

## **Bless Those Who Give, For They Get Everything**

By Blair Baker

The first day of July brought a wave of heat into New York City. The city bloated, full of tourists there for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. I sat at my desk on the sixth floor of the Ogilvy offices where I was working as an intern. I was not sure how I had beat out thousands of other students for this prestigious internship, but I spent that summer getting to the office early in the morning and leaving after most the city was out enjoying after work cocktails as I tried to prove myself. I was deep into a spreadsheet when I received a text from my uncle that wiped my mind clean. “Kids, I am so sorry to say Grandpa Jim died. Very sad”. This was a joke, it had to be a joke, but it wasn’t. How could a person be here one minute and gone the next? I grappled with a concept that is familiar to anyone that has experienced a loss in their life. I didn’t want to be sad so on that gummy summer day I pushed away every tear that I felt welling in my eyes and only leaving work when my friends insisted that I should go back to my apartment and relax.

The next morning, I walked to work along the New York streets passing trash bags bursting with remnants of lives lived within the brownstones that towered over me. Just as I did every day on my morning commute, I called my mom. Instead of our usual gossip back and forth, I had called to plan my trip to Chicago for the funeral. As soon as she answered the phone, I felt myself choking down another sob. I listened to her repeat, between tears streaming down her cheeks, “I can’t believe he’s gone.” This sentiment is repeated any time he comes up in conversation or I think, “I should email Grandpa Jim.”

Every so often, an internal alarm went off in me, reminding me to email him. I’d pull up a new email and send updates on my life, filling the message with arbitrary information about school and my friends, my mom insisted that he loved these emails even if they were returned

with no more than a, “BLAIR, ARE YOU GETTING ALL ‘A’s? LU GPJ.” Written in his signature all caps and signed with “LU” as an abbreviation for “love you”, his emails often resulted in a chuckle thinking about his keyboard in permanent caps lock as if he was yelling through his emails. My cousin once confronted him about his strong tone in emails. “Grandpa Jim, you know that caps are the email equivalent of yelling?”, but he liked typing in all caps responding, “It’s not yelling, it’s just strong.”

As my mom continued to discuss the various logistics of where I would be sleeping, what day I should fly in, and what black dress I should wear, I attempted to be strong. I wanted to be strong for her. In this moment she should not have to comfort me; I needed to step into the mother role. Pushing inside the devastating sadness I felt deep in my heart I dedicated myself to planning flights, logistics, and appropriate clothing for me and my brothers. In the following days, I sustained my stoic façade, insisting that it was what I needed to do for my family. When my grandpa’s friends hugged me and reminded me of how proud he was of me, I only allowed myself a few tears. At the funeral, I squeezed my brother’s hand as he broke down and soothed my cousins as the loss finally hit them. When I returned to New York after the funeral it felt like the mourning was supposed to be done. Friends stopped asking how I was doing, and I continued in my daily routine of working long days and dinner with friends, only to wake up and do it again. I didn’t cry, really cry, until about two months after he died.

I rarely remember my dreams but on a warm August night my dream was heavy and real. In my dream I stood, with various members of my family, in my grandfather’s yard. Holding his urn, it was my turn to say goodbye. I held the urn in my hands and placed an apple inside of it. There is so significance to apples in reality, but in my dream, it felt like this apple was his favorite thing in the world and now he could remain with it forever. I woke up with tears

streaming down my face. That morning at breakfast, as I poured my orange juice, I told my mom, “I had a strange dream last night.” As soon as I opened my mouth to recount it, all the tears I had pushed down escaped with a gasp. I finally cried, a deep cry where you have to gasp for air, and you hiccup when it’s done. I had been strong for so long and now I was letting the hurt in. In my sobs I was still strong; I was strong and sensitive and hurt. Being strong doesn’t mean I’m also not sensitive and vulnerable. No person is just one thing and we are full of contradictions and opposites. Strong and sensitive. Generous and selfish. Caring and sharp. My grandpa was no exception to this. In fact, he was full of contradictions.

My grandfather, Jim Mills, was a lot of things— he was bold, stubborn, and unapologetic. He was generous, caring and had a flair for the outrageous. What my grandfather believed in, and adamantly passed onto his kids to pass onto their kids was an emphasis on family. Growing up his father, Irving Mills, enforced a strict rule of wherever Jim goes Jon, his younger brother, also goes. His cheeks ballooned out, filling with air as he prepared what he was going to say. My grandpa used to tell me with a loud exhale, “nothing was mine, nothing was his...everything belonged to our family.” At my Grandpa Jim’s funeral, Jon recalled a fight between Jim and Irving. Siding with his father, who Jon believed to be right, resulted in another instance of whenever Jim goes, Jon also goes, “It doesn’t matter if I’m right, you have a future together and you are always to stand with your brother,” Irving said. Grandpa Jim stood by his brother through his entire life. It wasn’t Jon’s family or Jim’s family; they were one in the same. Grandpa Jim treated Jon’s kids and grandkids as if they were his own.

In Grandpa Jim’s mind, family shared everything, especially food. No plate was off limits. At any meal it was only a matter of time until a thick handful of fries or a piece of crispy bacon was snatched off my plate. This “trait” which has been passed down is labeled as a “Mill’s

qualities”, adopted by generations to the dismay of anyone that dines with us. It is not unusual for my hand to be swatted away as I realize, in shock, that I have eaten half of my friend’s meal.

While he valued his family highly, his life was filled with tumultuous family relationships. My mother’s relationship with her father was turbulent growing up. After telling a therapist that Grandpa Jim would, hopefully jokingly, offer my mom one hundred dollars to dance on the table almost naked, the therapist responded by saying, “Peggy, that relationship is not normal.” He pushed boundaries, said inappropriate things, and played cleared favoritism with my mom’s oldest brother, only attending his high school and college graduations. She mostly lived with her mother following her parent’s divorce that happened when she was seven, only making the walk to Grandpa Jim’s house on occasional weekends and for weekly Sunday dinners. She often recounted how this walk gradually got longer and her mother moved to an adjacent town she would continue to bear this walk through the chilly Chicago winters as no one offered to drive her.

Recounting her childhood memories to me, my mom explained that it was always “all about Vicki.” Vicki, my grandfather’s second wife, is larger than life; she is one of those people that you have to meet to understand. Despite their relationship beginning with an affair, my grandpa adored Vicki. He thought that she exemplified the pinnacle of female beauty. Her overdone makeup, transparent lace tops, and brightly colored suits were the epitome of fashion in his eyes. Her sweet southern accent, affinity to pink lemonade mixed with vodka, and sweet disposition make it impossible to not like her and seeing what flamboyant outfit she has chosen for the day is always at treat. Even at my grandpa’s funeral she ignored the usual black attire and, instead, wore a white suit with bright water colored faces painted on it; a suit my grandpa would’ve loved.

She was the perfect balance to my Grandpa; he was brash and harsh, but her cheery laugh and sugary sweet southern charm made them a perfect match. Everything in his life he claimed was due to Vicki. In a speech to his employees celebrating the success of his medical supply company, he attributed it all to Vicki claiming that her southern hospitality towards clients is what the business hinged on. Although there was no Jim without Vicki, my Grandpa Jim created his own success. He worked hard and demanded the same from those around him.

Although my grandpa valued family so highly, spouses trumped blood. In the fall of 1992, my dad called my grandpa to ask for my mom's hand in marriage to which Grandpa Jim answered, "What are you asking me for?" Although this "rule" of asking the future father-in-law for permissions *seemed* like a tradition my grandfather would've insisted on, it was a ridiculous question to him. This exemption to the rule of family first is confusing and illogical, but it was his rule.

My Grandpa Jim was extremely generous. He donated enormous amounts of money, enacted numerous programs at the elementary school he attended to help families in the poor south side of Chicago, and paid college tuitions for people he barely knew. He was especially philanthropic in the last twenty years of his life. When my grandfather, predictably, handed over the family business to his eldest son he had trouble letting go. He had spent years building a successful company and it was time to pass it on. He stayed in the office and hovered over my uncle as he attempted to do his job. In an attempt to get him out of the office, my uncle encouraged him to find a cause to put his work-hard attitude to. This came in the form of Clinton Elementary, Grandpa Jim's elementary school. He loved Clinton elementary, it brought him friends that he had until the day he died. Each year him and his friends from Kindergarten (and Jon, of course) would meet up for a reunion. He had loved Clinton Elementary and now was his

time to say, “thank you.” My uncle had suggested my grandpa participate in their philanthropy program to be, “principle of the day” in which, through a donation, you can be acting principle for the day; he never left.

Clinton Elementary is incredibly poor. Many of the students receive their only meal of the day at school and many have newly immigrated to the United States. To help these kids he paid for the eighth grades yearly trip to Washington D.C., gave all graduating eighth graders \$100, and gave the most improved student for the year \$10,000 to help them pay for college. All that he gave was a reward for students challenging themselves, supported by his idea that success is to be worked for. For the Washington D.C. trip, each student had to write two essays; an essay on the best thing the US government ever has done, and the worst thing the US government has done. My mom once went to school with my grandpa to discuss the eighth grader’s essays. They loved him at Clinton. Dressed in a full light blue outfit, he challenged their beliefs and encouraged them to argue with him. He also challenged the students to memorize Shakespeare’s balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*. The reward for memorizing this timeless scene was a night at the opera in Chicago with a limo and dinner. He instilled the importance of generosity into his kids to pass along to their kids, often quoting great-grandpa Irv, “Bless those who give for they get everything.” In an email to my cousin, Sam, he explained his generosity in his signature all caps writing:

SAM  
I GOT MORE THAN I DESERVED  
ONE REASON TO HOPE FOR AN AFTERLIFE IS TO THANK A LOT OF FOLKS  
IM PROOF THAT MONEY AND BRAINS ARE NOT RELATED  
GOT REAL LUCKY AND AM JUST TRYING TO PASS IT ON  
ITS A MIRACLE IM STILL HERE BUT THE BIGGEST MIRACLE IS ALL OUR CHILDREN  
AND GRANDCHILDREN HAVE TURNED OUT GREAT  
ALMOST MAKES ME THINK G-D CARES ABOUT US  
THANKS FOR THE NICE NOTE  
LOVE YOU

JIM

The truth is, he got all he deserved. He was hardworking, wanted everyone to do their best, and was incredibly generous. He made those kid's at Clinton lives better, he made my life better, and the world was a better place with him in it.

Although incredibly generous with money, he could not be more frugal with his time. He was the most impatient person I have ever and will ever meet. He was known for, in the middle of family gatherings, getting up and leaving in the middle of your sentence. "Say goodbye, Vicki," he would bellow. "Goodbye, Vicki!" she would exclaim with a laugh in response, used to his impromptu exits. He had this same urgency in restaurants; if the food took more than fifteen minutes, he would get up and leave. For this reason, The Deer Path Inn was his favorite restaurant in town. A short walk and, as they always took their custom light blue car with "*Vicki*" and "*Jim*" etched into the headrests, an even shorter drive from his house, The Deer Path Inn went along with his insistence of speedy service, upon sitting down he was served with one of his favorite meals: cheerios with a side of chocolate ice cream, waffles with extra crispy bacon, or blintzes. No matter how fast the service was, the meal would always end with its signature, "Goodbye, Vicki!"

These contradictions didn't make him less of one quality; he cared about his family and loved Vicki, he was generous and impatient. These opposing qualities are what made him so interesting, frustrating, and lovable. Grandpa Jim, more than his contradictions, wanted to be remembered. Many of his emails to me ended with the desire for me to tell my kids and grandkids about my "crazy Grandpa Jim." He hated to idea that he wouldn't get to meet his great grandkids and their kids, and I think that part of him thought that if his memory was passed on, at least they would get to meet him. One of the hardest parts of him dying, for me, was how

many people in my life won't get to meet him. They won't have the opportunity to walk into his fourth-floor office as he reclines in his black leather chair wearing fleece pajama pants printed with hundred-dollar bills and a shirt from the Clinton school. He would greet them with a loud exhale and a question that verged on inappropriate. "Does your family have money?" he would ask with a loud exhale. If they stayed for long enough, they would notice that the table was covered in photos of his kids, his grandkids, his nieces, his nephews, and great nieces and nephews. They would notice that the walls are covered in pictures of him and Vicki, the love of his life, from the past fifty years. They would notice drawing from children at Clinton school, thanking him and thank you notes from kids that had the opportunity to go to college because of him. They would notice various snacks, a result from leaving meals before the food was served. If they stayed long enough, they could get a peek into his life, they would understand why he was so loved, and all the contradictions that made him worth remembering.