

Handkerchief

by Jeffrey Wolf

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My grandfather was one of those people who carried a handkerchief, and when I was in grade school he'd offer it in response to my hacks and sniffles. I had terrible outdoor allergies. Pollen, mold, ragweed, all of it. I was always sneezing and rumbling phlegm, snorting it down and hacking it back up. He would pull a plain white handkerchief, softly folded, from his back or breast pocket, his deliberate movements like a magician who'd forgotten his flourish. I wouldn't take it. A child of the '90s, I thought mucous belonged in a tissue, something that, once sullied with my yellowness and germs, could be tossed and forgotten. The idea of blowing my nose in a wardrobe accessory. Something that went back into Grandpa's pocket after?

My hayfever attacks, frequent and inexplicable. A Pandora's box. Once unleashed, my violent explosions could not be calmed. Four, five, six in a row. Regular enough to keep time. An aftermath of unending snorts and sniffs. Worst in spring and fall, times of year when my grandfather would take me out in his wide, white Buick to a restaurant or movie or (most often) to browse the aisles at Toys "R" Us. I'd make do with scratchy paper napkins, if those were around, or my own left wrist. Surreptitious wipes down my puffy nylon jacket sleeve. (Why this cloth but not the other?) Again and again I resisted the handkerchief, until my grandfather got frustrated with my stiff upper lip routine. He hadn't spent his life working six days a week, scraping by on TV dinners and buying his pants at Woolworth's, so that his number-one grandson could suffer through sinus congestion.

My grandfather didn't get angry. He was calm, subdued, eager to listen and quick to crack jokes. He was always giving me things. A dollar or five on his way out the door, a flurry of toys for my birthday. The closest he ever got to angry in those days was being rebuffed over the handkerchief. He insisted and, worn down, I obeyed.

Like him, the handkerchief wasn't flashy. No monograms or decorative borders, just plain white cloth, rounded at the edges. Cheap fabric, but it must've lasted decades. Unless he secretly bought them in bulk, kept a stash in his bedroom closet. I wouldn't have put it past him. This was the same man who, for years, had me convinced he could inflate his bicep by blowing into his thumb. Still, I like the idea that it was just the one handkerchief all that time. I remember him handing it to me, his round face behind bifocals, made all the rounder when he smiled. He handed it to me, white as a wedding. The linen soft and firm against my fingers, not unlike the tallit cloth he wore on the High Holy Days at shul. (Trailing silver tassels, embroidered with lions and books.) And perhaps by proximity his handkerchief carried that same sense of the untouchable. I was afraid to unfold it, much less use it.

Yet use it I did. Poured forth unto it from the unquenchable faucet in my face. The cloth cool and decadent against my chapped nose. I could never refold it cleanly. (I had the same trouble with maps.) After a few strategically-placed blows, I'd hand back my best attempt, something fat and uneven. Or did I not even bother, and return a wrinkled wad? Somehow I remember both. Just as I remember him redoing the fold, turning it over and inside out, so that my snot and phlegm were buried deep inside the creases, to be devoured by whatever magic renewed the handkerchief for further use. Grandpa had me believing in self-sanitizing linen, that my body's discarded slime would be somehow neutralized once absorbed. A few minutes later

he'd pull it back out, to proffer at me again, or to empty his own nose, or to wipe a dirty chair at the food court.

Where am I going with this? Grandpa and his handkerchief. Back then, everybody's grandpa had a handkerchief. (And now I hear they're becoming popular again, something about sustainability, less tissue wads in landfills.) I could tell you that I didn't deserve my grandfather, his small acts of kindness, his quiet patience. I still don't. But it's more than that. It's my inability to hold the past. It's those forgotten moments that leap out and possess me.

Low white sun, leaves crisping. Rich, toasty air teasing anguish and sneezes. The passenger seat of my grandfather's Buick, a car that always smelled like new car. Its felt interior like a world made of carpet. News on the radio. A yellow box of Jujufruits wedged beneath the center armrest. And his handkerchief, out of sight but always at the ready.

Whatever happened to that handkerchief? After Grandpa died, we sorted through his house on a Sunday afternoon, my father, my uncle, and I. I went straight for the photographs. I already had visions of this book and, like a graverobber, hoarded any image that seemed useful. In the bedroom, my uncle emptied the closet and drawers, piling my grandfather's clothes onto the old king bed and re-sorting them for donations. Bland, faded, utilitarian. Grandpa had lived so long in old age that fashion was an afterthought. A wardrobe of crew-neck sweatshirts and baggy polos that wouldn't have fit me even if I'd wanted them. If the handkerchief was still around, that's where it ended up. Pressed under heavy stacks of cotton-poly blend in a drawstring Hefty bag, left by the backdoor at Goodwill or the Ark.