

Home.

There used to be a certain smell in Flat D, number ten, Regent's Park Road. It smelled of dust, and the smell used to make me sneeze. Out the window (if I could see past the jungle of potted plants) there was Regent's Park, and if I looked hard enough I could see a little corner of London Zoo - the penguin enclosure.

The living room was filled with many things. There were the standard armchairs and a couch, a grainy old television... but the shelves were lined with the numerous strange artifacts that my grandmother had collected over the years: an oblong blue plastic spinning top, a couple of ostrich eggs, strange copper molds, porcupine quills, feathers from assorted birds, a little brick of mud, interesting stones and pebbles, old woodworking tools. The living room led to the miniature dining room, which connected Flat D to Flat C.

There used to be a wall between the two flats, but my grandparents knocked it down when they decided to raise a family there. They had my Auntie Annie first, then my father, and they would spend their childhood and teenage years in those two flats, with two kitchens, two bathrooms, four bedrooms, and two living rooms.

Where the living room of flat D was primarily my grandmother's, the living room of Flat C was first and foremost my grandfather's. There was his desk, which held magnifying glasses and notebooks, and most importantly a collection of mechanical pencils that I often explored and rooted through. There was a phone in that room, as there was in almost every room in my grandfather's later years. On a low shelf against the wall, there was my grandfather's oboe and

cor anglais (which I had the privilege of playing on one occasion), along with a vast collection of oboe music, most of which is now in my possession.

We spent a great deal of time playing the oboe, me and my grandfather. He taught me the famous excerpt from Rossini's *The Silken Ladder*, along with many other pieces, but it was the *Silken Ladder* that he would ask about every time I saw him, even years after he had first taught it to me and I was sure he would have forgotten.

The bedroom that I stayed in with my brother was my father's old room from when he was a boy. There was a small bed that my brother always slept in, and I slept on a mattress on the floor. There were photographs in that room, an old desk, and an exercise bike that was stuffed into a corner. There was a wardrobe with wonky doors, and a radiator that I hit my head on when I wasn't careful lying on my mattress. If I flung myself onto the mattress with too much force, a dust cloud would billow from the sides. The pillows were even worse, and my brother and I would get allergic reactions just by lying in bed at night, and then we would be kept up for hours by our noses and eyes burning, and the sound of the other sneezing continuously. We used to pass the time by making bathroom jokes and telling stories about sentient toilets that made us giggle out loud uncontrollably, and that would consistently prompt our parents in the room over to get up and tell us to be quiet and go to sleep. Occasionally my grandmother would get up in Flat C and walk all the way to our room on the other side of the floor and tell us to hush, and when she told us to be quiet, that's what we knew we had to do.

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Spending time in that apartment was wonderfully calm. There was never a hurry, never any shouting. Everyone became as slow and deliberate with their movements as my grandparents.

When I was very little, this was understandably a struggle because my mind over-involved; I needed to be doing something new every few minutes, and I was not capable of sitting simply and quietly with a book or relaxing on the sofa with a cup of tea like the older ones, but as I grew up the serenity of that place posed a pleasing contrast to my mother's side of the family, with their great expeditions through the countryside. Whenever I stay with them either in their house or a rented farmhouse, every day is something - a hike into the Brecon Beacons, into the lake district, a drive to a remote lake. One particular occasion saw me and my brother scrambling up a high hill along a path bordered by a steep drop. The higher we got, the more the wind insisted we turn back and by the halfway point it was nearly impossible to walk straight. Nearer to the top, it got difficult to keep upright. The cliff to our left got steeper and steeper - a chilling drop into a freezing lake. "People have died here," my brother told me. Standing mere feet from each other, we had to shout for the other to hear, and the panicked cries of my father far below were lost entirely, but we saw him waving his arms, no doubt petrified from head to foot, beckoning us down before we fell. We pushed on to the top and stood above him and waved, and he turned back down the path, walking away from us as if he had resigned himself to losing his children. When we finally got down the hill his face was pale and sour, and he was angry to say the least. I think that he must have been bitter about that incident for days afterwards, and any passing reference to it, even as a joke, wiped away his good mood and replaced it with the same raw fury that had consumed him at the time.

But in Flat C, he was relaxed, he was home. He could go through his old things stored away in drawers. He would brush the dust away from his old toys and give them to me to play with, and every time I returned, I could find those toys again and play with them again, until I

grew out of them, just like my toys back in America. The farthest afield that we ever went while staying with my grandparents was the London Zoo, which was just down the road. My grandfather was stooped and weak, and he couldn't manage much more than that, and year by year my grandmother's arthritis made it so she couldn't walk much more than my grandfather, though her overall health was far better.

Another destination was Primrose Hill in Regent's Park. My brother and I would lead the way, and the adults behind, back when the climb was bearable for my grandparents. My brother and I would get to the top and look out over all of London - the Gherkin, the Eye, the beginnings of the Shard. And then we would race down to bottom, tearing past the old ones and disrupting quiet couples having picnics as we screamed by, laughing at the sensation of pure gravity as it drew us towards the bottom of the hill at incredible speed. We would inevitably have to climb the hill again to rejoin the grownups, and then it would be a time before we all went back down the hill - partly because my grandparents needed a rest and partly because the view was too beautiful for my young mind to appreciate.

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I would sometimes get my oboe out, and my grandfather and I would practice. I had a book full of famous oboe solos from a number of large orchestral works - everything from Bach to Tchaikovsky. In that book was the Silken Ladder, one of the most popular excerpts for an audition panel to assign. I was still very much a beginner at this point in time, and certainly not ready to play such demanding repertoire, but he wanted me to play it anyways because he thought I would have fun with it, and I did. I didn't have the attention span to play long, slow pieces, so the fast, short and sweet nature of the Silken Ladder spoke to me. I practiced it and he

would stand beside me, not interfering until he saw the need to write in a crescendo or a diminuendo, and when he did, his hand shook slightly, and the lines he drew were spidery and went all over. They were hardly recognizable as the symbols they were supposed to be but they got the message across. The solo from The Silken Ladder requires the tongue and the fingers to be in perfect unison at a very fast tempo, and this was the most difficult thing for me. So my grandfather made me slow it down to half-speed and we practiced it like that, and we practiced and practiced and practiced until I was light-headed and slightly nauseous, but the next day when I got my oboe out, my playing was improved.

One evening after dinner, my grandfather asked me if i wanted to play his oboe, and I was excited because I knew his would be made out of Grenadilla wood, as most professional models are. Mine at the time was a student model made entirely of hard plastic. He got the instrument out and unfortunately all I could play was a D-major scale, because German instruments have a different fingering system than American and French “Conservatoire” instruments. It just so happened that the fingerings of the D-major scale were the same on both styles of instrument, so that’s what I played. The sound was gorgeous - full and resonant. I could feel the vibrations of the reed and the instrument all the way through my body, and it’s one of the most important music experiences I’ve ever had, for in that moment I realized that I truly loved the oboe - and my grandfather, who I remember smiling as my sound bloomed out of his instrument.

Whenever he spoke to me over the phone, I would get my oboe out and play that for him, and I think that it brought him joy.

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The Flat as I knew it began to change as I became a teenager. I stopped seeing the interest in the old toys there, I got annoyed at how old and grainy the television was, how small the dining room was, how hard the sofas were. The walks up Primrose Hill came to a halt as my grandfather became sicker, going from using one cane to two, then to a walker, and then eventually a wheelchair. My father grew stressed in the Flat, knowing that his father's time was expiring, and the evidence was strewn about in plain sight. There were extra cushions on every seat, so that my Grandfather didn't have to work as hard to stand up after sitting, and there were handrails on all the toilets. There were pills on the dining table, phones in every room, a special bed. My grandmother grew stressed as well. I think that for most of their life together, he was the provider. He was a professor and a lecturer at a university while she was an artist. He was older, stronger, more outgoing, and then all of a sudden he was none of those things, and it was her turn to take care of him. She had to tell him things over and over because of his Alzheimer's, she had to help out of chairs, off the toilet, out of bed, down the stairs, and she was angry as the most alarming piece of evidence grew into plain sight right in front of her: my grandfather looked devastatingly sick. He became weak and dangerously thin, so stooped that he had to struggle to look at anything but the floor. His face sagged and turned a permanent shade of white-grey. His hair grew long and ragged. His teeth turned colors. The man that had read me children's books and taught me to throw a ball and taught me music was shrinking away before my eyes, before my grandmother's eyes, before my father's eyes, and the sicker he got, the sadder everyone else got.

My oboe playing became quite dreadful around this time. I was in no way motivated to practice, and I resolved to myself that I would quit as soon as I got out of high school. I failed

auditions, recitals, concerts. I was good enough to know what I should have sounded like, but not yet good enough to achieve that sound, and so playing became torcherous. My book of orchestral excerpts fell into a dusty pile of music in the attic, and the Silken Ladder was left totally forgotten by both me and my grandfather. I fought with my parents about how much I should be practicing, and I pretended to have practiced more than I actually had. They saw a future for me as an oboe player, I saw a future of being totally liberated from classical music, with my oboe tucked safely away in a dark corner where i would never have to look at it.

My grandfather also stopped playing. The oboe is a particularly demanding instrument on a physical level, and my grandfather couldn't muster the strength to play it, so he sent me his collection of music, his old reed cases, his old reed-making tools, which included a number of knives and razor blade, and other shaping tools. One of the most important things he sent me was a micrometer made by the British oboe maker Howarth. It's a special tool used to gauge the thickness of the reed down to hundredths of a millimeter, so the reed-maker knows when to stop scraping. If a reed is too thick, it won't vibrate freely. If it is too think, then it will vibrate too much and the sound will spread and become squawky. At one point I was examining it, and I let it slip out of my hands onto the floor, where it landed with a loud, heavy thud, and since the dials have been slightly misaligned. At the time I thought nothing of it.

The last time I visited Flats D and C, my grandfather was painfully close to the end. There was a personal carer that came to the flat everyday, and my grandfather was in and out of hospital on a regular basis as his body lost the strength to fight infections. The week spent there went on forever and ever, and the longer we stayed there, the more depressed we all got. When it came time to say goodbye and take the plane home, I hugged my grandparents, and gave my

grandmother a kiss, but my grandfather had walked away and sat in an armchair. I watched him begin to cry to himself as we walked out the door. I made eye contact with him as the door crashed closed, and his eyes were old and glazed over, but still angry and bitter as we looked at each other for last time. We both knew we would never see each other again. And that's how our relationship ended.

He died on my mother's birthday in January, and the funeral was two weeks after. The sky was grey. The streets were grey. The rain was grey. It was a funeral day.

When we got back to America, I went through my grandfather's old music, and played through some of it. It was full of the same spindly crescendos, wonky letters and bizarre marks that he used to make in my music, and I remembered how much I used to love my love my oboe, and I remembered playing his oboe so many years ago, and it made me upset to think that I had ever wanted to be without the music that had brought me so close to him.

My grandmother rebuilt the wall between the flats and sold Flat D, the one with my my old bedroom, the living room with the ostrich eggs and the porcupine quills, the drawers filled with the toys I used to play with, the one that became a home for me as grew up. It's all gone now, home to a family from the countryside. I know that the next time I go there, the smell of dust will be have disappeared, and that old, grainy television will be thrown away. There will still be snails in the garden, penguins in the zoo, a great old hill in Regent's Park, but there won't be my grandfather, there won't be anything about that place that I remember, and that's one of the saddest things I can think of.



## Author's note

### What works:

I think capture my relationship with my grandfather really well. This was something that I struggled to convey in a way that satisfied me and gave a full picture of what he was like when I was younger and how much of him wasted away with illness. I also enjoyed going back in time and describing all the things on my grandmother's shelves.

### What could be better:

I don't know if there's a clearly defined second story, or even a clearly defined first story. They're both definitely swimming around in there somewhere but it's not as clear as I think it could be. When two stories evolve in tandem, I think it's really, really effective when they converge and explode into a shower of emotion. I think that experience might be a little blurred in this piece despite my best efforts (though I think it could be a lot better with more careful planning and outlining). The whole first / second story thing is something that I really want to practice more. Getting the hang of it will open up a ton of new possibilities in terms of what I can do with writing and how I can affect a reader or audience or whatever.

### What I learned:

I learned a little bit of self control. My memories of my grandparent's old apartment are incredibly detailed and very, very vivid. They carry a lot of personal significance to me, as I hope I illustrated in the essay, but something that I found challenging was not adding too much

description of random things. I often found myself just barfing ideas onto the page and then realizing that that they don't actually advance the story in any way, and so I omitted them. The more this happened, the more I learned to filter out the useless stuff and put down the things that matter.

Feedback that I incorporated:

A few people said to me that I could expand on certain details that I mention in passing and then move away from to talk about something else. An example of this is the story about me and my brother climbing the windy hill in Wales. That started out as a small detail that I expanded into a larger story, that I could then use to take the main story in different directions.