



Too Many Boxes

by Dave Korzon

My grandfather, my father's father, was a difficult presence for me to understand when I was growing up. He liked to drink and smoke and he liked to fight with my grandmother the way other grandfathers liked to play checkers or watch Lawrence Welk. I think it relaxed him. To the best of my memory he never finished a holiday meal with us at his own dining room table, instead opting for the solitude of the cramped, steaming kitchen. One Thanksgiving (I was probably eight or nine), in a show of solidarity, I picked up my plate and followed him away from the dining room into the kitchen. I'm not sure what he thought of this gesture—he was mad at something my grandmother had done or said, and for all I know my act of loyalty served only to embarrass him. I hope this wasn't the case, but looking back I'm almost certain it was.

His name was Joseph, but everyone called him Joe. To me Joe was an All-American name that conjured up images of football players and cowboys. Joe to me was G.I. Joe. I never

thought it suited this Russian immigrant whose English was barely passable and who chose to fight with my grandmother using the richer vocabulary of his native language. My grandfather lived in this country for seventy years but I never thought of him as an American, and since *I was* an American it was always a challenge for me to draw any connections between the two of us. When I sat down at the kitchen table with him that Thanksgiving, we ate in silence, the expanse between us as great as Mother Russia herself.

But Joe did have an American pastime: the lottery. By the time I was old enough to walk to their house by myself and visit, he and my grandmother were living a sedentary existence. There were two small couches in their dark living room—his, by the front window facing the fireplace, and hers, at the far gable end of the room. They never had to look at each other. I imagine they designed this room after seeing a magazine feature on living rooms in communist-block countries. But it was a good set-up for two people who were con-

tent to merely coexist under the same roof. On the mantel in the living room was a handsome gold clock with a swinging pendulum. Its tick was overbearing, an ominous reminder of, at once, interminably long days and time running out. My grandmother could sit for hours on end in that living room twiddling her thumbs. (Literally. I kept waiting for them to fall off, or at least seize up from overuse.) My grandfather, it seemed to me, always had a newspaper in front of him, the sound of rustling pages intermittently drowning out his horrible labored breathing. He was a reformed smoker by this time, but years of cigarettes would not be forgiven in his case. It would eventually do him in, the emphysema, and when I would look at him, sitting on his small gray couch, I would pretend to see through him as if I were Superman with X-ray vision, only I did not see lungs like the healthy ones I'd once seen in a medical book. Instead I'd see withered brown paper bags like the ones the groceries came home in.

He liked his lottery tickets though. And, on some level, it pleases me now to think of him participating in such an American obsession. What, after all, is more American than anticipating an easy windfall, a shard of good fortune? It's the reason why many people like my grandparents came to this country in the first place—some of them needing to first win a lottery just to get a place on the boat. But there is a story about my grandfather and the lottery that I still often meditate on and in many ways am still trying to work through in my adulthood. I was not witness to this occurrence but it is part of family lore and has been confirmed as true by a number of reliable sources.

My grandfather, it goes, once held a lottery scratch ticket and in the process of scratching off the different boxes to see if his ticket was a winner, scratched too hard. Much too hard.

I've imagined this scene a number of times based on the renditions I've heard throughout the years. It is a scratch ticket with six individual boxes hiding a sequence of numbers. If each number is a match for the corresponding numbers on the ticket, well, you are rich. I can picture my grandfather on his couch, the clock ticking, the pristine ticket gleaming (or trying to gleam in that unlit room) in his hand. I can see him poised, with the buffalo nickel he used to scratch all his tickets, ready to see what fate had stored up for him that day. The first box reveals a match. Well, that's interesting. The second, another match, two for two. But he's seen this much before, only to be disappointed. The third box, match. His breathing becomes more pronounced, the paper bags inside him are working to keep up with his adrenals. Fourth box . . . match. Now he's in new territory. He pauses, going back to recheck the scratched numbers to make sure he hasn't missed something. Indeed, he's four for four. But he resigns himself to the fact that the fifth box will do him in. He'll reflect back on this ticket as a worthy opponent that got the best of him. But box number five turns out to be a match. His whole world stops now and he is transfixed. The room hasn't changed—there is the clock, there is my grandmother in his periphery. She says

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something, perhaps, and he barks at her. But fighting is the last thing on his mind. He has a chance to win. He stares at the covered sixth and deciding box, hesitant to scratch it clean. Again he thinks, I have a chance to win. Only, his thoughts of the possibility of winning do not come through clean and alone. Instead, another thought invades him, seeping in slowly as if viral: I could lose. After going five for five, I could lose. And he begins to scratch and he becomes afraid. He becomes afraid of what he doesn't know yet. And this fear in him radiates to his right hand, to his right thumb and forefinger which hold the nickel and he closes his eyes and he scratches and scratches and scratches until the number in the sixth box is illegible. He opens his eyes and it is gone forever.

As with all family stories, this one gets fitted with a different filter as I enter each new phase of my own life. As a teen I thought the story was funny. In my twenties it was inconsequential. Now in my thirties it haunts me. I don't like the idea of it being true. I don't like to think about my grandfather being afraid this way. I'd rather he be afraid of snakes or heights or the bogeyman for that matter. I guess this is because the fear of disappointment on a grand scale, or even a small one, the fear of an unknown outcome that is out of our control and that might not go our way, for me, adds up to a fear of life. And when I catch myself in a trivial moment, turning off an important ballgame because it's too close in the late innings or, in a less-trivial moment, wishing I could disappear while waiting for the results of some routine (or not so routine) blood work, I know this fear of life lurks inside of me as well. There are times I want to scratch out all the awaiting verdicts that, in a sense, make up all our lives, and live not knowing. I am my grandfather's grandson, and for me there are too many boxes out there.

Phone calls were made that afternoon, by the way, after my father found out about the ticket. He managed to get someone from the state lottery commission on the telephone and explained to him, probably a number of times, what had transpired. He read off the serial number on the back of the ticket to the man on the other end of the line and then waited. Finally after the proper records were checked, he was told that my grandfather's ticket, even though the first five boxes matched, wasn't a winner.

And the funny thing is, I never wonder about the moment when my dad had to tell his father that his ticket was a losing one. Instead, I think about the man who was on the other end of the phone. I envision him wearing glasses, a tie, a pocket protector. He hangs up his phone and maybe shakes his head at the story he's just heard, amused. Perhaps he'll tell his friend who works at the next desk about the whole thing later on in the cafeteria where they eat lunch. Then his phone rings again, his day resumes its flow, and soon he forgets all about my father's phone call and my grandfather's ticket. He works for the lottery, after all, and losing tickets to him, or winning ones for that matter, are just part of everyday life. ☺