

## HANDKERCHIEF

By Celina Santana – Bethesda, Maryland

The contents of my grandfather's ninety-eight-year-old life are sorted into the following piles:

- 1) Keep
- 2) Scrap metal
- 3) Recyclable
- 4) Salvageable parts
- 5) Flammable and better off flamed
- 6) Worthy of auction
- 7) Unidentifiable and to be snuck off the premises while he sleeps
- 8) Useable and likely wanted by neighbors
- 9) Objects he swears are worth a fortune that we'll dispose after his death

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I balance on the balls of my teenage feet as the wagon bumps and jerks behind the tractor. My jeans have dirt pods for knees. The tails of my brother's old church shirt are tied below my belly button; it's rolled-up sleeves are bulky rings around my wrists.

The baler's hydraulic arms pack eighty pounds of alfalfa and binds it in string. It spits out one, then a second, and my grandfather reaches forward and plunges steel hooks into each. It smells of spiced grass and honeysuckle. He swings both bales by their fresh cut bellies and tosses them to the back of the wagon, casting a rainbow of sweat, purple lucerne, field dust, and strain.

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Molasses brown juice diluted thin with saliva streams through week-thick stubble. To see the iron-proud chin of my grandfather stained and overgrown is the first understanding that time lacks compassion. How insignificant the decision might seem to anyone in the regular pace of the world. But here, in between thick West Virginia walls, the choice to blot again a handkerchief against his chin, or not, is profound. Both the dribble and the remedy are an assault on the long-earned pride of a man that once built steel structures to scrape the sky. I cannot suggest he unstuff his lip of the loose leaves that grow from his hand-tended land: it is all the man has left to tend. Fledging leaves of tobacco yearn for water, refuge, and time the way his children and grandchildren no longer do.