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WE'LL TAKE THE GOLF BALLS TO OUR GRAVES

by

Hadley Griggs

My grandpa lived through the Great Depression. He didn't talk about it much, but he carried the evidence in his house; when he dragged his way out of those dusty, gritty years, he came with a bitter smile and the incessant need to surround himself with *things*. He built a nest in his basement: a mixture of canes, posters, records, doorknobs, chairs, pipes, screws, and everything else. Oh, and golf balls.

Oh, the golf balls.

My family likes to tell a story about the golf balls. He had boxes upon boxes of them—and not shoeboxes, either. Big boxes, like the kind you pack up TVs to move in. They were all organized, too. By make and by number. “Titelists 7s” one box said. “Carroway 9s” was another. I'd estimate over six thousand golf balls, ferreted away in that basement-nest.

The story is the story of how he lost his glasses. He was out on the golf course one day, as he always was. (Not golfing. He just picked up *after* the golfers to add to his collection.) And he saw a golf ball. As usual. When he bent over to pick it up, his glasses fell off of his face. But when his hand went to reach for his glasses, he saw

another golf ball. So he grabbed it. And then two feet away, another golf ball. So he walked over and grabbed that. And then another. So he walked a few more feet and grabbed *that*. Pretty soon, he had wandered so far away from his glasses that he was left standing in the middle of the golf course, arms full of golf balls, with not a clue where he had left his glasses.

The story of how the golf balls had made him walk away from his eyesight and he was always embarrassed when we told it.

For his eightieth birthday my mom and her siblings took my grandpa to San Francisco. Not because he was born there but because they thought it would be fun. I remember thinking that he wouldn't like it there. There were no golf courses in the city. How would he get to enjoy his favorite hobby?

But apparently it *was* fun. He loved it and I used to wonder why.

I took a trip to San Francisco the summer after my twentieth birthday. I hadn't really meant it as an homage to my grandpa, or as a pilgrimage to the golf-ball-less city that he had enjoyed so much. I just wanted to walk the pier, take pictures of a few bridges, and eat a lot of expensive food.

As soon as I emerged from the dim subway station and into the light of Market Street, I was overwhelmed by the sudden barrage on my senses.

Antique books! 50% select genres: literature, history, atlases, and more!

Victoria's Secret: New. Simple. Sexy.

In with the new—shop Banana Republic.

Everywhere I looked there were sleek fashions, beautiful women, and clearance sales. This was culture; the advertisements

were the veins that pumped blood through the city. I reveled in the sensationalism that was Market Street, and I had the feeling that my grandpa and I weren't so different. There weren't any golf balls but the city wasn't holding back. It was still so full of *things*.

When my grandpa died we had to clean out his basement. His nest. There just wasn't anything to do with most of his *things* besides throw them away. I remember, during the purge, asking my mom why my grandpa had kept so much.

"Did he have plans to do anything with this stuff?"

She was going through a box of wing nuts with a frown on her face. "I don't think so."

I watched her sift through them. "What are you looking for?"

She didn't even bother to look up from the task. "Something valuable."

"Are wing nuts not valuable?"

"Not a box of old wing nuts. These are pretty much just junk."

And I sat there, in my grandpa's basement, wondering why he felt happier when he had surrounded himself with "pretty much just junk." I thought of my grandma, who had died early on in their marriage. I thought of my aunts and uncles, who moved out of the house so early. And I thought of my grandpa wandering through that empty house and filling it with "pretty much just junk." With *things*.

The golf ball boxes were the last thing we went through. The whole family gathered in the basement and stared at all of those boxes. I remember my Uncle Eric asking the obvious question:

"What are we going to do with all of these golf balls?"

During my trip I went to the corner of Haight and Ashbury. They say it's where the Beatles first smoked weed—where they first learned to transcend the material world and access their true potential. I went to admire the shrine: the flowers, the cards, the photographs. As I stood there a woman—overweight, dirty, and decked out in full hippie regalia—started picking at the shrine. At first, I thought she was just going through the gifts to choose what she wanted to take home; how could anyone pass up free roses, free signed posters, free, free, free? But then, I saw her pulling out dead flowers, rearranging multicolored afro wigs, and picking up the litter. I realized she wasn't picking at the shrine; she was pruning it. Showing her respect by taking care of it.

I was already touched by her devotion. But upon even closer scrutinization, I saw something that I will never forget. I saw her pick up a letter—"To the Beatles" typed in bold across the top—and rip the bottom piece off. I furrowed my brows and leaned just a little more forward to see what was written on the scrap. "Love, your friends, the staff of Barney's Grill." Their hours of operation might also have been typed there. She crumpled up the scrap and moved on to the next letter. From that one, she pulled off the business card and crunched it in the same hand as Barney's ad. On and on, with meticulous diligence, she cleansed the shrine of each token of advertisement, until I thought John Lennon would rise from the dead and embrace her. She was a rebel, fighting against the worship of *things*.

And I couldn't think of a better form of devotion than that simple, quiet act of defiance.

I don't remember much about my grandpa's funeral; people spoke, I'm sure they told jokes and everyone got to pay their respects. What I do remember were the golf balls. My uncle had grabbed an armful from my grandpa's basement and had brought them to the funeral. Maybe in an attempt to be funny, he had put them in a little drawer in the casket. When the pallbearers lifted the casket, you could hear those golf balls rolling around in the drawer. When the hearse drove the casket to the plot, there was that unmistakable growl of plastic-polymer on wood. When the casket was lowered into the ground, all I could think of were those golf balls.

And I wonder: would he have been happy, knowing those would follow him to his grave? Can his soul be at peace, knowing that the same golf balls that littered his nest, that took his eyesight, that filled that hole in his Great-Depression-heart are nestled under six feet of dirt, keeping him company as he turns to dust? Or are they just another awkward gesture, another testament of *things*, from those of us who can still draw comfort from cold plastic in our hands?

I wonder if that woman would see them as some sort of sign of respect. Or maybe she would come into the graveyard late one night, dig up the casket, and meticulously remove each one of those golf balls and let my grandpa decay in peace.