

by Boris Canzano
9/27/15

“How Are You, My Friend?”

“You’re late!” he said as I pushed open the door.

“Alright, grandpa,” I sighed. I was actually two minutes early. At heart he’s fifteen years old, so he’s always giving me shit. It was May of 2015 and I had just arrived at my grandfather’s place of business to help him out for a day. His law office is small, just a converted single-story suburban bungalow about a quarter-mile from the freeway in Auburn Hills, Michigan. He did almost no work at the office—he usually just left his receptionist there to administer urine tests to parolees while he drove around the metro Detroit area in one of his broken automobiles. There are always about six cars in the driveway: one car for one client, one car for his receptionist and four of his own, three of which never move an inch.

“I’m stuck!” he would tell me. “I got the Buick to drive myself, I got that Kia that used to be Karen’s before I bought her the Cadillac, I got the Cadillac that used to be Karen’s, and I’ve got this PT Cruiser on the front lawn and I don’t know what to do with any of ‘em! I only need one car, I wanna sell the other ones, but I’m not gonna make any money off ‘em. Whad’ya gonna do I got four fuckin’ cars! Any of your friends looking to buy a car?”

I shook my head no and laughed. Each one of the cars had a smattering of mechanical problems, even though each time he went down to Dearborn he traded legal help to mechanics for their own services. The PT cruiser that sits in the driveway of his law shack he actually accepted as payment for taking on a tax case last year. He had also traded his services for vintage pinball machines, soda fountains, clocks, car batteries and various other treasures that now fill the two-car garage adjacent to the office.

Every time I saw my grandfather he was trying to give me things. When I was younger, I would walk through his house picking up everything I saw. There were busted accordions from his days in the accordion symphony, singing refrigerator magnets and plenty of toys meant for someone much younger than he is. Occasionally we would be in the garage and dig up an old bocce set or model plane to mess around with. The tradition went: if I found something, I could have it. However most of it was useless garbage. One year I found out that my grandfather had been preparing for the apocalypse on Y2K; I found twenty pallets of canned corn and green beans in the garage and a case of Diet Snapple in the basement that expired in ninety-eight. I asked him about it and he couldn’t remember.

“You want a clock? Take whatever you want. Can you sell these old stereo receivers for me? They’re worth lot of money, hundreds of dollars,” he said. “Nevermind, we gotta go. We got work to do.”

“Where are we goin’ today?” I asked.”

“Dearborn. It’s right next to Detroit. It’s where all the Arabs are. Lots of Lebanese, Chaldeans, Saudis, Assyrians – they’re all down there. Here’s what I do– two days a week I go to Dearborn and I find clients. They find me, actually. I’m talking to a friend of mine, talking business, and he says to his buddy ‘Ay, come here, you still want the taxes lowered on the property on Joy, yeah? Roger here is a lawyer, he takes good care of you’, and just like that I got a new client. I can get two or three new clients in a day. On the third day, it’s collection day. I go down and I have to meet with all of my clients and tell them to give me my damn money, and they usually don’t. I have over eighty clients down there at one time, most of them owe me money, everybody knows me.”

As he was busy explaining to me his business and waving his arms around stereotypically like an old ornery Italian man, his Buick listed towards the car in the next lane over.

“Shit!” I yelled, grabbing the steering wheel and setting us back on course.

“I gotta make a phone call,” he said unfazed picking up his touch screen phone and scrolling through his contacts. “See this?” he said, pointing to another phone sitting in the cupholder. “This is an *Obamaphone*. It’s a government phone, I don’t use it, it a piece of shit. Now who was I going to call, Farrad? Farrad. I don’t remember his last name, Al-something..”

“You want me to try and find it for you?” I asked, hoping I could save us from an accident.

“Yeah, here,” he said, handing me the phone and picking up his large bi-fold planner and organizer and laying it across the steering wheel. “We’ve got a meeting at 1030, we’re not gonna make that, I’m gonna cancel it.”

He searched his organizer for a few minutes while I held the wheel and then he read me a phone number to dial.

“Here,” I said as I handed the phone back to him, quickly taking the folder out of his hands. “Your client is going to be mad, no? You’re calling thirty minutes before you’re supposed to meet to cancel.”

“Yeah,” he laughed it off. “I don’t want to meet with him, he never has my money.”

“So where are we off to first?” I asked.

“Caffina Coffee. You like coffee? They got the best coffee around, best I’ve ever tasted. Better than in South America” he declared. He has never been to South America. “They roast it right there in the building. You’ll like Mahmoud, he’s Lebanese, very nice man.”

We pulled up in front of a drab warehouse building, parked and walked into a coffeeshop that didn’t resemble any I had seen before. It appeared as if it used to be a local diner—outfitted with the long counter, pastry case and bland decor.

“Roger, my friend! How are you? Who is this?” Mahmoud said, looking to me.

“This is my grandson, Boris,” he responded. I shook Mahmoud’s massive hand firmly.

“What does he do? Is he going to be a lawyer like you?”

“He goes to college, up there in Vermont, where all of the liberals are! But he’s still okay, he doesn’t listen to them, right?” I smirked and let out a little laugh.

“What do you study?” Mahmoud asked me.

“English. And Italian,” I responded sheepishly.

“Ahh,” Mahmoud shrugged. “You sure you don’t want to be a lawyer like your grandpa? He is very successful, he is a good man, many people here respect him.”

“No... It’s not for me,” I muttered and looked at the ground.

“He is a big man! Is he going to beat me up? A bodyguard, maybe? Hahah!” he bellied.

My grandpa gave Mahmoud a slap on the back and walked around him and behind the counter of the shop, still talking with him.

“What do you want?” he said. You can have anything”.

I looked at Mahmoud, “Absolutely, take whatever you like,” he said.

I made myself some espresso and ate a flaky pastry filled with Lebanese Za’atar spice and olive oil and listened to my grandpa and Mahmoud talk. Mahmoud, tall and stony, towered over my grandfather and treated him like he was his younger brother. Despite Mahmoud’s size, they even looked alike. My grandpa’s dark and weathered Italian skin matched Mahmoud’s. They’re bulbous, big noses were nearly identical. Both old men even had surprisingly full heads of hair for their age. However my grandpa looked older—he was, by about 30 years—and more tired. Usually youthful and bright, he looked sad with sunken eyes and a sullen dip of his head.

My grandfather and Mahmoud continued to argue and laugh with each other in the empty shop for such a long time that I figured out we had no business-related reason to be at the Caffina Café at all; we were only there to steal some breakfast and to see his friend. I also figured out that this was where my grandfather was supposed to meet his client just a half hour before, and that, of course, his client was a bit ticked off. Needless to say, that wasn’t a big deal to grandpa. We had to leave Caffina just after breakfast. He figured that he shouldn’t stand up another client, especially since the next one owed him about three grand.

Before we left my grandpa walked around the shop pulling things from shelves and asking Mahmoud if I could have them.

“Boris, come here. You want some coffee to take to Vermont? How bout the pastry, did you like that? Take as many as you want. Do you like turkish coffee? Here, take these cups. Take this tea too, it’s very good.”

I looked at Mahmoud again for approval.

“Take whatever you like, your grandfather is a good man to me, I owe him many things.”

I nodded to Mahmoud and we left the café.

“Where are we off to now?” I asked.

“We’re going to see my friend Malik at his insurance company, he’s Assyrian. I’ve been helping him with taxes for a long time.”

We were only at Malik’s to drop off a folder of paperwork to be viewed and signed, but grandpa kept us there for well over a half-hour. Handing over these documents was in fact my only actual job of the day. After I handed the folder to Malik he shook my hand, asked me the usual questions and gave me the customary appraisal of my size and turned to my grandpa. I hardly learned anything about Malik in my time there; only that he was also quite large and had the same giant’s hands as Mahmoud. Malik didn’t have anything to give me so I stood by idly again, listening to my grandfather conduct his ‘business’ with Malik and staring at the wall clock. I began to see why my grandpa was never able to collect money from anyone for his services. Every business meeting seemed less business-like than personal. He really is a friend to everyone in Dearborn. The few folks that he doesn’t know already he meets every single day he goes down there. Each new client became part of his family and an impressive trust and respect would follow.

Grandpa cut each meeting short that day, because no matter who it was, they would begin to ask about my grandmother and offer consoling words for him. He appreciated it, but he just couldn’t take it during business hours. Before they would ever get to talking payment, his friends would steer the conversation towards his late wife, his eyes would well up and we would promptly leave.

“Ya know,” he began to say to me “I understand that they mean well, but it’s still hard for me to talk about your grandmother.”

She had passed about one month before from a tumbling multitude of complications stemming from pneumonia that ended with complete septic shock.

“I can come down here to do business and we talk business, but they, the Arabs, they’re so respectful. They care about you and they care about your family, they always want to know if you’re doing well or if you’re not doing well. They want to help, but I start crying and then we have to go. It’s easier than it used to be, but I had to stay out of Dearborn for a little. They only mean well, but... You hungry? Let’s get some food.”

“I could eat,” I said, speaking around the boulder in my throat.

“Let me call Hassan. He’s Lebanese too, the Lebanese are good people, but they don’t lie like the Chaldeans. Hassan knows all the places to eat. The Arabs, they eat a lot, food is important to them,” he said. He’s gonna make me pay for it though.”

We dropped off the Buick at Hassan’s garage to get some gratis work done and took one of his employee’s cars. It was a Toyota with plenty of aftermarket modifications – a supercharged engine, custom chrome rims and a tint so dark that it was illegal to drive with the windows up. So, grandpa drove us around the city in some kid’s modified Toyota, attracting more than a few quizzical looks.

When I met Hassan, I quickly realized that he was much the same person as the other men I had met that day – tall (though much thinner than Malik or Mahmoud), kind

and masculine. I received the same firm handshake, greeting and subsequent evaluation that I was subject to on the previous two occasions.

“Who is this? He is big. Will he be a lawyer? No? What will he be then? Rich? He is a strong man, good handshake, he will be okay. Does he like Lebanese food? I hope he does. There is a supermarket down the road that has very good food” Hassan said, turning to me. We will get anything he wants to eat, a lot of it.”

Hassan bought us a massive spread of Lebanese lunch and we ate it all. Stuffed tomatoes in yogurt sauce, stuffed Lebanese grape leaves, chicken schwarma with garlic, sauce, lamb schwarma and rice, tabouli, hummus, spinach pies and plenty of pita – everything was delicious. Hassan and my Grandpa shouted questions at me the entire time with their mouths full of food. Most of the time they were just asking me if I was going to eat more. Whenever I said no, Hassan enjoyed pointing out how much smaller he was than I. He also kept insisting that I had to come back another time, but only if I could eat more. We ate furiously for close to an hour until everything was gone from the table, but spectacularly, Hassan was still hungry. He insisted on stopping by a massive shop that only sold desserts. We stuffed ourselves again, this time with delicate pastries dipped in honey and rosewater. My grandfather and Hassan had plenty conversation here too, but at this point the subject had turned again to my grandmother. After our second meal was through, we had spent over two hours eating and I was nearly too full to move from my seat. I also sensed that my grandfather was getting anxious, so we got up to leave.

“Thank you Hassan, it was very nice to meet you,” I said earnestly, almost expelling the contents of my stomach.

“You are welcome. Come back anytime you want and we can eat even more,” Hassan said again laughing at me and shaking my hand. “Roger! I will see you soon. Stay well, my friend,” he said to my grandpa.

We got back in the Buick and drove for the highway.

“You okay?” I asked. His eyes were glazed over and stained light red.

“No,” he said.

“I’m sorry grandpa”

“Your grandma was the most important person in the world to me. I loved her. I hate being reminded that she’s not here anymore. I think I’ve accepted that she’s gone, but she’s still gone. She shouldn’t be gone; it’s the damn doctor’s fault. He killed her. If it weren’t for him she would still be here. It wasn’t her time” He forced his words out through tears.

It was obvious that he needed her still. I realized that my grandfather had asked me to help my grandpa for a day not because he was overwhelmingly busy, but because he was so lonely. My grandmother, Karen, was his wife, but also necessarily occupied the role of his mother. She cleaned the house, scolded him for buying studded metal belts and skateboarding clothes and cooked all of his food just as he liked it: gray and salty. Since her passing, my father and his brothers had been taking turns spending days with him to make sure that he could actually function.

“I really wish that I could do something to help you, grandpa. And thanks for showing me around today, I had fun, I learned a lot.”

“Me too. Thank you for coming, it was good spending time with you. Do you want to come one day next week?”

“Sure,” I said.

Grandpa took one hand off of the wheel and reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He went into his voicemail box and found a message from a little over a month ago.

I heard my grandmother’s voice, “Hey, Roger, it’s me, just checking in to see where you are! So... I’ll see you later!”

He listened and looked forward, his face just beginning to smile.

“Now, I do this every day,” he said. He took the phone off of his ear and called her again.

I heard my grandma’s voice again when it went to voicemail, “Hey, this is Karen, leave a message and I’ll get back to you!”

Then grandpa left her a message.

“I’ve gotta call and disconnect her phone. I’m payin’ for two fuckin’ phones. I just... I just don’t want...” he trailed off.

The next time I rode around with him I realized that it would hardly go any differently than it did before. Our first stop was Caffina Café again for another free breakfast. Mahmoud knew me from the last time and just shook my hand firmly, staring straight into my eyes saying, “How are you, my friend?” We didn’t stay for long; grandpa seemed to be on a mission that day and we were already late because we had to drop his Cadillac at Hassan’s along the way to get body work done. While we were in the car he showed me poems that he wrote for my grandmother.

“You study English, you like to write?” he asked.

“Yeah, I like to write.”

“What do you write? Stories?”

“Sometimes, I write poetry though, mostly.”

“Ohh! Look at these. I wrote some love poems for your grandmother a long time ago when we were in college. She loved ‘em, I think it’s why we got married.”

He took his hands off the steering wheel, I put mine on, and he rifled through his massive planner until he found a few old sheets of paper and pulled them out. They were terrible, but they made me smile. I can’t remember exactly how they went, but they went like this, just how you’d expect:

*Karen, you’re the only star in my sky.
The smile on your face shines so bright.
I can’t even imagine a day without you.
Forever, Karen, I’ll belong to you, it’s true.*

I read three of them, each indistinguishable from the other, and I told him that I liked them. They weren't good, but they made me smile, and I thought that counted for something. I understood that Grandpa needed a smile then, so I gave him one.

Suddenly, the conversation took a nosedive towards *Obama* and he began his usual assessment of *the liberals* and the usual protective warning of his grandson. He half-wiped his tears gave me these warnings with an attitude of sage criticism.

"So you go to school up in Vermont, with all of the liberals. You know not to listen to the professors there right?"

"Sure."

"They want to fill your head with all of that communist bullshit, like, uh, you're from Vermont, you know that guy, B-, Be-, Sau, Saund-"

"Bernie Sanders?"

"Yeah, him! You see, he's a communist, and he wants to take away all of our money. Your dad is well off, you know, and he wants to take away almost all of the money that your father makes for you!"

I fought back this time. I usually didn't, for obvious reasons.

"That's not exactly true," I said.

"Yes it is. He wants to take all of our money and give it to the poor people, like the Mexicans."

"Uh"

"Our economy is terrible already, and you know, it's all Barack Obama's fault. He's the one who wrecked the damn economy."

"The whole thing himself?" I asked sarcastically.

"Yeah. He did it himself. The economy was great before Obama when Bush was in office. Then he came in and fucked everything up. He's the reason why I have this stupid phone!"

He pulled out his 'Obamaphone' to show me again, moving the phone he *actually* uses out of the way to get it. This time I just stared at him.

"Well I know you're smart, you don't listen to those liberals, right?" he asked.

I made some respiratory noise and looked away with a smile.

"Now see this?" he asked me, pointing out of the window. I was looking at the Joy Road neighborhood of Detroit just off of the Interstate 96. "This is where the black people live." he declared. "This here, this looks bad, everything looks like shit, but the blacks, they're in bliss! They love it here! They could live somewhere else, have nicer things, but this is what they like! This is how they choose to live. I don't understand it, but whatever makes them happy."

"I don't know..." I muttered.

We had been driving around for a while before I realized that once again, there was no real business to conduct that day. We had just stopped off to do 'an assessment' of the property of one of his clients, which was really just my grandfather bringing "the Chaldean" some lunch. He also met briefly with a plastic surgeon in her office, but he didn't let me come in. She showed up a half-hour late and looked surprised to see him there, so I presumed that she didn't want anything to do with a lawyer that day. The only other item that he had on the agenda was to see a judge at the courthouse in Detroit. As we drove into the city, he repeated his daily remembrance.

"Hey, Roger, it's me, just checking in to see where you are! So... I'll see you later!" my grandmother said.

Then Grandpa took the phone and dialed her number. When it went to voicemail, this time he left a message.

"Hey Karen, it's me, Roger. Just down in Dearborn today, but I'm headed back home now. I love you, see you soon."

He hung up and put down his phone to dry his eyes.

My grandpa has never been a stranger to me, but I never learned more about him than I did on those two days. I've always known he was generous. While I rode shotgun, during every moment of silence I would think about the things I knew about my grandfather already: the ones I had subconsciously collected throughout my childhood. He had always been the fun grandparent, the one at whose mention my parents would roll their eyes, the one who would let me drink as much orange soda as I wanted, the one who let me hustle him out of one-hundred-twenty dollars playing poker, the one who would let me empty his change drawer and put it on the spinning ceiling fan.

But that is just the reason why we have always gotten on so well. My grandpa knows how to have fun and I've always known that. And above all, he knows how to bring happiness. Every Christmas, in addition to buying each of his children and grandchildren presents, he would stomp up on the roof and hurl a red sack of wrapped gifts onto the ground before running downstairs yelling,

"Oh my God! Did you hear that?! I think Santa just crashed on the roof and dumped all of his shi-, presents in the yard!"

And every time, there would be an extra gift from Santa for everyone, with their names written on them by Grandpa's left hand.

I've always known he was an asshole too. With age I realized why my parents treated him like an irresponsible, annoying child - because he was one. I remember that on my birthday one year, we were eating at a Japanese hibachi restaurant and I was sitting next to him across the table from a Lebanese family when he asked, looking at the father,

"Hey, you think I should ask him to pave my driveway?"

I know that my Grandpa once had an accordion symphony that played my parents' wedding in lieu of a normal band. I know that he cheats three times for every shot he

takes when we play golf. I know that his old broken stereo receivers aren't worth much. I know that he was once an engineer who designed a bridge that missed the pavement by two feet when it reached the other side. I know that, for some reason, he is in the armored tank business. I know that he's about to be a movie star in Saudi Arabia. I know that the last time he went to Italy, he was kicked out. And I know that he's the only person I know that would hold his wife's ashes above his head like the fucking Stanley Cup before tossing them into the backyard pool, scoop by scoop.