

Given a Chance
By Ruth Brown

A Parade issue contained an article about getting a second chance with someone that has died. Who would you pick to talk to or be with if such an opportunity presented itself? My husband wanted me to write about it and send it in. I asked why. They've already done an article on it, the author gathering thoughts from people he knows. The article did say that the magazine would like to hear from readers, but I don't have anything to share and I don't like being thrown into the mix, buried beneath other stories that would be more touching than anything I could say. Readers want to be touched. They want to experience emotion, drama and tragedy. I'm not good at tapping that, which will damn me as a writer.

As I got ready to go to the grocery store, I considered the premise of the article. Who would I pick? I struggled with that. One chance to meet with a person dead. At first, I reasoned it would be selfish to choose one person over another. I thought about famous historical people, whose brains I'd like to pick, people I imagine it would be interesting to chat with for a while. I thought of relatives and ones I knew that are gone. Would it be better to give my chance to another person who knew exactly who they would like to talk to without thinking about it? Well, no, this isn't a real thing. It isn't something to fret over or speculate. Just pick!

I picked.

If I was given the chance to talk with someone dead, I would request that person be my paternal grandfather. I don't know how exactly we would be brought together, but I know I would hug him upon sight because he is family even though I don't know him. I carry something of him in me. That's enough.

My grandfather died out in a field working when my father was twelve or so. I've seen pictures of him, but there aren't many and it's hard for me to remember his face since it isn't speaking or smiling or reading the newspaper. I didn't have years to study on it like children do when they stare at their relatives for hours. Does she look like me? Will I look like that when I grow old? There is one picture that I saw many times growing up. He's standing outside with a hat on. He looks very suave standing there in a suit, casual. But his face is shaded by the hat and the detail is lost. I've seen a clear picture of his face after I became an adult, but it doesn't last in my head the way that other one does.

"Hello, Pappaw, I'm Ruth Ellen, MD's daughter, your youngest grandchild. There are eleven of us. I'm the baby, just like Daddy."

Daddy's not really the baby, but everyone thinks of him as the baby, because the other two after him died as did the one before. He is the last surviving son, but he carries his father's name. I asked him once why he is the junior when he is the fifth son and the sixth child. He shrugs and says they must have run out of names. His brothers have unusual names, last names of respected people used as first names, so I've been told. To me it's perfectly normal, but my friends laughed and said it's weird.

I think it would be nice if we were given two old chairs to sit in on a porch. I would have to face him because I need to study his face, commit it to memory.

That's the problem. There's no memory to comfort me when I miss him. How could I miss someone I don't know? It's not hard. I know stories. I know his occupation.

I know he was respected. I don't know the sound of his voice, the way he walked, the shape of his smile, his views in adult discussions.

"My daughter's name is Ruth. Juda Ruth," he might say.

"I'm named for Ruth in the Bible and for her. My moma says I'm like her." Now he is anchored a little. He can think of someone he knows and relate to me. I'm wondering if he is like my daddy. I think so.

"You look like Lena and Juda in the cheeks," he says.

I smile. "I have Daddy's ball on my nose, his teeth and his legs and I'm taller than my mother. Pelle and I look so much alike in some pictures, Daddy doesn't know which is which, but we aren't so much the same now." Then I remember he doesn't know who Pelle is, so I give him a rundown of all my cousins. It has occurred to me I'm probably the tallest girl. One uncle and my daddy looked alike and are tall. The other boys and my aunt are shorter.

I ask him to tell me about being a drafter and architect, designing and building things and going to Chicago way back when traveling wasn't so easy.

"I like drawing buildings," I say. "Do you know I was married in the church you built?"

"No," he says and he talks about the unsupported roof design that was unique to the small town when he used that feature.

"When I went up there to check the building with Daddy, the man there was confused because he said my daddy's initials were on the beams. Daddy told him those were your initials marking the shipment of wood."

Pappaw laughs. "I'm immortalized on church beams."

"Yeah."

I tell him Mammaw came to stay with us in the summers for many years. He says he knows. Oh. I guess he does. She could tell him all those things now.

I ask him if there's anything he wants to know that I could tell him.

"I'm just enjoying listening to you, sweetheart," he says.

I hear my daddy's voice and my uncles' voices. I know the bones in his hands as if I've been looking at them all my life. It all fits.

Our time is up. So quickly, but I'm okay with that.

I hug him and he hugs me just like my daddy does.

"I love you, Pappaw."

"I love you, too, sweetheart."

He's gone, but not gone. I have memory now. I had it all along. I just didn't know it