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“Lontué”

I walked into my grandmother's apartment one day, and she said to me, "There's a broad-hipped woman lying in your bed, waiting for you."

I looked at her, she looked at me. Grandmothers, what are you going to do? An there I found the supple curves of my guitar waiting for me, and the mocking laughter of a 79-year old coming in from the door-frame behind me.

That's what my grandmother was like, when I met her. 79 years of age, but not really old yet. Sure, her joints were creaky, and the medicine she took in the morning, could have killed a horse. But it was always important to her to keep young people in their place.

So she made sure that I knew how to fry fish, and how to make stew. And most importantly, that if I ever found myself, by chance, in her father's mill in a little village, in the south of Chile, whose name I don't care to remember, that I should grab a handkerchief, and tie it to a cat, like a parachute, and then toss it out the fourth-floor window, just to watch it tumble as it fell to the ground, and then yowl as it ran away.

It was always important to her educate her grandchildren. To teach me to offer my arm to a lady, and to duck when a lady says she's going to punch me in the jaw. To make sure that her hard-partying californian granddaughter knew how to knit, and her prim proper Chilean granddaughter knew how to climb a tree with the proper vigor.

This was true in her own life, too: she went to school, she went to college, she went to law school, and then she spent her entire adult life as a lawyer. And then she retired, and she thought, "now what?"

And she took one of those old plastic pens that the banks used to hand out, she sketched, she scribbled, and she made a vision, and then she showed it to people.

And the curves were all jagged, and the straight lines curved, and it looked like a senior art project at Yale. So, she went back, and she studied, and she spent a year, and she traded the plastic pen for a metal one, and then a pencil. And at the end, she produced a magnificent landscape. And she showed it to people, and it was terrible.

And so she went back, and she kept studying. I think that's why my grandmother wasn't old yet

when I met her. Because she knew that if she failed at something, she could spend a year doing it. And if she still failed, she had time to put the necessary dedication, a decade if she needed it (and she did) to draw well.

I think this helped me make sense of high-school kids. You know the seniors, they think they're so old. And in a way, they are, because they have don't have much time left, where they are.

And it made sense to me of myself, twenty-three years old, big undergraduate, can't take Slavic A because I won't be here next semester for Slavic B. And it reminded me of what the fool said to king lear: "thou shouldst never have been old before thou hadst been wise."

My grandmother is wise. I remember we got to the airport once, hours ahead of time. We were just going to have to sit there, because changing tickets is expensive, you have to do paperwork, they don't like it, and we just didn't know what to do.

And she said "I am a lady, and they will take care of me." And then, she kind of shrank down, and she hobbled forward to the counter, and she was so sad, and so confused, and she just wanted to go home. And it was so pitiful that they changed our tickets for us, without charging us anything, or making us do paperwork. And it was so pitiful, that they gave us a wheelchair to roll her away in. And it was so pitiful that they didn't notice, as we rolled her away, how hard we had to try not to crack up. And it was so pitiful, that once she was out of earshot, we all agreed that we had seen a vision of where time would take her.

And, in fact, old age has followed wisdom, as it always does. She's 83 years old now, joints are a little creakier. And the medicine she takes could fill a breadbox. And it makes me a little bit sad, when I try to talk to her about something, and she says "no, no, no, I'm too old to worry about that." But, it's still important to her, to pass on her wisdom, and to put young people in their place. And so, in a way, it's sort of okay.

So, when I get to her front door, I knock, and she asks me how the broad-hipped woman is doing, and I look at her, and I call her a troublesome battleaxe, and I duck.