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Growing Up Lucy

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EMILY WEBB

Growing Up Lucy

—for Genaro

I.

I distinctly remember the moment when I became a calamity. It occurred mere minutes after learning I had become an older sister at four years old—a reckless age when scabbed knees are still considered cute.

While some of the frantic events that day linger as fragments in my memory, I still vividly recall my father trudging toward me as I lounged in my pink and cream plastered bedroom, filling my daily quota of coloring. I noticed how his bristly eyebrows crinkled together in a frustrated panic while he struggled to lure me away from my coloring book.

“Em, you need to come with me to the hospital right now,” my father pleaded between heaves of breath. “We have to go meet your baby sister.”

As he wildly whirled his hands in the doorway to hurry me downstairs, I couldn’t seem to understand what was possibly more important than finishing my Crayola opus. Sure, I knew that we had to make room for this tiny newborn in our already tiny family. I just didn’t see what all the fuss was about—my new sister was going to be another rambunctious kid just like me.

In waiting for her arrival, I had planned a gamut of adventures that would have trained this girl for her new role as my partner-in-crime. We were going to jiggle to the best tunes blaring from my Playskool cassette player, chitchat over cups of fathomed tea in my mossy playhouse, even rummage through my costume chest to flaunt the glitziest jewels and chicest outfits. Little did I realize that such overly eager impulses could get me into some tight troubles.

Caught up in the fantasy of being an older sister, I strolled over to the door of my closet and peered through its hinges to gawk at my father, who was frantically rifling through clothes to pack a suitcase for me.

“Hi, Daddy!” I shrieked through the crack, though he was too frazzled to respond. “I can see you! Look, Dad! I’m in the doo—”

Before I could even breathe out another chuckle, my father finished packing and abruptly slammed the closet door, inadvertently clinching my lips between its hinges. I still remember the searing twinge of hurt that pulsed beneath my lip tissue as I yelped for him through tears and muffled speech.

Though I knew that my father did not mean to inflict pain on my motor mouth with what felt like a closet chokehold, I realized years later that the episode was entirely self-inflicted. It was the birth of a hot mess. I bore a fat lip a week later to prove it.

II.

My mother never spent much time with her father as a child, though she cherished the moments when they’d plop in front of the tube together and watch their nightly program. In her small brick colonial in Queens, my mother would not have much of a say when it came to choosing the family programming on their single Magnavox television set. She usually had to tolerate her other five relatives wielding the dial, including my grandfather. He would often force her to sit through repeats of *I Love Lucy*, the celebrated six-year sitcom starring Lucille Ball, the outlandish funnywoman who cracked the televised veneer of a poised housewife with uproarious hijinks.

Though the show had been playing on air over and over again for almost twenty years, my mother would still strain her paunched baby cheeks from giggling at Lucy’s wild antics. Alongside her father, she would watch in hysterics as Lucy gulped down too many spoonfuls of Vitameatavegamin—an alcohol-based serum that was “rich in megetables and vinerals”—or when she played Harpo Marx’s reflection. She delighted in listening to her father chortle whenever Lucy would screw up another one of Ricky’s gigs at the club or bawl like a child after getting caught in her shenanigans. I can imagine my grandfather letting out his signature cackle—reminiscent of the Count from Sesame Street, though missing its Transylvanian nuances—as my mother looks over to catch his revelry and follow suit.

III.

Somehow, stories of my dumb luck or casual misfortune have become prime dinner conversation. That time I lost grip of the leash on Aunt Tracy’s dog after being startled by another dog’s bellowing bark, for example. Or the time I desperately needed to pee while stranded on a tarmac for seven hours before my first international flight, alone. Or even the time I accidentally blasted Blondie’s “Call Me” across the quiet section of my college’s library when my headphones popped out of my computer. These recurring tales of my awk-

ward pain have caused my family to christen me with nicknames. The most popular one, as of late, has been “calamity”—in the loveliest of ways, my folks assure me, though I still dole out an eyeroll every now and then.

If you ask my mother, she will insist that I’m just as endearingly clumsy as Lucille. I would expect as much from the woman who loafs around our house in ratty, pink pajamas, printed with that iconic scene of Lucy and Ethel gorging themselves with chocolates off a speeding conveyor belt. Those pajamas have floated through almost every distinct moment of my childhood for as long as I can remember, whether my mother was scolding my mindless antics or guffawing over my latest mortifying episode. Those pajamas have watched me bloom into a calamity while trying to grasp adulthood. I just wonder how long it will take before I bloom out of it.

IV.

A grand horn medley swells with the babaloo shimmy of maracas as Lucy’s opening credits swipe across the screen and introduce that iconic episode, “Job Switching.” When the screen fades into a shot of the Ricardos’ modest living room, Ricky walks on set by slamming the front door and calling for his crazed redhead in a huff. Lucy then tramples onscreen and chirps out a loud “is that you, sweetie pie?” ready to sling her arms around her husband until she catches his fuming glare.

Before she can retreat backstage, Ricky grumbles Lucy’s name with his burly Cuban accent and reels his finger inward to summon her as if she were an impudent child. Lucy’s lips curl into a guilty cringe, a response I recognize.

This time, Lucy’s crime is overdrawing her bank account. Ricky reads aloud a note that she leaves on one of her checks: “Dear teller, be a lamb and don’t put this through ‘til next month.”

As the audience chortles off-screen, Lucy winces under Ricky’s hard stare and starts to wring her hands together, as if trying to scrub the proverbial red off.

“I don’t know what’s the matter with you,” Ricky whines. “Every month, every *single* month, your bank account is overdrawn. Now what is the reason?”

The shrill pitch in Ricky’s outraged voice sounds similar to my mother’s when she would chastise my senseless behavior as a kid. That time I ran into oncoming traffic, the afternoon I left our basement door open and caused my baby sister to topple down the stairwell—you know, “kid stuff.”

While my mother has disciplined me for reckless antics over the years, I would never have served her as cheeky of a retort as Lucy’s when she tells Ricky, “You don’t give me enough money!”

The audience then falls into a bout of rousing laughter while Ricky and Lucy begin to bicker about who works harder in supporting the family. Sick of arguing about their responsibilities, Ricky finally challenges his wife to experience his life in the working world and apply for a job. With her head held exceedingly high, Lucy appears confident when she accepts this test of her competency, though we all know how she fares after working as a candy maker at Kramer's Kandy Kitchen.

V.

While he would yuck it up watching Lucy raise all sorts of hell on screen, my grandfather could have been a comedian in his own right. My mother remembers the way he would spill out cheeky one-liners almost as if they were scripted. "Do as I say, don't say as I do," he'd say whenever his offspring caught him disobeying his own rules, or he might say, "I zigged when I should have zagged," if he took the wrong route during a car ride. My grandfather hardly seemed to take himself seriously, even as the head of the household.

Though I still find it hard to believe that this former sailor, carpenter and World War II veteran could deliver such hilarious lines as if it were his job. I suppose there must be a kooky gene floating somewhere in our family line. While I've listened to my mother tell stories about his shenanigans over the years, I can't seem to conjure enough of my own memories about my grandfather's double life as a jokester.

When I look back on my whirlwind childhood, I can only piece together his vibrant presence in old photographs. I am often posing with my grandfather on some patriotic holiday—whether it be Memorial Day or the Fourth of July—his sanded palms cradling me close while we share a dimpled grin. I slightly remember the way my grandfather would watch over our family like a vessel, anchoring himself in an armchair at any gathering so that he could play with his grandkids and still watch the Mets game. He would often kick back and watch me ricochet around the room, cackling in awe of my boundless energy.

The only memento of my grandfather that still rings clear is his old, hearty laugh. It fueled my childish abandon when I scaled countertops for unreachable treats or played hardcore rounds of leapfrog. It made me feel daring and invincible, even when the calamity unfolded in welts and scrapes. I felt like I could do no wrong around my grandfather, no matter how impulsive or foolish I acted.

VI.

The camera cross fades into a bleak workroom at the candy factory, its walls seemingly starved of rich colors despite the black and white transmis-

sion. Enter Lucy and her faithful accomplice, Ethel (dressed in smocks and deflated chef hats) filing in behind their supervisor. As they walk into the workroom, Lucy and Ethel catch another employee sitting at a workbench and whisking her hand around in a frothy pool of chocolate.

When their supervisor comes to an abrupt halt stage right, the disastrous duo reacts on cue as they topple over each other with a jerk. With a taut frown flaunting her authority, their supervisor doles out instructions that raise the tight vessels of her bony neck.

“Ricardo, I’m going to put you to work chocolate dipping,” she beckons over to Lucy with a tone of inflated command. “You say you’ve had experience?”

Distracted by the mesmerizing efficiency of the other worker, Lucy waits a beat until she snaps out of her ditzzy trance.

“Oh, yes ma’am. I’m a dipper from way back,” the redhead assures her boss with a sprightly tone. “They used to call me the Big Dipper.”

Lucy turns to Ethel and rewards her punch line with a proud chortle until the audience joins in. The camera then focuses on the supervisor, her lips pursing into a firm crease and her eyes bugging out in scorn. Catching this displeased reaction, Lucy soon cuts her guffaw short and instead lets out what sounds like the bleat of a queasy doe.

“There is no room in this plant for levity, however weak,” the supervisor remarks. Lucy responds with a faint “yes ma’am,” quickly collapsing the dimples carved in her radiant cheeks.

When the supervisor decides to escort Ethel offstage and place her in a different department, Lucy hops onto a stool next to the employee hard at work and settles herself at the table, complete with a tub of melted chocolate, fresh candy and a wooden cutting board. Before she gets her hands dirty, Lucy peers over at the other worker to observe her mechanical motions. Her curious smirk signals the workings of a rascal—I can tell because I wore that same simper just before the door hinge cut my mischief short.

Once she believes she can handle the candy dipping process, Lucy blithely scoops a glob of melted chocolate out of its tub and spatters it onto her cutting board. She feverishly swishes her fingers around in the bubbling liquid, looking back at her coworker every now and then to check if she’s doing it right. As she continues to play in this muddy puddle, Lucy begins to prod the chocolate with a deliriously chipper grin, almost as if she were punching piano keys in a grand concerto. Ignoring wads of candy that drop around her workspace, Lucy flings its remains into a pile on the table and spatters the chocolate dripping from her fingers into that mess. The calamity builds to a crescendo and howls of mirth rise from the audience.

Before she proceeds to muck around in this slop, Lucy suddenly flickers her wide, dopey eyes across the room when she hears a fly buzzing overhead.

She follows its path until it finally lands on her coworker's face. Acting on a sheer impulse to kill the critter, Lucy whacks her sticky hand against her coworker's cheek, prompting the woman to strike back with another chocolate smack.

The audience starts to hoot once Lucy turns to the camera, her face slathered in globs of chocolate. She then gasps with disgruntled breath as the screen fades out.

VII.

One moment that crawls into my mind when I consider my grandfather's humor is the time he broke out in uproarious laughter after raving at my aunt in public over family dinner. As I gorged myself with plates of gnocchi and eggplant Parmesan alongside my relatives at an Italian restaurant, I could hear a ruckus coming from the other end of the table where my aunt sat across from my grandfather. As the noise grew louder, I looked over to find my aunt wrangling with a wine bottle that was clutched in my grandfather's wrinkled, wobbling grip. I assumed that he was trying to pour what might have been his third glass, but my aunt wanted to stop him since she knew that he could keep pouring.

"Stop it, okay?" she grunted in an audible whisper while hunched over her food, struggling to free the bottle from his fingers. "You've had enough already."

"What's the matter?" my grandfather whined. His grimace expressed all of his waning strength at seventy-five years old.

As he started to raise his voice—partly due to frustration and partly due to his poor hearing—I noticed how patrons sitting at other tables peered over their shoulders and gawked at this hollering old man. They were enthralled by his tantrum, as if he were a zany child.

"Will you stop?" my aunt sternly uttered under her breath, glaring at my grandfather until he released that coveted bottle. "We're in public—people are staring."

"So what?" he shouted in what sounded like a fit of enraged amusement. "I yam what I yam!"

Though it felt inappropriate at the time, I couldn't help but giggle at my grandfather's cartoonish outburst. It resounded against the restaurant walls with an odd note of both triumph and resignation. While I scanned the reactions from my family around our table, I caught my mother hiding a weak smirk as she focused her expression in her plate of angel hair.

VIII.

By the time she aged well into her twenties, my mother had grown too large for that modest brick colonial and soon mounted a quest for adulthood. She became the first in her family to earn a college degree (which she afforded with her own wallet), she worked through countless odd jobs until she secured her title as a Supreme Court clerk, and she even managed to raise two daughters while wrangling my calamity. In watching her face every kind of hardship over the years, I've come to admire my mother for this reason—she is a warrior.

While she has forged a foundation for her growing family, my mother still cherishes the time she spent with her father over the years, carrying his beloved cackle in her mind. When asked about her fondest memories of my grandfather, my mother immediately recalls his antics on the night of her wedding. She caught him grooving and gliding to disco music on the dance-floor, whisking almost every female guest off her feet.

"He was a dancing fool!" she chimes with an incredulous chuckle. "I had never seen him act that crazy before."

She kids that he was probably excited to get rid of his daughter. Though her weary hazel eyes, vacant as they whirl into a fit of nostalgia, suggest more.

Before she toddled out of the venue in her puffed lace dress that night, my mother remembers how her father ambled towards her, amidst hundreds of clamoring guests to bid her farewell. She noticed the way his bristly eyebrows knitted together as his eyes welled with tears.

"You know how I feel," she simply mutters, emulating his shaky tone. "I'm your father and I will always be there for you."

I can hear my mother echo his words with a snivel, which helps me realize that she rarely heard this kind of sentiment from her father. I believe my mother when she insists that she had always felt close to her father growing up, despite how seldom he expressed such warmth. I suppose her warrior skin must have grown with time, throbbing to thrive on her father's pride and affection.

When she steadies her voice to budge out another answer, my mother concedes that she must now harbor memories, like this one, since he can no longer express those feelings.

"It's like I've been mourning Grandpa for the past three years," she murmurs, shirking the hurt in her words with downcast eyes. "The way I see it, he's already gone."

IX.

If I were to have asked my grandfather about that public dinner outburst years later, he most likely could not have told me where we were, what we

ate or even who we were. He would have just stared at me vacantly with tired eyes. Though I would have probably repeated myself a few times and clearly enunciated in a raised voice so he could listen with his hearing aid, I know that he would have just resorted to shrugging his shoulders and staring back into space, listless and irritated.

In the past three years, as dementia clawed through his brain, I've watched my grandfather decline into an idle, sedated husk of a man. When I first heard the news about his diagnosis from my mother, I struggled to process her bleak report. Sure, I had heard tragic tales about elderly relatives in other families grappling with a decaying memory as a result of this syndrome—though I hadn't really believed that my family would be dealt such a faltering, emaciated hand. While the term "dementia" may directly translate to the Latin word for "madness," I refuse to believe that my grandfather was driven insane by its symptoms. Though I admit, he didn't seem to possess his own self as he reached its seventh and most crippling stage.

As the result of his cognitive decline in his last few years, my grandfather had to endure the touch of another human scrubbing his back in the bathtub and wrangling his body into an adult diaper, since he could no longer perform his daily routine. He often lashed out at his wife or his aide when they struggled to haul his inert, gaunt frame from his bed into a wheelchair everyday. If he tried to open his mouth and communicate, he could only groan in muted babble or sometimes bray out with incoherent exclamations. In those last few months, I also learned that my grandfather had become prone to a phenomenon known as "sundowning," in which dementia patients sleep during daylight hours but later become restless and confused at night. According to most psychological studies, these combined factors of weight loss, fatigue, and agitation usually manifest as a depressive disorder in most dementia patients.

I didn't really need a psychologist telling me what I clearly saw: he didn't even cackle anymore. While his brittle bones continued to age well into his eighties, I noticed how his spirit diminished as if he was retreating to the beginning rather than braving the end. I couldn't really tell what was worse.

X.

Cut to the final scene of Lucy's mayhem in the candy factory—the pinnacle of her sugared nightmare. The camera fades into the same dismal workroom set, though this time it features a long conveyor belt stretching from one side of the stage to the other. Lucy and Ethel are herded into this room like before, but the duo now fixes their tense gaze on the contraption.

The camera focuses on Lucy as she ricochets her twitchy eyes up and down the wide expanse of the belt, clearly dreading its automated gears and

levers. With a knitted brow, Lucy fears that this moment may be her last chance to prove her competency in the working world. She doesn't seem to have much faith.

The supervisor breaks Lucy's anxious stupor as she begins to give more instructions. "Now, the candy will pass by on this conveyor belt and continue into the next room, where the girls will pack it," she orders in a much more stringent tone than before. "Your job is to take each piece of candy and wrap it in one of these papers and put it back on the belt. You understand?"

Lucy and Ethel answer with a weary reply, "Yes sir—uh, yes ma'am!" before the audience rumbles with a few chuckles. The viewers don't seem to have much hope for the calamity twins either.

"Alright, girls. This is your last chance." The supervisor seethes with a twinge of exhaustion. "If one piece of candy gets past you and into the packaging room unwrapped—you're *fired*."

She bellows into the next room for the operator to start the conveyor belt. Lucy and Ethel suddenly jerk upwards in fright and pluck wrappers from the countertop. When chocolates slowly start to tread across the belt, Lucy and Ethel lurch closer with their hands hovering above the incoming stock. They snatch these candies from the belt, crackle their wrappers around each piece in a tizzy, thud them back onto the belt and watch for the next one.

Once they settle into a productive pace, Lucy and Ethel find themselves wrapping at a greater frequency. The belt picks up speed and bare chocolates quickly scurry past. Raucous laughter pounds against the screen as the audience indulges in what sounds like a fit of *schadenfreude*. The camera zeros in on Lucy's grimace as she watches her gainful employment slide away from her grasp, one sweet at a time.

"I think we're fighting a losing battle!" Lucy hollers over to Ethel above vindictive hysterics. She looks to her right side to find Ethel already shoving those pesky candies in her mouth so they don't pass into the next room.

As the laughter reverberates through the chaos, Lucy proceeds to hastily wrench her hands around each candy, twisting its wrapper with tense shoulders. But then, the conveyor belt stops. The frazzled women look at each other in pure terror and start to grab any sugary remains from the belt, collecting them in their oversized caps and even larger mouths.

When the supervisor returns onstage to find not a single candy left, she surveys the duo with pleased astonishment while they sit upright, stuffed with their secret of failure.

"Well, fine. You're doing splendidly," the supervisor smugly remarks. She then shrieks to the operator offstage, "Speeeeee it up a little!"

Lucy and Ethel bug out their tired eyes in shock and resume their work. The scene fades out.

XI.

In spite of my yearning to help care for my grandfather in his last months, I could only send recycled words of solace to my mother over the phone while six hours away at college. When I was available at home, I made sure to visit my grandparents so that we could catch up. Essentially, I tried to distract them from his sickness with my sprightly energy.

One night last January, I offered to drive over to their cramped apartment, which is five minutes away in a neighboring town. My mother often assumed the role of caregiver when his aide wasn't on duty, so I wanted to spare her for one night. Besides, I thought I could handle it—I had just turned twenty-one after all.

Once I briskly knocked on their apartment door, I waited for a minute or two until I heard my grandmother jingling its chain lock and then opening the door to greet me.

“Oh, hi, Pussycat,” she said in a rather subdued tone. “Come on in.”

As I stepped through the doorway, I immediately noticed my grandfather, sitting hunched against a reclined bed loaned by the local hospital. His gaze was glazed over onto the television set.

“How's he doing?”

“Meh, he's not getting any worse but not getting any better either.” My grandmother shrugged her gaunt shoulders with exhausted indifference. As much as I imagined that she wanted to assist her husband in every possible way, I knew that her slight, shrunken frame couldn't handle the physical strain.

I headed over to the foot of his bed and tried to focus his attention on the genial wave of my hand. My grandmother then scurried closer to his bedside and slapped him repeatedly on the shoulder until his eyes found her face.

“Do you know who is here to visit you?” she hollered into his ear. It was one of the many brain puzzles we quizzed him with so we could gauge his condition. “Do you know who this is?”

When he heeded her questions with a meek “huh,” my grandmother repeated herself, but much louder this time. I remember when they used to bicker like Fred and Ethel. Now, it just seemed like she was screaming at him. I watched my grandfather crane his neck to stare in my direction and then slowly turn back to her with a response.

“Uh, Cheryl,” he gurgled out as his lip started to quiver from too much work. Cheryl is my mother's name.

While I had tried to prepare myself for this day, I couldn't stop the shock that shuddered through my veins once I felt this reality of his syndrome. My grandfather had become the dementia patient.

As I tried to shake off those broken nerves, I noticed my grandfather swiftly tack his fingers onto his knobby calves and start scratching into his skin with his fingernails. His legs were lacerated with streaks of dried blood.

“When did this start?” I asked my grandmother as I struggled to steady my faltering voice, not looking away from his damage.

“Oh, that? He’s been doing that for a while now,” she replied. “I’m not really sure why.”

My mother told me months later that my grandfather had contracted scabies, or parasites inside the skin that are usually festering under unwashed linens. She assumed that his previous two-month stint in a nearby rehabilitation facility might have caused the infection.

Watching my grandfather cringe as he tried to scrape the pain out of his skin, I began to question. I might have convinced myself that I could nurture him since I had reached an adult age, but I will always be Lucy. No matter how hard I would try to deliver the tender care and comfort he desperately needed, I knew that I might topple onto his frail body after catching my foot on the bed or I’d inflame his abraded skin while trying to warmly touch his knee. This calamity can’t be trusted to watch over someone so delicate. It would be a child taking care of another child—I would easily make his condition worse.

XII.

Working toward her starring role on *I Love Lucy*, Lucille Ball fought tooth and nail for twenty years to rise out of amateur films so that she could become a slapstick queen. She might have endured plenty of hardships on the way—the deaths of her father and uncle, the frequent absence of an unfaithful husband—but she made sure that she fumbled into televised greatness.

With each new episode in the series, Ball strove to perfect every pratfall or wacky face. Once the cameras started rolling, Lucille would bawl like a glorified lady child until audiences broke into hysterics from her shenanigans. When it seemed like Lucy would never overcome her calamity, Ball was right behind her to control the chaos.

After watching countless episodes of *Lucy* over the years, I realized that such mayhem could foster a hilarious blessing if steered in the right way. I could still comfort my grandfather with a boundless spirit as long as I focused that energy on treating his condition. If Lucy could tackle the responsibility of amusing others, then I sure as hell could for the sake of my family. That’s the truth to growing up—accepting that life needs more laughter.

XIII.

When my grandfather finally stopped scratching his red-slathered legs, I tiptoed closer to his left bedside and picked up a tube of prescribed ointment and a washcloth from the night table. Once I started to cleanse his wounds with hot water and massaged them with cool gel, I looked over to catch the tense wrinkles ease in my grandfather's face while he slowly closed his eyes to slumber.

I found my grandmother watching the film *Hope Springs* on their small, gleaming HD television set. In this particular scene, Meryl Streep and Tommy Lee Jones sit in a movie theatre as an elderly couple, bickering about one potential way to spice up their date.

"What's going on?" my grandmother asked in a whisper of innocence.

In this moment, I heard canned laughter echoing inside my head. It would be too awkward, so instead I laughed it off with a loud chortle until she giggled in return.