Gramps

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> Gramps died last night.

My great-grandfather died last week. He was just shy of 100 years old. Gramps lived up in Otis Maine — a few miles from Acadia National Park. When I was growing up, Gramps would often stay a few days with my family on trips to visit his sister. We'd walk down into the creek near my house and while my brother and I fished, Gramps would tell us stories about growing up in not-so-rural anymore Connecticut and carve us bows and arrows from saplings.

I wrote a piece back in high school that I planned to share on Gramps' 100th birthday. He didn't quite make it but he was ready to go.

I feel lucky to have met four of my great-grandparents and to have known one of them well.

I'll miss you Gramps.

—

Gramps' black leather loafers step silently across the old asphalt of the road, and the end of his checkered red scarf wraps itself further around his deep coffee overcoat in the light breeze. His thin white hair whips in the breeze that blows down the hilly half plowed road occasionally covering his whiskey rectangular glasses. He's on his daily walk, but today it's a little different.

It's Christmas time and Gramps is spending some time with his granddaughter and great-grandchildren. He may be two hundred miles south of his home in Otis, Maine but that won't stop

him from taking his daily walk to take in the fresh air and the sunshine.

With family dog in tow, Gramps and his great-granddaughter set out. They move briskly, the dog stopping often to absorb some incredible stimulant of the olfactory that to us is just dirt. At one of these spots, the foolish dog stops abruptly in front of Gramps, and he nearly trips and falls onto the cold asphalt the dog is so enamored of. Gramps catches himself; he's fast on his feet. Casually leaning over, Gramps pats the dog on the head and takes one of her ears between his worn forefinger and thumb.

"Get along then."

Gramps pats her once more on her head and they're off, dog's tail wagging as she runs ahead. Gramps likes dogs, he's had one most of his life, starting with the first springer spaniel he bought alongside his first shotgun when he was twelve.

"The sporting good store didn't want to sell me the gun because they said I was too young, so my older sister went in there and bought it for me."

Spending a good part of his boyhood in the forest outside his boyhood home in Danbury Connecticut, Charles Malarik—or as the family calls him, Gramps—had collies and springer spaniels for both hunting and companionship.

"I like them as a companion first of all, and I always like springers because they always stay right close with you … I've had eight or ten [dogs] maybe [over my life]."

Gramps bends over and frees the dog from her leash as they enter the house. She bounds up the stairs after Gramps' great-granddaughter. Gramps walks up the short flight of stairs to the kitchen and settles into a dark upholstered chair. Sometimes he likes to just sit and watch his world—the family—move. Today he's taking it in with black tea—his favorite drink. He doesn't seem to be bothered by the houses' chaotic din and the constant movement of the family from one room to the next.

After all, chaos was something Gramps became accustomed to early in life. As a Jeep driver in the Second World War, he became intimately connected to chaos.

Drafted into the Army after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Gramps and forty or so other young men from Danbury were loaded onto a school bus and shipped to Fort Devens in Massachusetts for a

physical and to be assigned to a particular branch. Sent to Europe to fight the Nazis as an infantryman, Gramps disliked the heavy pack associated with the job and applied to be a Jeep driver after seeing an ad. Scoring well on a written exam, he was reassigned and deployed to Cherbourg, France where he ferried platoon commanders between headquarters and the line. Advancing all the way to the Elb River on the outskirts of Berlin, Gramps was on his third Jeep at the end of the war after the previous two were destroyed.

"I would be driving along and then I'd get caught in a [barrage of]… artillery, you could hear it whistling a little, but the mortars, you don't hear them. All of a sudden they're exploding. I would dive out of the Jeep and it'd roll in a ditch or roll down the road a little ways and when [the artillery barrage] stopped I would get back in and get out of there."

The intersections were the most dangerous.

"The Germans would target [those] as there'd be more traffic there. When I would get through one of them, I always felt relieved."

Gramps' granddaughter chops tomatoes on the kitchen's cool granite island. His great-granddaughter throws a toy for the dog near where Gramps sits in the living room, sipping his tea, absorbing the family's lives from his relaxing coffee armchair. The great-granddaughter, looking for new amusement, pulls a Parcheesi board from a tall oak shelf and sets it up on the long maple kitchen table. She calls her mother, her brother and Gramps to the table as she sets the bright tiger, elephant, oxen and camel pieces in their home spaces. Gramps listens as his great-grandson explains the rules. The game begins, and the pieces start their journey around the board. Gramps just watches and takes the suggestions his great-grandchildren offer him. It isn't too bad of a strategy as Gramps finishes second, but he's rather indifferent to this. His granddaughter offers him another cup of tea but he's "good" for now.

Gramps is always "fine" or "good"—he's a very agreeable man. He enjoys eating out and being with his family but goes along with most whatever else his family does. That's what brought him north after the war. That's how he came to work for Mr. L. L. Bean.
After his time in the service, Gramps, tired of Connecticut's cold winters, decided to move west to California. Taking a southerly route, Gramps stopped in Dallas to stay with a friend.
"I never left there, I liked the place. It was a fun town."

Having only been previously employed as a tree surgeon and wanting to try something new, Gramps enrolled in electronics school.

That's where he met his wife, Elizabeth (known by everyone as Ted).

"...I met her [while I was] going to electronics school at nights. I made friends with another one of the men that was going there, and his wife worked in a restaurant as a waitress and [Ted] was a hostess there. She knew that [Ted] didn't have any boyfriend or anything, so she introduced us. That's how we got together."

It was she who brought Gramps to Maine and to work for Mr. L.L. Bean.

"[Her best characteristic] was her personality. She could get mad, but she would laugh quite easily. She was easy to get along with." Others would say differently, including her granddaughter and several employers.

"We were living in Texas, [I was working at Love Field rewiring airplanes] and she wanted to move, so she wrote to [Mr.] L.L. Bean, [and] they hired us. It didn't amount to much at the beginning, but Ted was a smart person and they hired her as a housekeeper. I was his chauffeur, and I worked up there in the store as a clerk."

Gramps and Mr. Bean quickly became friends as they bonded over their love of the outdoors. Mr. Bean showed Gramps brooks where he could fish, and they went hunting together in northern Maine. Each year when Mr. Bean went to Florida during the winter, he would rent a boat and Gramps would accompany him deep sea fishing. After a couple of years, Mr. Bean gave Gramps a Smith and Wesson .22 that he had carried with him to shoot partridges when he had been hunting.

"[Mr. Bean] had a two car garage, and there was a storage area up above there, and that's where the gun was. When he was done with hunting, he had someone put it [along with all his other hunting stuff] up there."

"[When he gave it to me,] he told me one time he was deer hunting with his brother and two other friends and there was one of those Canadian Jays up in the top of the tree, and they bet he couldn't hit it with his pistol and he proved them wrong." Gramps' good natured laugh fills the room.

Gramps carried the gun with him for many years after it was given to him, and it still functions today.

"I carried it around; I used it. I did some target practicing with it and I might of shot a couple of birds

with it, but I didn't see too many when I carried it with me."

After four years of working with Mrs. Bean, Gramps' wife moved on to an office management position to earn more money. Gramps followed soon after to a job as a pattern cutter at the same factory.

The next day, the family bundles up and heads out to lunch. The cold wind whips the heat from their bodies as they walk, but Gramps doesn't seem to be bothered by the cold as he has a heavy wool overcoat and red plaid scarf. On his feet, Gramps dons a worn pair of L.L. Bean boots.

"I wear them all through the winter. They're insulated and the rubber bottoms keeps your feet dry, so yes, I wear them right through the wintertime."