

## Stories in My Ears

I grew up with books.

My second word was read.

READ, imperative, to my grandpa, who sat me on his lap and traced out the words as he spoke with careful pathologist fingers.

READ, when he would stop for a minute, to ask me if I was bored, if I wanted to watch cartoons.

READ, in the middle of Barnes and Noble, where we'd go every Sunday so I could twirl in the racks of paperback picture books, while he waited in the store's worn-in armchair, ready. He read to me out loud, whatever ones I picked, however many I wanted. My favorite was *The Three-Hundred Pound Cat*. Sometimes other kids would pull down their parents' hands and sit beside me, listening. I grew up with my grandpa. I grew up with stories in my ears.

I grew up getting ice cream in the bindings, *Harry Potter* propped open in one hand, spoon in the other.

I grew up getting scrapes.

I tripped down the stairs and got rug burn on my face once, reading, because I was reading while walking and I didn't stop to look for the steps.

*You couldn't put it down for two seconds?* my dad asked. *You gotta be aware*, he'd say, AWARE, really slow, like I didn't know what it meant.

I did, and I was, but not the way he thought.

I got coffee stains in books; I got books wet from reading in the rain.

I carried books in the front pocket of my overalls.

I tucked books inside textbooks in math class.

*Mary would be a great student*, my report card said, *if she would refrain from reading novels and listen to the lecture instead.*

I wrote in books.

I highlighted, underlined, questioned, and illustrated in the margins.

In college everyone talks about how much money they make, selling their books back. I keep my books, even the ones I don't like, for door jams and to prop up broken legs of mismatched furniture.

Every Sunday my grandpa calls to ask me about my books. He laughs into the phone, remembering how much he must have spent, teaching me to read.

*Thousands. Remember the three hundred pound cat?*

I laugh, correct him, teasing. *Only thousands, Grandpa? It must have been tens of thousands, hundreds, I bet.* I hear him smile.

He still asks me every week if I have all the books I need for my classes, and I tell him yes, that I bought them all at the beginning of the semester.

I tell him I'll tell him when I need more.

I tell him that he is too kind.

Every time he sees me he gives me twenty dollars anyway, carefully folded.

*Book money*, he says, *for books, for whatever comes up.*



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