So many people contributed their time, patience, and memories to this paper. Each went out of their way to help me learn who my grandfather was and remember things they haven’t thought about in fifty years (well, for some at least). No words can describe how grateful I am to have preserved and shared their precious memories. You are the thread, fabric, and love that made the quilt of my grandfather’s life.

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Grandpa Joe for speaking to me from heaven in both moments of discovery and panic. I feel your smile and spirit back here on earth.

And most of all, Gamma, for allowing me to turn her life upside down with all my prodding at her most private and sacred memories.

Thank You
Rocking with Joe

This is one of the last photographs taken before he died. The medication makes his eyes
tired and his cheeks heavy, but he still smiles. He smiles from deep within his eyes and you
know that he is happy.

He has his pajamas on, probably from when the two boys got into theirs. He wants to
suggest that he, too, will be going to bed shortly. A moment ago, the boys must have been told
to give their dad a goodnight hug and kiss. He scoops them up as they reach and try to climb
into his lap. They are sitting in his favorite rocking chair and he holds them gently, yet you
know he’s not going to let them go, not for anything.

Uncle Russ softly nuzzles him and gives him a fairy kiss. He grasps his neck to bring
their faces together. His toes instinctively play with the hem of his risen pajama leg. Their
pajamas have nearly matching prints, so my uncle looks like a second head and third leg on him.

On the right is my dad, Mitch. He is looking over his shoulder for approval and his next
two-year-old direction. He looks back as if to say, “I kissed him, did you like that?” before he
turns back to give him another. His hair is slightly tousled, as if he has been rubbed on the head
or just finished burying his face into his dad’s chest. He fits so naturally in the crux of his left
arm.

Their older brother, my Uncle Dave, could be at Cub Scouts or out playing in a
neighborhood friend’s backyard. Or perhaps he is building with his Lincoln Logs, sprawled out
on his bedroom floor. Is he making a village of cabins, one for each of his friends? Are his eyes
focused with an intensity that could start a fire with the wooden pieces? His hands must be
moving with a calculated synchronicity. He wants everything to be just so. The Cub Scout mom
tells my grandmother he should become a surgeon. In his own world, Uncle Dave is not aware
of anything going on downstairs.
He knows Dave is safe or being entertained elsewhere, so he doesn’t worry about him. Instead, he sits with his two youngest in his favorite rocking chair. The rocker is on a swatch of turquoise carpet that coordinates with sofa. When the tips of his toes are at the front edge, there is only enough room for exactly one rock back before the legs slap the black linoleum. His toes are strong and they keep the chair from slapping too much.

He is wearing a pair of slipper socks, one from his collection of Christmas presents from relatives. He would never buy a pair, but he likes to wear them. They are thick and gooshy and just the garment he needs when his body is too distracted with illness to worry about keeping his toes warm.

When he is home, no one sits in the rocker but him. No one dares. Back and forth he rocks. He rocked at Officer Candidacy School in Ft. Hood, Texas and he rocked while he and my grandmother waited at her mother’s house for his next army assignment. Now he still rocks. He rocks during the day and he rocks at night. And when he rocks, he rocks for the whole time. Always back and forth, back and forth.

Sometimes he rocks and watches the television. He has tried sitting on the sofa, but it is too hard to take his eyes off the screen. He can’t sit still, either. Back and forth he rocks whenever the boys or family friends sit there. He notices their eyes glue themselves to the pokes and punches of the Stooges. He must prefer the angle to the screen because he likes the control he has over himself and his time. Besides, he doesn’t need the dead-on view; he’s too fast.

When he turns on the television, he starts laughing. He already knows the joke. Rocking at an angle he can give everyone else time to catch-up to him.

Back and forth, back and forth, he rocks. Back and forth, back and forth he rocks my dad. Born with severe asthma back and forth he rocks my dad as an infant. My dad begins to
gasp for air. In between the back and forth, he brings his mouth to my dad’s and slips in a breath. Back, my dad coughs. Forth, he breathes. He whispers in another breath to my dad. With his eyes steady and ears focused, back and forth he waits for rhythmic breath. Back and forth, back and forth they rock in his favorite rocker.

*My grandmother still has this rocker. Sometimes she rocks and thinks of him.*

Within an arm’s reach from the rocker is a newspaper, most likely the Philadelphia *Inquirer*. On Sundays he reaches over from his rocker to work on the crossword. He gets to do it first. When he is done, he folds it over and leaves the tricky ones for my grandmother. The fold is the signal that it’s okay for her to try now.

Maybe she will look at it over coffee later that morning, but it might not be until Thursday when the two younger boys are taking a nap that she has a moment to think about it. Sometimes the puzzles are a cinch and she teases him for not knowing the answers. Other times, they both need to let the clues ferment throughout the week, unfolding it again and again when a spare moment appears or a strike of genius.

When my grandmother’s not looking, he likes to write in dirty words and fold it back up. “I can’t think of a word for that that ends with a ‘s’…” she wonders aloud as she scrunches her face and twiddles the pencil in her fingers. “Maybe this ‘h’ should be an ‘e.’” She erases the character. “No, no, that won’t do.” She writes the ‘h’ back in next to the ‘s’ as neatly as she can.

It pains her to erase it. He has perfect handwriting and no matter how slowly she writes, her loopy font never compares to his neat and orderly print. When she sees his handwriting she gets angry. “Even your numbers look good,” she complains to him, of course flashing him a smile. She should just trace his ‘h’ next time. “I know that letter should be there and that one,
too. But where did that ‘t’ come from? I just don’t get it.” She shakes her head. In the corner, he is snickering and she realizes that she has been teased yet again.

*My grandmother still does the Inquirer’s Sunday crossword. Armed with her chewing gum and clipboard, she tackles at least one crossword a week. Sometimes she chuckles to herself when she sees the pattern for a dirty word.*

And possibly behind the newspaper is a copy or two of the *Reader’s Digest*. Both are in rack that is actually a part of the end table. The iron legs extend from the faux-wood Formica tabletop and go on into the rack. An identical table is on the other side of the sofa. They are strong tables. The boys sit on them when the sofa is full and use them to draw pictures of monsters. He can casually tap his cigarette ashes into the tray on the tabletop with his left hand.

And under the tabletop is a shelf. It is hidden by the rack. They have lots of magazines and books around the house, but most are tucked away on these two shelves. There are toys and half-eaten crackers that the kids stuck there. Things get lost in that organized clutter. Sometimes my grandmother finds a magazine she hasn’t seen in a while. She takes a five-minute break to read it over and visit with an old friend.

Every month, he looks forward to receiving his *Reader’s Digest*. Maybe he only scanned the pages this month or maybe it was a cover-to-cover issue. He crosses his leg into a four and rocks on one foot. He begins reading and he remembers. He remembers every word. He remembers when he is on the phone with a friend. “In fact, Al, I think I read about that not too long ago. I’d say in the June 1954 *Reader’s Digest.*”

He amazes my grandmother when he recites the excerpts just like he recites the Lord’s Prayer. “How do you do that? I read it, too, but I can’t tell you the measurements I just took for
that dress, let alone something from two years ago in the *Digest.*” She demands an explanation, but he doesn’t take her too seriously. He just smiles.

My grandmother is scrubbing the turquoise, loopy, carpet-like fabric on the sofa. As much as the pattern hides the stains from the rest of the world’s eyes, she can still see them. She sizes-up the seams. They are stapled shut. Out go the staples on all five cushions and seat backs. They *ching* when they hit the black linoleum floor. She stuffs the covers in the wash and, like magic, they come out sparkling clean. But there is a slight problem. She calls him at work.

“Can you bring home a staple gun?” He laughs and says his thoughts out loud. “Now what did my wife do?”

*Although no one smokes anymore and the lamp went out with the sofa in the eighties, my grandmother still wonders if she can borrow a staple gun to clean the reclining sofa.*

Behind them is a narrow room. Some might call it a fat hallway. It is wide enough for a laundry basin, washer and dryer, and a workspace or desk when all are lined up against the far wall. The side door is at the end of this room.

My grandmother is a seamstress. Her ladies come and go through the side door—not the front door. They are not supposed to be in the house; leave my house alone. She rips seams and pins up silk chiffon ball gowns to do the roll hem she is so practiced in. When the ladies slide into their outfits, they spin around in front of the mirror.

She uses the cutting table her brother-in-law made for her. It is at the end of the wall, next to the side door. As she rolls out the fabric, she fights with the walls and corners. Her elbow bumps the door and the fabric bolt bangs into the back wall.

*The struggle with the cutting-table in the corner resulted in its relocation to the sewing room upstairs. She still uses it.*
While serving in Korea, he sent her numbered letters counting down how many more days until he returned home. He never missed a number. Sometimes he sent sketches of dresses and assorted other garments he saw on the other side of the world. She would send him back letters and special packages with the rye bread and pepperoni he loved.

When all the girls go to Jay Thompson’s for portraits, my grandmother sends her photograph to him. It is a stunning black-and-white portrait with her cheekbones high and lips like velvet. She is wearing a black, rayon-crepe dress with beads on the front and back of the left shoulder and more beads creeping up the cuff of her right forearm. She spent forever sewing on the tiny things. Following a design on tissue paper she goes through the holes one-by-one, and one-by-one into the thin fabric they go. Due to the military mail system, though, the portrait never made it to Korea.

Years later, they go to wedding and she is wearing the beaded dress. They are serving a full course meal and the waiter is going around giving the guests their soup. He slips and the bowls lands in her lap. My grandmother is upset, but doesn’t make a big deal about it. She wipes it off and pats the dress down with a napkin. He is glad they don’t make a scene, but as the liquid soaks in he grows upset over her ruined dress. Liquids make the fabric shrink and ripple, so dry cleaning and hand washing are not options. Nothing can be done. He doesn’t get angry often and it was just an accident, but he fumes.

_He always loved my grandmother’s sewing and was so proud of it that his calm behavior towards the waiter is hard to explain today._

Through the door is the one-car garage. Years ago it would have housed a ‘50 or ‘51 white Buick convertible. It had leopard seat covers and silver streamlines on the doors. With the
top down, you were a movie star. “Oh my god, look at her go,” people would say. She never tried to figure out if it was the car or her they were referring to.

My grandmother wanted to learn to drive so she could visit him at army Basic Training camp. She took a week of driver’s class and jumped in the Buick with her new license.

It was a visitor’s weekend at Ft. Dix, about a 25-mile drive. The car has an almost human-like beauty. Not a scratch, dent, or knick can be found. But it is nothing like driving the tiny Henry J car she learned on; it’s more like a bus or a tank. She drives around 20 miles per hour through the infinite deadland and fields of southern Jersey. She passes a sign that reads “Speed Limit 55 mph” and continues at her same pace. Every few miles there is a streetlight or a set of white posts that direct you off one endless road onto another.

She is alone on the roads. That is, until she looks into her mirror and sees flashing lights. Her face turns a shade of white that matches the car. “Is everything alright, Miss? You’re driving awfully slow in an awfully fine automobile for these roads.”

“Yes, sir. Everything’s alright, I’d say. It’s my first time driving this car, and I’m a bit scared that I might break something if I go too fast, and I don’t know how to work all the gadgets, and I don’t think I’m lost, but you never know, and I’m on my way to Fort Dix, and I’m all by myself, and I think I’ve got this gearshift figured out, although it gets tricky sometimes, and I’m not doing anything wrong, am I…”

“That’s enough, Miss.” The uniformed man puts on a sideways smile with one cheek up and one cheek down. A few teeth peak out from behind his lips. “I think you can drive a little bit faster, Miss. There’s nothin’ to be afraid of. Fort Dix is just up the road, ‘bout 5 more miles. You’ll be there in no time.”
She holds her breath as he strolls back to his vehicle, checking to his left and right for more suspicious behavior. He tips his hat at her before he pulls away into a cloud of dust. Her fingers loosen their grip on the steering wheel and her eyelids fall shut. She sighs out her held breath. Boy, do I have a story to tell him.

A year later, he has finished Basic Training at Ft. Dix and graduated from the artillery division of Officer Candidacy School at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma. He is now married to my grandmother and an Assistant Executive Officer at Ft. Hood, Texas. When he trains his men, everyone knows you can hear his orders from a mile away.

Even though he parades and marches around in his black boots all day, they’re always shiny. They get scuffed up, but he shines them ‘til they are like glass. It’s every morning, sometimes twice a day. His men call him General Shiny Shoes. And he’s always shining. Shining on the back porch steps, shining at the kitchen table. Shine, shine, shine. An hour goes by, they have to be shined. Shine, shine, shine. “There he goes again, shining them shoes,” my grandmother tells another wife.

She had followed him to Ft. Hood in the Buick. It was her, a Bible with twenty dollar bills stuffed in the pages, and the dog, Ginger, he got for her against my great-grandmother’s wishes. (Though she ended up liking Gin-G anyway.) The gearshift had trouble in the mountains, but a nice man helped her out the one time it stalls.

There was a telephone strike and she couldn’t call her mother to tell her she’s safe and hear the voice she already misses so much. The man helps her again and somehow manages to contact her mother. My grandmother is young and he’s too nice. He’s so nice, she decides to block the motel door with a dresser before going to bed that first night.
She’s too nervous to sleep much and is on the road by 5 am each day. 12 hours later, she breaks to eat and to miss the going-home crowd. She gets two flat tires along the way, but they are nothing she can’t handle. Each turn and exit is guided by the TripTik scattered across the leopard seats and crinkled underneath the dog. She uses the churches marked on the maps as signs that she is going in the right direction.

*The second trip in the Buick, she drives much faster. Instead of 20 miles per hour, she averages closer to 45 miles per hour, traveling over 1600 miles in 3 days.*

But the Buick was never in the garage. After they drive back from Ft. Hood, he sells it and buys a used, 1950 series *Sixty-Two-Cadillac* sedan. The gearshift is gone and they have an easy to use, automatic shifting car. It is a deep green—not emerald or Christmas-tree green, but more like a jade green—and it matches the shutters and garage doors.

The garage is just long enough to hold the Caddy. My grandmother inches-in and inches-in to park it. Her neck is stretched out like a crane, spotting the front hood. She inches-in and inches-in. She inches-in too much. The bullets—which are more like silver rods sticking out of the front fender—puncture the back wall. He jumps out of the passenger seat and is quick to comfort the distressed woman. In no time he has a temporary solution: a scrap piece of wood nailed over the two holes. “I’ll fix that one day.”

*Behind the spare boxes, and assorted rakes and garden tools, the scrap piece of wood is still there, untouched. She believes, has always believed, there is no reason to bother with it.*

This is the house they bought together in 1954. They had to save their pennies for a long time. After scouring the papers and visiting apartments near their mothers’ houses, they find an old peach orchard that is being developed. Most houses are ranches, but their house is one of the
first three split-level homes. It is in Delaware Township when they buy it, but the area 
eventually became the Cherry Hill it is today.

Together, they watched every nail go in. Every Sunday they visit and marvel over the 
transformation. They imagine where the kitchen table will be and paint pictures in their minds of 
the decorations at Christmas. All their possessions are squished in a room at her mother’s house 
and they will have to buy lots of furniture. He is tired of the antique style he grew up with and 
comes to like the chic, modern pieces like their two-tone orange striped end chairs.

This is the house that Santa decorated during the night of Christmas Eve. This is the 
house that had a pile of my dad’s brown-bag lunches under the front hedge because he liked 
when the nuns said “Poor Mitch” and his classmates gave him their sweet cakes. They tied 
Uncle Russ’s tooth to a doorknob in this house and he lost it when he was sitting down so they 
could slam the door shut. In the backyard of this house, my dad found a baby sparrow with one 
feather—Harry—that they nursed back to health by feeding it oatmeal with an eyedropper.

They dyed the living room and dining room carpet in this house with Ritz-dye in spray 
bottles to cover-up the stains from their dog, Casey. My dad would roll down a flight of stairs 
and around the corner down another in this house and got my uncles in trouble every time. In the 
sixties, Daviddora, Russellina, and Mitchellina listened to the Beatles and smoked cigarettes into 
a vacuum in this house.

This is the house where we grandkids get a dollar and a year’s luck for finding the pickle 
ornament my uncles hide on the Christmas tree. This is the house with the kitchen floor I 
learned to tie my shoes on and where my brother developed a fear of black dogs like Max. My 
grandmother stubbornly rakes hundreds of pounds of leaves at this house, even against the 
doctor’s recommendations for an eighty-year-old woman.
This is her and Joe’s home.

*My grandmother will not even consider the notion of moving out. She still feels that her Joe is away. He’ll come home soon.*

Maybe the boys are playing the we-don’t-want-to-go-to-bed-yet game. They plead with their kisses and cuddles for more time. Grandpa Joe knows the tactic very well. In fact, he probably taught it to them. She looks at all three faces and gives in quickly. I’ll let Joe put them to bed tonight, she thinks.

He carries them up the stairs, one in each arm. They’re getting big, but he has no objections. Uncle Russ won’t lie down until all his toys are assembled in his crib. Grandpa Joe adjusts the humidifier to keep the air clean for my dad. The boys are heavy with sleep and normally not difficult to put to bed. Tonight is no exception. As he slowly closes their door, Grandpa Joe smiles to himself.

He forgets about the leukemia and he forgets about the drives into Philadelphia for all the doctors. He forgets about all the questions they ask about how he could have gotten this. Was it radiation contamination in the Japanese hospital he was treated in for burns from when his plane was shot down by friendly fire? Was it the Teflon flecks he may have brought home from his job coating rocket-cones and burned inside his cigarettes? Was it the turpentine from stripping the paint off the exterior of the house?

They don’t know, he doesn’t know. But he does know he must keep fighting. He must keep taking their medications and injections. (All except the snake venom; it makes his blood burn and skin peel for week.) He knows he must keep eating, even if it means eating dinner twice because he can’t hold down the first plateful. From Korea he knows that soldiers that eat more live longer.
He tiptoes down the two flights of stairs and back into his rocker. My grandmother is on the sofa, altering Mrs. Potter’s newest New York City purchase. Without my grandmother, her tiny frame would prevent her from keeping up with the fashions. He picks up some reading materials for his studies at Drexel. Three nights a week he is taking classes to become a mechanical engineer.

My grandmother turns the television on low so they can watch Steve Allen’s late night talk show without waking the boys. As he reads, he begins rocking. Back and forth he goes, back and forth. He smiles a soft smile and thinks about tomorrow.

*He fights for a month longer for moments like these.*