

Legends

When Gramp was my age, he poured kerosene all over the field across the street, struck a match, dropped it. He said fire stains the Earth, eats up the brush like Thanksgiving dinner, never stopping to take a breath. On a Sunday afternoon after church, his legs ran across the tracks on the other side of Rochester, New York. With two strides he clambered over the railings, floating along with the bums until the train ran out of places to go. He spent his fall months setting up animal traps in the rusty woods up the road from his house, layering leaves across the metal teeth and adjusting the prong's angles to suit rabbit and raccoon feet. His mother's father was a butcher, a woman with a taxidermied face but fingers nimble enough to help him skin small mammals. He didn't earn a lot but enough to buy a BB gun and a jackknife. He once slipped between two docks on the lake. They sealed up above him, kept him thrashing underwater for three whole minutes. How his lungs shriveled up, like worms on a summer sidewalk. He sucked in so much air his eyes bugged out.

Whenever his sister comes around, she brings pictures of him from back then, always draped in girls, their thin arms across his broad shoulders. "You should've seen the way they looked into his eyes—they would've looked forever." But I can't see the young man she keeps paperclipped in her pocketbook. He speaks like he's got words stuck in his teeth, his skin speckled with sunspots. We poke and prod him to just come sit on his Adirondack chair, where he puts up his feet and pulls a baseball cap over the hump of his wrinkled forehead. I fuss, grabbing hold of his arm. "But Gramp, didn't you tell me about a time you waterskied off a dock?" He grins, quietly refusing to jump in the lake with us kids. He'll still dance with my grandma in the living room sometimes, a slight shuffle with that constant shushing sound of feet against carpet. After a few songs, the former prom king adds kindling to the fire, tossing in crumpled newspapers as it shrinks, dies down. He sinks into the sofa and looks into the embers, and I look for the man I was promised, wishing for the who once sent his neighbor's yard up in flames.

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