone beeps indicating new four voicemail.

Play.

"Kerry, we'd like to offer you an Americorps position. We'd love to have you out here in Washington..."

Skip.

Next voicemail.

"Hi, Kerry, its Dad. Look I think you should really consider this Fidelity job. It would be nice to get you on your own next year..."

Skip.

Next voicemail.

"Hey Kerr, its Mom. Just calling to tell you that we will get you a suit for your Fidelity interview. It is a great opportunity and you are lucky to have it. I know you will do great there..."

Skip.

Next voicemail.

"Hey Kerry, its Ryan (my brother). Congratulations on getting the interview at Fidelity. I know you are going to take advantage of it. You can always write on the side..."

I turn off my phone and fling it across the room.

I let the voices circulate in the air as I close my eyes and drop to my chair.

*

The biggest disappointment in my life would be to let my family down. I won't do it. Everything I've accomplished has been fueled by a desire to be better than my siblings, to be more successful, to make my parents realize that their hard work has not been in vain. This desire has propelled me my whole life.

They have been aligned with my aspirations...until now. Until now when I have to decide where

I will be and what career path I will choose. My mom used to say “follow your passion and the money will come” however these days it sounds more like “get off our dime and sacrifice all the work you have put towards your passions in order to get a ‘real’ job and have health insurance.”

I don’t want to waste time. I don’t want to let them decide this for me. I will not let them decide this for me.

I want to speak to the 21 year old version of my Granno, the woman who chose to be a mother, a wife and to secretly “write on the side.”

*

I am nine years old and am visiting Granno. I am sitting on her pale blue couch in an apartment complex that is for people who need assistance. She hates the apartment. It is filled to the gills with all of her favorite things, her sculptures, her books and photos of her people but it is no home she has ever known.

Her sprawling house on Union Street with the secret entrances in back closets and the beautiful terrace overlooking the yard where her children made tepees and played ball are gone. Sold to a new family after almost sixty years of life; her life.

She can no longer have tea parties on the iron patio furniture, painted white with floral accents, situated perfectly underneath the red, green and yellow lanterns that she lit at night. The glow from the colorful lights attracted the bugs and was radiated in the reflection of her brown eyes.

Today, those same eyes are quiet with a marked anxiety. I can feel her fading.

We don’t say much. I am a shy third grader, afraid of upsetting her. Her room smells of lavender. For no reason at all I glance out the window and see an albino deer starring back at me. It stands frozen, intently meeting my gaze as if to tell me something.

“Granno look!” I say, excitedly, pointing at the stagnant doe.

She looks at me wearily and tells me it is a bad omen in a raspy voice.

Before I leave, I give her a hug and tell her goodbye without giving the visit much thought.

She died the next day.

*

I’ve reflected on her last day with me, her last full day of life.

That visit was the closest I had ever felt to her. My mother had left us alone for a bit and we sat in silence. Silence was better than the sharp voice of hers I knew well. I didn’t know it then but that sharp voice would never yell at me again. That day I felt nothing towards her, not even pity. I still felt hurt by her constant undermining of every attempt of mine to get to know her.

I recently found this journal entry about what she really thought of me:

[found on faded notebook paper, not attached]

“Eileen-new baby Kerry-”

by B. Feltner

Eileen is my daughter in law-a fine happy girl with Irish background. She has black hair & big shiney blue eyes-high colour in her cheeks-she is a superb operating nurse-with plenty of savy for her job & a joy to the operating physicians-She is accurate deft and unflappable in her work-Eileen & Roger have 2 little boys-Ryan 6 and Christopher 4. She is pregnant with her 3rd and hoping for a girl. She was 2 weeks from her appointed date. Saturday morning-Roger went to the hardware store for some window fixtures. He took Ryan with him-My phone rang, Eileen. She said she was having big & little cramps close together now-I told her to go in to the hospital right away. I would come for the boys-Roger came home [and went] with Eileen to Highland Hosp-I went quickly the 8 miles for the boys & brought them home with me. They are a lively pair-cute as can be but lively! The day moved along-lunch for the boys-games & cookies-Phone ringing-Eileen 2 weeks early has a little girl Kerry-but the reason for the early cramps-The baby had inhaled some of the meconium in the womb and started to struggle-Her doctor realized this and did a section right away-The baby was taken & rushed to intensive care and was given oxygen & antibiotics-tubes to the nose & mouth etc-Eileen was taken back to the room. The 3rd day Eileen came home to me-She was so tired & hurt-had had no pain killers & was miserable-I put her on the couch & went to put the little boys to bed-When I came back she was so miserable and only wanted to go to bed-I took her upstairs and helped her undress-put a warm flannel nightie on her & tucked her in-I asked her-”does your chest hurt-no-do you have a headache?-only a little but I’m so thirsty-I went quietly and got my thermometer, and asked her to put it under her tounge-I read 104 degrees F. That frightened me-I called my husband & said we had a pretty sick girl here. He said get her ready & I’ll take her right back to the hospital-I put a warm bathrobe on her, wrapped her in a blanket & when my husband came, put her in the warm car-We both wept as they went off-Back in the hospital, my husband took her up to intensive care & watched while they gave her a big dose of antibiotic by intravenous-to stem her high infection. She was a sick girl-Now I AM my husband came home hating to leave her-

Next day the baby was moved to Strong [hospital] to take advantage of the special respirators for babies-Following day, they moved Eileen over to Strong Mem [Memorial] too, so she could nurse the baby-or at least give her milk-She was in a room by the desk centre of people walking, telephone calls, doctors calls, general confusion and when you hurt with heavy surgery one can only think of home, peace & quiet. A call to her Mother gave me assurance-she would come to be with her-Baby still in dangerous territory, but holding her own-What a dashing blue eyed blonde baby-so wanted-Mother & baby causing us all great fear and great longing for the right outcome-

Today my husband & I went down to Ithaca to help move Roger & Eileen to a new home in Horseheads. I took lunch for all-Brothers all helping and of course hungry. I packed dishes, and boots and books-but beside me a beautiful blue eyed blonde little girl was sitting up by herself-laughing & giggling & rolling over & over, holding a tiny teddy bear & squeezing it-It is such a pleasure to see & hear this lovely little girl & to see her Mum hugging her-Perhaps I helped with this great miracle-I’m very proud of daughter & baby.

It has been eleven years since I've seen her and I can't help but feel cheated. I don't care that I have her sense of humor, her bone structure or her silk scarf.

I don't have her.

*

I released the emotional upheaval by writing down my memories of Granno but was left with so many questions. After being compared to her my whole life, I wanted answers. What were her passions? Why did she have eight children? Why did she leave Nova Scotia? Why didn't we get along if we were so alike? Was she happy? How could she not pursue a career of any kind for the majority of her life? How could she be happy raising children all day, everyday?

I didn't realize it then but by writing that story, I reached out to her. She circulated my thoughts, my dreams, my writing for months after.

Two months after I wrote that piece, Granno got in touch.

*

"Kerry, Jonny said that he has something for you," said my Mom over the phone. "Apparently Granno kept track of a lot of things."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "What does he have?"

"He said something about journals or papers of hers that he found," Mom said. "Sounds like she liked writing too."

"Wow, really?" I asked, surprised.

I never pictured that old woman as a writer. I guess I had never pictured her as anything but angry. I was instantly curious about what she wrote about. Whatever it was I thought it would be interesting to hear from her. Maybe she was nicer on paper.

I had my doubts that she was a writer.

A blue tub arrived, courtesy of my parents after they carted it to New Hampshire from upstate New York. Inside were love letters from World War II, journals spanning her life, notebooks with writing samples, nature poems and scrapbooks of my grandmother, filled with pictures of her as a young woman, holding her baby.

I have her works of love, loss and daily interruptions. The notebooks are faded with age, the letters tired, nestled from their tight envelopes and opened to expose my Granno's very being on the page. She is letting me in.

I have begun to listen to her.

*

[Cross-country skiing]

by B. Feltner

The wind is blowing great clouds of snow off the roof of the red barn across the road. The snow has fallen softly all day. We have three or four inches now and the world is quiet.

Snow smothers loud noises, and gently covers the pine trees, until they are beautiful in their winter dress, and proudly wear the white flakes, sparkling in the sun. The wood stove is warm and cheerful. The kettle sings quietly on the surface.

Most household chores are finished, now for an hour or so I will ski cross-country. Black Creek Park is just across the road. I pull the slender skis off the rack in the garage, poles hang near by handily. One does not need to dress too warmly. Once the motion of skiing begins, the warmth generated by the body is sufficient to keep you comfortable. Important to have hands and feet warm however, and always a scarf on your belt or jacket in case the wind in your face, in open spots, threatens frost bite.

I cross the road. There is a long line of big pine trees bordering the park. Depending on wind direction, one can be sheltered by skiing on one side or the other, keeping the pine trees next to you, to break the wind. The first half hour is always slow. There are many things I should be doing, the snow is deep, my skis are sticking a bit. My dog runs beside me, his leash tucked under his chin, so I can reach it easily, in case we meet other dogs in the area.

A bit slow, breath coming hard. Perhaps I shouldn't have come. All of a sudden the trees have passed, and we are out in the open. A winding road, leading to a hill in front. We pass the wooden fence and begin our climb of the gentle hill beginning the trail. Slowly the softness the quiet of the snow, the shush shush of the skis is all I hear.

Poles pull and rest, skis move in rhythm of long glides and arm pushes in between. Soon the rhythm takes over. One is not aware of distance or time. We top the hill, where the stone bench looks off to the rolling country. Below, trees and paths. One can rest there if needed. But the trail lies ahead.

Long sure-riding skis down the hill and into sheltered paths. Not a sound. I see rabbit tracks and deer tracks, and once in a while fox prints in the snow. Now in the woods the birds are chirping. Crows give their strident call down the hedgerows to tell each other of my coming. The snow is smooth and crisp. There are other tracks ahead, so there are skiers in this area too. Deeper in the woods now, I hear the wind way up above.

Trees groan and creak and moan as their trunks sway and branches clutch at you. Suddenly beside me there by the old oak tree stand a doe and her young one, not alarmed, not afraid. Perhaps she know I too love this place.

We move together only shortly and she disappears, with her young by her side. Now the trail leads out of the woods to an open field and there a large pond is pure white in the depression in the earth below me. I take my pole and put my initials on its smooth surface, but dare not venture on the surface for fear it is not solid enough. I cut off to the right, cross a small wooden bridge and slide down another slope to the region of the summer picnic area. Tables are there, cold and

bleak and abandoned.

It will take Spring flowers to bring the picnickers back. So I slide by them, down along the half frozen creek. Three ducks fly up as I pass, flapping their wings as they rise frightened above me. Along then for some time-length by the creek and there is turn-style in the trail and I turn right heading back to the park entrance. My dog scoots off, investigating every leaf, branch and rabbit hold. He smells tracks and knocks milkweed pods off as he charges bushes and long grass, slipping and sliding on the ice or snow. He wanders off, and then suddenly returns to see where I am and to rub his nose on me as I travel.

Soon I see the gates of the park road and we follow that out to the entrance and again get on the left side of the pines. Now we face the last half mile against the wind. We hunch down a little, dog and I, and greet the north wind. Pushing and pulling, by the small stream and the pines, we make our way to our own road. Sun has gone.

We pick up the mail and open the gate to home property. I put skis back on the rack and hang my poles. My dog and I come in to a warm kitchen, a still warm tea kettle, and make a pot of tea. The dog chews at the snow and ice on his paws, then snoozes by the radiator. Every muscle is relaxed, fresh air has done its wonders again.

This routine is one of the greatest pleasures in life. One glows with happy healthy thoughts and the joy of being alive. Its amazing how quickly one forgets the world in that white and silent woods and all stress and tears seem to disappear.

God gives us so many ways to refresh the mind, body and soul that cost nothing and renew our faith.

Her athletic release was from cross-country skiing, mine is from participating on the UNH crew team every morning on the Oyster River. We both share the need to exercise physically, everyday.

[The Oyster]
by K. Feltner

The sun has not yet peeked its eyes over the edge.

An aura of orange marmalade coats the sky's waist and the ground walkers are subdued in slumber. The Oyster River's waters slowly careen to each side of the river, taking time to gently shake the water dwellers awake.

My crew boat coasts through the tidal river.

Eight blades connect to the quiet pool, creating rivulets of puddles, an athletic momentum and heavy breathing. I sit, knees to my chin, body hunched over. I am perched in my coxswain seat like a jockey, core tight, eyes fully focused ahead.

The quiet of the morning erupts with my raucous voice as I yell for the eight women in front of

me to give me every ounce of energy they possess, to give me full reign of their physical prowess and to get our boat across the finish line first. As we surge through the glass water, the sun decides to open it's eyelids. Birds start to greet each other during the morning shuffle. We are a part of the sleepy solitude. We serve as an alarm clock in this cyclical routine. It is 6:00 a.m.

We are not average college students.

It's just another ordinary day of practice.

*

A woman in a simple white dress, wearing a white fedora hat with ribbon encircling the middle stares down at the ground. A man in suit jacket holds his overcoat, folded over his right arm, cradling the woman's elbow with his free hand. He stares at her, a warm smile over his long jawline, one that I share. Behind the couple, a priest's right hand is raised and pointing at them, smiling as the rice in the air suspends, propelled out of his fist. A large house with dark shutters and a front balcony looms behind them. Their friends and family spill out of the balcony with grinning faces. A car awaits in the right-hand corner.

The black and white photograph I hold depicts the first few moments of my grandparents' marriage. The first few moments of my Granno's new life. She was a 21 year-old bride. A woman with aspirations and writing skills that were never fully pursued. I look at her, her granddaughter, one year older than she was then, in awe of a relative I never truly knew.

My grandmother had the soul of a writer.

Beneath her duties in marriage to a top orthopedic surgeon, her maternal duties as mother to eight children and her obligations as a neighbor and friend, was a writer. A woman with instinct in her prose, with an observant eye that took notice of the natural world and the nature of humans. She left behind typed vignettes, poetry, letters, and journals filled with her slouchy, cursive writing.

In turning 21 years old, I thought most about the legacies of my ancestors, (the people they turned out to be) to find some answers for my future.

Memories of my childhood interaction with my grandmother began to resurface, as if she were trying to get my attention. I thought of how she treated me. I was a child in her presence, her personality reworked on me after a second stroke.

"Hold my hand when we cross the street," she threatened. "Don't run or get your dress dirty."

I spent family visits as far away from her as possible, immersing myself in the fur coats of her french sheep dogs in order to hide. Even her dogs didn't like her.

"Mom would cook us all some bacon and clearly the dogs wanted in on the breakfast," my father said. "So after we'd finish she'd take the frying pan outside for them to lick up the grease. Little

did they know that the pan was still scalding hot. They burnt their tongues so badly that they were whimpering. “Dumb dogs” she’d say and we’d look at her like she had three heads. She had a crazy streak.”

*

I am living the aspiration of my grandmother.

I am attending college for a skill that I intend to pursue and hone. A love of the written word, a love of the stories of the obscure; names that line address books, obituaries and telephone directories.

The complexity of a life without a microscope where families grow and shift, creating eddies of unspoken thoughts. The obscure person I am pursuing happens to share my DNA.

I am able to choose this path. I am not married. I don’t have a husband off to war, leaving me alone for four years to settle in a new country. Nor do I have to raise my first child by myself, without her father to tell her stories or hear her laugh. I do not have to choose my future path based on my family’s finances or lack thereof.

I can choose myself.

Barbara Billington did not choose herself. She quite willingly married and took up nursing, a respectable vocation for women in a time where women were not expected to pursue their intellectual desires.

As a nurse, ‘Barb’ could help support her family, one broken up by alcoholism; a father absent from her life but always buried deep in her psyche.

I found a photograph of my Granno working as a nurse in the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal. There she is, lying on the hospital bed with one leg in the air, donning white scrubs. Her head is upside-down and she has a small smirk on her face. Two fellow nurses stand on each side of her, looking foreboding in their face masks. One, with glasses, stares directly at the camera, no smile detected behind her mask. The other seems to be smiling under her mask, a scalpel held near my Granno’s leg as if to saw it off.

It never occurred to me that my Granno could horse around with her girlfriends, could be spontaneous, could be fun. The ideas I’ve held onto of this person in my life are shifting daily and it is disconcerting. As a child, I decided who my family members were and what they were like.

I will not repeat her life.

*

Physically we are alike. We share the same figure, a thin but athletic body with the same jawline. Looking at photographs of her in her early twenties I see myself, I see our resemblance even if I didn’t want to believe it. We both share the love of the outdoors, the love of a physical challenge, and the value of staying active.

I have come to realize how important it is to acknowledge the people who have gone before you in your life. The names on a genealogical chart were people who directly shaped the person you have become. They were complex. They failed, they succeeded, they doubted themselves. I learned that the woman I labeled as “mean and cranky” as a child was a woman who gave much more to life, even though I never got to observe it.

*

Throughout my Granno’s writings were descriptions of her family. She instilled in my father the importance of supporting family members and he instilled the value into my life. She influenced my perspective of others.

[Roger the Inquistor]

by K. Feltner

Tufts of salt and pepper hair peek out over his ears, which hold silver glasses that perch atop my father’s nose; our identical nose. He has light blue eyes that resemble the remnants of a puddle after a spring storm and they are ignited by long, natural conversation. He has over ten blue-checked, button down shirts that he wears on rotation. They hug him like an old friend and fray at the collar every now and then but he doesn’t mind, he doesn’t discriminate. He drinks Earl Grey tea with an entire spoon of granulated sugar because he has all of his life and it is good for him. He could talk to a rock for an hour.

I am my father’s daughter.

* * *

The sky has closed its mouth shut after talking all day in various hues and I am listening in captivation to my dad who is reading another installment of Grimm’s Fairy Tales. During these stories my dad never lets my eyelids even think about drooping as he asks me so many questions to pique my interest in the story. After asking me about how many blades of grass are in one picture or who was my favorite character, my eight-year-old self is spent and would like some peace.

“If you stick your legs out while you sleep you will grow nice and tall,” my dad says to me as he tucks me in tightly.

He leaves and I am left questioning the validity of such a statement. “Why hasn’t anyone told me before?” I think, annoyed that I have wasted eight whole years of cramming my body into a ball like a mole rat, trying to get warm. I extend my legs out as long as possible in my small twin bed clothed in hot pink covers.

To this day, twelve years later at age 22, I still sleep as though in a coffin.

* * *

Dads are weird. My father is a certified forester and loves the outdoors. He writes long letters in

purple ink, handwriting always cursive and confusing. He has likes to repeat statements to make his point, a trait I have picked up myself.

“I used to have a teacher who was never afraid of drilling something into your head until it stuck like glue,” my dad would say to my siblings and I. “I don’t think it can do you any harm if you hear things a few times.”

** * **

I drew a picture of my dad for father’s day when I was in elementary school to show him my appreciation for being such a great and supportive figure in my life. I carefully crafted the picture with great detail. There was my father lying on the couch napping his day away. To leave nothing to the imagination, I wrote at the top, “My dad likes to lie on the couch and nap all day.”

I bring my masterpiece home for my dad and can hardly wait for his approval.

“Did your teacher see this?” my dad asks with a serious tone, one that I was not anticipating. “Yeah,” I say. “I showed my whole class.”

My mom, a short-haired brunette with ivory Chiclet gum teeth like mine cannot contain her laughter and is having trouble breathing in between giggles.

“Don’t you like it?” I ask with uncertainty, a last attempt to please him, although I know something has gone completely wrong.

“Kerry, you know I do much more than nap,” my dad says in a gentler tone. “I work hard and earn a living for this family.”

My mother is no longer trying to contain her laughter and it fills the confusion in the room with something warmer to lighten the mood.

“Oh Roger, relax. She just wanted to give you something nice for Father’s Day,” my mom says to my dad. “Don’t be so sensitive.”

At seven years old, I do not know why my father is so upset, but I hang up the picture on the fridge anyway. I did work hard on it after all.

Only now, at 22 do I realize what that episode reflects. My dad, while probably too sensitive at the time, is someone who works hard. He does not “half-ass” things as he puts it.

“There are two ways of doing something Kerry and you need to remember them. You can do something wrong the first time and have to do it again, or you can take the time and energy into doing something right and that is what matters,” he would always say to me.

My dad has always been someone who grounds me like his curiosity about the things and people he encounters grounds him in his eagerness to learn and to engage in his surroundings.

** * **

My dad is like a the trees he sells, reaching for expansion, aged in ringed experience and shading his kindling in canopied warmth.

Both Granno and I connected most with our fathers, men who were wildly different but who shared their passions with us, their passions of music, the outdoors and of natural conversation.

[Music]

by B. Feltner

Very early I loved music. Though my Mother had no voice for music, she used to hum and croon to us as children. My Father loved music. I used to go with him to a hotel in Winnipeg, as a little girl, and we sat on the red carpeted stairs outside Gala Kerchi's room and listened to her practice her voice. That was a very long time ago. My Father was a gentle, soft spoken man, loved poetry, read to us daily, and camped with us in Banf and Lake Louise. He finally destroyed himself, but to us as children, he gave us much to love and enjoy. Music has been to me a source of great joy Every event in life can relate to music. Music as teenagers was full of fox trots and waltzes and Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra and Guy Lombardo. Late at night my radio kept me company when I was ill for three months. As I grew older and took piano lessons I could read some notes and sing. In boarding school I sang in the church choir for three years, which gave me a little more feeling for music. The soft music brought feelings of love and rest. In Montreal, where my nurses training took most of my hours, I went to the Cathedral for church to hear the music and to calm the fears of the terrors of human suffering in a big hospital.

My mother's sister Agnes taught piano. She lived with us for several years when we were children. She was not very strong, coughed all the time and was very thin. But when she sat down at the piano, she was well, and her thin hands could make the moonlight sonata sing, and we would sit quietly by.

Opera, through my father's influence was the great love of mine. My life after marriage became very busy, with children and school and my husband's practice. I had three little boys all under three. When it was nap time after lunch for them, I tucked them in, then would lie on the floor to relax my back and muscles, put on a record, listen to the strings of an orchestra or just the horns. In three minutes I would dreamily drop off to sleep long enough to catch the record after 20 minutes, and I was rested and ready to go again, and the little boys were asleep.

Texaco brought opera into my house every Saturday afternoon. It still does. I have never lost the love of the human voice, the most beautiful instrument of all. As the children grew, and we were able to travel to Europe, I found myself looking up opera in Vienna, concerts in Finland, choir in England, native song in Fiji. My husband had very little music in his life, began to be interested too, and willingly accompanied me in every effort to get tickets wherever we were. His knowledge of history has been great for the settings of many operas so we both enjoy it now. For me the music, the beautiful voices and the story make such a fantastic combination.

I found too, a wedding has happy music, a funeral has slow music. The masters wrote symphonies. Sibelius walked his woods and listened to the trees and screams, rills and birds. Wagner brought the Flying Dutchman into your conscience and the phantom ship sailed the

seas. Puccini lyrically told simple tales with haunting delight. Straus waltzed us into big ballrooms of Paris or London. Each tells its own story of love or hate or fear or tragedy.

*

Buried under heaps of parchment in a large box I pull out a tattered photo album, one held together by shoelace strings.

The pages are faded, the pictures, forgotten.

My eyes rest on one photograph, kept to the page by silver corners. A young woman with dark brown eyes, and full eyebrows smiles back to me, cheekbones like my own, a teathy smile I share. Her brunette hair is pulled back, though a few strands have freed themselves, blowing in an afternoon zephyr across her forehead.

I'm staring at myself, my person, in my family.

Barbara Billington, my grandmother is at ease in this picture, the smoothness of youth shaping her face, the full grin one of contentment. There is no trace of the weathered, fractured, fading woman I remember, only vibrancy and potential exudes from this woman's stare.

Grandparents are mysterious for most people. The young rarely think of the lives of their forbearers until they age, when often it is too late to express any feelings to them. Even those lucky to have the chance to interact may not ask the hard questions about their lives, the decisions they made, the people they became and why.

What I remember is a woman who had little time left, time that was spent in a home, with the pain of a stroke slowly taking her life away. First her patience, then her personality, finally her body.

It has taken 13 years after her death for her to begin living in my life.

*

It has been a year since she has come back into my life.

I feel more connected to her than I ever did when she was in my presence. I wish that we could have had time together before her two strokes, before her old age, and after my youth.

Some photos of her reveal her personal life; a chubby baby on her arm in one, around the arm of her husband in another. There is one photo that captures her youth, her spirit around the same age that I am now.

Her eyes are vivid, ignited by youth's possibilities.

I imagine my own picture next to this one, how similar we'd seem though life would create different opportunities for each of us.

*

I remember sitting beneath my Granno's red, blue and yellow patio lanterns, the sun beginning its perpetual slide to sleep, the night crawlers beginning their summit. I was around 6 or 7 years old and my mother and I were over for tea. We sat on white patio furniture and were served delicate tea cups and saucers, each one vastly different from the next.

I remember feeling tremendous pressure not to damage mine, trying to prove to this woman I could be good. I drank my tea in record time and swallowed a few tea leaves in the process.

I looked down at my cup and saw a mass of black leaves creating a nest.

My Granno noticed I was done and asked for my cup to read the leaves. I gave her the cup, thinking that there was no way she'd see anything, the leaves were too thickly piled. She held the cup in her gnarled hands, skin sagging with age. Tilting the cup, shaking the cup and circling the cup she moved the leaves until she let them settle, speaking no words. She finally was satisfied with their free fall and cleared her throat.

"I see a young girl," she said. "She's sitting up against a large tree reading a book. She's got a furry friend next to her."

She looked at me and smiled, showing me the bottom.

I looked and did see a small figure, the leaves creating an image of me and John Paul, my grandparents' sheepdog. I was amazed at how she could transform the leaves into something that I could be a part of.

I realized now how much I loved to learn about myself, loved the sense of self-awareness I received when I felt that I was involved in something, especially as interesting as a tea picture.

Granno had intrigued me from that visit, though I didn't see that side of her often.

*

My Granno's writings have reminded me of what is important in life. The simple things: nature, family and wildlife were dear to her heart however the most important lesson I have gleaned from her is the importance of self-fulfillment. Her writings, especially the later writings, have a tone of melancholy, a realization that her time was running out. Though she lived a fruitful life, she could have pursued writing and could have been a published writer, had she allowed herself to choose that path. I am carrying her talent with me, carrying the writing gene with me everyday. She has shown me what a disservice it would be to let it falter.

I am a writer. I claim it.

*

[Bird watch]
by B. Feltner

On the edge of the woods, the willow trees hang their long branches; the first harbinger of Spring. As the snow leaves, the days seem dreary and gray. The willow hangs out her weeping

branches, now yellow, to the world, to give hope and encouragement to the weary. Spring is not far behind. The gray, windy and often rainy days continue. It seems to take so long after that endless Winter. But there are signs, the first fat robin, the crocuses come out so bravely, even when there's snow at night. They lift their cheery blossoms to the sun, even short bits of sun. Then more gray days, often a week, before the sun warms the beds of waiting bulbs. Their greenery is up, but no blossoms.

Then there are classes and house chores and Birthdays and Easter to deal with. One morning a whole row of dwarf tulips, blue hyacinth and narcissus are smiling at me, gently swaying in the early morning breeze. I take several steps outside to see these wonders in my garden. The bees were humming and busily pollinating. A huge hawk circled the yard, riding upward drafts of wind, great wing span, watching for mice or a wayward chipmunk. But on the other side of the house the bird feeder is alive with birds, woodpeckers are busy on the suet, and at the finch feeder a lovely gold finch, as yellow and as fresh as the day. They have made their way north and are welcoming the food source. Below the creek is full, almost to the top of the bridge. So much rain this year. The stream is rushing along, the current swirling and gurgling, sucking in muddy entrants from the bank.

I sat out in the chair by the back door, sheltered from the wind on the bricks. Suddenly there was a great cheeping and fluttering, much commotion. I looked up and sure enough our little barn swallows were sitting on the wire over my head. "We are here, we have come a long way I hope we can have our old nest in the garage, please welcome us"-what a thrill. Every year they come and nest and flutter and chatter and produce several little swallows. The Mother is so solicitous. She cares for and feed these babies, lines them up, mid Spring and teaches them to fly.

The bluebird houses were a xmas present, all wrapped in their boxes and ready for Spring. They were put on the porch to keep till usable.

This day was soft and warm, a slight breeze. We decided to take our bird houses up to the chalet and set them in place. Because the hills are much higher in the Bristol Hills, we felt we still were ahead of nesting blue birds. It is an hour's trip to our hill house. It's called Alm Hof, Alm meaning meadow and Hof meaning a man's castle. All along the road the blossoms are coming.

A few cherry trees are out, and trees in green lace ready to turn into leaves, perhaps in a day or two. the road is dry, and we enjoyed the winding road ever upward to 2200 feet. We brought posts with us, with square pieces of wood with nails in place and ready to attach the bird houses to the base. We opened the door of the chalet, and let the fresh air and sun rush in. We picked out tools, shovel, pick-ax hammer, pliers and a wire piece.

We carefully chose the two spots for the posts. One part way up the hill, the other at the top. Both near the woods, but in the open and very accessible. Blue birds like to be in the open, perhaps near the woods, but not hidden by them. My husband dug deep holes, he nailed the bird houses to the posts and then set in the hole the completed post, and bird house, all in one unit. Then we shoveled in the dirt. I held the post steady and straight, and suddenly there was a new home for our feathered friends. They looked so perky.

We know there are bluebirds in the area. Last Fall when we were up here I heard a tapping noise. I thought one of the car's brakes was giving out, its a long way to the bottom of the hill so I went out on the balcony to check. There, on the car mirror hinge sat a bluebird. He could see himself in the side mirror and thought another bird was in his territory. He was repeatedly tapping the mirror with his beak. It was so amusing. Soon he flew to the railing of the balcony. Another bluebird flew and sat with him, perhaps his mate. So this year I thought we'd put up some proper bird houses for their home and perhaps we could start a new colony.

Before we left we checked the pond, full this year after our many rains, and small fish jumped in its centre. The chalet is tight and secure. A phoebe called as we left. Now we will be ready for Summer warmth.

*

My Granno's journals illuminated her truest thoughts. She was able to release her real opinions on the page, writing of the trials and the successes of her life.

[Untitled Journal Entry: No date]

by B. Feltner

Now as the house as been sold. We have divided it among the 8 children. I look to myself, I think I am the bigger loss. Blue sea, white fishing boat, sand & sun & breeze--old friends, family members, my mother--dear thoughts. The house was built in 1860, came to us 30 years ago. It stands long & nestled in the moors--It has been added to and taken from--It has a new roof, a basement under, a new paneled room--a fat new couch by the fire, new blankets & mattresses--much loved for 30 years. The children have grown and played & bicycled, and been swimming, three the surf laughing at the sea--Stormy times with wild winds, wilder waves, children growing to adults & finding wives and husbands & creating new families. Time flies and speeds away the older we get but the ocean pounds on, relentless in the story of life & death--of soothing & ruthless awakening--Today it is blue & soft & calm, the decision is made--I gather only personal things--The sea gulls still sit on the post going to the steps to the ocean--the bay berries are ripe in the thicket--I'll leave the sand pails for some other children--the sun is warm and I'll leave the raincoats for the next storm--We have benefited from this lovely place. I'll keep it in my heart for the lovely hours.

*

Granno wrote with a genuine passion to her husband John when he was overseas. She writes candidly about her feelings, realizing that she might never see him again to tell him her thoughts in person. Her letters show a warmth I never knew.

[An excerpt from one of her letters]

Littleton, N.H.

November 18, 1942

Letter 93

Dearest Dearest John,

I can't understand my letters not reaching you for how faithfully have I written,

almost every night time you lift me. I tell you every thought and every care I have--for only you can I share all with. Dear heart no wonder you are worried. My heart aches for you. You have I hope by now received many more letters from me explaining all my moods and thoughts and acts here. But dearest you remember what mother once said to you--once I had given my love you can be sure of it forever. Do believe this & trust & love me for dearest I'm true to the depths of my soul. I'm true all through as you say when I'm completely happy then I won't need you. Oh dearest I could never be completely happy again without you even here I am as upset as unhappy as restless--There's that awful ache in my heart--that lump in my throat. I can work through dear--as cooking & washing & ironing. Don't you see I must keep busy. I must have more than I can do for otherwise I think too much. & please please don't feel you were wrong to enlist. You were right dear & you would have to go now & it would be even harder. Oh no you were right & I'm so terribly terribly proud of you & I love you completely. Dearest there is no other nor ever would be. How can I make this clear to you how can I tell you that every time I write as I do now that tears well up each day--

Her letters reveal a side of her I never was exposed to, a side of compassion that embodied most of the years of her life. She lived a comfortable life as the wife of one of the top orthopedic surgeons in Rochester, New York. She was a nurse, trained at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal, however, once married, became a mother, full-time.

*

Another photo depicts my grandmother, hair now turning white though her youth still present, holding her baby girl MaryLou, the first of her eight children.

She is not looking at the camera. Her eyes stare down at the top of her daughter's head.

MaryLou, sitting on her knee stares straight ahead, scrunched face suspicious of the camera. My grandmother's hair is neatly parted and her hands grasp her child securely. The warmth of her touch works with the sunlight to produce a picture evoking complete serenity, a moment between a mother and child.

My Granno's own family had their fair share of hardship with her father Philip, an alcoholic, however her memories of him are fond.

[A journal entry, no date]

by B. Feltner

I was about 6 years old. We lived in Winnipeg, Montreal. My father asked me if I wanted to listen to music--I was excited to go with him. It was a sunny day in September. We took a streetcar to the hotel. I've forgotten what the name of the hotel was--But we got off in the middle of the city and I hung on to my father's hand, for fear I would lose my way. This hotel was a fancy one. There were red carpets up the stairs--Our singer was Kali Kershi. It was a practice round. We sat at the top of the red carpet stairs outside the room--for an hour we sat there listening to this lovely voice singing La Bohem. It was thrilling--I have never forgotten this & to this day I love the operas--It must be the reason for me to love this thrill of the voice. I have love it in Vienna, in Montreal, in Finland--

*

As I continue to open doors into her personal life, I can't help but wonder what she is thinking about this pursuit.

She kept these writings, as I do mine, personally tracking each day, not writing with the idea of others to read them. She left behind a legacy of writing talent that I can find no where else in my family line.

We are writers, she and I, we are connected.

I will be the writer she could never fully commit to being.

*

My grandmother died in 1999.

I did not cry at her funeral. I did not mourn her death for another twelve years.

I am carrying her torch. I carry the writing gene she never put to use. It is up to me to create a legacy.

When my father was moving her stuff from her home in Spencerport, New York, he found this poem:

*Who'd a thought, at eighty,
that I would feel so all alone.
Who'd a thought, at eighty,
I would be asked to start my life anew.
Who'd a thought, at eighty,
I would need the strength of twenty.
My children say they love me.
My children say you must go on with your life.
My children say you must make a new life,
now that "pop" is in a nursing home.
My children say you must go on.
My house is gone.
My husband is not there for me,
but he cannot be mourned.
My life is turned upside down, undone, fractioned.
So, who'd a thought, at eighty,
I would be asked to do all of this.
Who'd a thought, at eighty,
this would be the way.
Perhaps, only the Creator, who has such faith in me.*

-Barbara Feltner, 1998

To my grandmother

by Kerry Feltner

"I feel a little timeless too, adrift on a sea of blue, just for a little while."

-Barbara Feltner

You were born in 1918. So
wise were you by your twenties that
the auburn hair nesting on your head
turned a marrow
white. I am one
& twenty, idling,
banking on inheriting your cerebral capabilities,
banking on your observance of
my legs, arms, my cadence--your hair
was so elegantly white. Eighty-one
years you lived. I knew
you, for nine.
I spoke, you scolded,
for a few. You didn't like
me & I didn't
think of you.

Your son sent me
your journals,
& love letters to your John. You signed your letters,
"Yours, Brat."
I have been taking in
your words like a wayfarer, walking in
old footprints of dirt roads that are obliging.
Did you want me
to read your thoughts?
Did you
want me?

I am the leaves of
your tea. You read
tea leaves. You could have read me.
But you died & I'm still
a clump of leaves.