34. If you’re born to hang, you’ll never drown.

In the shimmering blue water, my great-great-grandmother saw death. After the War of 1812, the family had settled on the shore of the St. Clair River in Algonac, Michigan, and she feared her children might wander into the swift current flowing from Lake Huron to Lake St. Clair. Wanting a decent swath of Michigan flatland between her family and that river, she told her husband, “I’m going back to the country.”

“That’s when they bought the farm out in Starville,” my grandmother explains. She and I sit at her dining room table, sipping coffee, as she tells me about my ancestors. Robins wash in the birdbath outside and their chirping comes through the open windows. Her elbows rest on the white table cloth, and her index finger is hooked in the handle of her mug. “As my grandma said, ‘If you’re born to hang, you’ll never drown, and if you’re born to drown, you’ll never hang.’”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“Your fate is your fate,” she responds. “I got a list on the computer of sayings in the family that go way back.”

I am delighted that my grandmother keeps a list. All my life she has sprinkled her conversations with pithy saying and aphorisms, but they have never stuck in my memory. What I do remember is the way she talks, how she adds an “r” to wash and says, “warsh,” how she pronounces Port Huron as one word, “Porcharon,” how the nasal resonance of her voice emphasizes her matter-of-fact style of speech.

For years, I have taken these sayings for granted, but now that she is my remaining grandparent, I listen more to what she says. The more I listen, the more I hear in her words a great confluence of generations and experience. At eighty-four, she embodies my family tree. Her memories burrow deep, bearing to the surface minerals and fluids of distant times.
and friends and relatives now gone. Her many branches unfurl wide—five children, twelve grandchildren, six great-grandchildren—and we spread like a canopy across the country, from Maine to California, Dallas to Tacoma. Her sayings fall effortlessly like acorns and contain the essence of the whole, and even though I recognize this now, the specific words and their meaning often bounce off of my thick skull. I need more time to listen to my grandmother than I can find at hectic family get-togethers, and this is why I have flown across the country to visit her.

59. Nothing is “pretty good.” It is either good or it isn’t.

In the upstairs bedroom, I lie in a creaky single bed indented in the middle from so many years of service to sleeping bodies, and I examine the list. She began compiling “Family and Friends Sayings, and Tidbits” on Valentine’s Day, 2000, and it now fills three single-spaced pages. Clip art decorates the document: a pink, smiling half-moon shines on the header of the first page, and the second page has a pink-toned beach scene with a chair, umbrella, and sea shells.

As I read through the list, I recognize some of the sayings, either because they are familiar clichés or because they have been frequently tossed into familial conversations.

1. Born on the wrong side of the sheets.
2. Two sheets to the wind.
3. He only got one oar in the water.
4. Up the creek without a paddle.
5. Two quarts low.
6. Not playing with a full deck.
7. Bats in the belfry.
8. Got a screw loose.
9. A few bricks short of a full load.
10. It’s a dirty bird that soils its own nest.

Most of the sayings seek to nail down in metaphorical phrases the vagaries
and vicissitudes of life. For example, numbers five through ten on the list
describe the various ways someone with a severe case of neurosis or stupidity
gets out of synch with the status quo. Any of these could have described
certain members of my family (me included) either permanently or during one
of our “dark” phases.

But as I continue through the list, however, I find other saying that I do
not know or understand. Nor can I imagine where they came from.

63. Sugar tits
84. I’d rather be a doorknob because a vest doesn’t have sleeves.

I put stars next to these and others like them, hoping that my grandmother
will explain their origin.

Other phrases I just want to hear my grandmother talk about. One
of these is “Nothing is ‘pretty good.’ It’s either good or it isn’t,” a saying
that reminds of E.B. White’s warning in The Elements of Style against using
qualifiers: “Rather, very, little, pretty—these are the leeches that infest the pond
of prose.”

A couple days later, we are sitting at her dining room table again, and I
ask about this saying. “That’s just one of my pet peeves,” she replies. “It bugs
me when somebody says, ‘That’s pretty good.’ Something isn’t pretty good.
You’re just trying to be polite. It’s either good or it isn’t good. If anything is
pretty good, in my mind, it isn’t good.”

60. “Do I have to call Bud?”

Several items on the list refer to my grandfather, Joseph Denomy. “Do
I have to call Bud?” is one of these. My grandmother explains, “If I wasn’t up
by eight o’clock in the morning, Joe thought I had wasted the day. He’d come
and say, ‘Do you want me to call Bud?’ Bud was the undertaker.”

My grandfather returns to life with this one sentence. He rose early to
work in a factory during the week and to work in his yard and garden on the
weekend. My grandfather loved his garden. At one time or another he grew
just about anything a person could in Michigan: zucchini, cabbage, cucumber,
tomatoes, raspberries, even kohlrabi once, which no one liked. The happiest
I saw my grandfather was in his garden, proudly holding a large pumpkin at harvest time. The smile he wore shown like a yellow squash blossom beneath his usual foliage of sarcasm and grumpiness. As kids, my cousins and I stayed far from the rows of dirt and maturing fruits and vegetables unless he invited us to pick something. The threat of his wrath was an invisible fence we never dared cross.

During the summer months, meals at my grandparent’s house always included something freshly picked—I have never tasted sweet corn as good as his—but whenever he invited us over, we had to be on time. Tardiness inflamed his temper and the sour cloud of his mood would saturate the dinner table. He valued punctuality not because of a Protestant work ethic; my grandfather was a devout Catholic who every Sunday knelt in a pew, bald forehead resting on his fist, praying intensely. Ingrained in his personality were clear expectations of how others should act and how the world should be. When sharp pains traveled through his chest one morning, my grandmother told him she was calling an ambulance, and he said his last words: “Oh shit!”

Except for the asparagus patch, grass now covers his garden. My grandmother breaks the stalks at their bases and fries them in a skillet or gives them away in Ziploc bags. She still misses Joe.

84. I’d rather be a doorknob because a vest doesn’t have sleeves.

“When I was in high school, there were a lot of dumb sayings that were thrown around and this was one of them: ‘I’d rather be a doorknob because a vest doesn’t have sleeves.’ They didn’t make any sense. It was like knock-knock jokes, nonsense responses.”

55. He treats me just like he would a coal passer

“Dad was on freighters that used coal,” my grandmother says. “The coal passer is the lowest in the chain of command in the engine room, and mother said he treated her like a coal passer.”

My great-grandmother was accustomed to having her husband—an
engineer on Great Lakes freighters—gone most of the time. “By the time my dad retired, Joe and I had been together more time than they ever spent together,” my grandmother explains. “Dad would go sailing in March and get back in the end of December, sometimes January, so they had only two to three months in the winter. They didn’t settle these picky little arguments in their day-to-day lives. Mother was used to living alone and not waiting on him, and just felt he was treating her like a coal passer, not one of the engineers.”

The seasons, flow, and storms of the Great Lakes marked my great-grandparent’s marriage from the beginning. They were engaged on New Year’s Day, 1913, and soon afterward the groom enrolled for six weeks of engineer’s school, then began his career on the Great Lakes. Less than two months before their wedding day, he was caught in the Storm of 1913, one of worst gales to churn the freshwater oceans that surround Michigan. His ship had just left Milwaukee when it hit; they turned their bow into the surge and wind. At sunset, the ship was going full speed at the break wall outside Milwaukee, and when the sun rose, it was going full speed at the break wall outside Milwaukee. They had not moved at all, but they were still afloat. Another ship, whose lights they had seen in the distance, was gone.

The day the storm hit, my great-grandmother had gone to Detroit to buy her wedding gown. As newspapers chronicled the devastation from the Freshwater Fury, she did not know whether her fiancé was returning home for their wedding or washing up on the beaches along with other dead sailors. A message arrived five days later, telling her that he had survived. They were married on New Year’s Day, 1914, and several months later, a great expanse of water again stood between them.

80. The mind contains all possibilities

“I don’t know where that came from, but I heard somewhere that anything that the mind can conceive is possible. And it scares me to death. You look through history, people like Jules Verne, he had an imagination, and half the things he wrote of were never heard of. The mind can think of so many weird things and it’s all possible,” my grandmother says.

“Is this something you read?” I ask.
“I read it somewhere or I heard it on television. It’s really frightening that anything the mind can conceive is possible. Just think of all the things you can think of. If you’d not moved to Vermont, or if you’d stayed in Vermont when your parents moved here, it would have created a whole different world. If my friend Dorothy and I went off to New York and got an apartment, all you kids wouldn’t be around.”

This idea later haunts me. Since my grandmother doesn’t know the source of this quote, I try to track it down. Quote books and internet searches don’t clarify anything. Some attribute it to the Buddha, perhaps because it sounds like something he would have said, but I find no documented references. The closest Buddhist quote I can find comes from a Zen priest, Shunryu Suzuki, who taught: “In the beginner’s mind, there are many possibilities, in the expert’s there are few.” Others give credit to Edgar Cayce, a New Age clairvoyant who was a prophet in some eyes and a crackpot in others; he wrote, “For as you think in your heart so will your life be, the mind contains all possibilities.” Then again, Joseph Conrad, in the Heart of Darkness gives Marlowe the following words: “The mind of man is capable of anything – because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future.” My grandmother’s quote contains the possibility of all these quotes.

63. Sugar tits

“One that I don’t understand is ‘Sugar tits,’” I say.

“That’s Grandma Denomy, Joe’s mother,” my grandmother replies.

“When she got mad, she didn’t swear, she said, ‘Oh, sugar tits!’”

Sugar tits were baby pacifiers. Long before a drunken Mel Gibson used these words to refer to the female police officer who had pulled him over, crying infants were given damp pieces of cloth wrapped around lumps of sugar.

107. Go find me a sky hook

I read aloud from the list, “On dark gloomy days when the sun was blocked by dismal gray clouds, Everett Thomas would send me for a sky hook.
The idea was to hook the clouds and drag them around until the sun could shine through. Never found a hook long enough."

"He had me do all kinds of weird things. I spent a lot time with him, and he was very patient and kind to me." My grandmother considers Everett and his wife, Mary, her second parents. They owned a meat market near her childhood home in Marine City. Mary got bouquets of weeds from my grandmother. "Oh, these are such beautiful flowers," Mary would say. Everett got a little, happy-go-luck girl asking him if he needed help. "Go down to the river and bale it with a spoon," he'd suggest. Or he'd tell her to find a sky hook.

My grandmother would scour the yards, looking among fallen sticks and branches for something long enough to reach the sky. She earnestly threw herself into the search and wasn't disappointed when she never found one. The search made waiting for the sunshine more bearable.

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I stroll with my grandmother through the same streets where she never found a sky hook, and she tells me what she sees in the brick facades and the old homes. Her head of thick, white curls is just below my shoulder and her right leg has a limp, from the artificial knee. At the curbs, she puts her arm in mine. She is not frail, just slowing down. She still plans to swim in the St. Clair River later this summer, something she has done every year since she first splashed into the blue water as a young girl.

We approach the river, which courses with the dull glint of turquoise beyond the boardwalk. "I'd go down and just lie on the ferry dock and watch the water go and I'd move," she says. "Have you ever done that? If you stare long enough at the river, instead of the water flowing down, you start moving, and you can go anywhere you want." This last sentence hooks into the clouds of my mind and tugs.