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MY GRANDMA'S BOYFRIENDS

Maggie Mattinson

“He’s really something else, Maggie. I can’t wait for you to meet him. Anyways, enough about me, what about you? Have you met any cute boys recently?”

I rolled my eyes and took a deep breath. It should be pathetic that for the last year of her newly acquired singlehood, my grandma had more stories of first dates and new relationships than I did. They blossomed from the many circles of friends she kept in Rock Springs, Wyoming: she had her quilting circle, McDonalds Senior 10 cent coffee Monday group, librarian ladies from the high school in Sweetwater County where she was able to patrol my dad and uncle’s every move during their teenage years as the head librarian, and most recently, her grief counseling pals.

“Uh, not really,” I said, biting the inside of my cheek as I spoke into the phone. I reached down to pet my cat, noting the irony of the situation. The thought that I should be the one buzzing about boys I was dating while my Grandma should be the one sitting at home with her cat didn’t pass me by.

“Oh, honey. Well, that’s okay. Take all the time you need, dear. You’ll get back out there. You have lots of time. Just look at me! But you probably can’t understand. It probably sounds crazy to hear about your seventy-six-year old grandma falling in love, right?”

“It doesn’t sound crazy,” I said. “I’m excited for you, grandma,”. I forced myself to sound chipper as I spoke, hiding everything else I was thinking about my grandma’s dating life that was like an episode of *The Bachelor*. She giggled once more and I set my phone down on my desk, turning on the speakerphone so that I could open the Valentine’s Day card she had sent that week with a \$20 folded bill inside. I wasn’t sure if I was the only college student that still got \$4.99 greeting cards from Hallmark for every holiday from their grandma with money inside, but I wasn’t about to complain. Someday I might tell her that half of the time the money she sent bought me printer ink the night before a paper was due and a half-gallon of Popov vodka the other half. I may not have been actively looking for a new piece of arm candy like my grandma had been for the last year, but what I couldn’t tell her was that I had more fun walking into house parties uninvited in the University District, playing beer pong and drunkenly adding people on

Facebook I'd never talk to again than trying to find a boyfriend.

My Grandpa died when I was ten. For the next decade after his death, my Grandma had one life partner who lasted eight years and a series of other dates to talk about during the two years when she wasn't being snatched up by a lucky senior bachelor of Rock Springs, Wyoming. She was a hot commodity. Armed with the stockpile of my Grandpa's retirement money from his years on the railroad, my Grandma could afford all of the fine knit turtlenecks from Christopher & Bank that she wanted and to get her hair styled every other day at a salon. My Grandpa had intended to spend his hard earned retirement loot living their life in luxury after skimping for years and working sixty-hour weeks miles from home, but his early death created an entirely different future for my Grandma without him. After he'd passed away in his early 60's of a sudden heart attack when I was 10, phone calls to my grandma became a weekly routine. I was the oldest grandchild of five and having someone who would happily listen to every college anecdote, girl cat fight, and boyfriend problem had been invaluable to me. Sometimes, you just need someone who will listen.

However, her dating life didn't go over well with anyone in our family. It wasn't until I entered college that I realized that there was a lot she wasn't telling me during our weekly phone calls about her boyfriend, Barry. She would later admit she would have married him but due to the retirement plan my Grandpa had set up before he died, if she ever remarried in the case of his death, she'd lose 60% of his retirement money. It was money he intended to use to pay for each of their grandchildren's college tuition so we would never struggle in the poverty they did in their early days of marriage. She wanted to marry Barry during the eight years they were together, which I never found out until later. However, there were even worse details she would fail to tell me she was even more ashamed to admit.

I had just turned thirteen the first time my grandma introduced us to Barry. We met at our family cabin in the middle of the Wind River mountains just south of Jackson,

Wyoming. I knew it bugged my dad that she was bringing her new boyfriend to the place where we not only had years of memories stored, including my first steps as a baby, and where we stayed every summer while we went fishing in the mountains, but it was also the place where my grandpa had suffered his heart attack barely two years ago. My dad stood with his arms crossed outside of the cabin. It was so hot the prairie's horizon blurred and the top of the Wind Rivers seemed to blend into the blue sky. A breeze made the wind chimes hanging on the clothesline jingle and the trill of the river that ran alongside the cabin could be heard from where we were standing in a circle.

My mom stood by my dad's side with her mouth in a matching straight line. I was confused. I didn't understand why they weren't excited. I had squealed on the phone when my grandma first told me she had a date with a man. I vividly remembered the look on my grandma's face at Grandpa's funeral and the way she looked at me like we were now her only reason for living. We couldn't mention his name for months without making her cry. Seeing her happy now seemed like it should have been a great thing and I glared at my parents who seemed less than enthused.

"This is Barry, everyone," my grandma said. She smiled wider than I'd seen her smile in years and the happiness in her eyes was obvious. We all looked at my dad, who remained silent. I glanced at him and widened my eyes in his direction, waiting for him to ease the awkwardness. Finally, he took a step forward and shook his hand.

"Nice to meet you, sir," my dad said. Barry immediately lit up and relaxed, but he didn't know dad like we did. My dad was painfully friendly to the point of embarrassing me at grocery stores and public places by making friends wherever he went. I glanced at Barry again, looking more closely this time. He had a skinny nose that looked like a pencil was glued to his face and circular eyes that made him look like a fly. He was the opposite of my Grandpa. The women in my family always compared my Grandpa to a James Dean with his broad shoulders and square jaw-line even until his death. Barry reminded me of a teddy bear, but not a new one in a store, an old battered one found under a kid's bed after a new toy had replaced it. He looked friendly enough, though, despite looking a little awkward. I saw the way my grandma's skin glowed and the perkiness in her voice as she

spoke and tried to ignore everything else.

Barry turned to look down at me and outstretched his hand as well. I took it eagerly. “Well, you must be Miss Maggie. You’re the one who always interrupts us at dinner with your phone calls, eh?” He winked and I smiled at my grandma who laughed out loud.

“Oh, Barry, stop. Maggie can call whenever she wants.”

My dad cleared his throat and I stepped backwards in line with my younger sister, Sophie.

“I know, Judy, it’s just that my steak usually gets cold by the time you get back from talking to Maggie on the phone,” he said, chuckling louder than anyone in the circle. This time I looked at the ground, blushing slightly. I glanced at him to see him smiling at me with a goofy grin on his face and laughed just loudly enough that he could hear it. I felt my dad next to me take a step backwards as he leaned against the truck with his arms folded.

“Oh, Barry,” my grandma said. She laughed and poked his giant belly that looked like he had a basketball hidden underneath his shirt, which I had failed to notice at first. “In that case, Maggie needs to call more often. We need to watch your figure.”

They giggled again and it was like watching kids at my school in the hallways. My sister didn’t say anything but shielded the sun with a hand across her brows. I raised my eyebrows at her and instead of acknowledging me, she crossed her arms and looked at the ground.

“Come on, let’s get in the car, girls. We’re going to town, Mom, to get some groceries. Anything we can pick up for you, Barry?” my dad said. He was looking Barry squarely in the eye this time with less friendliness than even before.

“Just a tin of chew, if you would there, Scotty,” Barry said. The wind seemed to stop at that very second and all noise seemed to cease. Scotty had been my Grandpa’s nickname for my dad and there was no way my dad would be okay with being called that.

In the car, my dad barely spoke a word for the twenty miles into town. The only time he spoke it was to tell Sophie and I to stop laughing in the back as we laughed obnoxiously about Barry’s nose. The rest of the vacation passed uneventfully as my dad

avoided being in the same room as Barry under all costs. At dinner, he escaped to the shower and my mom was forced to make small talk with a smile on her face at the table to make up for it. Barry didn't seem to notice, though, as he laughed the whole hour of dinner each night, cracking jokes no one seemed to think were half as funny as he did.

"I woke up and heard scratching outside my window and could have sworn it was a bear. So what do I do? Grab my shotgun and head outside in my skivvies only to leap out of my boots to see not a bear but a raccoon! Nearly shit my pants!" Barry would say, telling the same story over and over again of why he was afraid to sleep alone in his own cabin just twenty minutes away from ours.

We didn't see Barry that often for the duration of their eight-year relationship. For the first couple of years, the phone conversations with my grandma centered on me and the perils of being a fifteen year old that couldn't wear a pair of Abercrombie jeans that all of my friends wore because it cost too much money to get six inches hemmed. I also seemed to be the only one in my group of friends who hadn't had a boyfriend yet. Everything mattered more than my grandma's spiraling relationship and I didn't start to notice that anything was even beginning to go wrong clear into high school.

"Maggie, have you talked to grandma recently?" my mom asked one day after school. I was in 11th grade and just starting to realize life was more than wearing the same clothes everyone else did. Most people sucked as I started to realize, anyways, and the genius of being short was that I could wear heels to school and still be inches shorter than everyone else. I also realized fictional boyfriends in TV shows and books definitely beat the real boys I knew who thought it was sexy to stick their tongues in your ear within twenty seconds of of giving you your first kiss.

"Um, duh. I called her yesterday. Why?" I said.

"Did she say everything was alright? Did she sound okay? Mention anything... about Barry?" my mom said.

I shook my head but this time, my interest peaked.

"No, why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing. If she hasn't mentioned it to you, I don't want to tell you."

“No, tell me. What’s going on?” I asked more persistently this time. My grandma and I had only become closer over the years and although I still hadn’t really warmed to the jolly teddy bear, I had been happy that she had seemed happy.

“Just ask Grandma next time you talk to her. You’re old enough to know but it’s up to her to tell you. Barry hasn’t been... feeling well lately.”

I called her that very night. I sat on the cold floor of my bedroom pressed against my door. My grandma was visiting in a couple weeks and I was surprised that anything could be wrong when lately all we could talk about was our shared excitement of her coming to Idaho to visit us.

“Grandma,” I said after talking for about twenty minutes, “is everything okay? Is... Barry okay?” I wasn’t really sure what to say since I didn’t know what was wrong.

“Oh, um, he’s having some trouble right now. But I don’t want you to worry about it, honey. Your dad and I have it under control,” she said. I sighed and allowed her to switch the subject. I figured if my dad was taking care of it, then there wasn’t much to worry about.

“I just can’t wait to see you next week! We’re going to have so much fun!” she said.

Two weeks later, my grandma arrived. She was staying for four days, overlapping with Sophie’s birthday. Most of the trip was focused on birthday shopping for Sophie, going to movies, picking out ice cream cakes at Baskin Robbins, and “girl time.” Nothing seemed weird. The excitement of the trip masked any awkwardness between my dad and grandma that I might have noticed if I was paying closer attention. But because my grandma so happy, any question about Barry sort of got shoved in the back of my mind.

On the third day of her visit and the day of my sister’s birthday, the phone rang as we were cutting her birthday cake. My mom answered it and in the middle of everyone scrambling for pieces of cake, I didn’t notice my grandma get up and take the phone.

As we started opening presents, Sophie looked up from the biggest gift in the pile that everyone knew was from my grandma, “Where’s grandma?”

I walked to the back of the house to my grandma's room to find her. Her back was turned to me as I entered the room. Immediately, she jumped as she heard me step into the room and I quickly saw the mascara streaked down her cheeks.

"What's wrong, grandma?" I asked. I wrapped my arms around her waist and she fell into my hug immediately. I staggered as I felt her body weight shift into mine and I stood up a little straighter to keep us upright.

"Barry... Oh, honey. Barry's having a tough time."

"Is he sick?" I asked.

"No—well, yes. He's ill. I have to go home to take care of this," she said. Her voice shook as she struggled to put together every word. Her breathing was irregular and she gasped for air between each word.

"This?" I said. I imagined a cold or maybe walking pneumonia. But I couldn't understand what would make him sick enough for her to leave.

"You can tell me, Grandma. I can help you, even," I said, speaking slowly so maybe I'd sound older than I was. I felt desperate to know what was wrong and thought of the hours I'd spent complaining to her about everything that seemed so terrible about my life. Not once had she ever mentioned anything bad in hers.

"Oh, honey—I'm sorry. I haven't told you because your dad has been so upset but Barry has been struggling with his depression and, um, he hasn't been all right in the head."

"What do you mean? He's depressed?" I said, more loudly this time, still not putting the pieces together. My jaw was clenched and I made sure my grandma couldn't look away from my eyes as I pleaded with her to tell me the whole truth. I knew that like my grandma, he'd lost his spouse shortly before they had met.

With this, my mom walked into the room and helped her finish packing. My mom squeezed my shoulder as I left the room so that they could talk about whatever was wrong with Barry. She drove my grandma to the airport minutes later. That evening my dad worked in his shed all night. I could hear banging past dark and couldn't help but stay awake wondering what it was my grandma never told me but was clearly telling my

parents. I tried to remember the first time my mom and dad asked me if my grandma had told me anything about Barry. I tried to remember phone calls where my grandma might have sounded less cheerful than usual. I wasn't sure if I was more worried or angry. The week passed slowly and we didn't hear from my grandma the night she flew out or the next morning.

"Dad?" I asked my dad one morning as he was stretching in the living room before his run. He nodded at me, permitting me to continue.

"Has Grandma called yet?"

He shook his head quickly and started whistling.

"What's—I mean, what's wrong with Barry?"

"Barry is a big problem, Maggie. But it's grandma that is the bigger problem," he said, rolling his eyes. He stood up and glanced at me before leaving for his run.

"I don't even want to know what she's telling you," he said, slamming the door shut behind him.

My grandma called two days later and when I asked if everything was okay, all she could do was insist that it was and that Barry was going to be "much better." I believed her, partly because I didn't know any better but mostly because I wanted to. It was so far from the truth, but I ignored the signs for years even as they became increasingly frequent. I ignored that my parents continually asked me for "updates on Grandma" and didn't ask about Barry on the phone with her unless she volunteered information. I ignored the fact that during our annual visits, Barry never visited the house while we were in Wyoming. I became the line of communication between my parents and my grandma, except for the occasional email they sent one another. It was almost like Barry didn't exist except in the silence between my dad and grandma.

It was the day after Christmas. I was twenty. We were spending Christmas with my grandma in Wyoming. My grandma started the morning by announcing to my sister and me, who were transfixed by Netflix episodes of *The Office*, that she expected Barry would stop by the house to say hi sometime that morning. We barely heard her and I

didn't register any worry in her voice.

"Judy, I'm sure he'll call," I heard my mom say after a couple hours. I looked at the clock. It was eleven in the morning and while we were still in our pajamas, my grandma was dolled up already in her cashmere turtleneck and gold hoop earrings.

"It's just—he knows I worry. He has never gone even half of a day without calling," my grandma said.

I paused the episode and listened from the living room. Her voice rang through the quiet house and I didn't hear any sign of her withholding any worry she might have hid from us normally. I heard footsteps and I turned slightly on the couch to watch. I gulped. My mom was hugging her reassuringly but my grandma kept her arms crossed across her waist.

"No, he always calls. Something isn't okay."

For the next hour, my sister and I half-heartedly paid attention to the television. We heard snippets of the next course of events: my grandma called Barry's son who agreed to go over to his house to check on everything. There was something we gathered between the lines about them not hearing from him since they'd opened presents on Christmas morning the day before. That morning, my mom sat on the couch next to my grandma while they held the phone in their hands waiting for the call from Barry's son. My dad sat at the dining room table silently with his head in his hands. We expected the worst, but surprising to us all, was that we were hoping for the best.

"Mom, I'm sure he's alright," my dad said after it had been about twenty minutes that we'd spoken to Barry's son.

"Thanks, Scott," my grandma said. She brushed at her eyes with the Kleenex my dad brought her. She grabbed his hand before he went back to his spot at the dining room table and he let her squeeze it.

A couple minutes later, the phone rang. My grandma looked at all of us, pausing on each face, before jamming the answer button on the phone.

I knew before I heard the scream seconds after, paralyzing us all to our spots in the house. I tugged at the threads on the new polka dot sweater in my favorite color that

my grandma had bought for me for Christmas, fighting the urge to cry as my grandma knelt on the ground with her head in my mom's lap. I glanced out of the large glass front window at the kids across the street who made snowmen and whose screams could be heard from here. I think we'd all known, really, the moment she'd said something had been wrong that there wasn't going to be a happy ending to the day.

We prolonged our trip by a week so we could go to the funeral with my grandma. It was at a church on the outskirts of Rock Springs, in a building that looked like a jail with its brick exterior and barred windows. I walked in first, holding my grandma's hand. A blur of faces I didn't know reached out to take their turns hugging my grandma.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, dear," someone said. I looked at my grandma to see her reaction until I realized that this stranger I'd never seen before was talking to me. I nodded.

We reached the back room where the minister stood in front of Barry's immediate family. As we walked in, they each jumped from their chairs to hug my grandma, too. I watched as they came together and moved to the edge of the room where my family stood quietly in the corner. After talking to my grandma, each of Barry's family members shook our hands, addressing us by our first names. I looked at my mom and motioned towards them with a flick of my elbow. Did she know their names? I didn't know nor had I ever met a single one of them.

The minister addressed my sister and I next. She grasped our hands, folding them to her chest and murmured a prayer.

"Now, girls, I want you to stand with all of the grandchildren during the ceremony. We are all family here, blood or not. Under God's eye, you are as much his family as everyone," the minister said. My eyes darted to my mom's, who immediately walked forward.

"It's really okay," my mom said, "that's not necessary."

"Yeah," I said, my voice vacant of any emotion as I struggled to withhold my laughter and disgust, "we don't need to be a part of it. It's for Barry's family after all."

"Honey, you are Barry's family," the minister said.

My grandma started to shake her head as she caught wind of the conversation and waved the minister off as well, but she didn't have any of it. I glanced at Barry's grandchildren, the oldest of whom was about my age and didn't hide her anger. Barry's son also cast us a look I couldn't decipher and I felt my dad stiffen next to me.

"I don't get it," I said to my dad, whispering. He ignored me.

Halfway into the service, the minister asked if the grandchildren would all come forward and place a flower of our choosing on the casket. My sister and I shuffled towards the front. I tried to ignore the hundreds of faces behind me and then tried to ignore the chorus of gasps as we placed a flower on his casket. I turned around and saw hundreds of pairs of eyes on me. I gulped and resumed standing next to Barry's grandchildren who were audibly sobbing while my eyes were drier than a desert. Every few seconds, I made eye contact with one of them and received looks of hatred that made me wonder what we'd done.

I was twenty-one, and my grandma, mom, and I were all visiting Sophie in Virginia where she was a freshman. My grandma had bought all three round-trip plane tickets and demanded on the second night we switch hotel chains completely, moving from a Double Tree to a Hilton. At the mere mention of grabbing Chik-Fil-A for dinner, she immediately suggested we drive to the nearest Olive Garden on her bill.

Sitting at Olive Garden in a four-person booth, we mulled over the menu. Sophie had a textbook in front of her while she highlighted notes for an upcoming midterm and my mom and I talked amongst ourselves. The whole weekend had sort of gone like this: Sophie with her nose in a book and my mom and I whispering during breaks of conversation with my grandma.

"Isn't this so nice, girls?" my grandma said. My mom and I both looked up. My grandma was grinning warmly, her eyes sweeter than milk chocolate. I gulped and smiled back.

"I'm so glad we could all make this trip. Thank you, Suzy, for organizing the whole thing. I could never do this on my own," she said, continuing.

“Sure you could, Judy,” my mom said. Her eyes flitted over mine and we shared a knowing glance.

“The history here is just outstanding. Everything is so beautiful,” my grandma said. I rolled my eyes and when the waiter came back, ordered a glass of wine. Now probably wasn’t the time to bring up the subject of Walter, her new boyfriend, who my mom seemed to push out of every conversation the moment he was brought up.

“It’s so special,” she said, “to spend time together like this. To eat in nice restaurants and share a nice hotel room together.”

“You’re right, Judy. It is,” my mom said. She squeezed my hand from under the table and I unclenched my hands before I nodded in agreement.

“I think tomorrow we need to visit the downtown to do some shopping, don’t you think?” my grandma said. She nodded at me, smiling. I didn’t return her smile and looked back down at my drink. I wondered if I could get away with ordering another. After a few seconds, I decided I didn’t care if I could or couldn’t, and asked the waiter for another glass of wine for \$8 which was twice as much money as I’d ever spent on one drink for myself.

“Oh, you probably think I’m crazy” my grandma said. “You’re too young to understand,” I grabbed a piece of my hair and twirled it between my fingers, willing myself to keep staring at the hotel carpet. I felt my heart rate accelerate.

“Yeah, you’re probably right, Grandma,” I said. “I am too young.” I bit my tongue and drummed my fingers on the bed. After a three second pause, I looked over to see if she was still there. She was smiling and her cheeks were flushed. We were back from dinner and my grandma had found me on my bed with my Kindle after she’d gotten off the phone with Walter. She held her hand across her chest and it made me want to leave the hotel immediately even if it meant sleeping on the floor of my sister’s dorm. I wasn’t a kid anymore and I was sick of her pretending like everything was perfect. I was sick of her acting like I couldn’t notice the tension between her and my dad, whose relationship seemed to have taken another hit when she started dating Walter four months after Bar-

ry died. They met in grief counseling of all places and everyone thought it was nothing short of ridiculous after the emotional turmoil Barry's death had taken on her.

"I know it's crazy, but lately I've been thinking... And I never thought this with Barry in the eight years we were together, but I think, I think I could marry Walt," she said. I whipped my head around to face her, not even trying to hide my surprise now. She waited for me to say something but I didn't budge. After a few seconds she reached across the bed to squeeze my hand. She sat up from the hotel bed. Before leaving the room, she paused at the doorway.

"Don't worry, you'll understand someday."

Later that night, while my grandma was snoring in the next room, I told my mom what my grandma had told me earlier that evening about wanting to marry Walt someday. I knew what it meant, for our family and for my dad. His silence and me being the "news-updater" on my grandma suddenly made sense. She didn't know that I was aware that she'd lose most of my grandpa's retirement if she remarried and her eagerness to get me as excited as she was about it made me mad.

"She would really give up all of the money Grandpa worked for so she'd have a nice life to a guy she just met. Your grandpa wanted her to be happy but I just don't think she gets it. This is bad, Maggie," my mom said beside me in the queen sized bed we shared. Her voice was steady but careful, like she didn't want to say the words out loud that would mean it was true.

"Mom," I said. Now that I was old enough to clue into what was happening, the question of what really happened with Barry felt more important than ever. I remembered the look on Barry's son's face condemning us for something I didn't know. I knew I couldn't ask my grandma anything more about it either. Until she had met Walter, she'd openly admitted her life felt empty without Barry in it anymore.

"What was wrong with Barry?" I asked.

"You never knew?" she said, her voice ringing loudly in the mute hotel room.

"No, she never told me. No one ever told Sophie and I what was actually

happening,” I said, trying not to sound bitter. I wanted to know, needed to know. She sighed and turned on her side so she was facing me. It was completely dark in the room and nearing two in the morning. Neither of us had adjusted to the East coast time change and the smell of the pizza we’d ordered a couple hours prior lingered. My grandma, on the other hand, had fallen asleep promptly by ten each night, leaving the late nights to us.

“Barry had a multiple personality disorder. It was brought on by his depression. That’s why Dad was so scared. He wasn’t safe for her to be around,” she said slowly. I heard her voice catch as she said the last word, and she cleared her throat.

“Is that why she had to leave on Sophie’s birthday?” I asked.

“Yes, that was the first time he had an attack.”

“An attack?”

She nodded, “He tried to kill himself, Maggie. He was a hunter and had whole cases of guns at home. That was only the first time, he had more that followed. Grandma stayed with him through it all even when he turned on her. He almost sent her to the hospital a few times. We were scared... he was going to try to hurt her worse than he wanted to hurt himself.”

I considered this for a moment and felt the blood rise to my cheeks. The years of phone calls my grandma and I had shared, and all of the secrets I’d told her that I had never mentioned to either of my parents felt suspended in my mind. She was my confidant and maybe it had been naïve of me to think that she would treat me as her equal, but instead I saw that what she’d hidden from me had been a means of validating her own actions.

“So she didn’t tell me... because she told Dad and it made him mad?”

“Of course,” my mom said, “she never wanted to be told she was wrong. Your grandma is so kind, but she never puts herself first and it’s like she can’t stand the idea of just being alone. Does she just need to be with someone all the time? We wanted her out years ago.”

“So... Walter?”

“Yep, Walter. He lost his wife six months ago and here she is again. Who knows what

problems he has?”

I rolled over in bed. Confusion filled my mind as I tried to navigate through the problems that were light-years from what I knew how to wrap my mind around. I thought of the way she giggled whenever she talked about Walter, the same giggle she showcased openly when we'd first been introduced to Barry. I thought of the way I'd been kept in the dark, not to protect me, but maybe as a means of protecting herself. I didn't want to think about that. It seemed easier to pretend all those years she was protecting me. And lastly, I thought of my grandpa.

“What do you think Grandpa would say?” I asked my mom. She shifted again.

“Don't you think,” she began, “that's part of what bothers dad so much?”

I shook my head, not knowing whether I understood the truth of it or not. What did I know about life after your spouse dies? However, I thought I knew more about getting too wrapped up in a boy too soon than she did. And, I thought I knew more about trust than she did, too.

“I don't know what I'm supposed to say to her, mom,” I said.

“None of us do, sweetie.”

A couple of days after I got back from Virginia, my grandma called me. I answered the phone and said hello with genuine enthusiasm.

“That sure was a fun trip,” she said. “But it's so nice to be back. I missed home and Walt.”

“I understand,” I said. I understood that while it was pretty clear to my grandma that my dad would probably never stop worrying about her and her relationships and while she still thought I was blind from the truth, she wouldn't stop pretending everything was normal. I decided for the time being, I didn't want to stop, either. I wasn't sure I could keep it up forever but for the moment, I wasn't ready to lose more than I already had.