

## Open Spaces

BY JACOB BUTLETT

I stop underneath my late-grandpa's bedroom window and slip my hands into the pockets of my old college sweater. My late-grandpa looks down at me from the window. His eyes unblinking, his gray eyes always glazed over, like this icy, wintery lawn. He smiles at me and I wave back and wonder if I'm going to cry this time. A part of me doesn't want to say goodbye.

I enter the house. Pouring inside from the window above the front door, sunlight captures the dust motes in the air. I walk up to the stairs at the end of the foyer. The house smells like Lysol; Dad and the realtor must've cleaned. I set my sneakers next to the front door, walk to the staircase several feet away, lay my wool jacket over the banister, and look down at the floor in front of me. More than a year before Grandpa passed away, Grandma had stumbled over the last few stairs in the foyer. Grandpa found her sprawled and panting at the bottom of the stairs, unable to breathe. Before the ambulance arrived, she died in his arms.

I turn around. Grandpa is hovering in the light.

"We need to talk," I say.

"I figured," he says, his voice deep.

I clear my throat. "It's about—"

Suddenly the front door opens and in walks my girlfriend, Joanna.

He fades. I want to call out his name, but instead, I bite my lower lip and force myself from trembling.

Joanna starts to stride across the foyer. I force a smile and rise from the stairs. She wears a pair of blue mittens and green stocking cap, wavy black hair curling around her pierced ears. She unzips her bulgy jacket and reveals a white blouse with a fringed collar. Her old high heels clack against the hardwood, and her golden keyring dangles from a belt loop attached to her dress pants. Red lipstick, light pink blush, and purple eyeshadow cover her face. She curled her eyelashes this morning. I've never seen her so beautiful. We met during our first year in college. She sat in front of me in College Composition 101, and when she noticed me looking at her and not the professor, she blushed and smiled—and so did I. After class, I gave her my number and we've been together ever since. But for whatever reason, things have changed between us. In the

foyer she stumbles in her high heels. I reach out to grab her, but she finds her footing on her own.

“All right?” I ask.

“I’m just fine,” she says, and walks away, her feet too small for her shoes. She has an interview at a publishing company in a half hour. She checks her wristwatch.

After Grandpa’s death, Dad inherited his house and rented it out to college students. Recently he put the house on the market, and it sold a few days ago.

Joanna pulls out a compact from her back pocket, checks her makeup, and asks, “Then why did you tell me to drive you here?”

“My car wouldn’t start,” I say. “If you didn’t want to come in, you should’ve stayed in the car. I want to say goodbye.”

“The house isn’t a person,” she says, and steps into the living room to her left, her high heels tapping the floor. I follow her and offer a smile of goodwill. Ignoring me, she glances at the chimney and touches the room’s yellow wallpaper.

This morning, right before she put on her makeup and clothes, she told me I looked nice in my current outfit: gray sneakers, gray college sweater, gray sweatpants. Though I graduated with my bachelor’s in Creative Writing last month, I still look like a college first-year. Sometimes I fear I’ll always live in the past, naïve and dependent on Grandpa. But I’m with Joanna. That must mean something.

In the living room, I look at Joanna anxiously. I still need to talk to Grandpa. Say my goodbyes.

“The place is so open,” Joanna says.

“A lot of open spaces,” I agree.

“I don’t like empty houses. They look haunted.”

“Ghosts don’t haunt houses,” I say. “Ghosts haunt people.”

“Roll credits,” she mumbles, and takes my hand reluctantly.

And we begin to cross the room together.

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At aged twelve, I went to Grandma’s wake. I hid behind my parents like an infant with a security blanket. It was still incomprehensible—the lighthearted chatter and somber laughter among the funeral attendees. When I was a kid, I didn’t know much about death, except that it

appears throughout life when you least expect it. Dad and I approached the casket. Slouched in an old wooden chair, Grandpa looked at the room's red carpeting with downcast eyes. I looked up from behind Dad and gave Grandpa my sympathies. He smiled and shook my hand, a sign of gratitude. His calloused hand consumed my small fingers. In that moment I started to appreciate the purpose of sadness: to fill the open space happiness leaves behind.

I didn't leave Grandpa's side for the rest of the wake. He wrapped his right arm around my shoulders and said, "Death should not be the end."

"It shouldn't," I agreed.

I thought I was smart. I knew nothing.

At Grandma's funeral I looked at Grandpa as if for the first time. His eyes were turquoise, his wispy hair white. Later on, I spent the night at his house every weekend. He didn't dress differently: the same dress jacket and the same boater shoes. He never left the house, so Dad now bought him groceries. I always asked for macaroni and cheese, and that's what we usually ate whenever I slept over. But I quickly started to lose interest in my weekly visits, but I still spent the night almost every weekend. It was as if he needed me more than I needed him.

During one of my sleepovers, Grandpa told me that life for a boy starts the moment he can think for himself. I was spending the night at his house when he told me that. I was thirteen, reading a comic book at the kitchen table. He was pouring milk for the two of us at the kitchen table, my face buried in a comic book, trying to avoid his sullen eyes.

He asked suddenly, "How's school, kiddo?"

I shrugged. "All right."

"Passing your classes?"

"Yeah."

"Good. And how are they treating you, the teachers?"

"Fine, I guess."

"Good," Grandpa said, then an awkward beat. "And your grades?"

"C's. Could be better."

"Doesn't matter," he said. "Schools don't teach you about real life." He pushed my comic book aside. I looked up with curiosity. He lowered his voice. "Don't ever die, Jake."

"Huh?" I leaned back.

He squeezed my hand and I flinched. “I have seen bad things happen to good people,” he said. “So be good. Don’t let the day you expire be the day you die.”

He let go. I rubbed my arm; it didn’t hurt much.

Not wanting to upset him, I asked softly, “To expire means to die, right?”

He shook his head. “The world has a lot to teach you.”

“Like money?”

“Yes.”

“And other things?”

“Of course,” he said. “Lots of other things. Like friendship, hard work, and—”

“Love?”

The word came out randomly. Thinking of Grandma, I wanted to apologize. But he said abruptly, “Yes, Jake. Especially love.”

I nodded out of respect, not comprehension. And together we ate.

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Next, I show Joanna the living room, pointing to the red floral wallpaper Grandma picked out over forty years ago. I then show her the kitchen and joke, “His love for the microwave prevented him from being a serious cook.” But she doesn’t chuckle. She looks around the room as if she lost something—something innocent and precious. I grip her hand tighter, to show that I still love her.

Next, I show her the backyard from the enclosed patio and tell her that Grandpa and I used to make birdhouses on the back lawn. “It was our favorite pastime together,” I say.

“That’s nice,” she says, and lets go of my hand.

I remember two days ago, while we watched TV at her apartment. Joanna asked me if I could name the color of her eyes without looking.

“Blue,” I said with hesitation.

Her lips furled. “What’s my younger sister’s name?” she demanded. “Can you even remember my middle name?”

I laughed nervously. “What’s with the questions?”

“Can’t answer them, can you?” she muttered, and flashed her green eyes at me.

“Babe—”

“Knew it.”

She was right. I didn't know much about her. She was like a book I never thought I needed to read. I thought love was something you *felt*, nothing more. But I was wrong. She was the future, a mystery I assumed would solve itself. Whatever that meant.

She went to the bedroom and slammed the door. I checked on her an hour later and apologized for being so forgetful. She accepted my apology and we fucked.

Afterwards, lying on her side of the bed, she said, "Remember the first time we made love?"

Stupid and ashamed—like my twelve-year-old self, who knew practically nothing about anything—I fell asleep, leaving the question unanswered.

Still in the enclosed patio, Joanna and I watch the snowflakes tumble from the sky. Joanna glimpses her watch. Soon I tell her about the gold sink faucets in the bathroom. Grandpa bought them because he knew that I liked the way they glint in the light, like lighthouses. I explain this to Joanna and she gives me a perfunctory nod. Then I think of Grandpa, of our inevitable goodbyes, and then I think of Joanna, my future, my love. I seize her hand and she flinches.

"Sorry," I say, and show her the next room.

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When I was thirteen, I walked into my house with an overnight bag slung over my shoulder. Mom greeted me at the front door and asked, "Anything new with Grandpa?"

I could've told her I'd seen Grandpa staring at Grandma's picture on the mantel while I watched TV last night. I could've told her I'd corrected Grandpa for repeatedly calling me by Grandma's name at dinner. I could've told her I'd found Grandpa sobbing into one of Grandma's old dresses. I could've told her what had happened this morning: as I'd stood in the foyer waiting for Grandpa to drive me home, Grandpa looked at the bottom of the stairs, the place where Grandma died. I offered to throw down a rug—the idea was random and stupid—and I touched his arm. He swatted my hand and muttered, "Putting a rug there would be like spitting on somebody's grave." I trembled and nodded. He continued, "If you're going to be a man, you got to remember the people who love you." Getting the car keys from his pocket, he proclaimed suddenly, "Jake, she's that open space now." Because I didn't want to upset him with my ignorance, I remained silent.

"Anything new?"

I looked up. Mom was still waiting for me to speak. I loved Grandpa so much, I refused to talk about his sorrow behind his back. So I lied.

“Nothing’s new. He’s great.”

“Really?” Mom said.

“Yeah. He’s doing all right. Never been better.”

A week later, Grandpa passed away. It must’ve been old age, my parents reasoned. But I thought differently: broken hearts can kill people too.

At the wake I sat next to the casket as he stood in the window behind me. This was the first time I saw him as a ghost. He reached out to me with a sullen smile, his arm passing through the glass. Scared but unwilling to turn him away, I let him stroke my hand, his fingers delicate like melting icicles.

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“Upstairs,” I whisper in the kitchen. “I need to talk to you in private.”

As Joanna returns from the restroom, I look up. She’s used to me talking to windows—to myself, she assumes. I tell her I was praying to Grandpa.

Zippering up her jacket, she remarks, “You pray to him a lot.”

“That’s how I remember him.”

She checks her wristwatch again.

“Won’t be long,” I say, remembering her interview.

“Good,” she says. “I’ll be outside.”

“Okay. Love you.”

“You too.”

I listen to her stride away before addressing Grandpa in the window. “Upstairs,” I repeat. “It’s time we have the talk.”

He has been dead for almost ten years. Now twenty-three, I have grown used to his ghostly presence in my life. In high school a friend offered me a cigarette. In a puddle in the school parking lot, Grandpa glared up at me. Ashamed, I gave back the cigarette, smooth like unused chalk.

It was like that all through high school, his watching over me. He wanted to make sure I was becoming the man he wanted me to be. But later I’d want to be independent. But I first had to value Grandpa first. And understand how stupid I was and still am.

On the night I left my first college party, I drove down a mountainside road drunk. The world was a haze of car lights and star shine, the mountain itself a black fortress. Below, the treetops in the canyon glinted like the top of marble headstones. In the car, the radio's heavy metal music blared along to the roar of the motor, the clank of the engine, the whoosh of the back wheels. In the passenger seat, Joanna was screaming at me to pull over. Teary mascara ran down her cheeks like black rust. Then I swerved around a bend. The front wheels started to shriek, and the car skidded, whipped a guardrail, released an explosion of sparks. Joanna screamed in panic. When I regained control of the car, I caught her eyes and, sensing her panic, started to slow down the car. In the rearview mirror Grandpa glared at me. I started to feel ashamed of myself. A block away from my apartment, I pulled over. Joanna hurried out of the car and rushed away, her high heels clacking frantically.

"Go after her," Grandpa commanded in the rearview mirror. "Say you're sorry, say you're not a complete idiot, say you can be the man she deserves, say you'll never leave her."

"Sorry," I whined.

"Do as I say," he said. "Act like an adult . . . Please."

I went after her and spent a half hour on the sidewalk apologizing for my carelessness. Reluctantly she made me promise never to drink and drive ever again. That was fair. On the sidewalk I hugged her.

An hour later we reclined in my bed. I told her I loved her, even though we'd been together for only a month up until that point. She kissed my forehead. As I wrapped my arms around her, I peered at Grandpa's reproaching eyes in the vanity mirror next to the bed. I looked away, hugged Joanna, and told her again I loved her. But she didn't say anything back.

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When Joanna steps outside, I put on my jacket and trudge up the large staircase in the foyer. With each step, the stairs moan as if the house is dying, begging me to leave, to visit Grandpa only from under the bedroom window until I'm older and wiser. In the hallway mirror at the top of the stairs, Grandpa looks at me. I used to visit the house just to see him: every time, tears collected in the creases on his face. And I fear he'll forever be worried about me, a young man who knows nothing about life. At the top of the stairs, I walk into his old bedroom and address the window.

"Spare me the sentimentality, Jake," Grandpa says in the glass. "I know why you came."

My heartbeat quickens. I stammered, “I’m an adult now, yet I feel stuck. Stuck in the past. My future’s with Joanna. Grandpa, I need to move on.”

He says, “Are you sure you’ll be all right?”

“I have Mom, Dad, and Joanna.”

“You have a lot to learn.”

“I’ll manage.”

“You sure?”

I want to say no, but I nod.

Glowing and translucent, he passes through the window and stops before me. “Well, if you’re sure.” He touches my shoulders with a dejected smile, his body soft like a fleece blanket. “You have a lot to live for.”

“I know,” I say. Though I have my doubts. “I’ll be fine.”

“You will,” Grandpa says. “Sometimes I have to remind myself that you’ll turn out all right without me.”

Joanna’s high heels pound on the staircase. I turn to the doorway.

She calls, “I want to get to the publishing place early.”

“Won’t be long,” I call back, and turn toward the window. Grandpa’s no longer there. I dry my cheeks with the back of my hands and leave the room. From the second floor I watch Joanna stomp down the stairs.

Then it happens—one of her high heels breaks. She tumbles down the last ten steps.

I run down the stairs after her. A moment later she comes to a rest at the bottom. Her chest heaves. She sprawls on the open space Grandma left behind at the bottom of the stairs. I reach her a moment later.

I crouch down and ask as calmly as I can, “Are you hurt?”

“I’ll live,” she grumbles to herself.

“Can you stand?”

“Yeah. My jacket cushioned the fall.”

I say, “Anything broken?”

“Jake, I’m all right.”

“You need a doctor,” I say, and lift her.

“What the hell?” she says, cradled in my arms.

I struggle to open the front door, then I begin to cross the icy lawn.

Flailing, she says, "I don't need a doctor!"

"We're almost there."

"This isn't funny!"

"Where are your car keys?"

"Let go! I'll be fine."

"Don't speak," I beg. I need to show her I love her. That I can still mean something to her. Beyond my ignorance.

"Let go!"

"You're going to be okay," I reassure. "Grandpa, everything will be okay."

I pause. We look into each other's eyes.

"Put me in the driver's seat," she says softly.

I set her inside the car.

She says, "This isn't working, our relationship."

Another moment of silence.

"It's been obvious for a while," she says. "Remember when you drove drunk?"

This question I can answer. I say yes.

She says, "I forgave you. But I didn't mean it."

"You didn't mean it?"

She looks away. "I thought I could love you."

"And you don't?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "I'm sorry."

"Well, we could still make it work."

"No, Jake." She sounds bold, more solemn. "It won't work."

"We could learn to love each other."

I sound pathetic. I reach out, but she withdraws, smiling with unease. I stand up and say, "Are you breaking up with me?"

She turns on the car without saying a word. The answer is clear enough.

She asks, "Want me to drive you home?"

"No. You need to get to your interview. Up for it?"

"Bruises won't stop me. I'll be okay. So will you."

I disagree, but still I nod.

I watch her drive off a minute later. Dusted in snow like the slippery road in front of Grandpa's old house, I turn toward the house and look up at the bedroom window. The glass shimmers in the sunshine and the frost along the edges of the windowpane sparkle. No one's at the window, Grandpa's open space. I begin the long walk back to my apartment, tears falling down my cheeks like fresh blood.