

An Open Letter to My Grandfather Whose Death Gave Me a Broken Chair

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Dear George,

Yesterday, I listened to your voicemail again. It's been in the 'deleted' section of my voicemail inbox for quite some time, but I never found the strength to delete it. Unlike stereotypical sweet last voicemails from deceased loved ones, yours was—for lack of better words—a plea for help, for freedom, for someone. And, when you begged, "please call me... Somebody, please call me," I knew that 'someone' was definitely not me, I just received your message instead. Nevertheless, I blamed myself—my younger and more naive self—for not answering when you called, not being the granddaughter you desperately needed, and not understanding why you called me and not your sons.

As a child, I placed you on a pedestal of righteousness where you could do no harm in my eyes. I spent my summers in your ground-floor apartment, digging through the white fridge, planting cheap strawberry seeds, and swimming in the community pool. I watched you, in almost everything, as you loved everyone in our family: from instantly quitting smoking at my little sister's request—ending a thirty-year addiction—to bringing my grandmother's presence into every place, even posthumously. Children are impressionable, and I was no different. I loved you unconditionally, and in all of your righteousness, because I believed that my naivete was you. I created such a secure and imaginary form of you that it became seemingly unbreakable. Yet, after your death, I was forced to reckon with the blanket of ignorance your mythical image had kept from me.

Admittedly, I have not completely left that protective blanket because it's comfortable. I do not pretend to know the closed-door conversations you had with my father, nor your relationship with him. But I do know the silence that your name produced. When I asked my father about you, there was always silence before he answered. And I've realized that this silence was not him thinking about what to say, but rather how much to reveal. Your relationship with my father was complicated—to say the least. You were often stubborn in your ways, highly critical of their every move, and a not-so-stellar listener. Despite it all, you all loved each other in your own way.

I recognize now that you showed them tough love: a distant, and often removed form of love, one that is seen and not heard. To you, tough love would protect them from the racialized brutality you experienced; tough love would encourage them to pursue college education, unlike many others in our family; tough love would keep them alive.

To them, tough love was a chair in the corner of the living room—the one that you always sat in. For fifteen years, you sat in that reclining chair until the wear-and-tear of time and constant moving rendered it useless. After the first chair, you assumed your position in that corner in the same way. Even when the chairs would rip or lose pieces, you would shrug and sit back down; the chair couldn't be the problem. When we change the chair, we cannot ever realize that our sitting—as an exemplification of emotional distance—was always the problem. We show our

children, grandchildren, and subsequent generations that emotional distance and tough love are inevitable. As they grow older and create their own families, they refuse to put a chair in the corner like that, at least at first. Slowly but surely though, the familiarity of the chair—and tough love as the only love they've seen—can reel them back in because we loathe distance until we create it ourselves. So, although we all know how much a broken chair can cost, the darting gaze from the corner, or the immovability of the furniture that's just too physically-taxing to carry, they may choose to sit as well.

But instead of taking up the chair in the corner—like you did—my father sat next to me at the table. From an early age, he nurtured my interests and encouraged me to critically question everything around me, all while ensuring that I did not know enough to question you.

Despite the resentment and guilt I will always carry with me about your death, I have both you and my father to thank endlessly. Without the continuous encouragement to explore Black American history, I would've never found the academic subject that has now overtaken my life. It is a light, a superglue, and life-raft that sustains me in a moment when the world seeks to destroy it—and me. So, thank you for pushing: pushing me towards the academic field I can no longer live without and my father closer to me, my siblings, and my family.

To me, tough love produces broken chairs in a storage facility—the ones piled under old suit jackets and paperwork, just accumulating dust. And yesterday, my family and I went back there to see the chair one last time. We stood there silently as the dust floated around us. Then we turned the lights off, shut the door softly, and went home.