

Jon Muñoz  
jonathen\_munoz@emerson.edu  
(862) 268-5718  
First Submission

In My Grandmother's Garden

*JUNE 22, 2018*

My mother calls me and asks if I can pick up some groceries for her before I visit. It's been less than a year since I moved out, and her use of the phrase "visit" is especially odd to me, though I say nothing about it. "Visiting home" is a concept I am still getting used to.

She asks me to pick up milk and eggs and chicken breasts—she is sure to clarify the brand for each of the items, and even goes so far as to remind me that she gets 2% milk, the kind with the blue plastic lid. I remind her that I know what kind of milk she wants.

"Well, you can never be too careful," she says.

I arrive less than an hour later to "visit." As I put the groceries away for my mother, she comes into the kitchen carrying her purse.

"I'm going to lunch with Beany," she tells me. "Do you want to come?"

"You're going to lunch with Beany?" I ask. "I thought you guys didn't talk."

"We only just started talking again, really. She's turning 79 this summer and I don't want to spend the rest of her life not speaking to her."

"Why?" I ask. "I thought you didn't like her."

"I never said that!" My mother snaps. She puts her purse on the counter and leans in towards me. "What makes you think I don't like her?" Her brows furrow together.

"Oh, I don't know, maybe the fact that she hasn't been involved in our lives *at all* for

well over a decade?” I feel my brows furrow together and instantly relax them when I realize I’m making the same expression as my mother.

“It’s more complicated than that,” my mother says as she picks her purse up from the counter. There’s a kind of sadness in her expression that I haven’t quite seen before—she looks resigned. “She really hasn’t been the world’s best grandmother, I’ll give you that. I’m sorry. I wish you could have had grandparents around when you were growing up.” She looks me in the eye. “But you can’t change the past. You can only try to shape the future.”

I let what she has just said sink in. After a moment, she asks, “So, are you coming?”

Half an hour later, I am sitting in a booth at Yetter’s Diner with my mother and my grandmother. It is the first time I have seen her in well over a decade. She looks the same as I remember her: curly white hair cropped short, winding cerulean veins easily visible through her pale skin, crinkles around her eyes and nose. She even wears penny loafers similar to the ones I remember her wearing years ago—always black, always with a bow on the toe, always worn with socks that have a ruffled cuff just above her ankle. The only real difference between her now and the memories I have of her is the warmth with which she greets me. She hugs me tightly and tells me I look just like my uncle Eric did at my age.

“Your mother tells me you’re moving to Boston for your masters,” Beany says as I open the menu. She leaves her menu on the table, closed, and stares at me instead. “What are you going to be studying?”

“Writing,” I say.

She perks up immediately. “*Writing?*” A smile spreads across her lips. The skin around her eyes crinkles so much that her eyes seem to disappear in the folds. “That’s amazing. I’ve always said we needed a writer in the family. Haven’t I always said that, Kathy?”

“I don’t think you’ve ever said that, Mom,” my mother says.

“Of course I have,” Beany says with a dismissive wave of her hand, “you just don’t listen to me. You know what I think the best book in the world is? The Bible. Now, I don’t say that because I’m a Bible-thumper, per se, but I *do* think it is by far the best book ever written.” I ask her which books of the Bible she likes the most, and she takes a moment to think before answering. “Genesis, Exodus, and Joshua, I think.” She does not elaborate, but rather turns the conversation back to me. “What are you going to write about?” She looks at me with such a genuine interest that I decide to tell her the truth.

“I’m going to write about our family.”

At first, I don’t know how she’s going to react. The tales I have heard of my grandmother’s life are not exactly a shining testament to the family history. In fact, most of our family history is dysfunctional and abusive—not something older relatives like to discuss or have known, in my experience—so I am surprised when Beany tells me that she thinks this is a great idea.

“I mean it! That is *such* a great idea. You two need to come to the house when we’re done here. I have some things I need to give you.”

When the server comes to take our orders, my mother and Beany end up ordering the same thing: scrambled eggs with French fries—*not* home fries, Beany will clarify to the server twice—and a cup of black tea. No toast necessary. I order chocolate chip pancakes with a side of bacon.

“I’ve been coming to this diner since I was a teenager, and I always order the same exact thing,” Beany says with a wink as the server walks away from the table.

The meal passes with easy conversation. I am surprised not only by how quickly the time

passes, but also by how much I enjoy getting to know Beany. At one point, she happily retells the story of how she became “Beany,” and I let her tell the story even though I have heard it many times by now: My older brother, Chucky, was Beany’s first grandchild, and she wanted to make sure she was called Nana by her grandchildren. Chucky, however, would not be able to pronounce Nana easily as a toddler. Instead, he would call her *Nee-nee*, which eventually transformed into *Beany*. The name stuck.

My mother pays for the meal and we drive back to Beany’s house, which is less than ten minutes down the road from Yetter’s Diner. This is the house my mother grew up in, the house that Beany has lived in since she was eighteen years old. We don’t stay for long—my mother has other plans for the afternoon, and I have to get to work soon anyway—but Beany tells us to take a seat at the kitchen table while she rummages through a cabinet down the hallway. After a moment, she comes into the kitchen heaving a treasure trove of photo albums, with a Ziploc bag full of yellowing documents stacked on top of the albums. Through the Ziploc bag I see birth certificates, death certificates, handwritten letters dated from the early 1970’s, photos of faces and places I don’t recognize.

“What is all of this?” I ask her.

“This is everything I’ve learned about our family,” she says. “I want you to take this. All of this.” She slides the albums across the table to me.

“Are you sure?” I ask her. There are so many documents here, so many stories held within these albums and this plastic bag.

She lights a cigarette and takes a long pull as she opens the kitchen door. She blows the smoke through the screen door, which she leaves closed.

“Someone needs to tell our story,” she says while staring out the door, “and it’s not going

to be me.” She looks at me and smiles her crinkly-eyed smile. For the first time in my life, I feel a genuine connection with her.

“Thank you for all of this, Beany. Seriously. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Thank me by writing about our family,” she tells me. And then, after a pause, she smirks and says, “And thank me by keeping these papers and photos safe. I haven’t saved them for fifty years just for you to ruin them.”

###

### *GENESIS*

Dolores Cecile Ferreira will be born on July 13, 1939 in Franklin, New Jersey. She will live within about ten miles of Franklin for her entire life. She will never move away. Franklin will always be home. She will also never be able to afford the move.

She will be born to twenty-two year old Grace Morgan (also born in Franklin, New Jersey) and thirty-six year old Julio Ferriera. Her birth certificate will list her father as Julius Ferrier, the “Americanized” version of Julio’s name assigned to him at Ellis Island. No two legal documents of his will ever agree upon his name: this birth certificate will name him Julius Ferrier, his certificate of naturalization will name him Julio Ferreira from Portugal, and his death certificate will name him Julius Ferriera—a misspelled compromise of the two. No one will refer to them as the Ferrier family. They will always be the Ferriera family.

Julio will work as a zinc miner in Northern New Jersey throughout his life. Grace will work as a housewife. They will raise their family in the same house in which they will both die.

Dolores will have three sisters: Darleen, Sandra, and Anita. Darleen’s name will be misspelt on her birth certificate, and for just over a month her legal name will be Starleen. Anita will die less than three years after she is born. There will be a singular photo of her, preserved in

a porcelain frame, which Dolores will keep with her for the rest of her life.

Dolores will always share a room with her two sisters while she lives with her parents. The room will always make her feel claustrophobic, but with her sisters, it will feel safer. That is, it will feel safer until one night, when Dolores is older, her father will crawl into bed with her mother, intent on finally having a son after four daughters. Her mother will tell her father, *Stop bothering me. Go bother the girls.*

And so he will.

Dolores will run away when she is fourteen. She will not get far. A police car will see her walking by herself alongside Route 206 with an overstuffed backpack weighing her down. The cop, a close friend of her father's, will recognize her on sight and ask her where she thinks she is going. He will bring her home. Her mother will be relieved. Her father will thank his friend, who will leave promptly to let her parents handle the situation *as they see fit.*

Her father will clasp a fistful of her hair and drag her through the house, down the steps, and across the yard to the vacant doghouse. He will throw her to the ground and tear the iron dog chain from its post and wind the chain around one of his hands. He will use the other hand to bring the chain down upon her back as many times as he sees fit.

She will scream until the world goes black.

She will never try to run away again, no matter how often her father comes in the room at night.

Dolores will get her first job on a neighbor's farm one year later. Her parents will not know about the job. She will fall in love with the work, with seeding and planting and picking and plucking. When her boss pays her for the first time, she will immediately walk to the hardware store three miles up Route 206. The first thing she will purchase with her own money

will be a deadbolt for her bedroom door. She will install the bolt herself.

Her father will never come in the room at night again.

###

*JULY 13, 2018*

[Beany's 79<sup>th</sup> birthday breakfast]

###

*EXODUS*

[The story of Dolores's marriage to Peter Szanyi, my grandfather. One specific highlight is a scene in which Peter goes after Dolores with a butcher's knife when she threatens to leave him. My uncle Steve, age eleven at the time, will jump on Peter's back to protect his mother, and as a result, Peter will slam Steve against the wall and punch him so hard he fractures his eye socket.]

###

*JULY 24, 2018 — PART ONE*

I wake up to my phone blaring Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. My mother is calling.

I answer the phone still half-asleep, and my mother is sure to take note of the tone in my voice.

"Did I wake you up? Why are you sleeping so late? What are your plans for the day?"

"Um—yes, because it's my day off, and I don't have any yet."

"Huh?"

"I'm answering your questions respectfully."

"You should answer all of my questions respectfully—I'm your mother. Anyway. I'm going to see Beany in a little while and I was wondering if you wanted to go. Kait's coming."

I don't have to think twice before I tell her that I would love to tag along.

Just under two hours later, we are pulling into Beany's driveway. Just as I shut my car door, the gate to Beany's garden swings open.

"Come here, come here, come here!" Beany is excitedly waving us towards the garden with hands covered in dirt. She is wearing a large sunhat that I mistake for a sombrero at first.

Kait and I hurry towards the garden. As we approach her, Beany gives us each a hug and a "Hi, sweetie." My mother is nowhere to be seen.

Beany yells, "*Kathy!* Get your ass over here!"

"I'm *coming*, Ma," says my mother from somewhere on the other side of the car. "I'm looking at your cucumbers over here by the garage. You don't have too many—"

"I know what I have in my own garden, Kathleen, now *come here!*" She rolls her eyes and smirks at Kait and me. "Never did what she was told, your mother."

"What'd you say about me?" my mother says as she approaches.

"Nothing that isn't the truth," Beany says as she turns and leads us into the garden.

This is the first time I am standing in my grandmother's garden, and it looks even larger on the inside. There are rows and rows of plants and crops I can't even begin to name, lining the ground in perfect rows. There are two long rows of tomato plants, each standing in their own black planter. Their stalks remind me of a hedge maze.

"Come over here," Beany says as she walks down the row created by the tomato plants. She disappears around a corner in the plants that I didn't realize existed. As I follow her around the corner, I am surprised to find stalks of corn shooting up alongside the tomato plants. I follow her past the corn, around the cabbage bushes, alongside the zucchini and spinach and eggplants and asparagus and the bell peppers. We pass her herb patch—she excitedly points out how well



the rosemary and mint is doing—and find ourselves on the far side of her garden, facing a wall of towering sunflowers.

“I didn’t know you grew sunflowers, Beany!” Kait says excitedly. Sunflowers are her favorite, and she tells Beany so.

“Really? I didn’t know that about you,” Beany says as she steps over a stray cabbage bush to get closer to the sunflowers. “These were a total accident, actually. But, come here!” She waves us closer to her with an excited smile. “Don’t step on the cabbage, though.”

As the three of us get closer to her, Beany pushes a sunflower stalk aside to reveal a bird’s nest cradled between another sunflower’s stalk and the fencing of her garden. Kait and my mother gasp.

There are six baby birds in the nest, their tiny beaks wide open and pointed towards the sky, waiting for food. I’m not sure why, but the sight makes me uncomfortable—their beaks seem to be open too wide, as if they were unhinged. I don’t look at them for too long.

“Aren’t they just the cutest?” Beany asks.

“Oh my *gahd!*” Kait says.

“Just *look* at them!” My mother says with adoration in her voice.

Beany looks at me.

“Oh my god,” I say, searching for a reply. “They’re...so small!”

Beany smiles at me as she nods her head quickly up and down. She turns her gaze back to them. I take a step back and admire the sunflowers.

“Beany?” I start.

“Hm?”

“What was that you said about the sunflowers being an accident?”

Beany gently releases the sunflowers, taking extra care not to jostle the nest in any way. She comes and stands next to me while my mother inspects the stray cabbage bush and Kait continues to try stealing glances at the baby birds and their gaping mouths.

“Well, I got two sunflowers as presents a few years ago when I started this garden,” she tells me. “I don’t remember who got them for me—everyone was giving me seeds and plants when I first told them about what I wanted to do in this garden—but I figured I may as well give them a go. The two that I got did okay that first season, but I let them die and figured I’d just plant something new in that same spot the following year. That next year, though, sunflowers started popping up along this wall of the garden,” she points to the mass of sunflowers with a dirt-covered finger. “Then the next year there were more, and then there were more the following year, and they have just been popping up ever since. Not exactly what I had intended for my garden, but at least they’re beautiful.”

I chuckle. “What, you mean you *didn’t* want an entire wall of sunflowers in your garden?”

“Well, you can’t always control what takes root in a garden,” she says as she bends down to pluck a handful of weeds from the soil near the stray cabbage plant. “But I don’t worry about that. There will always be weeds trying to smother the garden before it can even grow. That’s just life.” She tosses the handful of weeds over the garden’s fence and then glances towards the towering sunflowers. “But sometimes—well, sometimes you find yourself surrounded by surprise sunflowers.”

Beany smiles at me after she says this, though there is a trace of sadness in her eyes that dampens the authenticity of the smile. I’m taken aback by this moment of wisdom and beauty. I never thought of Beany as a woman who could sound so optimistic, nor did I expect her to

produce jewels of wisdom such as this surprise sunflower comment. I realize that the woman smiling at me is a stranger that I don't quite know. I return a half-smile, wondering if Beany would have been a poet in another life.

###

*JOSHUA*

[The story of Dolores's life after her marriage to my grandfather.]

###

*JULY 24, 2018 — PART TWO*

We are sitting down at Beany's kitchen table a few moments after she has shown us the baby birds in her garden. My mother sits across from me, Kait is to my right, and Beany is to my left. She has been telling us about how her neighbor, John, had an amazing crop of squash in his garden plot this summer.

"You should have *seen* them. Oh my *gahd!* I went over there a few weeks ago to bring him some tomatoes and he asked me if I wanted any squash because he had so many, and I swear they were *this* big!" She stands her hands on the table about a foot apart, a lit cigarette poised between her right pointer and middle finger, her thumbs pointing towards the ceiling, a cerulean vein slithering across the back of her hand.

"Wait," my mother says, a sly smile creeping along the corners of her lips. "Why were you bringing him tomatoes?"

Beany takes a puff of her cigarette and exhales in the general direction of the open screen door before she answers. "Well, I bring him tomatoes every once in a while! Lord knows I can't

eat all of the ones I grow. I'm always giving people tomatoes. You know that—you get most of them!" She smudges her cigarette out before she stands up and shuffles across the kitchen, her loafers hissing against the floor with each step. "Speaking of, does anybody want a tomato sandwich? It's lunchtime."

We all say yes to the sandwiches, though the question is apparently rhetorical: she has already begun slicing the tomatoes on a cutting board that is comically small.

My mother proceeds with her playful interrogation. "I just didn't know you'd been bringing John so many tomatoes."

"I bring him a lot from my garden! He really likes my zucchini, too. I bring him some cucumbers when I have a few to spare, and maybe a cabbage head or two—oh, that reminds me..." Beany trails off and puts the tomato knife down on the counter before shuffling over to the stove. Placed in the middle of the four gas burners, there is a deep metal pot that is scuffed silver along the sides and edges. Beany reaches in and extracts a remarkably large head of cabbage that drips water all over the stove.

"I told you these were enormous!" She beams with a proud smile. I notice for the first time that when Beany smiles, the skin around her eyes crinkles with such intensity that her eyes all but disappear. I look over at my mother, who is smiling back at Beany, and notice that she has the same crinkles around her eyes, though to a lesser degree—her eyes do not yet disappear as Beany's do. I think of the skin around my own eyes when I smile, how crinkles and creases form in places I wish they wouldn't. I realize for the first time in my life that these crinkles are hereditary.

"And John just gives you all this squash?" My mother muses, unimpressed by Beany's cabbage diversion.

“Yeah! Sometimes he gives me carrots, too. He’s a very nice man, John is,” Beany says as she gently lowers the head of cabbage back into the water. She shuffles back over to her cutting board as she tells us more about John: a widower of nearly a decade, he is always working on some kind of project for his property. He is the one who helped Beany fence in the newest expansion of her garden. He is a good man and always has been, as far as she can tell.

A smile crosses my mother’s face. I understand why. There’s a tone in Beany’s voice that is airy and almost girlish, and this tone makes it clear that Beany does not go see John just because she likes his squash or his carrots. There is a hint of tenderness in her voice that I have not heard before.

Beany finishes chopping the tomatoes and makes herself a sandwich with two thick tomato slices and a hearty smearing of mayonnaise on both slices of white bread.

“I don’t know how you all like your tomato sandwiches,” she says to no one in particular as she shuffles back to her seat, “so you can make them yourselves.” She takes a bite out of her sandwich as my mother gets up and crosses the kitchen. The kitchen is too small for all of us to try making our sandwiches at once, so Kait and I wait for her to finish.

My mother tells Kait and me that the ultimate tomato sandwich is made with three tomato slices (“*Not* two,” she says as she casts a look at the back of Beany’s head), and instead of mayonnaise, she uses Miracle Whip. As she returns to her seat, Kait crosses the kitchen and tells my mother that she is wrong.

“Beany has the right idea,” Kait says as she begins smearing mayonnaise lightly on both slices of her bread. “Miracle Whip is, like, super gross. I don’t even know what’s in it. I’ve never tried it.”

My mother wipes her mouth with a paper towel before speaking with her mouth still half-

full. “Well, how can you know it’s gross if—”

Beany lightly slaps the back of my mother’s paper-towel-wielding hand. “Didn’t your mother ever teach you not to speak with a mouthful of food?” she asks through a mouthful of food. The three of us laugh while Kait ignores us, deciding on two tomato slices for her sandwich. She sits back down.

I cross the kitchen and stand in front of the sink for a moment, contemplating if I want to try my tomato sandwich with Miracle Whip or not. As I fish two slices of bread out of the plastic bag, I look down and realize there is a butcher’s knife in the sink. My hand stops fishing as I feel time begin to conflate. Though I am standing here in the present, I also find myself with one foot in the past. I see the scene play out in my imagination: my grandfather advancing upon my grandmother with a butcher’s knife poised in the air, my uncle jumping on my grandfather’s back, my grandfather slamming my uncle into the wall with such force that the drywall cracks only moments before my uncle’s eye socket will. This is not my memory to remember, and yet I imagine the scene vividly, as though I were there. I construct this narrative by relating these people to me—“my grandfather,” “my grandmother,” “my uncle,”—even though I have no place in this scene. In this moment, they are Peter and Dolores and Stephen. They are just like characters in a play. I can see what happens, I can watch events unfold, but this is all I can do. I cannot reach into time and save Dolores and Stephen from the wrath of Peter. I cannot revise these scenes from their lives, no matter how badly I want to. I can only bear witness.

*You can’t always control what takes root in a garden. But I don’t worry about that. There will always be weeds trying to smother your garden before it can even grow. That’s just life. But sometimes—well, sometimes you find yourself surrounded by surprise sunflowers.*

I understand now why this jewel of wisdom took me surprise earlier in the garden.

I have spent my life thinking of my grandmother as just that: my grandmother. I have pictured her only as Beany, an aloof matriarch who I have only ever really met through stories that my mother and her siblings have told me. I have only pictured her as a victim of events outside of her control—events I viewed as predetermined up until this point. I have only pictured her as a woman permanently damaged by decades of terrible abuse.

I never once thought about her as Dolores, the girl who used her first paycheck to buy a deadbolt and protect her sisters and herself; Dolores, the girl who tucked a butcher's knife under her mattress to protect her children and herself; Dolores, the woman who taught herself to drive at 28; Dolores, the single mother who found herself trying to raise five children with no outside support; Dolores, the woman who traced her own family heritage and began teaching herself Portuguese.

I have only ever seen her as Beany, a static human whose story is best told in the imperative mood to indicate her lack of choice or opportunity. I have never once considered my grandmother to be who she actually is: Dolores, in a state of becoming, her story best told in the indicative mood to show that her life is still continuing, only occasionally intersecting with my own narrative.

I pull my one foot out of the past and stand with two feet in the present. We are in my grandmother's kitchen, and we are eating tomato sandwiches, and what happened in this kitchen almost fifty years ago does not matter right now. There are infinite memories that take place in this kitchen—and soon eating these tomato sandwiches will also just be a memory—but for right now, I choose to remain in the present with my grandmother, Dolores, who has continued talking with my mother about John. They are discussing the cats that roam his property as I finally decide on how to make my tomato sandwich: two tomato slices with a respectable spread of both

Miracle Whip and mayonnaise. I make a point of checking the Miracle Whip label before I cross the kitchen and sit back down.

“What did you decide on?” Kait asks me through a mouthful of food.

“Two tomato slices with Miracle Whip and mayo,” I tell her. “I don’t think it’ll be too bad. I’ve never had Miracle Whip, but the only things that make it different from mayo are—”

“I don’t care,” Kait says with a wave of her hand. “It’s gross, and you’re gross for liking it.” She swallows, sticks her tongue out at me, and takes another bite before turning her head to listen to the ongoing conversation about John’s cats. I listen while I eat my sandwich, never once opening my mouth while it’s full. At one point, my mother tells a joke about John’s gardening skill that is on the borderline of being raunchy.

“Oh my *gahd!*” Beany and Kait exclaim in unison. They exchange surprised glances with one another before bursting into laughter. Their laughs are nearly identical, with the only difference being that Beany’s is raspy where Kait’s is smooth. I realize that Kait’s laugh must be what Beany’s sounded like when she was younger, and I feel time begin to conflate at the table. Each feeds into the other’s laughter until they are both using napkins to wipe tears from the corners of their eyes, gasping for breath.

“See, Jon?” my mother says from across the table. “I told you that crazy runs in the family.”

Beany bunches her napkin into a ball and drops it on the empty plate in front of her. “You’re damn right it does,” she says to my mother. Then she turns to me, her eyes still saturated with joy from the laughter. “And don’t *you* ever forget it.”

A smile creeps across my face and makes the skin around my eyes crinkle a bit.

“I could never.”