**My Grandpa Does Push Ups**

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I only knew my grandpa as an old man with short, duck-fuzzy hair

and a thick Russian accent; he resembled Nikita Khrushchev, but

smiled more, missing teeth. He and my grandma flew each winter

from Cleveland to babysit me and my brother in Maryland. I loved

him as a ruddy, cuddly presence. His breathe smelled bad, as did

my grandma’s, but I learned to hold my nose when they kissed me.

I recall my grandpa in our driveway shoveling snow, which he

loved to do, or felt obligated to do. He wore his duties like a badge

of honor, under a fedora, and sometimes an old overcoat, his squat

figure lifted snow efficiently and tossed it into piles as I watched

from the living room window. Once, before I understood anything,

he took my 1-year-old self and my 7-year-old brother for a sleigh

ride, a trek to the local store: baby me packed onto a sled. In route

a car honked, pulled over, and a lady inside lowered her window,

“Sir, you dropped your bundle.” Oh, those days, when you

could lose a baby in snow, and the only consequences of your

negligence was a polite reminder from a good citizen. Once a year

we visited my grandparents in Cleveland. Their apartment smelled

like onion soup, old letters, and all the furniture covered in plastic,

so when you sat down it felt like riding a raft without the water.

One visit, when I was ten, I sensed a change. A hospital bed, where

grandpa now slept, was pushed up against the dining room

window. Grandpa was dying, but I knew this only vaguely,

because I could read the tragedy in the room and on my father’s

face, a face which still held the answers to my world. That visit

grandpa was even more obstinate, shrugging off any offer of help,

grumbling in Yiddish, smiling toothlessly at me. By then, my

grandpa visited the hospital every other week where doctors

removed fluid from his lungs, which accumulated due to his failing

heart. He still wanted to shovel. But, he was not allowed outside in

the cold, and he was banned from eating the smoked herring he

adored, too salty, and I thought what would be the point of living

as an adult if all pleasures were forbidden—was he not now like a

child? Sitting bored to death in this apartment in Cleveland. The

adults were talking about nothing useful, when suddenly grandpa

rose from his chair, took a few steps forward, fell to the floor and

stretched out his hands, spread his feet, lifted his torso from the

rug, bent his arms, and did a push-up. “Stop that,” my grandmother

said. But my father smiled, and said, “Ok, Dad,” when he got to

three. But he kept straining, until he eeked out his tenth, and we all

applauded, and grandpa collapsed. I thought him dead. But after a

moment he rose with a scowl of proud, ferocity, as if he had won

a prize fight, which he once did, in a way, by leveling two men

with a shovel who broke into his store, and how he once took my

father to fight the kids who beat him up, and how my father cried

fearing another beating; I loved that story, and the way grandpa

would end it: you don’t stand up, they don’t stop; you stand up to

stop.