

A Grand Featherly Fall

The darling buds of May blossom into the chill of June, blowing through rough winds chilling adolescence, “Ma, you didn’t need to walk me in.”

“Dylan, mijó. My son. You can walk to places when you’re older and have your own car. And a job. And kids of your own to walk to *my* door.”

“I’ll get there one day.” He rubs his arms to stimulate warmth.

She takes off her sweater, “You’re twenty-two, son.” She wraps her son in a shirt a bit bigger than him.

“Just let me be on my own for now. Writing takes time, okay?”

Her eye contact fades into a somber stare, “But you’re always going to need your mother. With your father no longer with us, the least you can do is have your family around to support you.” Cars rush past on the street behind them, reminding her, “I gotta get back to work. Have fun with your father’s mother.”

“You mean grandma?”

“Aye, whatever. Bye, mijó.”

Mijó? It’s like she’s reminding herself of my role in her life. Dylan knocks with light taps, waiting for a response that, hopefully, turns him away.

“Harold? Is that you? Come in!” Grandma Gertrude chirps out. Dylan opens his grandmother’s unlocked door, bumping into Joy, the middle-aged help who couldn’t be bothered,

“She’s your problem now.”

Dylan chuckles as he steps to the side, “Thanks, Joy.” *How pleasant.*

“Harold, oh my, how you’ve gotten tan.”

“Grandma, it’s Dylan. Grandpa Harold passed away in his sleep 21 years ago.”

Ignoring his reply, “Harold wouldn’t leave a poor old lady lying helpless on the floor.” Grandma Gertrude is lying helpless on the floor, sprawled out next to her sunken leather recliner.

He exhales, “And yeah, tanning is easy when you’re half Mexican.” Walking over to his grandmother, he slips his forearms under her knees and back, swiftly picking her up and letting her land gently on her tiptoes before she plops back down in her recliner. “You’re welcome.” He mutters.

“Goodness, there’s that sass. You always had a way with words. Just like your father and your father’s father.”

“You mean Harold?”

Grandma continues, “And your father’s father’s father.”

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“They come from a different era. I’m nothing like them.”

“Obviously not. They come from a more civilized time. Not you, you’re growing up to be big and strong just like--”

“Don’t say it.” Dylan slides through his gritted teeth.

“Your mother.” Grandma Gertrude says while flipping through pages in her daily junk magazine. “How is my dead son’s widow of a wife?” She gives Dylan the side eye, “Her taste in fashion hasn’t changed.”

Rolling the sweater sleeves to his elbows, “You mean mom?” Dylan’s interrupted by his grandmother slamming her magazine to her coffee table.

“I have something for her and her starving artist of a son in my spare room.”

Blowing past her dementia-ridden remark, “Just upstairs, right? I’ll grab it-”

“No!” Grandma squawks. She motions her arms up like a toddler, “Carry me upstairs.”

Dylan motions to the staircase with her professionally installed electric chair that she uses regularly to carry her up the stairs.

“Why would I need that rusty piece of garbage when I’ve got you, Harold.”

His face turns widely rigid. Biting his bottom lip, he swung his way to her before kneeling. Allowing her to climb onto his back, they make their way up the stairs before facing her thick, black tree stump of a door held open with a poor excuse for a wedge. Dylan presses his shoulder against the door, stumbling his way in. The wedge loosens into the room before the door slams shut behind them.

Grandma Gertrude hops off, propping against an old bed frame and shelves as leverage, leaving wrinkly fingerprints amid their dust before gently plopping herself on the hardwood.

The room is a moderately tight fit. White walls dinged up with cracks, and patches turned to a spoiled white or yellow. One stack of boxes lay in the corner. The room is filled with antique garble that scrapes and redecorates the interior of the room juxtaposed with the house it lives in. She inches her way to lean on a box labeled “*Christmas*” that she could fit into, “Well, we’re stuck.”

“Excuse me?”

She lifts her index finger to the wedge, holding the door open, now lying on the floor with them in the room. Dylan runs up to the door to yank on the handle. Twisting and pulling, leaving black residue on his palms from the handle, *this hasn’t been touched since gas was 25 cents a gallon*. After a struggle, he presses his forehead against the door. Turning away from their escape, he slides down to the hardwood below, meeting eye to eye with his beak-lipped grandmother, who mocks, “I told you we were stuck.”

With his head leaned back, he reaches for any scrap within arms reach to use as a projectile towards the one singular window, casting a shy sunset caramelized in the pockets of clouds bathing towns down the road. Dylan whips a screw at the window, leaving a sharp recoil.

Grandma's ear perks up as she turns her shock into frustration, "What's the meaning of this? Throwing things at my window? Why not do something more productive and open it, genius."

Standing up to dust off his sweatpants and mother's sweater, he walks across from the black door, unlocking the hinges on the side of this splotchy window opening to the left that is now inviting a cool breeze. Gertrude's shivers cause Dylan to turn his attention towards the yard, a drop away.

A very cloud rests on the horizon, blocking the sun and leaving a harsh shadow over the neighborhood, "It's June. Why'd it get so cold in the shade?" She gums out through her shaking.

"Must be grandpa looking over us," He walks back to his spot on the floor by the door, "Working long hours at those factories pumping pollution into the world to turn winter into summer and summer into winter. Kinda seems like his thing."

"Harold was always so happy to be doing long hours at the factory."

"Must've been a good job, no wives, girlfriends, or mothers to bother you while you worked."

Continuing, "Unlike my grandson. Twenty-two: no job or a girlfriend or best-selling novel." She scoffs, "Writers."

His face scrunches, "If my family wasn't always suffocating me, then maybe I might have a chance to live my life before I eventually die."

"Oh, Harold. Don't talk like that."

He slams his elbow into the bulging black door behind him and points at his grandmother, whose gaze has been stuck elsewhere for some time, "I'm not him!" His tone is more defensively overgrown. Dylan's finger, misaligned with his grandmother's eyesight, finds its way into her peripheral vision.

"Look."

His eyes burn a hole in the stack of four boxes in the corner his grandmother couldn't break her stare from. His eyes dart from the boxes to his grandmother back and forth until he finds his way to the open window that might be worth squeezing through. Swiftly lunging to the window, he looks down and backs to the stack of boxes.

She buds in estimating Dylan's plan, "A drop that high could damage your spine, leave you in a mess of a coma."

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With a box in hand, his eyebrows raise, and he tilts his head, weighing those options. He squeezes the box through the window before dropping it on the grass with a muffled thud.

“My nightgowns!”

He giggles as he picks up the following box to slide out the window, leaning left and right before letting go, having that box land directly on the box with the nightgowns. The ground grows closer. He slightly smirks, “How’s that for an escape?”

“I bet you’re getting a kick out of ridding this room of my nightgowns and handbags.”

He shrugs, then giddily laughs at his award-winning escape plan. The third box drops more than a few feet away, making a metallic cacophony on top of the nightgown and handbag boxes. His smile melts, and his eyes widen with remorse.

“Those were your grandfather’s tools and rope, Dylan.”

His shock shatters, “Wait, what did you say?”

Before getting the chance to continue, Grandma’s words are drowned out by the sound of Dylan’s ill-balanced escape. The weight of his grandfather’s tools has tipped over his cardboard tower. The three boxes, once stacked, now lay sprawled across the back lawn.

Grandma Gertrude focuses her attention on the last cardboard box in the corner. The top flaps open lightly by themselves. She took a look at her grandson and then went to the box. With a guiding finger, she points, “Look.”

Dylan inches his way to the box. He takes a knee and opens the flaps, revealing tons of pages and burying a peeling, withered typewriter. “Let me guess.”

“Your grandfathers, then your fathers, and now, Dylan, it’s.” She pauses, “Your mother’s if she wants to sell it, I don’t need it. Your father and grandfather don’t need that clunky thing. You know, being dead and all.”

His eyes scan page after page of his father’s unseen works. One page entitled *To Be or Not To Be* catches Dylan’s eyes. He picks up the piece to read his father’s cliché 4th grade Shakespearean titled essay:

“I want to be like my father, Harold; he is my role model because he makes life easier when he reads me poems every night from a black book that he told me was gifted to him by God himself. His words put me to sleep to sleep. Perchance to dream.”

The essay, filled with grammatical errors, falls feathery to the floor before the inside of the box is shoveled out by Dylan’s hands to uncover that black book his father

had mentioned. He opens the book to find the opening scribbles in the ownership of Harold Ramus, a grandfather he never truly knew. The book is littered with poems, some original, others Shakespeare or T.S. Elliot or the band Metallica.

“Oh! I told you you’d find your poems, Harold.” She smiles, “You always had a way with words.”

Like the grip he now holds on the black book, Dylan’s throat tightens, “This has always been here. The insight into my father and grandfather’s lives was buried 6 feet beneath your material interests?” The book lands flat on the floor, slapping his grandmother’s attention onto him. His words escalate piece by piece into a harsh landing, “How could you have kept this from me?”

“Harold, you’re shouting.” She whispers, “Maybe take a nap.”

“Is that how Grandpa would escape this family’s burning grip? A nap? No wonder he died in his sleep, Grandma.” Kneeling to his grandmother’s level, pointing his finger on her forehead as he whimpers, “To die? To sleep? Makes no difference to me.” He choked back, “One day, I won’t have to suffer the smothering of worms force-fed into my mouth from my cuckoo grandmother.”

The wind intrudes to tickle the walls of the tight spare room before reaching the attention of the fire burning in Dylan’s eyes. Fixing his focus on the window, he hops up. Lightly stepping, he finds his footing before looking at his grandmother, whose quiet eyes stay planted on the black poetry book chained to her possessive nature.

Without a second thought, Dylan takes flight. Flying down to the floor below. Below lies the one box filled with nightgowns. Nightgowns cushioning but crushed by Dylan’s weight. Feathers, packed in, now surround Dylan but puffed up and out of the box by the impact of his fall. He lays there amid feathers dancing in the fading sunlight, peeking through the clumps of belly clouds passing through. Dylan squints in the sunset, dazed, “Perchance to dream.” His eyes push him into darkness.

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The midsummer night’s chill is quelled by the slow stimulation of warmth pressing on the youth’s face, “Mijo, wake up.” There’s a pause, then pins and needles as his mother smacks his temple, “Wake up!”

“Ouch!” Dylan holds his head and shouts, “Why?”

“Throwing stuff out a window? Jumping out that same window? Yelling at family? This is what you had in mind for your early twenties. Look at your poor abuela.”

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Grandma Gertrude exhaled heavily and dropped her nightgowns by the front porch with the rest of the boxes filled with handbags, tools, and writing equipment with a cheeky smile, “Just dropping all my baggage onto you two to take home with you.” Her face drops to the cynicism Dylan and his mother know all too well, “I couldn’t be bothered with it.” She goes on with her hands fiddling around in her oversized pockets.

The wind pushes the front door open, intruding on their moment of exit. Dylan’s mother flashes him a *give your grandmother an apology* look. His eyes meet the floor to guide his way to Gertrude, who’s focused on the chill breeze of June passing by her neck. Fixing a look at the back of her head, clearing his throat, she said, “This visit wasn’t terrible.”

“Dylan!” His mother shouts without a delay.

“You could say that again,” Grandma Gertrude giggles through her dentures, “You and your words.”

“Grandma,” He exhales before being stopped short with a shove to his chest. Planted in his torso, he finds his grandma’s hand pushing his grandfather’s black poetry book into him. He takes the book. An unfocused glance goes from the book to his grandmother. He takes the book with his right hand, smiles, and, in his pinch, wags it rigidly.

Dylan brushes past her like the wind on the way out, grabbing two boxes at once to his mom’s car parked under the stars. He leaves his grandmother and mom alone in the same living room. His mom sits on the couch, puzzled by what transpired.

“Sorry for him, he’s-”

Gertrude interrupts, “Extraordinary.” There’s a beat, “Get out of my house. You’re letting in all the dead son vibes back in.”

The door shuts behind her daughter-in-law. Guided by Gertrude’s hand, she faces her back to the door to guide her descent to the floor. The quiet house releases the tension from her shoulders. Reaching into her large knitted pocket, she takes out another book, opening it to pages of Dylan as a baby being held by Harold, his grandfather, with a bit of scribbled verse underneath it.

“I like the world much better when mother bird sings; she becomes my only distraction.”

She smiles at Harold’s last signature. Closing the book, she smothers his legacy into her knitted sweater, “I have no idea what he means by that.” She chuckles as she rolls her eyes to scoff, “Writers.”