

The Anniversary Party

by Harper Alexander

By 1947, my grandfather had returned from World War II and married a French girl he had met while going to college at Emory University in Atlanta. This was my grandmother. He looks at her sometimes in their kitchen when we are down to visit and loudly claims to have known from the moment he saw her that she would be the woman he'd marry. My grandmother Geva, short for the lovely Genevieve, smiles and shakes her head and takes a coconut cake into the other room while she remembers the hot day in Georgia when she lost her French name - Bertat. Bertat, Bertat. That name - incredibly beautiful, with the little lilt at the end lifting it up. She remembers becoming "Mrs. Alexander" and then incorporating the name when they started the "ALEXANDER'S OFFICE SUPPLIES" stores in Milledgeville, Macon, and Dublin, Georgia, where they live. And she puts the coconut cake down where it goes, where it will sit to be nibbled at in times of boredom by the men she made it for, and she thinks on where she is now - fifty years she's been married to him. Their stores are all three going strong, and she is still working at the Dublin branch every day, including today, her 50th wedding anniversary. She is still as sharp as the ten thousand tacks she ordered for Macon this morning.

We are down to visit and to celebrate this anniversary, this fairly amazing accomplishment of my grandparents. Their marriage has been full of love, and today their house is full of children and grandchildren. I am the oldest and long ago was dubbed "#1 Grandson" by my grandfather. My cousin Chris, a year younger than me, is "#2," my younger brother is "#3," and Chris's brother Scott is "#4." It's hardly a creative labeling system, but it works well when yelled from across the house if one of the dogs is bothering him or if anyone comes to the door. Chris has had a hard life and has made the lives of those around him hard as well. He is not in Dublin right now - he is in South Carolina at a military school, but he probably won't stay there long.

He was kicked out of one school for breaking into their computer system and messing with their records. He is fairly a genius with anything mechanical or technological, the exact opposite of me and my brother, who throw up our hands like the prissy city-boys we are when Chris talks about taking apart hard drives or fixing cars. His father, David, was in Vietnam and came back with nightmares. My father was born with the bone disease osteomalitis, right about the time a cure for it was found, so he lived but has had knee and hip problems all his life and never came close to Vietnam. One time when we were all little I found Chris smoking a cigarette and he told me I better not tell. Another time he told me that there were bees in Dublin called cow-killer bees and that if they've got enough poison to kill a cow they've sure got enough to kill me. He was brilliant and terrifying at times but always sweet underneath. When he broke into the school computer network he didn't change his grades or mess with records - he fixed it so that every single person's grade in every single class was an A+. He even kept the real grades hidden in another file so they could have them back when they found out who'd done it. Then he went to Dublin High and tried to burn down the building and was caught and kicked out. When I heard that he had tried to torch the school, I remember only being surprised that he hadn't succeeded.

He was sent to the military school in Aberdeen, South Carolina - three hundred disciplinary-case boys from all over Georgia and South Carolina crammed into a line of bunk-style barracks a quarter mile long, at the end of which sits a giant rectangular building where classes are held. Beyond that is a barren field they call the Oven because it bakes in the spring, summer, and autumn. For eleven months a year the field gets so hard it's like walking on stone. Winter there is about three weeks long and consists of a single raw wind that blows in one improbable morning, hovers with as bitter a countenance as all the other souls there, and blows on out in the afternoon of another unlikely day.

Driving down to Dublin, my mother told me not to talk about Chris because it would only upset everyone. He is mentioned anyway, in oblique ways. While Northern people take public spaces and try to make them private, real Southerners can't help but make their private lives public. Chris's mother Nanette, my aunt, fits this model - she wonders aloud, when will he clean up his act? She murmurs it to herself over an afternoon game of bridge. This is the right thing for him, she sighs to one else. She convinces no one and makes everyone else sigh. No one moves to cradle her dangling words, and the conversation slinks out of the room.

Thinking of Chris and thinking of him not being here at this event makes my grandmother sad, I can tell. She knows him better than anyone else does. She knows he is hard, but she has seen him all other ways too. In about a year from now, after he leaves the military school, he will come and move in here, into our grandparents' basement, attend classes at a local college, work at the Dublin store. For now, she is just sad for him, sad to think of where he sleeps. He has not been an easy child, but she remembers that he is still just that - a child. When it comes time for the family portrait the next evening at the anniversary party, it will be taken without him, and then it will hang on the wall for years without him. If you looked at it and didn't know the story, you wouldn't know anyone was absent, but the numbers don't lie - if you are looking to count grandsons #1 through #4, you will find you miss one.

The anniversary party is set to begin at seven at the Dublin Country Club. Dinner will be served around seven-thirty and around eight-thirty will commence all kinds of roasting my grandfather and toasting my grandmother. She will smile bigger than I've ever seen her smile and wave away the praise. He will revel in the ribbing these Southern men heap on. These men could only be called "cronies." It's such a perfect word - the way they stand, the lines traced around their eyes trained into unconscious squints, their hands giant and fatherly from working next to each other in the mill. Their stories lurch along, pausing to be remembered or embellished, pausing with a master storyteller's skill - they are pure cronies, closer than brothers and funnier than hell.

Even so, just as it is said of billiards tournaments and casinos that the real game, the game behind the game, is found

not in the official matches or on the gaming floor but rather in the practice room and behind locked doors, the same must be said for old men's stories. On the microphone before a crowded room, something is lost that is not lost in kitchen conversation. Far from being merely "not lost," something is found there in those kitchen stories, something is born there, and that moment that is found may far outlive the person telling the story. The *moment* of an old man's story and the *telling* of an old man's story are two very different beings. The telling of an old man's story is nothing more than the actual, measurable time it takes him to tell it. This may be two minutes, if it is simply a remembrance of when the Mustang convertible was finally sold or when Daddy Paul broke his hip for the second time, or it may be a half hour, if it is the explanation of a scar on the old man's neck or the story of how Carrie, the old black woman who cooks and cleans the house, came to work for my grandparents as a girl.

Contrary to the telling of a story, the moment of a story is not defined merely by the time it takes for all the words to be uttered. A story's moment - if it may be measured at all, since some stories have been around since before one was born and seem to stride toward a point far beyond one's worldly end - is measured by how long a listener can live and breathe within its boundaries. A good story's moment stretches far into the past and future. A story constructs of itself a kind of home - the biggest stones sit at the corners and the strongest beams run end to end in the floors and ceilings. After this framework, the innards are built in too, the story furnishes itself and makes comfortable each of its rooms, decorating some simply and others ornately, adding polish to the space. Like well-made homes, well-made stories outlive their original inhabitants and become a thing that people return to from far afield. After people perish and physical spaces fall away, the stories themselves become those things that later generations return to and point at and say, "That is what happened, that is how it all happened, that is how I used to live."

For most of the afternoon leading up to the anniversary party, the kitchen is the place to be. Carrie cooks some rolls and warms up green bean casserole that wasn't finished the night before, and people eat. My grandmother makes tea. The old men who have come by the house to do nothing more than sit around and talk do just that. They are not trying to entertain, they simply mean to talk, meandering around each other's words, leaning back in their chairs. And of this mix of food and talk comes that very visceral feeling of the casino's back room, the smoking car, the practice table, where these old men recount again the stories they know by heart. The story I remember best from that afternoon is the one about Lloyd Jr. and the tank.

This was in 1949, not long after the war was over. The tank itself ended up on its side in a shallow part of the Oconee River in East Georgia, almost all burned up, though Lloyd Jr. and his buddy had made it out before they were ever in any real danger of going up in smoke with it. Lloyd Jr. had to pay for the two diesel tank engines that he suddenly owed the United States Army, but that was pretty much nothing for punishment considering what he'd done. Lloyd Jr. was my grandfather's first cousin. He was two years younger than my grandfather, and the only man I have ever heard my grandfather, who was something of a wild man himself - his nickname from World War II was "TIGER" -, describe as "damn near a hurricane."

There was a party at a fraternity at the University of Georgia. Lloyd Jr. had "sipped on" a few beers - "sipped on 'em in 'em, and all around 'em" says my grandfather. And a boy in that fraternity who knew Lloyd was in the ROTC at Georgia started to challenge Lloyd Jr., saying he wasn't any kind of tank driver and that he certainly couldn't drive any tank, as drunk as he was. Drunk or sober, Lloyd didn't take being challenged. "Hell yes I can drive a tank" he said, and he and a bunch of buddies left the party heading for the armory. When they got to the armory there they found it all locked up and managed to get Lloyd and another boy up a wall and into a window about fifteen feet off the ground. Inside, they found they could get into the tank but couldn't start it, they didn't have the tank keys. Well, Lloyd Jr. says, "I'll just straight-wire the thing," and he straight-wired the tank. His buddy reminded him that the doors to the hangar were locked, but Lloyd simply hit the gas and busted right through those doors and then right on through the fenced-in gate surrounding the whole armory.

What do you do with a stolen tank once you've got it out? Lloyd Jr. didn't know any better than any other young man, but he took off for the countryside around the armory, to fool around some down there. Before too long, he got bored. "That was when he remembered his girl's sorority," my grandfather recalls. My grandfather laughs at this memory. "He drove that tank right up to that sorority house and put the tank right up against it, and the sororities at Georgia back then still had those old Southern columns you see sometimes. He took that tank and started nudging one of the columns, shaking the building, till it looked like the whole building was going to fall down. People were gathering around like you would expect them to around a stolen tank, and girls were hanging out of the windows looking to see what was happening." My grandfather laughs at this memory too. The police were called and Lloyd Jr. pulled that tank off the building and hit the road, chased by several police cars. The other guy in the tank starts yelling, "They're chasin' us, they're catchin' up to us," (and here my grandfather puts on a high, tinny voice).

"Well, I'll see about that," Lloyd Jr. says, and he starts to turn the big M7 gun mounted on top of the tank around so it's pointed back at the police cars. The police cars stop. Lloyd stops the tank. Lloyd starts the tank, going in the other direction back at the police cars. Now he's chasing the police cars in the tank. All of this is out on country roads around the University of Georgia, which, back in 1949, was still pretty much out in the middle of nowhere.

Lloyd Jr. jumps off the main road and starts tearing through the country, not really knowing where he is anymore until suddenly he feels the front end of the tank fall out from under him. He had hit the Oconee River, about four miles from campus, and now the tank went down the bank and ended up on its side. The police were pursuing him, and he could have gotten away, but his buddy in the tank was dazed from the crash, so he stayed and helped him get out of the tank. He let himself get caught. The tank burned. The tank and all that was in it was charred to a crisp by the jumping flames, which were eventually left to die out of their own accord near the bank of the brown Oconee River.

My grandfather tells about the day after Lloyd's adventure:

"I was studying at Emory then, but it was a small world, people kept coming up to me and asking me about my brother out at Georgia. I said, 'I don't have any brother at Georgia. I have a brother at Georgia Tech,' and they would say, 'Well who is this crazy man Lloyd Alexander out at Georgia, stole a tank, and drove it into the Oconee River?' I said 'What?' and they told me all about breaking into the armory and about the tank and the river. I said I always knew Lloyd was crazy, but this one was beyond even him. Turns out, I pick up the Atlanta paper and Lloyd Jr. and the tank made the front page, down in the corner. Later in the day, Mother called me up hysterical that Lloyd had tarnished the family. 'Lloyd Jr. has ruined the Alexander name, he has just ruined it,' and I thought about it for a minute and thought about all the people that had come up to me and told me what happened. And I thought about all the attention Lloyd must be getting out there, and the Atlanta paper, and I said 'Mother, Lloyd Jr. hasn't ruined our name, he has made us famous.'"

My grandfather leans back in his chair and laughs his high-pitched giggle. I strain to imagine him as a young man, a young husband newly back from war, the 'Tiger' that he must have been. The story of Lloyd Jr. and the tank happened in spring of 1949, when my grandparents were living in a trailer park outside Atlanta. They would move to Dublin in the summer, and a little more than a year later, in October of 1950, my father would be born. The telling of the story now complete, I begin to feel the moment as it really is. Everything in the room is crystal clear. I am aware of everything now - where people are sitting and standing, what they have in their hands, how the women and the men are arranged, the way the grey of afternoon here stretches on unchanged.

We have to go put on our nice clothes for the party now. My mother is ironing the wrinkles out of my pants now and putting them on the bed. It will be a night full of stories, but I can't shake off the one from the kitchen. Not because of the tank or the crash or the genius comic swivel of the M7 gun, but because of the moment in which it was told - the lazy afternoon, the gloomy talk of Chris, the desserts put out, the twitter of nerves right before we leave for the club, the tellings and the moments after.