
SALVAGE

Andrew Wingfield

Shooting Fish

Carl Fowler was a wizard. He resurrected dead machines, brought them purring back to life. He transformed ghoulish heaps of wreckage into neat stacks of green money. In his “shop,” a rusting tin structure that stood at the entrance to his salvage yard, he conducted elaborate rituals of tinkering and talk, casting strong spells over males of all ages.

Whenever people gathered at Carl and Ruby Fowler’s place the men and boys would start in the carport next to the house but would inevitably migrate out to Carl’s shop. This quiet, cavernous, work-worn interior was the right kind of shell for people who never came out of theirs. Surrounded by Carl’s tools and gear, passing the bottle he kept in the lever-handled fridge, the men would puff smoke and chew fat, surveying the busy workbenches where Carl’s vices clamped works-in-progress. The place smelled of dust and bourbon and butts, oil and engine parts, kerosene from the furnace that heated it in winter. Nothing cooled it in summer.

I entered that shop as a hallowed place, newly convinced of my great good fortune each time I crossed from the dirt outside to the concrete slab within. For Carl Fowler, this maestro of machines, this high priest of salvage, was my very own grandpa. My great hope, whenever I visited the shop, was that Grandpa would decide to fire up the little John Deere tractor he parked inside. He would climb onto the cheek-holder seat, I’d hop in the trailer behind, and off we’d go down the pitted dirt lanes that wound among the rowed husks of cars. What stories, what sorrows in the jagged window holes, the stripped innards and bared chassis, the rusting bumpers, the weedy grilles, the tireless wheels, the badly mangled bodies of those wrecks!

Cottontails had colonized the place, nesting beneath the picked carcasses and darting across the lanes from one brushy tunnel to another. Any rabbit that crossed our path risked a rain of bullets from Grandpa’s .22. I was a great friend of the ammunition makers, but when the old wizard wielded his thunder stick we often brought Grandma fresh meat to fry. We might flush a covey of bobwhites as we worked our way back to the falling-down house where copperheads were rumored to gather, then over to the low bluff above Muddy Creek. Here we would sit quietly a while, content to watch turtles sun themselves on snags. Still, Grandpa kept the rifle handy: he was not above shooting any fish foolish enough to forsake the sheltering deeps. Once or twice I scrambled down the bedspring ladder to collect a slain gar.

It was no mean feat, shooting fish from that distance in the brown waters of Muddy Creek. And it’s not much easier drawing a level bead on some of my Missouri memories through the murk of time past, beneath the reflecting surfaces of my family’s many stories, my own contending impressions. What do I know? How do I know it? How much have I lived myself, how much in the vivid language of my kin?

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Once I woke up in Grandpa and Grandma’s house to a frightful noise, a kind of groan or growl, an agonized, animal sound. Was it then or later that I traced that sound to its source? Grandpa was legendary among us for grinding his teeth. I might have heard the sound that night, remembered my older sisters’ marveling complaints about Grandpa from their visit one summer before, and understood instantly what I was hearing. Or I could have lay there disturbed and perplexed, drifted off eventually and passed a restless night, only to be enlightened at the breakfast table. It’s also possible I dreamed this experience or made the memory up. The sound in my head—close, sad and vaguely menacing—is such an apt aural reflection of my feelings for the man that it probably shouldn’t be trusted. Chances are I never heard Grandpa grinding. In all my bona fide memories he has no teeth to grind. Dentures, rather—a full set, bottom and top. The real teeth were only part of the feast of losses served up in his sixth decade, when a violent attack of rheumatoid arthritis left him with locked knobs for knuckles and lumps like walnuts on his wrists. At fifty-three he had to quit driving the Coke truck and lay his cue stick down.

Truck driving was only one of Grandpa’s jobs, but for a man like him even partial retirement was tough to accept. After all, he had made his life in work. Born on an Iowa farm, he stopped school after the eighth grade and worked alongside his father in the years before he partnered up with Ruby McCutcheon, who at 22 already ran her own café. To go with her entrepreneurial instincts Ruby, my grandma, had a steady temper, while Carl was clever mechanically, also tough, charming, energetic, opportunistic, foxy, by turns severe and whimsical. My mother remembers when her dad drove for Krogers grocery store in St. Louis

and took her out with him every Saturday, buying her whatever she wanted. She was too young for school then, but old enough to fear for him when he got shipped off to the Philippines. For three years, while Grandpa worked the radios during battles on malarial islands, Mom lived with her mother and baby brother in her grandparents' house down in the Ozarks. She still shudders to think of the great fevers that wrung her father after his return.

That Ozark town was the family's base during the postwar years, their various employments keeping them more and less settled. Grandpa crewed a while for an outfit running a gas pipeline across several Midwestern states. During that job's most transient year, my mother studied in six different schools. Later on the family ran an Ozark dairy farm while also collaborating with Grandpa's bossy sister Violet and her husband Charles on Club 66, a roadhouse they built and operated alongside the legendary highway. Out of necessity, temperament, or some combination of these, Grandpa commonly pursued multiple ventures at once, his nose for opportunities often putting the whole family in harness. Mom recalls mornings feeding the milk cows with brother Harry's help while Grandpa was off tending to other business. She would drop the round hay bales at the top of the sloped pasture and set each one rolling with a swift kick and a solemn pledge to never, ever do such miserable work when she was old enough to choose.

When the family moved north to Sedalia, where Grandma and Grandpa would settle for good, Mom served meals and pumped gas at their live-in service station on Gasoline Alley. Grandpa ran the service station during the day and drove a truck at night, sleeping very little. Meanwhile he was getting started in salvage, a business that requires land. As soon as he could afford to he bought fifty acres a few miles outside town and began collecting wrecks. A short strip of frontage road gave access from U.S. 50—Fifty Highway, in Grandpa's lingo. He built a house for his family, then started another. When the second, more spacious house was finished they moved into it and rented out the first. This continued until four houses lined that stretch of frontage road. The red one, a four-bedroom, split-level spread, stood at the top of the gradual incline. As a child I relished staying in this red house, which occupied the highest point in the little kingdom Grandpa had built.

I couldn't know then that I would grow up watching the kingdom come undone. When I came for Grandpa's funeral in 2000, it was not in the red house, but in the gray one down the hill a piece, that I stayed. His was the first corpse I ever saw in person: embalmed, suited, situated in a lacquered coffin next to a bank of cut flowers, his face molded to mimic some mortician's-manual notion of Dignified Repose. I took one good look and saw nothing of the actual man. Nothing.

Earlier that day, while sucking down beers under the carport roof, I had watched my Uncle Harry pour gasoline on the oil cloud that marred the concrete slab beside his father's house, scrubbing at the stain. Anything to keep my eyes from straying beyond the back yard, out to where the salvage yard used to begin. Grandpa's shop, the spent cars, the winding roads, the bushes and trees and critters—all gone. Now a barbed wire fence stretched around a green pasture empty of all but a rich man's trophy cattle.

Like people, places die—even when the land remains. The dead live only in what we tell each other, what we remember ourselves, what we salvage with our words.

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Old Country

I liked the salvage yard from the beginning, but I truly lost my heart to the place the summer after I turned ten. That year, 1976, my family took the train to Missouri and stayed in the red house for two weeks. Every day, morning and evening, my father and I fished Muddy Creek. We'd rise early, before traffic started stirring out on Fifty Highway, and walk with Grandpa back to his shop. Grandpa would open the fridge, take his bottle by the neck and give it five or six strong slaps on the butt, making it bubble and fizz before he unscrewed the cap and took the day's first pull. Then Dad would have a nip as Grandpa set about coaxing the little John Deere to life.

I took comfort in the slow, jostling way the tractor moved along the bumpy salvage yard roads, the musk of warm Missouri morning laced with Grandpa's Lucky Strike smoke. The engine rattled too loud to talk over so no one spoke, which suited me fine, busy as I was scratching my chigger bites and soaking in the pleasures of the ride. Without covering a great deal of ground, I sensed we were going great distances in feeling and time. While my three sisters, my mother and my grandmother slept back at the red house, I was out on an expedition with the men. Away from the highway and the paved frontage road. Away from the snug red house and mowed yard. Back into this magical middle ground of dead machines and teeming vegetation and furtive animal life. And then back even farther, back past the falling-down house where I fancied my mother and father had been raised in an ancient, mythical world where women bore babies in dim bedrooms and men killed what their families would eat.

Beyond the salvage yard, at the farthest edge of Grandpa's property, Muddy Creek lazed. Grandpa would shut off the tractor when we reached the low bluff, bringing back the quiet. Dad and I would descend the bedspring ladder, load our gear into the waiting aluminum boat, and set off to check the limb-lines we'd baited the evening before with fish we'd caught but couldn't eat, little bluegills and pumpkinseeds. Grandpa would wait on the bluff until we came back with a stringer of channel cats and bullheads, then he'd head off to clean the morning's catch and putter in his shop while we fished our series of holes.

On the surface these sessions were meant to educate me in some of fishing's finer points. Dad used the fly rod he favored, dropping his floating bugs close to the dark protected places where big bass lurk. I used a spinning reel, my nightcrawler dangling a few feet beneath a bobber, and he encouraged me to cast my rig as close as I dared to whatever log or weeds or branches guarded a promising hole. But the fishing was mostly a means to some deeper schooling. I was a California kid, the suburban son of a professional scientist, an expert in fish diseases who had lately foregone angling in favor of golf and tennis. I was growing up amid ball fields and built-in pools, while Dad's youth had played out on and around a thousand Muddy Creeks, places where he learned to set limb-lines and trot-lines, where he giggered frogs and wing-shot quail, where he knew birds by their songs, which snakes to stay away from, where to smoke and cuss with a rascal cousin and where to hide from a raging father. He brought me here as an immigrant takes a child to visit the motherland.

A cross, taciturn man at home, he opened up on Muddy Creek, taking my errant casts in stride, patiently undoing my frequent tangles as he told me stories about great float trips he had taken, answered my questions about what squirrel tastes like, how snakes pass the winter, how owls see at night.

I always tuned in closely to Dad's tones and turns of phrase. He could wither me instantly with a harsh rebuke, and he could puff my sails full of fresh wind with the colorful language that rolled from his tongue as he eased back into his old country. A strange person was nuttier than a peach orchard boar. A buck-toothed person could eat oats out of a Coke bottle. An unruly person was wild as a March day.

And fishing with Dad on Muddy Creek? That was better than dancing with a fat girl.

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Drought

I returned to Missouri in 1980, the summer before I started high school, this time alone. My mother pitched the trip in an upbeat way, and part of me wanted to go; but I couldn't shake the feeling I was being shipped out. Mom, I'm sure, told herself it would do me good to be in Grandpa's company, as Dad had kept such a low profile in the two years since the divorce. I was fourteen and hard for her to handle. I was angry about the break-up, prone to nasty outbursts and deep sulks.

On the plane ride to Kansas City, my first solo flight, I soothed my nerves with fond memories of the salvage yard. Events at home had encouraged me to hold Missouri hostage from history, to protect it as a place that existed before—and somehow beyond—my mother's betrayal, my father's absence, and my own confused fall into the fires of the flesh.

But I arrived in Sedalia to find Grandpa's world even more changed than mine. The previous spring he had sold the red house and the salvage yard acreage to Olin Howard, who owned the quarry and ready-mix outfit just up the road. Grandpa had shut the salvage yard gate for good, planning to live on Social Security and the interest from the land sale. Olin had found renters for the red house while Grandpa and Grandma moved into the gray house next door, a little two-bedroom place that needed work.

I chafed against these changes, but Grandpa kept me so busy I really didn't have much time to brood. The heat wave everyone teased me about bringing from California lasted that whole summer. Because of the weather, we would get up early to work on the gray house before the heat of the day. The arthritis had by now crippled Grandpa to the point where he could hardly grip his wrenches and pliers. His skin tore like tissue paper and the slightest knock bruised him badly. It pained him to drive a nail. Thus I supplied the brawn for our morning sessions, he the brains.

The house's bathroom lacked a shower, so we installed one in the basement. There we also hooked up the washer and dryer that had migrated down from the red house, brought power over from the breaker box, sweated new water lines, and installed a drain pipe and vent. Grandpa knew how to do it all and he took great pride and pleasure in doing it without spending a nickel. To heat the basement, we used a little stove somebody had thrown away. He had also scared up an air conditioner, a massive window unit that cooled the whole main floor. We built a platform to support that behemoth and Grandpa lined up a

couple of young bucks to help me hoist it into place. From then on we had a cool spot to sit and watch a Royals game, pulling

in the Kansas City signals with the antenna we'd raised on the roof.

We would work until Grandma called us for lunch and then rest a while after we'd eaten. Later in the afternoon we would take a run, Grandpa's phrase for getting in his old Dodge sedan and going someplace. Most days we headed in to Leo's Budweiser Bar, his watering hole on Sedalia's dying Main Street, where he would order a shotnabeer and I'd have an RC. He'd give me quarters for the jukebox and, if things were quiet, agree to a game of eightball. He had wielded a wicked cue stick in his prime, and though he couldn't execute the delicate combinations anymore, he still saw all the shots and took the game seriously. If any of the current generation's shooters had a game going at Leo's, we sat on our stools and paid attention.

On the way home from Leo's we might stop in and see his sister Violet. Or we might cross the railroad tracks and take a spin through Colored Town, where a tornado had done some spectacular damage a few months before. If we took Fifty Highway back out to Grandpa's place, there was always a chance his foot might suddenly turn to lead: he liked to see if the old Dodge could still make the century mark. If we traveled the back roads, he'd let me get behind the wheel to drive between the fields of drought-stunted corn.

One of the detours Grandpa liked to take on the way home was through the gate of Olin Howard's domain, the last place on Fifty Highway before you reached the turnoff for the frontage road. Olin was one of the richest men in that part of Missouri and he displayed his wealth to everyone who passed the property. To the right of his gate stood the big white house where he kept his snooty wife, the pillared porch overlooking a pasture where Black Angus grazed. To the left, in long, tidy rows, gleamed the great trucks and machines Olin's men used to dig and break and haul the rock he'd made his fortune from.

Though Olin had married into a devout, established family, he was notorious (I later learned) for his tomcatting around the local honkytonks. He was loud and coarse and utterly out of place in his own living room. He was Grandpa's junior by a good fifteen years, but they came from the same stock. Grandpa never flinched from Olin's shouted point-blank greetings or quailed at his raunchy jokes. That spring's land deal might have cemented the bond between them, but they'd always enjoyed each other. Grandpa liked that all the money hadn't altered Olin much; and the old salvage man answered his tycoon neighbor's need for a kind of touchstone, keeping Olin within comfortable reach of his origins. In later years Olin would ride over and have coffee every morning in Grandpa and Grandma's kitchen. During this era, when he was too busy for coffee breaks, he was still delighted to drop what he was doing whenever Grandpa and I rolled onto the quarry grounds.

"Hey Carl!" he'd yell. "Hey young feller! How y'all doin'? You wanna see some big catfish, young feller? Let's take him down there to the pond, Carl. Get some fishfeed out a one a them bags, them ole catfish come right up out the water for it!"

Grandpa lapped up this attention, but he'd always insist that Olin go back to his work. Then, as trucks roared back and forth, kicking up the quarry dust, we'd toodle along in the Dodge. We would stop off at the catfish pond, swing by the cow pasture, then proceed to Olin's dump. Anybody else had to pay to extract treasures from the dump, but all of Olin's men knew Grandpa had carte blanche to scavenge as he pleased. He was forever spying a fan or toaster or TV set that needed a cheap part or a few minor adjustments in order to work like new. It shocked him to see what people threw away.

The smaller items he snapped up at Olin's suited his waning strength and scaled-back ambitions. He had no interest in selling the gadgets he redeemed, gladly giving away what he couldn't use. He had rigged up a workbench behind the gray house and now did most of his tinkering there.

Olin planned to turn the salvage yard acreage into black angus pasture, but he hadn't touched it yet. Grandpa's shop and salvage yard remained intact, but much of the old life had leaked from the place. Now and then Grandpa and I would fire up the aging John Deere, rumble through the salvage yard gate, and lose ourselves amid wreckage that had never struck me as desolate before. The cars were four years rustier than the last time I'd seen them. That summer's drought had done all the weeds to a deadly brown. Still, the queasy feeling in my gut mostly boiled down to a change of perspective. Where these roads had once granted me access to my heritage, to a whole matrix of family meaning, now I traveled as a trespasser here, the twisted metal ghosts writhing in the awful heat, threatening to overwhelm me with the weight of things lost.

Imagination is such a fickle friend. The same scene-building bent that made strong bridges to transport me could just as deftly turn the waters treacherous below. As a child I had been much easier to scare than my sisters, even the younger one. My parents grew wary of introducing me to Disney ogres after seeing the deep impression pelt-hungry Cruella DeVille burned onto my mind. At sleepovers later on I had to shield myself from the cheesy late-night horror flicks my friends devoured like Halloween candy. I did manage as I got older to build some bulwarks against old insecurities, but when my father moved out all those protections dissolved in his wake. At home, sleep eluded me as I lay in bed each night, my body curled like a giant ear, listening for signs of threat. I was the property's sole male protector—no matter that I was woefully inadequate for the job. It's no surprise that superstitions long at bay mounted fresh offensives in this vulnerable season. In her guilt, Mom never sus-

pected that my anger over our crashed family rose like surface shimmer from a deeper source of heat, the boiling conviction that I must have done something dreadful to make the world go so far afield.

Even at fourteen I was the kind of kid who took it to heart on some level if you accused him of bringing a heat wave from California. Droughts did spook me, since I'd watched a brutal one whiten lawns and kill trees and suck the reservoirs around my home town dry a few years before. With their power to parch, to wither and blight, droughts carry the marks of a potent hex. One drought is all it takes to show you why so many human beings have danced so hard for rain. One was enough to worry me that I might have carried this current curse into my ancestral land. Not that I ever thought this out loud. Only that I took this Missouri dry spell so personally.

After the old folks had gone to bed I would make my nightly nest on the couch and watch TV a while. The ten o'clock news would eventually come on, the weatherman would flash the unchanged picture of the empty heartland sky, and I would dejectedly shut off the tube. In the dark quiet I'd lie there all uncovered, open to the sounds of occasional trucks out on Fifty Highway, their tires singing me west away from the gray house, away from Sedalia, through fields of brown Missouri corn and on into flat Kansas. I'd cross Kansas and keep on west up the Colorado plateau, then up more steeply over the Rockies' shoulders, down again and up, down and up over the mountains of Utah. The last range left me at the edge of the Great Basin. All the way through that immense desolation I'd follow Fifty Highway, my lifeline, the old cross-country route whose wandering thread I liked to follow with my fingertip across Grandpa's U.S. highway map. I'd grow eager as I spied the Sierras' eastern slope. With a full head of steam I'd climb up my state's noble mountains, curl down along Tahoe's southern shore, then shoot the pass and coast down past Placerville and El Dorado Hills, aiming toward my home town, which happened to also sit near Fifty Highway, the marvelous ribbon of road that tied the two ends of my world together.

But I didn't go home. Instead I followed the sadly familiar route to the house of the girl I'd been breaking my heart over all spring and early summer, seeing that place so clearly in my mind, the chocolate-brown sides, the shake roof, the slick speedboat trailered in the driveway, the ornamental rocks on either side of the front walk. Soon she'd emerge from the front door and climb into my pickup, sliding toward me across the seat. We would set off down Fifty Highway together, but by some miracle of geography we found ourselves on the short stretch of the road leading from Grandpa's place into town. Soon we'd park in front of Leo's Budweiser Bar and I would enter the smoky room a solid man in jeans and work boots, T-shirt and cap, a younger and more potent version of Grandpa blended with an older and more confident version of myself.

I had come to throw back a few shots and show people how to shoot pool. The other shooters who hung around Leo's all saved their best stuff for me, but it was never good enough. My stick was way too wicked. As if I needed an extra boost, I also had my girl here, standing by the jukebox where she waited for me to finish these fools off, collect my winnings, come over and take her by the waist as Loretta Lynn belted out a ballad. We would dance there, bellies pressed tight, until the growls of thunder called us outside to welcome the storm that spelled the end of this awful drought.

Side by side in my pickup, the tools of my trade bedded down in locked boxes behind us, we would follow Fifty Highway out of town as the warm wet wind blew through the open windows and lightning flashed out ahead of us. The rain would come pelting and scattershot at first, then thick and steady as we pulled off the frontage road and down the drive, past the darkened gray house and into the salvage yard. We would feel our way down one of the narrow dirt lanes, the wet wrecks on either side revealed by sudden flashes as we wound back past the falling-down house and eased up to Grandpa's vacant perch on the bluff overlooking Muddy Creek, where we killed the engine and embraced above the swelling stream.

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Chocolate Syrup, Light Beer

Alcohol is one of the more popular solutions to the problem of imagination, in my family as in many others. Grandpa had never been one to tinkle on the job if someone else was signing his checks. On his own time, though, the rules were different. My father remembers him putting away a fifth of bourbon during a typical day's salvage work. An accomplished drinker himself, Dad still marvels at the way Grandpa would down that whiskey without ever slurring his speech or altering his manner very much.

Dad had first come courting at the Gasoline Alley place when he and Mom were fifteen. That day, Grandpa invited him out to the garage and offered him a snort from the bottle. Dad passed this sniff-test with ease. He and Grandpa got along famously after that. At nineteen, when he married into the family, Dad had already secured the role of Grandpa's sometime running buddy, though he'd learned the hard way not to match rounds with the old man when he was chasing shots with beers. Even Grandpa had his limits, however. By the time of my drought-summer visit, his body had turned balky toward the hard stuff. He still threw back the odd shot at Leo's, but otherwise restricted himself to the twenty or so cans of light beer he typically

drained between breakfast and bedtime.

Bedtime came early, in part because the beer made him groggy, in part because Grandma's sister Jewel liked to come over and visit after supper. When Jewel's husband Jack was still living, Grandpa had sold Jack and Jewel the house beside the gray one. Grandma didn't drive, had no way to get herself to town or out to one of the nearby farms where her people lived. Except on special occasions her whole social circle began and ended with Jewel, a feisty intriguer who had the disconcerting habit of punctuating her chatter with little whistles and peeps. She and Grandma drank plenty of light beer also, and by this time of day they were usually ready to see what kind of rise they could get out of Grandpa. He'd go to bed as soon as they started in on him, leaving me to face his tormentors.

Like Grandma, Jewel had a daughter whose marriage had collapsed. Divorce was very much on these sisters' minds. Grandma seemed to blame my mother for my parents' troubles. Why else would she have plagued herself so at the thought of losing my father, her son-in-law of twenty years? Night after night she chanted her love for him, reminding me that he was the father of her grandkids. Oh, and how she loved us! How it comforted her to recite the litany of the times we'd shared, the cute things each of us had said or done. I knew every line of it by heart, knew there was no way to hurry or abridge it, that once it started I would be there a good long while, offering up the occasional stock response, doing my part to help the ritual run its course.

I came to dread these lugubrious evening sessions. Even in the daytime I avoided being alone in the house with Grandma because of the way she rambled, talking on and on whether I stayed in the room or not, her words eerily void of value, like checks drawn on a closed account. Surely this sad side of Grandma hadn't emerged overnight, even if I experienced it as something entirely new. I'd just been too young to notice it before, and insulated by other family members. Before this solo visit, I'd known Grandma as a playful person with a penchant for secret plots and alliances. Silver dollars had a way of appearing in your sock drawer at Grandma's house. Cans of Hershey's chocolate syrup would turn up under your pillow. Now, though, the only glimmers I saw of Grandma's playful spirit came tinged with meanness, as she and Jewel got in a few drunken jabs at Grandpa before he retreated to his room for the night.

But on two day-long fishing trips we took on Lake of the Ozarks that summer, I saw Grandma freed from the isolation that Mom later blamed for her mother's decline. Grandma occupied the middle of the three swiveling seats on Grandpa's fishing boat. She cut a charming figure in the slacks and long-sleeved blouse she wore for protection from the heavy sun. A bright scarf, knotted daintily beneath the chin, kept her wide-brimmed hat from flying off when Grandpa gunned the engine. She was content to let Grandpa bait her hooks and handle her caught fish, but she delighted in the catching. She also excelled.

Our main quarry on these excursions were crappie, paper-mouthed fish with a special talent for aggravating people with dull nerves and jerky reflexes. With her sensitive hands, Grandma easily outfished Grandpa when we got over a lively crappie bed. You bet she let him know about it, too, ribbing him goodnaturedly as she slipped me an occasional wink. Everything out on the water delighted her. She'd point out woody bluffs and limestone cliffs she found pretty. The cliff swallows' mud nests captivated her, as did the egrets' way of flying with their feet dragging behind. It gave her a great thrill whenever I went over the gunwales for a dip.

Out in the boat, Grandpa bantered with Grandma as he never did at home. To hear them out on the water together, familiar, at ease, gently teasing, was to know the blame that Grandpa bore for ignoring her into the rambling woman she had become. At first glance he was the one who suffered more, with his knobby joints and pained gait, his eighteen aspirins a day. But he also controlled his own destiny as long as he could drive. Grandma came from a big family. She'd raised three kids, often while running a restaurant. She'd gotten used to a lot of traffic, also a lot of work. The gray house must have seemed awfully quiet to her. And keeping it in shape? That was small potatoes. Dust never had a chance to settle on her surfaces; objects never strayed long from their rightful places. She made three full meals a day and kept her cookware as shiny outside as within. She instructed me to throw my dirty clothes to the bottom of the basement stairs each morning; in the afternoon they'd appear in my dresser drawers, even the underwear ironed.

The gray house's demands kept Grandma in harness only half the day. Beer helped her muddle through the remainder. She'd been an indifferent drinker in the prime of life but her thirst grew in this late chapter, as much as her world contracted. Grandpa's drinking was a fated thing: a man of his time and place, with the intense oral needs he had, the restlessness and strong anxieties, couldn't help but hit the bottle. But Grandma's drinking was mostly a matter of environment. In the peculiar atmosphere this old couple created, even alcoholism was catching.

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Snakes

I drove west through Sedalia on a cross-country road trip with two friends the summer after I graduated from college. The Plymouth Valiant we traveled in bore the scars of the twenty brutal winters it had weathered in Buffalo, where the salted roads had sent a rust rash climbing up the doors and fenders and gnawed large holes in the car's underside. Glance down at the floor while driving and you could see the roadway pass below. The car ran better than it looked, as long as you didn't push it too hard. A couple of early breakdowns convinced us to do most of our driving at night, when the air temperature fell, the engine strained less, and we ran no risk of destroying our retread tires on hot asphalt. Running at night worked fine until our tail lights quit.

The good news about the tail lights was that they gave out near Sedalia. We presented our dilemma to Grandpa the first morning at his place. He nosed around the car a little bit, announced that the problem boiled down to wires we'd be fools to mess with, and set about devising a solution. By that evening our silt-colored Valiant wore a pair of round red running lights high atop its peaked back fenders. We lit them every evening through the rest of our journey by attaching to the battery a wire that snaked back through the fire wall, up along the ceiling of the interior, and on through the trunk.

Grandma chuckled over that old car and my long-haired friends when I returned four years later, and she spoke repeatedly of earlier days on Lake of the Ozarks when I used to jump out of the boat to swim. Yet she couldn't consistently bring my name to mind, nor that of my sister Sarah, who also came on this trip.

Naturally, it upset us to see Grandma's mind begin to fray. Yet it also fascinated me to hear her laboring to haul some of her stories back from the edge of oblivion. Our first evening together, while Dad and Grandpa were laughing over some of their old adventures, Grandma decided to offer a tale of her own. She blurted out that a little girl had said, "But really I farted." Everyone paused, endured an awkward moment, and moved on. At breakfast the next day Grandma filled in a little more of her anecdote, telling us that the child who said that about farting was the daughter of Allan Ray, her younger son. And then that evening came the whole tale of little Andrea, Allan Ray's first born, announcing to a group of grown-ups that she'd farted. Allan Ray corrected her, saying, "No, you passed gas." And Andrea said, "Okay, Daddy. But really I farted."

Snakes coiled at the center of the other memories Grandma retrieved in this piecemeal fashion. Early in our visit she told about the boys who put a snake in the girls' toilet at school when she was a child, which scared her nearly to death. Later, she referred to a more recent time when she'd stood frozen in the back yard watching a snake on the lawn, waiting for Grandpa to come home and kill it for her. And then, a good thirty-six hours after first telling about the snake in the toilet, she added a host of details to that ancient scene, supplying the name of the school, the teacher, the town. I knew Grandma's repertoire as well as anybody, and I'd never heard these serpentine stories before. Why were they surfacing now?

It troubled Grandma deeply that the ornery boys at her school way back when could get away with such a violation. "Them boys was awful wild," she told us. "I couldn't control em." Nor could she control the fear that seized her when she'd seen that snake in the yard; she stood there paralyzed until Grandpa came and delivered her. I'm pained by the thought of her frozen out there on the lawn, the larger truth this image tells about her dependency on Grandpa and the fears this brought. The dependency was of course an old story; but it was also an ever-deepening reality now, as dementia slithered through the garden wall and began to drag her down.

One morning during that visit I came into the living room and found Grandma parked on her recliner, bare feet propped on the levered footrest. Her toenails were in awful shape—overgrown, misshapen, the color of cold bacon fat. Sarah came in soon after me, noticed the toenails, and went for a pair of clippers. While she made herself useful, sending shards of gnarled nail bouncing off the ceiling and walls, I brooded over my grandparents' gloomy prospects.

Many of the things Grandma couldn't do anymore Grandpa now did himself. He bought all the groceries, cooked and cleaned, did the laundry. For our welcome dinner he barbecued pork chops out on the carport and served us cole slaw out of a bag. The pink angel's food cake we ate for dessert came from Wal-Mart, like the gooey ice cream we scooped from a gallon plastic container. Grandpa couldn't offer us his wife's home cooking, but he hosted us with gusto. He was more lucid and awake than we'd seen him in a long time, thriving on this diet of new chores. But the house bore only the vaguest resemblance to the tight ship I remembered. Not exactly messy, it had the rough-edged look you'd expect of a vessel with an arthritic, alcoholic eighty-year-old man at the helm. Then there were the toenails, which pointed toward a kind of care that Grandma needed and Grandpa couldn't supply. Mom and her brothers were already on his case about bringing someone in to help.

Eventually a state-sponsored nurse started coming a couple mornings a week, but Grandpa remained on duty at all other times. He claimed they couldn't afford extra help. When Mom and her brothers offered money, he declined—not surprising from a man who'd always avoided borrowing everything, from cash to Crisco, out of a staunch aversion to owing. God knows a restless spirit such as his must have bridled against being so tied down. And Grandpa was such an operator. Legend has it he used to hose down a stack of wrecks in winter, to add weight in ice before he trucked them to the scrap metal man. Wouldn't this crafty character have arranged more help if he'd seen any kind of angle? Yes, but only if he wanted more help. Only if he

truly resented the rigors of this caretaking job. Only if he hadn't grasped on some level that, in shouldering the burden his wife had become, he obeyed the rule that every farm boy learns early on: you reap what you sow. His choices had helped get Grandma to this point. She was his responsibility.

The old man who turns doggedly solicitous only after his neglect has helped damage his wife past the point of repair. The old woman who gets the attention she needs, too late to do her much good. Out of such stuff homespun tragedies get sewn. It's tempting to tell the story that way, but the facts suggest something a little messier and less pat. Grandpa did pour all he had into looking after his wife. Besides running the household, he escorted Grandma everywhere, from the recliner in the living room to her chair in the kitchen, from the kitchen to the car and back again, until he tucked her into bed. He led her to the bathroom when she needed to go, waited by the door until she finished. He kept the basement door locked so she wouldn't fall down the stairs. He never left her alone in the house. She came on errands with him, waiting in the car while he shopped. In the evenings he'd often take her driving on the back roads, hoping to see some turkey or deer.

Those evening rides, and occasional fishing trips taken for his benefit as well as hers, may yet have been the only efforts he made to boost her morale. Otherwise he ensured her safety, he kept her body in working order but let her spirit languish in a hundred little ways. A weakening mind needs nothing so much as exercise. As she had showed during our visit, Grandma relished the chance to do some salvage work, toiling through two days sometimes to reassemble one of her stories. But after so many years of ignoring her, Grandpa wasn't about to start drawing her out now. He'd pass an hour in the living room with her and not say a word. Worse, he'd go into the kitchen to cook something for them and leave her marooned on that recliner. Their round of errands never included stops at her kinfolks' houses or the beauty shop. He seemed oblivious to anything touching Grandma's dignity, acting as if all self-pride had dissolved in advance of her mental and motor skills.

At dinner during my next visit, two years deeper into Grandma's decline, I watched her glancing in nervous bafflement at the knife I'd placed by her plate when I'd set the table. I cut up her meat for her, once I saw that Grandpa was content to let her eat with her hands. This time Dad and I had come alone and found Grandma and Grandpa both starved for company. As we ate the steaks Grandpa had barbecued, the cole slaw and boiled taters, we sipped good red wine from California and Dad escorted us back through some highlights from his and Grandpa's running days. There was the night they got drunk working Grandma's fireworks stand on Gasoline Alley, Dad's giggles spilling over in the kitchen as Grandpa lied to Grandma about why they'd gotten in so late. Also the time they got a ticket while clamming out in Oregon. They dug three limits, but the warden who'd watched them through his binoculars pointed out that Grandma had never touched a shovel. And who could forget the giant salmon Grandpa caught in the American River, with Dad handling the boat and gaff? Dad finished with one I'd never heard before, a story from the salvage era, when Grandpa owned the rights to all the surplus rubber from Whiteman Air Force Base down the road in Knob Noster. They would share the truck ride when Dad was home from college on a break, drinking peppermint schnapps so that—as Grandpa claimed—Mom and Grandma wouldn't know they'd been at the bottle. They'd fill the truck with life rafts and bomber tires and overshoes and Grandpa would dispense with most of the booty. But Dad would take some overshoes back to college and sell them out of his trunk on rainy days, along with cans of shark repellent and die packets scavenged from the rafts.

Grandma enjoyed these stories as much as Grandpa, leaning over to me now and then to say she thought them two had been awful wild. Though she couldn't say Dad's name or mine, she knew just who we were—mostly because of Dad. Earlier, within five minutes of our arrival, she'd begun telling Dad everything she could think of about her daughter. During that dinner—that whole visit, really—she stayed cheerful and sociable, whether she was laughing at the stories or jumping into the fray now and then to tell us something. Narrative was more than she could manage anymore. She just wanted us to know who her people were, reciting the names of Jewel and Sylvia and Betty Jo, her three closest sisters, but blanking out on the rest. She asked Grandpa to tell us how long her mama had lived—ninety-nine years, as we knew.

Two years before, Grandma's elliptical, slow-motion story-building had helped me to see how connections make memory. Her illness didn't erase words and pictures from the data bank, but wore away the associative links that granted easy access. To see her stories slowly take shape reminded me of driving a car with its automatic transmission on the blink. The transitions from gear to gear, normally so smooth and speedy we don't notice them, turn into grinding labors. And now her stories rested beyond reach. Now she possessed only the handful of names that situated her, carved out her context in a family, a lineage. Grandma connected to the world through her bonds with people, those whose names and faces and voices still meant something to her. As long as she had these basic links, the world also kept its connection to itself—its integrity, its wholeness. That feeling for the whole must be what goes in the later stages of dementia, the afflicted person faced with disintegration of the most literal kind.

As long as Grandma could see and hear my father and think of her daughter, as long as she could tell us who her sisters were, that her mother had lived a long time, she had a hold on identity, some sense of self. If you have that you have some ground to stand on, and reason to turn a cheerful face toward the darkness. But the darkness looms—a little more of it creeps in each

time a link dissolves, whenever the word for something won't come. I noticed on this visit that Grandma, despite her basic good cheer, had new tricks to keep anxieties at bay. She talked about Grandpa in a nervous way when he left the room, fretful until he was again in sight. In those moments her eyes edged toward the look of baffled helplessness that had come that first dinner when the steak knife confronted her. I barely noticed these shaky moments while they were happening, but in hindsight they've grown. Here were the first hints of the frightened, bewildered woman she had become by the time of Grandpa's funeral.

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Memory's Yard

Fluids flooded Grandpa's lungs and drowned him at the age of 83. Everyone who came for the burial had to agree he'd lived one hell of a long time, considering how he'd treated his body. Some of us marveled privately at his iron constitution, wondered how long he might have made it if not for the multiple packs of cigarettes he'd smoked every day for seven decades, and all those oceans of whiskey and beer. Most supposed the rigors of tending to an invalid wife had cost him a couple of years. But nobody thought life had shortchanged him, except perhaps his sister Violet, who'd never cared much for Grandma.

A typical American family, we descended upon Sedalia from the many directions of our wide diaspora. I came from the nation's capital to support my mother and represent my sisters, preferring the clarity of these objectives to the murkier question of what might be at stake for me personally. Mom and her brothers are three of the most gracious hosts I know. But death is a tricky occasion, a hard one for people whose habit is to assemble in good times, but grieve alone. Our gatherings at the gray house had a weirdly festive feeling, with plenty for everyone to eat and drink, and relatives wrapping the real reason for our coming in yards of long-time-no-see chatter.

I gravitated toward my cousin Brett, whom I hadn't seen since a Christmas visit fifteen years before. Back then he was a precocious Minnesota fourteen-year-old and I hadn't had my driver's license long. Now I was a married college teacher, and he a divorced ex-con. Brett inherited our grandpa's mechanical smarts. He'd done a couple of tours as a Navy technician before getting dishonorably discharged and settling in Phoenix, where his mom and sister lived. One of the ways he earned cocaine money was ferrying stolen cars for a ring of auto thieves. He got caught in one of the cars with a cache of drugs on board and did a couple of years in an Arizona state prison. When he came up for parole, he wanted to get away from his Phoenix friends. Grandpa agreed to house him in Sedalia while he got back on his feet.

By now Brett had been living in the gray house a year. He worked the graveyard shift in a chicken processing plant and took courses at the community college. He gave Grandpa much of the credit for the clean year he'd passed. The old man had kept him on a short leash, vowing to toss him out at the first hint of trouble. But Grandpa had also involved him, expecting him to help with Grandma and pull his weight around the house. Brett told me all of this out on the carport while his father, my Uncle Harry, knelt nearby on the slab with the gas can and stiff-bristled brush, scrubbing at the oil stain from Grandpa's LTD. The stink of gas drowned out the faint scent of manure wafting over from Olin Howard's Black Angus pasture. Smoke from Brett's cigarettes also hung trapped under the carport roof. He tore through half a pack in that conversation, and hammered light beers with alarming speed. His voice quavered under the weight of what it meant to have Grandpa take him in.

"That was my buddy," he said. "My good friend."

How long had it been since I'd felt real friendship with Grandpa, since I'd admired and looked up to him the way Brett did? Probably not since my own sojourn in the gray house, when I was fourteen and Mom sent me there to be under Grandpa's influence. Back then I'd harbored a fantasy about settling down one day in Sedalia or someplace like it, of working a blue collar job, driving a pickup, owning tons of tools and knowing my way around the pool table. But such a life didn't really suit me at all, with my hands all thumbs and my middle-class rearing. Maybe it was Mom and Dad's divorce, the instability it created, that spurred me to invent a self who would belong in this world which seemed so safe and settled compared to home. Maybe I envisioned that roughneck version of myself out of some wish to bridge the social distance my parents had put between themselves and their beginnings.

Whatever motivated me, I liked the idea of fitting in this world—fitting in the natural way Brett had seemed to fit from earliest childhood. When Brett was a baby Uncle Harry had migrated up to Minnesota to work as a maintenance man at a nuclear power plant. The family lived on a lake and kept a pool table in their basement. Brett learned to fish shortly after he started walking. He challenged the men in pool from the time he was twelve. As a kid he rode snowmobiles and dirtbikes and knew

how to work on them. The times when he and I were together with Grandpa, I remember the easy way Brett gave and took, while I strove to seem more rugged than I really was.

Even when Brett wasn't around I sensed myself falling short in Grandpa's estimation. All through that drought summer, as I'd worked alongside him in the gray house, handling the tools that didn't obey him anymore, I had suffered his unspoken judgment whenever I stripped a screw's threads or drove a nail untrue. That feeling sharpened as I got older. I go back to that trip through Sedalia with my long-haired buddies in the old Valiant. Grandpa had gladly helped me and my friends make our car roadworthy, but I knew he frowned on us in secret: a bunch of college boys who couldn't even fix their own damn car.

And then on my next big road trip, when I was twenty-six, I rolled into Sedalia with my future wife, whom I'd met while in graduate school. I don't know whether I was more nervous about this cultured, East Coast woman meeting my humble Midwestern grandparents, or them meeting her. Either way, I didn't get in touch until we were a day's drive from Sedalia. Grandpa and Grandma were staying in their trailer down at the lake, so we spent the night at my Uncle Allan's and took off the next day. I spoke with Grandpa on the phone after we'd left town and could hear in his voice he was offended—rightly so.

I wish I had that one to do over again. By now I know I had nothing real to fear about bringing these two parts of myself together. I had just confused Grandpa the person, the gracious host who would have welcomed my mate and me into his home, with the Grandpa of my imagination, a stern judge who would surely scorn me for what I was becoming, for choosing the work of the mind over the work of the hands, for liking prose better than pool tables. I had a lot riding on this trip west, which was to open a whole new chapter in my involvement with words. A serious painter, my traveling companion had encouraged me to actually do what I'd been talking about too long, to give up my graduate fellowship, forsake the academy's stifling shelter and turn my full attention to the writer's craft. Most writers will agree that the decision to take writing seriously, to call oneself a writer, is a heavy one. While I didn't share Sam Clemens' or Mary Ann Evans' need to take a new name, I liked to think I'd destroyed an old self in the creation of a new one. Such demolition projects are hard to pull off without causing collateral damage. Which may begin to explain the remoteness I felt from Grandpa the last part of his life: the old self I'd buried was the one for whom Grandpa was a living presence.

And now here I am all these hours, all these pages later, hopelessly hooked on the work I've chosen. I haven't inherited Grandpa's weakness for nicotine. My thirst for booze is modest compared to his. Of all his cravings, it's the hunger for work that bites me deepest. I know the solace he took in toil whenever I manage to make a sentence run smoothly. And like him, I know how to brandish my diligence as a shield against the claims of those who need me.

I've taken a long time coming round to see this link between us. It's a strong thing to swallow, but I chase it with a chuckle as I sit here in my swivel chair, steering slowly along the roads that wind through memory's yard. What a comfort to be surrounded by such treasures. All these hulks of experience, a life's shapely scrap, not much to look at, maybe, but still valuable for the possibilities they offer, the working parts that might one day yield a profit, or at least help me get somewhere.

Say for example I wanted to go see Grandpa, to be a child again, cringing and laughing as he clowns it up for my sisters and me, shoving his top dentures halfway out of his mouth and growling like a circus bear. Say I wanted to hear his operatic snores again, the sounds Sarah believed came from a baby monster. Say I wanted to listen to him stumping about the kitchen in the middle of the night, sighing and scratching as he ate the cereal that settled his stomach. Say I wanted to see him skin a rabbit or filet a crappie. Say I wanted to sit beside him in the front seat of the old Dodge, my body pressing harder and harder against the seatback as he leans forward with a sly smile, watching the needle rise. Or if I just wanted to see him in the denim overalls he wore every one of the hundreds of days I spent with him, excepting only the days we drove to the V.A. hospital in Columbia, where he got his gold shots. The overalls and plaid work shirt and boots. The Howard Quarries ball cap pulled down over his dense rug of charcoal hair and tilted at a slight angle. Say I wanted to see how his head bounced to one side when he laughed. Or watch him swallow a shot the way he did at Leo's Budweiser Bar, a quick backward toss of the head, then the shot glass smacking down loudly on the wood. Or smell the toasty tobacco aroma when he'd light up outdoors in the morning. Or the whiskey and beer on his breath. Say I wanted to hear the way his voice softened when he watched the doves at the feeder outside the kitchen window. Or how the mischief crept into it as he bantered with Grandma in the fishing boat, the two of them eager and chummy, glad to be out on the water again.

Say I wanted to feel his death, the sharp ache of that loss, as I failed to feel it at the time. Say I wanted to be redeemed.

Andrew Wingfield's 2005 novel, *Hear Him Roar*, deals with people and mountain lions in the northern California region where he was raised. His place-based short stories and personal essays have appeared (or soon will) in *Prairie Schooner*, *The Antioch Review*, *Resurgence*, and other magazines. He teaches at George Mason University. "Salvage" is the title piece from Wingfield's forthcoming collection of place-based personal essays, *Salvage: Place, Family, Memory*.