A STEADY GRIND

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CHILDHOOD

I grew up with my artist grandmother living next door to me. She could draw; she could paint; she could sew; she could cook and bake; she made gorgeous porcelain dolls that sold for hundreds of dollars at a local Christmas craft shop. Even though my Nannie did countless art projects with me, she had to hold the paintbrush in my hand to make it work for me. My hands were just too shaky. It felt like too much pressure for me to create in that way. It felt too permanent. I couldn't sew, I couldn't draw; I couldn't paint. I wasn't really sure what I could do in the art department. So, when I was eight years old, I started photographing clouds. I remember laying on the grass on the edge of my gravel driveway in Brookhaven, Pennsylvania, looking up at the sky-peering up at the amusing cloud shapes and snapping them with a 5 and 10 point-and-shoot 35mm camera, hoping it preserved the image I saw in real life. Looking at the cloud photos after my mom picked them up at the drive-thru Fotomat in the Pep Boys parking lot, I remember being disappointed. The old lady and her poodle weren't there. Where was the dragon? I got frustrated and stopped taking photos.

Instead, I spent time climbing oak trees, collecting bird skeletons from under the evergreen trees, riding my go-cart and dirt motorbike around my backyard, and spending summer weekdays at my family's

junkyard in Chester, PA, playing in junk cars. Dodging deep puddles of sludgy rainbow-colored water, my older sister and I jumped from car to car and entered people's lives-their memories were strewn across the floors, behind seats, scattered throughout the trunk. Old photos, coins, greeting cards, rosary beads, and toys were still lying there alone-forgotten. My grandfather and his workers would tear these automotive carcasses apart for their metal and parts, as my sister and I searched for treasures and stories.

I always loved being at the junkyard, and am proud of the memories it gave me. It is there where my father taught me to drive; where my uncle, who later died by suicide, worked so hard; and it is where I got my first (and last) tattoo, at the age of 14.

Although I was a girl and not allowed to inherit the family business, I still felt that it was my culture, my blood, my roots. I was never taught to work on cars, but I sure loved exploring them and making up stories about who drove them.

It wasn't until many years later, after my parents' divorce, the deaths of my grandfather and uncle, the failing health of my grandmother, and three-and-a-half years of college under my belt, that I decided to pick up a camera again and start documenting the junkyard and all of its stories, this time on moving film. If I filmed those clouds many years before as they moved and took shape in real time, would I have seen the dragon? I'd be damned if my art attempts would be still this time. I picked up my family's old Super-8 camera and a borrowed VHS-C camcorder, and began my journey finding stories. My family's story.

NO GIRLS ALLOWED

I was not expected to run the junkyard business because I was female. I grew up around men fixing up motorcycles and cars, yet was never encouraged to pick up a tool. There is one photo of a three-year-old me crouched down next to my uncle Mark as he fixed his motorcycle. I remember handing him paper towels to wipe up the grease. I vaguely remember playing with the adjustable wrench,

but that is the only memory I have of myself as a child with a tool. I was encouraged to ride my go cart and mini dirt bike around my yard like nobody's business, but I was never taught to fix them when they broke down. I was allowed to help with paperwork, however. I remember evenings after dinner, sitting with my mom at our dining room table, entering the car titles of the recently junked cars. My job was to read off the number on the title to my mother as she entered it by hand into a two-foot-wide book of hundreds of cars acquired over the past year. It wasn't a job with tools, but it felt good to contribute in some way to my family's business.

Even though my grandmother was the matriarch of the business, she said she wanted more for me-meaning a college education. All of the men in my family worked in the trades and all of the women went to college-my great grandmother, aunt, and great-aunt were all nurses. Women were the caretakers and men were the handymen. Women were supposed to use their heads and hearts; men, their hands. Unlike my father, who was forced to drop out of high school in the tenth grade, my forced path was college. Nursing was not my calling, but I chose psychology, because I wanted to help heal people. In my own family, I saw what happened to people with untreated mental illness, and I wanted to help others avoid self-destruction. I will get into that a little bit later.

HISTORY

In 1949, my great-grandparents bought a large plot of land in Chester, PA, for their sons. Hungarian-American sons of a coal miner, they had oil and hard work in their blood. After a family rift (there are various opposing versions of the story), my grandfather and great-uncle split the land into two separate junkyard businesses: Joe's and Lou's.

My grandfather built Joe's from the ground up. Everyone called him Junkyard Joe (Pop Pop to the kids) and he had a reputation for being just as mean as he was kind. He often gave free parts to people who had very little money, but he would smash a car window instead

of selling it to a customer who was trying to rip him off. My father loved school, but, as the oldest son, he was forced to drop out of the tenth grade to help run the business. Here is where my father learned to fix cars and build motorcycles.

LOVE

My grandparents met at a school dance in 1950. My grandfather had graduated a decade earlier from high school, but came to the dance to find a wife. There he met my grandmother and they were married shortly after. My grandmother describes their early years together as living the life of movie stars. She said they would drive around Downtown Chester, a bustling shopping district at the time, though today it is one of the most poverty-stricken small cities in America. According to my grandmother, local establishments would "roll out the red carpet for them at social events."

By the time my grandmother was 24 years old, she had four children. The junkyard was their home. My grandfather built a series of trailers there, where they spent the early years of their childhood. Their Super-8 family movies gave me a glimpse into their little junkyard world. The grainy film strips show the kids playing on junk cars with oil wands as swords, hugging each other in a field of sunflowers my grandmother had planted, and driving an old metal toy fire truck around a dusty fenced-in play area. My grandfather was proud of his family of three boys and one girl, and made sure it was documented. One of my favorite scenes is from Christmas morning as he played the part of Santa Claus, in his shabby red felt suit, with his beard half fastened. The kids were in complete awe of him. I love this footage, mostly because it shows me that there were, in fact, happy beginnings for a family that would suffer a series of tragedies many years later.

TRAGEDY

By the late 1960s, the business was doing so well that the family moved from the junkyard into a beautiful stone house in a wealthy neighborhood. My grandfather had bought the home in cash from his

friend, who was a scrap dealer. The house came complete with gardener, maid, and butler, and was simply gorgeous. It was decorated in period furniture; everything down to the linens was included. The scrap dealer felt that the junkyard was no place to raise a family, and before he went to Florida, made my grandparents a generous offer. The man became wealthy because of scrap metal from Joe's, and felt he owed our family something. Life was good. My grandmother always dressed to the nines, and was the president of the Women's Opera Club. The kids took art and music classes and horseback riding lessons. All of my grandfather's hard work and dreams of success and providing for his family had seemed to come true.

However, in 1973 and 1974, my family's success and happiness took a turn. The dream home burned down to the ground, possibly the fault of my father's younger brother, who lived in the rec room in the basement. Rocky was the second child of the family, and, according to some family members, he was violent, did drugs, and drank a lot. About a year after the house fire, 19-year-old Rocky went into a violent rage, accusing his pregnant wife of cheating on him. The newspaper articles say that gunshots were fired from within the apartment house, forcing my great-uncle to escape by jumping out of a two-story window. The police were called, and as Rocky was shooting at a car full of his scared friends that was speeding away from the scene, he was shot and killed by the police. My grandfather and grandmother arrived at the scene an hour later, to police tape, flashing lights, and their dead son's body on the lawn.

My mother, who was nine months pregnant with my older sister at the time, told me that Pop Pop telephoned my parents in their row home in Toby Farms. My father answered and screamed out, sobbing that Rocky was dead. My mother, in the next room, ready to deliver any day, ran to his side. My father was on the floor with the phone cord outstretched, screaming and crying. My parents rushed over to my great-grandparents' apartment house, where everyone had congregated in the kitchen. The moment my parents got out of the car in the pitch-black night, they heard deep, desperate wailing from inside

the house. The next morning, when my parents left to go home, my grandmother was outside, picking up Rocky's gold hoop earring from the coagulated blood in the gravel driveway.

My mother said that after that September day, my father became quiet and Pop Pop shut himself in his attic room and would not come out for months. So that the business would not crumble, my grandmother went to work at the junkyard until Pop Pop was well enough to return. Joe's Junkyard still provided for the family for decades after Rocky's death, but there was always a deep wound that lived in the junkyard soil. The family and the business would never be the same.

HEALING

My grandfather did not identify as an artist, but he made some of the most complicated, raw, emotional art I have ever seen. As I was doing research for my documentary about my grandmother and the junkyard, she gave me the scrapbooks that he had started after Rocky's death and continued to make well into the 1990s. Inside the colored construction paper art pads, Pop Pop created collages of family photos and tragic newspaper articles with electrical tape and glue. At first, I thought these were simple family albums with news clippings about people he knew, but as I dug deeper, I learned that he had begun to cut out all the horrifying and tragic stories from the paper he was reading at that time. All of the stories were about strangers, but somehow he must have felt connected to them through their heartache. Kids killed by drunk drivers, political figures committing suicide, and any disturbing story that kept him up at night were paired with his grandkids' class photos, wedding portraits, his baby pictures, etc. My grandfather's grief lived somewhere between the juxtaposition of the happy family portraits and the horror. I photographed, filmed, and scanned these scrapbooks numerous times, and learned something more about him each time I attempted to document them.

DEATH

In 1991, my Pop Pop had his first heart attack. He was preparing to have minor heart surgery but did not want to miss another day of work because the business's finances were unstable. Against my grandmother's wishes, he walked out of the hospital with the IV still attached. Only days later, he got very excited over a large engine sale, and had a heart attack right there on the junkyard soil. My father and my uncle Mark witnessed the whole thing. When the paramedics were unable to revive him, they left, and my father buried all of the paramedic debris into the ground with their boots.

My grandfather's funeral was really beautiful. His sisters and old customers, employees, and business partners came to pay their respects. I met Rocky's son, my cousin Jamie. The first time he met his grandfather was here at his funeral, in his casket. Because of the trauma associated with Rocky's violence and death, Jamie had not been allowed to meet his father's family until then. It was a sad day, but it felt like a new chapter was about to begin. At the cemetery, before Pop Pop's casket went into the ground, my sweet uncle Mark made a speech: "Dad is in a better place now. Life got so hard for him and now he is free."

My Pop Pop did not have a life insurance policy. He regarded the junkyard as his insurance policy, but instead of selling it (it could only be sold to another junkyard or auto shop because of soil contamination), my grandmother and her sons, Joe Jr. (my dad) and Uncle Mark, ran it for many years after Pop Pop's death.

MENTAL ILLNESS

From 1995-1999, I went to college and studied psychology. I think that one of the reasons I felt drawn to psychology was that I had seen so much pain and tragedy in my own family like that, I thought that I could possibly save others from suffering painful lives. In my final year of college, my favorite uncle, Mark, was a victim of his own mental illness.

Mark was the baby of the family and was the only one to enlist

in the U.S. Navy in order to follow in his father's military footsteps (Pop Pop had been in the army). He was one of the most loving men I have ever met. When he looked you in the eyes and asked you how you were, you could feel that he really wanted to know. Growing up, he was a curious boy, and had learned how to fix cars and do body-work by himself by the time he was 18 years old. He was a fervent Christian who was raised in a Pentecostal Christian Academy. He loved to talk about the Lord, and he dedicated his life to his religion. He met a woman at church when he was 25, adopted her three children, and then they had four children of their own. He was a wonderful father and worked night and day at the junkyard after Pop Pop died to provide for them and to keep the family business alive. In 1997, when Mark was 37 years old, his marriage became shaky, and his wife became pregnant with another's man's baby before the divorce was final. Life was hard, and Mark had no coping skills except for his religion. His faith was not providing the solace he needed to combat the stress.

On September 19, 1997, I got a late-night call from my grandmother. When I answered the phone, she said, "Uncle Mark is with the angels now." In shock and sobbing, I asked my college roommate to drive me to my grandmother's house in the middle of the night, and I sat with her for the next three days, making funeral arrangements. At first, my grandmother thought he was murdered, because, allegedly, he had been robbed earlier in the day and may have possibly shot the intruder. The police report noted that a gunshot was reported hours before and a man was seen leaving the junkyard, bleeding. Apparently, shortly after this incident, my uncle called both my grandmother and estranged wife to tell them about the robbery, and at some point during the call, Mark shot himself in the head. Both phones were hanging off the hook in the junkyard office when the police arrived. I have never had the courage to ask my grandmother what he said on the phone the moment before his death.

We all have so much under our surface, and I wish I could have connected more with my uncle before he died, even if it were just

to look into his eyes and ask, "How are you really doing?" Later on, by making my junkyard film, I found a way to ask him that through my lens.

FILM

About one year after my uncle's death, I discovered documentary filmmaking in a Women and Film class, and decided to take a couple more media electives while I finished out my Psychology and Women's Studies degree. In Documentary Film 101, we were asked to make a non-fiction video. Here I felt stuck, until my sister, who had been photographing the junkyard as part of her thesis for grad school at Yale, said, "Why don't you follow Nannie around the junkyard with a video camera?" My first response was, "No way. Who would want to watch that?"

From grade school on, I was very shy and embarrassed about my working-class background. Kids from the McMansion cul-de-sac behind my little cinderblock stucco rancher used to make fun of my family. They called me "Harley" because my dad was a biker, and when they found out I did not have a security system in my house, one kid said "I doubt her house even has windows." I was embarrassed to be one of those kids on the free school lunch program. I would rarely invite friends over. I'd say, "Oh, you can't come over because my house is under renovation. We are getting an addition."

As a result of my women's studies classes, I learned strategies to dissect issues surrounding class, gender, and race. This gave me the necessary space to embrace my upbringing in a new, informed, loving, and accepting way, so I said, "Why not!" I started filming my chain-smoking, foul-mouthed, working-class grandmother in her junkyard. It was, after all, a paradise for me growing up, and I adored my grandmother with all of my heart. Why not explore it from behind my lens? My grandmother was aging and was a more complex person to me now. Instead of the doll-making artist grandmom, I saw her as a fierce warrior trying to salvage a failing business in the midst of crisis. The tragic death of my uncle had left

a mark there at the junkyard. His blood had been cleaned up, but a deep sense of sadness and failure was present in the air. Even though I was not aware at the time, I believe I set out to document what was left of him after his passing. I regret not filming him when he was there only a year earlier.

I was hesitant to share this part of my life with strangers, but then I thought about Uncle Mark. I thought about the business that my grandfather built and how it seemed to be crumbling by the minute. Why miss another moment and lose another story? My grandmother may be gone tomorrow, so I should preserve her legacy. I started shooting the junkyard on an old Super-8 camera, searching for the energy that was once present there when my father and his siblings were young. I also desperately searched for those colors that seemed so beautiful to me when I was little, jumping from car to car looking for treasures. I could not find that either.

Instead, I found a sad, lonely, failing junkyard that had seen death and pain. At the time I started filming, my grandmother's and father's health began declining rapidly, and the business continued to decline as well. People were breaking in and stealing parts, and disgruntled employees were setting tire fires that cost thousands of dollars in cleanup and fines. My father was depressed, addicted to various 'recreational' drugs, and was misusing business money. All of the good customers were going to my grandfather's brother Lou's junkyard next door because they had more parts, better prices, and did state inspections. The junkyard I once knew as an exciting place that put food on my family's table seemed cursed.

In the moment, I was not sure why I continued to film the junkyard after my sad discovery. However, looking back after so many years of working in community media and hearing so many people's stories, I know for a fact that storytelling heals. Even if Mark was not alive to tell his part of the story, he lives in others people's recollections of him and deep in those puddles of rainbow water. When I was filming, I saw the clouds in those puddles, and they were moving. Could those moving clouds possibly be my grandfather and uncle?

I was not able to catch either of them in real life on my camera, but they found me somehow.

SOLD

When the junkyard sold in 2003 to my junkyard cousins next door, I documented the sale and life after for the third act of the documentary. My grandmother and father both felt relieved that the junkyard was gone, but we all cried when we realized that it was permanent. The letters on the Joe's sign were painted over and now read Lou's. Only months after the sale, my grandmother started drawing and painting and making porcelain dolls again. That lasted a couple of years, until her emphysema got too severe, and now she says she is ready to pass. She says, "My work is done here. I am ready to go home to the Lord." My father, also ill but from diabetes and heart disease, is still a junkman, selling old car parts and trinkets at local flea markets and car shows. It is hard for him to get the junk out of his blood.

LIFE

As for me, I am a media maker, arts coordinator, social justice seeker, junk collector, and a mother. I find joy in helping others find the creativity and freedom to tell their stories that would otherwise be lost. Perhaps that became ingrained in me when I met those people in the abandoned cars when I was little.

When I picked up that Super-8 camera and started filming my family junkyard, it legitimized my family's history and hardships. I came to terms with the class shame I once had and it helped me heal from my uncle's death. From behind the lens I was able to deal with the feelings of being a class outcast as a child, and celebrate it instead. I was able to jump into those old cars again-imagining those stories, but this time it was my story. They were all part of it. I may have been female and not allowed in the junkyard to work, but I found my place there so many years later, with a camera under my arms, shooting clouds and puddles of muck.

My life and my art have helped me immeasurably; to become an artist, to become an activist, to understand how art can change life. For the last eight years, I've been lucky enough to work with the Workforce Development Institute, doing just that in our Arts and Culture Program. Finding ways for working people to use their talents to tell their own stories-in photographs and in words. The Workforce Development Institute is committed to work, to working people, and to art as a tool for social change. Today, my camera is my tool to tell the stories of others, and the funding and support we provide help working people all around New York State to do the same.

All of my creative endeavors; not just my own, but the ones that I've facilitated in others, helping people find their voices and stories using media arts, began when I was a girl, at that moment I chose to look up at the sky and shoot the clouds with my little point-and-shoot camera.

College gave me a bridge to cross, gave me the tools and lenses of feminism and art to study myself and help others study their worlds and tell their stories. I've gained pride in where I come from, and I like helping others explore class, race, gender, and social justice issues. It is all connected-isolation, art, and the communion that can be had through self-expression. I love the fact that I've found my voice and vision in film, and that I have the privilege of helping others to also build bridges between the worlds of limits where they live and the worlds of choices that begin with telling our stories to ourselves, and to others.