

## **The Power of Lightning**

*Lori Leonard\**

When my grandfather was a young man, he left the family farm in Garryowen, Iowa and moved upriver to LaCrosse, Wisconsin to go to work in a factory. The enduring image I have of him is from the living room of the house on North 10<sup>th</sup> Street, the house where my father grew up. My grandfather is sitting in an oversized recliner, watching TV from the corner of a darkened room, a can of Old Style on the table next to his chair. I can see his silhouette, but not his features. People say the Irish are eloquent, but my grandfather was a quiet man. Our family attributed his reserve to a childhood trauma that permanently rewired him and took his words away. When my grandfather was ten, he found his father in the fields with his head split open. He had been struck by lightning. The sky was blue. The day was bright and beautiful.

The French talk about lightning strikes as *coup de foudre*, usually to describe the kind of violent, visceral, life-altering jolt associated with love at first sight. The kind of jolt that changes everything all at once. But those are the French. We are Irish, and Irish romanticism is tempered by a healthy dose of melancholy. In our family, that electrostatic charge became a touchstone for explaining much of what was happening at home and in our worlds. Other people seemed to narrate their lives using a broader set of referents, but we grounded our family stories in that errant seam of electricity that touched down in the bucolic pastures of northeastern Iowa on a sunny April day, decades before any of us were even born.

\*\*\*\*\*

When I was growing up, we saw my grandparents frequently. We lived just across the river, on the Minnesota side, and visited them at the house on North 10<sup>th</sup> Street on Sundays. They came to our house for holidays, and together we made trips downriver for family reunions. My grandfather was present for these events, but he rarely said anything. He lived to be 83, and in all those years, he never once spoke about his father's death or his discovery in the fields. He had turned inward – retreated into himself, as my father said.

He said only one thing that I can remember. It was a statement, and a statement so incongruous that it has stuck with me. It happened as we were leaving the house one Sunday after dinner. My grandmother was complaining that I hadn't eaten much and wondering aloud why I didn't have an appetite. It was out of character for my grandfather to say anything in these kinds of moments,

\*Lori Leonard is a professor in the Department of Global Development at Cornell University. She is interested in narrative form and good writing in addition to many other things. She can be reached at [ll536@cornell.edu](mailto:ll536@cornell.edu)

but this time he did. “She must be in love,” he said. The diagnosis was gentle but matter-of-fact. I can remember where we were standing, even how we were positioned, when he posed it. His intervention struck me, not just because my grandfather was a man of few words, but because it signaled to me that his internal life might not be as quiet as I had imagined from watching the man in the reclining chair.

There are many holes in our family story, much that we will never know about my grandparents and their lives. My father says he regrets not asking more questions; he regrets allowing the silence to settle in. He explains his love of reading and his obsession with words and stories as a kind of reaction formation, a response to his story-starved childhood. He remembers sharing a featherbed in the attic of the house on North 10<sup>th</sup> Street with his maternal grandmother and, at night, begging her to tell him stories. When she had exhausted her repertoire, he would ask her to tell the same stories again.

Maybe in consequence, my father worded up his life. He taught high school English, wrote a column for the local newspaper, self-published five books on topics as varied as baseball, homelessness and getting old. He still reads voraciously; he is a devotee of the *New York Times* crossword puzzles, and a Scrabble player invested in wordsmithing, which makes him not very good at Scrabble.

But it isn't just that there are holes and gaps in our family history. It is also that, despite my father's obsession with words, our family narratives are spare. The lightning strike figures prominently in the stories we tell. It serves as an all-purpose explanation for things, supplying a cause for a lot of effects. It was why my grandfather left school in the fifth grade, why he lost himself in alcohol, why he never went to my father's baseball games or taught him how to drive, why he rarely spoke, why he never had a plan for what to do when the beater he was driving broke down, or for anything, really. My father describes the strike and the encounter in the field that followed as central to my grandfather's character – a chance event that changed the course of his life and, by extension, ours.

When my father was experimenting with poetry a few years ago, he wrote these two stanzas:

Imagine the damage done by a direct hit to the human skull  
A singular shaft of blue in the magnitude of a million volts.  
Unleashed by Prometheus, unaimed, random, life to annul.  
One flash, one sundering clap, one in a million lightning bolts.

The squire fell instantly, pocket wrench near welded to spar.  
Unknowing, unsuffering, thrust to the even brighter light.  
The shock, the wake, the requiem, then buried with the scar.  
The ten-year old boy sent to find him, four score more of fright.

What is remarkable to me about the poem is the last line. How it compresses four decades of life into a clause and explains them all in one go. How it ends a poem-in-process in the same way it ends our family discussions. How it allows the silence to settle in.

What I realized long after my grandfather pronounced me lovesick was that even as a child I had my doubts about this story. I had a suspicion, though I would not have been able to articulate it, that the story about the lightning was in the way of other stories that might have been equally frightful and traumatic. But what are those other stories? All these years later, that's hard to know for sure. All I have been able to assemble are bits and pieces, fragments from memory, from my father's stories, and from what little has been recorded of my grandparents' lives.

\*\*\*\*

My grandfather was an electric plater. This was his occupation as written on my father's birth certificate. He worked at Northern Engraving, a metal trim manufacturer that makes nameplates, gauges, dials and other parts for the auto industry and appliance manufacturers. His job was to etch those parts by hand-dipping them into vats of muriatic acid. He came home from work with holes in his shirts and undershirts from the fumes and splashes.

For the 30 years he worked at Northern Engraving, he was a dues-paying member of the United Auto Workers, the UAW-CIO. My father attended union picnics with my grandfather, who wore his union hat, made from yellow felt, for these occasions. The company's efforts to break up the union eventually led them to close the plant where my grandfather worked and to open a scattering of smaller plants throughout the upper Midwest, most of them in small, rural towns in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa. One of them is now a Superfund site. The EPA kept the site on its National Priorities List for more than a decade because of soil and groundwater contamination from trichloroethane, dichloroethane, vinyl chloride, and a string of heavy metals that cause kidney and liver abnormalities and respiratory problems in the chronically exposed. By the time the union plant closed, my grandfather was in his mid-50s and had emphysema.

Minus the might of the union and dispersed across multiple plants in a rural region, workers today register their complaints on-line. On job search sites like Glassdoor and Indeed, they refer to the company as 'Northern Enslavement' and complain about the 25-minute lunch and 5-minute bathroom breaks, the lack of opportunity, the boring and repetitive nature of the work, and conditions on the factory floor. "Loud, hot and hard to breath (sic)." "They will hire ANYone." "Takes advantage of people who have no other options." "Not for the old or hurt, only for the young or desperate." My grandfather was young when he entered the factory, but he was not young when the doors closed on him. He was almost certainly desperate, coming and going.

My grandparents lived in rented housing, moving from house to house and landlord to landlord until my father was a teenager. It was only when my grandfather's family sold part of the farm

that he was able to make a down payment on the house on North 10<sup>th</sup> Street. After three decades of working on the line at Northern Engraving, he had no job and no pension. At the end of his life, in the years before he developed kidney disease, in addition to his chronic respiratory problems, he lived in public housing and paid 35 percent of his social security check as rent.

\*\*\*\*

My grandparents kept separate bedrooms and lived in different regions of the house. It was not a large house, but it seemed divided. My grandmother spent most of her time in the kitchen even though she rarely cooked. She sat at the kitchen table, in the chair directly in front of the stove, which she used as a heater, one leg tucked beneath her. On the counter to her right, she kept bottles of booze next to a metal breadbox. My grandfather drank beer; my grandmother preferred hard liquor. Before I knew them, they drank together. As a boy, my father would ride his bicycle from one neighborhood tavern to the next looking for his parents. He counted ten in their small neighborhood. By the time I was a young girl, we didn't have to guess where they might be. We could count on finding them in their separate corners of the house.

My grandfather lived at the front of the house. His bedroom was just off the living room. It was neat, spare, and formal. The bed was always made. A doily made of Irish lace covered the dresser; on it was a single, framed photograph. I can't remember who was in it. My grandmother's bedroom was at the back of the house, off the kitchen and dining room. It was smaller than my grandfather's room, and was cramped and unkempt, the colorful macramé throw she used as a cover lying right where it landed when she threw it off that morning. I used to think of the front and back of the house as different spheres. The kitchen was warm and light, filled with my grandmother's chatter and the smoke from her cigarettes; the living room was dark, cool, and silent, except for the sound from the TV.

There wasn't much that traversed these lines – not much from one world that entered the other. There was just one notable case of trespass. In the living room, I sometimes found my grandmother's Harlequin romance novels on the coffee table, turned over to the page where she had left off reading. I imagined her flashing my grandfather with the soft porn covers while stealing words from the male protagonists that she could not elicit from the silent man across the darkened room. I am not sure why she read these books, the only books she ever read, in his space, but I took their presence in the living room as evidence of some kind of incursion – romantic, aggressive, or both. Did she leave them open for a reason? Was she mocking him? Was she letting him know of her desires? Was she trying to feed him words?

\*\*\*\*

My grandfather dropped out of school in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. That was the same year his father died. Many years later, before he started working in the factory, he went back to school to become a

barber. That career was short-lived. My grandfather shaved a scar off the face of a Mexican man and never worked as a barber again. The story is told just like that. A one-sentence story – a story as short as my grandfather’s barbering career. Was my grandfather re-traumatized by another bloody scene, another head sliced open? Did the straight razor open up his own scar in addition to the one on the Mexican man’s face? And why is it important that the man was Mexican? There are many details that might be remembered and narrated about that incident. So why is that descriptor always there, always part of such an otherwise bare-bones narrative?

\*\*\*

On the day of my grandmother’s funeral, I learned that she had run away from the house on North 10<sup>th</sup> Street. In fact, she had run away more than once. I’m not sure why I didn’t know this earlier, but part of the explanation might have been that she was no longer a flight risk by the time I was born.

One of her last get-aways took place when my father was in his first year of college. He learned about it because a high school friend sent him an article from the *LaCrosse Tribune*. It was a short piece with the title “Woman Reported Missing.” According to my father, the article said my grandfather reported her missing. I struggle to imagine how he did that. On the drive down the river road from Wisconsin to Iowa, where we buried her alongside my grandfather, the man she had apparently tried to distance herself from, I asked my father why she had run away. Where did she go? Did she have a lover? He didn’t know, but he thought she might have gone to Minneapolis. That’s where she had gone the last time she ran away.

My grandparents were poorly matched. My grandfather was born into a large, Irish Catholic family in Garryowen, an Irish settlement of a few hundred people organized around St. Patrick’s church. His youngest brother became a Catholic priest, following the now defunct Irish custom of finding a place in the church for last-born sons who have no chance of inheriting land. My grandfather went to mass on Sundays and vespers at mid-week and remained a devout Catholic throughout his life. My grandmother never took to religion.

My father described her as “carefree or undisciplined, depending on your perspective.” She was a spoiled child, the youngest of her father’s children by many years. She grew up on the banks of the Mississippi River in a family of railroad men, which gave her more mobility than other women her age. I’m not sure how she met my grandfather. It might have happened while she was visiting her brother, who was the station chief on the short-lived, narrow-gauge railroad that connected the small, unincorporated Iowa hamlets west of the Mississippi to Dubuque, the working-class town where I was born. They married when she was 19 and he was 21.

My grandmother worked, when she felt like working, as a nurse’s aide. My father remembers lying in bed at night listening to her co-workers in their cars outside, waiting to pick her up for the night shift, and my grandmother, just home from the bar, ignoring them and going to sleep

instead. I remember arriving for visits and seeing the kitchen table covered with bingo cards and daubers, my grandmother's gambling paraphernalia and a sure sign she was about to leave our family event for a night out with her girlfriends. She liked to have fun. She also liked me. Maybe because everyone said I had her eyes and a bit of her – carefree or undisciplined, depending on your perspective – spirit. She gave me her mother's wedding band, the only heirloom she had to hand down.

My father didn't leave school after his friend delivered the news that his mother was missing, and he never learned anything about the incident beyond what was printed in the newspaper. Those facts surprise him now. A few years ago, I asked him to help me locate the "Woman Reported Missing" piece at the public library. He searched a few months' worth of newspapers on microfiche before giving up and writing me a four-page letter instead. In it, he said he would keep looking. He wanted to find the article, but the only thing it would confirm for us was the date. He said that my grandparents had a tumultuous relationship; they were like oil and water. But they meant well. They did the best they could with what they had.

\*\*\*

I'm not sure the lightning strike took away my grandfather's words, but I know that it took away ours. I often wonder how our family would have narrated our lives if that wayward streak of electricity, discharged from the back of a thundercloud in some other Iowa sky, hadn't taken up so much space. What other stories might we have told? What other causes might we have considered for all of those effects? These are the only questions I can ask at this point in the story, the only way I know not to allow the silence to settle in.