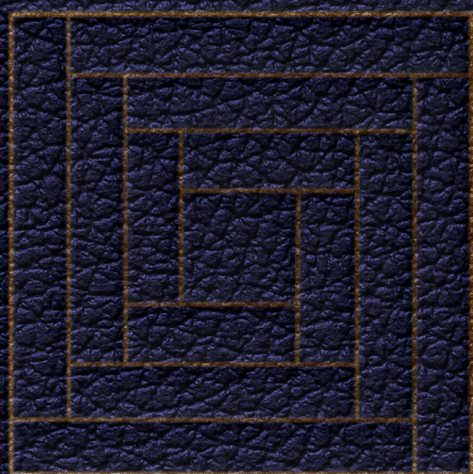


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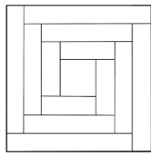
BLUE

MATT GOULD



NAVY BLUE

By Matt Gould



For the most part, the Sunday dinners at my parent's house are often filled with a predictable flow of conversation. My mother will rave about a new book that she has read, my grandfather will regale us with a story from his childhood, my brother will do his best to turn any discussion into one about cars, and my father will prattle about his problems at work before asking his children for the sixth time that evening "Are you sure you two are okay?"

However, there are still times when the topic that comes up surprises me. Lately, that subject has been the paranormal. If you let him, my grandfather, who together with my grandmother operated a quilting store out of an old commercial property built in the late 1840s, will talk garrulously about the numerous spirits that haunt the place. His favourite, or at least the one he repeats the most, is about the ghost of a man who lived in the workshop upstairs. He explains how several years ago, he and my grandma would occasionally unlock in the mornings to find the chairs from each station turned around and that bolts of fabric from the shelves downstairs would suddenly be in piles stacked like Jenga blocks. Also, that one night, when staying late to finish some things, they briefly saw an innocuous phantom-like figure of a young man in a faded wool ditto suit, walking peripatetically across the workshop floor before vanishing completely. "The bottom two inches of his feet went into the floor because he's walking on the surface that he remembers. Not the warped boards that are there now." My grandfather says. "It really was something."

For me, my belief in ghosts and otherworldly entities is no different than my faith in Santa Clause or the Easter Bunny. Fables that, as a child, are almost impossible not to at least want to believe in. Though, I've always been puzzled as to why older people, some of whom I would even consider intellectual, put so much faith into the idea of apparitions. For most, I assume it helps ease their anxieties of mortality. To make death feel like just another process of

one's journey. For some, it becomes a way for them to maximize an object or a location. People will drive across the country looking for ransacked homes or abandoned properties – cavities in the pearly white teeth of every neighbourhood – hoping to be tormented by someone no longer living. Others pride themselves on collecting obscure heirlooms and antiques, parading and celebrating the morbid history attached to them. I find all of it to be preposterous. It's as if people refuse to admit that the premise of a person remaining on earth after death is as spurious or apocryphal as a man who comes down your chimney to deliver gifts or an animal that hides chocolate eggs for you to find.

Despite that, I do think that those who are deceased can still drop in on us - though not in a way that is unearthly or abnormal. In 2016, my grandmother passed away from cancer. What shocked everyone most wasn't her passing but that she never told anyone about her disease. Instead, waiting until she could not hide it any longer. As a family, we found out on a Wednesday, and by the following week, she was buried.

Since then, I've had a recurring dream where I visit her. It always takes place at the store, but similar to the ghost in the ditto suit and the floor he walked on, it's not how it looks now. Instead, it's how I always remember it - The musty smell of antediluvian furniture, the aisles of quilting supplies and Hallmark cards that lined the retail section, the bookshelves of Beanie Babies behind the counter and the bags of batting in a nook hidden under the staircase. I find my grandmother where I always would - the back-right corner, sitting at her desk behind her pale-green antique Singer sewing machine, piecing together a patch to a log cabin quilt. Her short silver hair brushed aside, wearing a collared navy blue shirt tucked into drawstring pants of matching colour, with white New Balance shoes tied tightly on her feet.

From there, the visit becomes quite loquacious. No different than when I used to stop by while on walks around the neighbourhood or in-between time with friends. She asks me how I've been, and I do my best to catch her up on all the things she's missed. I'll show her my diploma from when I graduated college. I'll read the speech I wrote for when my brother got married. It can even be as minuscule as showing her my new haircut whenever I have just gone to the barbers. "I always knew there was a handsome man under all that hair!" she'll joke.

I can always tell when our time together is ending. Either the spool on her machine will run out, or the glass of ice water she drinks will become empty. She'll stand and give me a wave goodbye; For some reason, the dream never permits me behind her desk for a hug or a kiss on the cheek. She'll grab whatever she needs to refill and tell me that she's happy I could swing by. "Behave." she'll end her message with. The last word she ever said to me before she died. A word that, unlike ghosts or spiritual grandeurs, haunts me.

Did I not do enough to show her that she didn't need to worry? Was I still too fatuous at the time of her passing to make her feel like I wouldn't end up okay? Since our last real conversation, these questions have been with me, and my visits have always managed to keep those queries closer to me than I'd wish.

There are occasions when I don't want to catch up with her or have the garrulous chatter that I usually would do anything for. There are times when I want to become fervid and lachrymose. To fall into pieces in front of her and apologize for all the things I never got to. Sometimes, I want to do the opposite. To become obstreperous and have invective against her. To snip the thread from her machine and scold her. "Why couldn't you have told someone that you weren't feeling well?!" I want to scream. "Why did you have to be so selfish?!"

In the end, I don't do either. Deep down, knowing that it will do nothing but wake me from my dream. Leaving me lying in a pool of cold sweat, reminded of death and all its unfair totality.

I have these visits with my grandmother roughly three times a year. I'm never able to tell when they're going to happen, nor can I force them to, which I prefer. If I always had them immediately after a significant life event or could cultivate them just by thinking of it before I fell asleep, they would lose lustre and stop feeling real. Instead, their unheralded arrival keeps me eager. I sometimes find myself cataloguing a conversation or pieces of literature that I know she would find interesting, keeping a record to bring them up whenever I see her next.

In many ways, these reposing sojourns I share with my grandmother have become therapeutic. I don't go to her grave much anymore - as why would I? Our visits now, despite being all in my head, are far more valuable than conversing to a stone inscribed with her name. That being said, it doesn't mend everything. There will always be days when the dreams aren't good enough. When a memory of her will cross my mind and I want nothing more than to talk to her - the real her. They will never fill the void that not hearing the whir of a sewing machine whenever I stop by my grandparent's house has made. Or the one empty chair that now exists at Sunday dinners. I miss her social contributions to the times when we would be together as a family. Whether it be about a new quilt she was working on or the banter from the retired women who would pile into her sun-drenched sewing classroom four days a week, her stories and the way she would delineate them would always be refreshing.

Her absence will never go unnoticed, but my family beats on. Our conversations have become more foreseeable without her, but that has never mattered, as we find solace in each

other's company. I'll continue to enjoy my grandfather's stories - even the ones about ghosts - and anxiously await my mother's dinnertime review of the newest Stephen King. And as my brother tries to talk over her about his Toyota, my father will turn to me and ask,

"But are you *absolutely sure* that everything is okay with you?"

"Yeah, Dad," I'll reassure him. "I'm behaving."