

# Furnessville

Furnessville Road is haunted by the living. None but us would ever know there was a house there. The tall oak we eyed nervously out the front window every time a big storm rolled through stands firm as the surrounding woods close in. We walk the length of the clearing where the veil is thin between this world and the next, trying not to forget our way around. We picnic where the kitchen table was, fighting back the mosquitoes that used to have to wait outside the screen door to settle on our sweaty skin.

We can't sit at Grandpa's piano or let one of his lemon drops melt on our tongues. We can't sneak a cookie from the cookie drawer (one of Grandma's yan hagsels if we were lucky). But for us, descendants of Kenneth and Hazel Hine, the power of that place still draws us in and washes over us when we most need it.

If you'd believe me, I would tell you God is there and so are my grandparents. If not, I would say there was a palpable solace in that house, which nurtured the best in our family and repelled the worst, and its memory comforts us, still. It's something no wrecking crew or bulldozer can take.

People are always surprised to hear my favorite place on earth is Indiana. It's not a state that stands out in their minds. Most often, it's a flat stretch of road between here and somewhere else.

But tucked away on the northern edge, about 50 miles east of Chicago and suspended in time between before I was born and 2004, stood my grandparents' modest old farmhouse, deep in the woods along the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore.

Long, lazy childhood weeks were spent leaping from dunes and building sandcastles on the beach, where only the fresh unsalted air and hazy outline of the Chicago skyline reminded you the nearest ocean was 800 miles away. Back at the house, we spread beach glass, stones, driftwood, and crinoids across the smooth, cool family

room tiles. Grandpa built a lamp from a large mason jar and filled it with the prettiest ones.

Extended family gathered for big meals, card games, and walks through the woods. Us kids skipped half a mile down the road to The Schoolhouse Shop where we perused oddball treasures, and skipped back sucking on peppermint sticks.

It was in those ordinary moments at Furnessville where the magic resided. The same can be said about life, in general. But somehow, at Grandma and Grandpa's house, you were saved the injustice of failing to recognize the gift of the moment until after it was over. You knew, as you were drying the dishes and Grandma was washing them, as Grandpa played hymns on the piano, that you were the luckiest person who ever lived.

My grandmother had a favorite saying: "A place for everything, and everything in its place." And that's how things were in her home—never in a sterile, compulsive way, but in a predictable, comforting way. Even my family fell into place. My dad stopped drinking, my brother and I enjoyed one another, chores were completed cheerfully, and we ate breakfast around the table together every morning.

Grandma and Grandpa sat at either end of the blue and white woven tablecloth. Grandma offered Cheerios, Honey Nut Cheerios, toast, or an english muffin, with tea, coffee for the grownups, milk, or orange juice. If you were lucky, you got the coveted bear bowl. If you were really lucky, it was a Grandma's Pancakes morning. She made thin, crepe-style pancakes, which we slathered with too much butter, sprinkled with sugar, and rolled up.

My grandmother always had half a banana, tea, and an english muffin with orange marmalade. Grandpa had Cheerios with the other half of the banana, sliced in a circular pattern on top like a flower. He then hovered one teaspoon of sugar over the bowl, tap-tapping the handle with the index finger of his opposite hand to spread the sugar evenly. All the kids did the same thing, when we were there.

We cleaned up straight away, after every meal. Mom and Grandma washed the dishes, while my brother and I dried and put them away. The silverware was placed neatly in the drawer, so each spoon or fork nested inside the one beneath it.

Grandpa filled the bird feeders in the afternoon, and sprinkled some of the seed on the ground for the family of raccoons we enjoyed watching from the living room windows, at night. He built dozens of bird houses and gave them away, spreading his love of birds well beyond Furnessville Road.

One of the only things left of my grandpa, the last time I saw him, dying of Alzheimer's in a nursing home, was his love for birds. He had a pocket-sized paperback guide, with pictures and descriptions of North American birds. He was trying to tell me something, maybe trying to teach me something. He had the dog-eared book in his hand, and pointed emphatically, babbling unrecognizably. But I could tell he knew exactly what he meant. My grandpa was still in there—he just couldn't get out.

As Alzheimer's carved out his brain, Grandma loved him through the ordinary. She visited every day, washed his clothes at home and brought them back, and fed him his applesauce. She hated that he couldn't be at home. But they were both in their late 80s, and she could no longer dress and bathe him, help him use the bathroom, or keep him from wandering away.

Grandma was a collector of collections—a trait I've inherited. Her windowsills were lined with antique bottles. On her dresser lived a family of snow globes. The kitchen was home to her spoons and teacups. In the living room, the front window was wreathed in bells, and the wall of windows facing the wilderness shone with blue glass figurines.

The objects she chose had nothing to do with monetary value, rarity, or condition. In fact, she often didn't choose them at all—they mostly chose her. She could tell you (and she loved to tell you) who gave her each piece, when, and the story behind it. One by one, she wiped them clean. She called this ritual her “trip down memory lane,” and she would share the stories with you, as she handled each item. To her, these weren't just things—they were reminders of the people she loved, and the extraordinary value of ordinary moments in time.

My grandparents bought the house in 1957, after my dad left home and joined the Marine Corps. Aunt Janet was 15, and Uncle Dirk was five. They drove from their home

in Ogden Dunes on weekends to work on the house, all summer, before moving in. Janet remembers their hair being white and stiff from plaster dust, by the end the day.

My grandfather built new floors, walls, and ceilings throughout the house. He replaced the stairs to the second floor and all the windows, and constructed front and back porches. He rewired the house, insulated it, installed indoor plumbing and a hot water heating system, and reinforced the foundation. He added built-in shelves and desks in the family room and two upstairs bedrooms, and a vanity in the upstairs bathroom.

He created a utility room with laundry facilities and pantry cabinets, right off the kitchen, to make it convenient for my grandmother to attend to the washing and cooking. In fact, he made the kitchen the center of everything, just as my grandmother was, in so many ways, our center—my center.

And although we might bristle at the 1950s presumption that cooking and housekeeping duties were wives' work, Grandma lived until her 96<sup>th</sup> year and never stopped mentioning how much she appreciated the laundry room/kitchen setup. Aunt Janet wrote a high school paper that said her dad built love into their house, and I think that must be true.

That love was lost on the federal appraisers, who swept through in the late 1960s and early 1970s, to seize the first half of 15,000 acres that would form the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. Through a series of gracious but increasingly frustrated letters, my grandfather negotiated the best any working-class carpenter and draftsman can negotiate with the U.S. Government.

This period of time is remembered with a lump in the throats of close family members. My grandparents loved Lake Michigan, and the dune country that surrounded it. They supported the creation of a national park to protect the area, and it was important to them to fulfill their duties as good citizens. But they had poured their sweat, their hearts, and their future into Furnessville, and felt unheard and uncompensated by a faceless government that exploited their community.

In 1972, upon threat of condemnation, my grandparents sold their house, and 9.2 acres of land, to the United States for \$23,000. The government allowed them to lease

back the house and three acres, for 25 years, and required them to continue paying property taxes throughout their tenancy. When my grandmother lived beyond the leaseback, the government introduced a new contract, which eventually drove her out. Her Social Security income wasn't enough to cover the rent and property taxes, and she elected to move into an apartment in Joliet, Illinois, to be near my aunt Janet.

True to form, Grandma helped the rest of us through the loss of "our" home. She chose to experience the move as a new beginning, instead of an ending, and enjoyed choosing her very favorite things to furnish her new apartment. This wasn't easy, as she treasured everything she owned.

Visiting the apartment with my own children was like being given a secret portal into Furnessville, on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor of this nondescript high-rise in Joliet IL. One of the saddest things I've ever experienced was visiting Furnessville before the government tore it down, as it stood quiet and empty. Grandma brought the soul of that place with her, and left the bones. It wasn't about the house, but the home she built with my grandfather, and the family they created from their love for one another. Nothing was more obvious to me as I watched my lovely grandmother shuffle around her tiny new kitchen, offering tea and an English muffin with orange marmalade.

A few weeks before she died, Grandma dreamed she was walking in a beautiful garden, just outside the gates of Heaven. She saw Grandpa sitting on a park bench, and asked him what he was doing there. "I'm waiting for you," he replied, that familiar clear blue spark in his eye. "We have always done everything together. I'm waiting for you." She told him she wasn't ready yet; she loved living.

Afterward, our family began sorting through her papers. She kept every photograph, newspaper clipping, grandchild's crayon drawing, Christmas card, and letter, neatly placed in unlabeled cardboard boxes. Among the belongings she painstakingly selected to move from Furnessville, these boxes accounted for a healthy percentage.

We sat in a rented house in Michigan for a week with 25, or so, family members, without making much of a dent in Grandma's archives. We each took a box or two home with us—some to Montana, some back to various parts of northern Indiana, and others to

Upstate New York with my parents, younger brother, and I.

I'm not in a big hurry to get through my lot. I sort through a small stack, from time to time, carefully unfolding each story, allowing my grandmother to take me on another trip down memory lane. She continues to teach me, through the messages she left behind. Among the cards and drawings were little notes Grandma wrote to herself. On a particularly desperate evening, shortly after Grandma's funeral, I pulled an envelope from the box. In her handwriting, it said:

*Decide what your basic values are and then live by that.*

*Be honest with yourself.*

*People respect you for being honest.*

These words cut right to the spiritual heart of that moment, as Grandma always did, and continues to do.

When I walk slowly along my own window sills, holding Grandma's antique bottles in my hand, cleaning them one by one; when I wipe the dust from the lamp built by my Grandfather, full of stones that represent the holiness of hundreds of ordinary moments once held in the hands of the people I love; when I hear piano chords spelling out a familiar hymn—it reminds me to stop and appreciate the magic happening all around me, at that very moment, and it takes me down memory lane.

Once or twice a year my parents drove all day, from New York—my younger brother and I bickering over back seat real estate, listening to our walkmans, praying our bladders were tougher than Dad's one-stop-per-state rule—to spend a week or two with Grandma and Grandpa on Furnessville Road.

As we rolled through those final minutes and miles, through the rural Indiana silence, through the tunnel made by the trees bending over the long straight road, through the humidity and mosquitoes, my body felt like it would turn inside out from anticipation. There was the Schoolhouse Shop. There was the cemetery. There was the park office. There was my grandparents' mailbox. And, finally, there was their house, the same as it was when I left it, the same as it always was.

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