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The Forgotten Ending

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I had always remembered my grandparents’ house in Florida as a magical haven. Curtained by the mystical clouds of Spanish moss, it seemed that their Daytona cottage could just as easily have been the headquarters of a clan of undiscovered sorcerers. In my youth, Grandpa Jack and Grandma Joan’s Florida home was an alternate universe, free of rules. Stocked with a limitless supply of sidewalk chalk and a brand-less soda my Grandpa referred to as “Sprite-like stuff”, visiting my grandparents meant a want-less period of freedom and bliss.

Exploring their shaded, suburban neighborhood one summer, I was a detective. Inspired by the *Nancy Drew* series that lined my shelf at home, I imagined dozens of mysteries in need of a solution. Devoting entire afternoons to getting to the bottom of imaginary burglaries and murders, I was unstoppable. On that trip, there was no puzzle I couldn’t decipher, no set of monkey bars I couldn’t conquer, and no friendship bracelet combination I couldn’t master. Every day presented my eight-year-old self with a new conundrum to crack.

Visiting my grandparents again five years later, I yearned for that same thoughtless freedom I had experienced just summers before. Bogged down by the weighty stress of middle school homework and hallway drama, I was relieved to be able to return to a place so entwined with the ideals of individuality and independence that I craved. Upon forcing open the sticky, screened-in door after my five year recess however, I could already tell that the trip was going to be different.

It smelled; that was the first thing I noticed. Rather than the musty, almost nostalgic smell of mothballs that had previously embalmed their house, the entire place now reeked of the Marlboros my grandmother had resumed smoking since I last saw her. In addition to the house’s unwelcome new scent, it seemed Joan’s newly-resumed habit had affected other aspects of their residence too. Like the yellow tint of my grandmother’s fingernails, all of the white table napkins had adopted an unavoidable “vanilla” color that made me second-guess rubbing my mouth against them at meals. Even my grandmother’s previously praiseworthy cooking was affected and adopted a pungent staleness that I assumed reflected the way cigarettes must taste.
Determined to enjoy my week of vacation despite the lingering impact of my grandmother’s sickening habit, I decided to spend more time outside. Escaping out the back door to revisit my previous crime scenes however, I was not greeted by the same feelings of excitement and adventure I had once experienced. Instead, the crushing heat of the sun immediately exhausted me. It seemed the Florida heat had become more merciless somehow-less forgiving, meaner.

In fact, I began to realize that everything had become more hostile in my absence. The loud, rusty squeal of the oven door opening assaulted me. The dirt flecks on the bottom of the drinking cups violated me. The slightly mildewed smell drifting from the fridge defiled me. It was as if everything that I had previously appreciated and familiarized myself with had gone behind my back to purposefully sabotage me.

In addition to the overall griminess of the house, I was taken aback by the noise. My grandparents had unexpectedly gotten louder in my absence. Almost every movement required an audible wheeze, grunt, groan, or exclamation. Like the protesting squeals of their coffee maker every morning, and the achy squeaks of the couch springs every time someone sat down, it seemed my grandparents’ bodies continuously echoed a series of noises in a desperate attempt to alleviate their workload. I began to catch myself silently cheering them on every time I watched them do something. “You can do it Grandpa Jack!” I would think as I watched him take a sip from his mug while simultaneously balancing the newspaper on his lap. My daily adventures had changed from exposing the neighborhood newspaper boy as a nose picker, to helping my grandma unload the dishwasher. Life seemed less important this way, less significant.

I hardly recognized my grandparents anymore. A strong, stable, oak tree just five years earlier, it seemed my grandpa had shriveled into a fragile houseplant under the harsh Florida sun. He was different somehow; like everything else, he was worse off than when I left him. My grandmother was different too. If not as dramatically physically different as my grandfather, she seemed slower somehow, duller. It was as if her colors had washed away in the rain like the old sidewalk chalk masterpieces of my youth. It was in the way her hands shook pouring her coffee. It was in the energy it took her to stand up from the couch. It was in the way she would trail off in the middle of a sentence… oblivious to where she left off.