

2024

## Passing

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### Recommended Citation

Khoa (2024) "Passing," *Exile*: Vol. 71: No. 1, Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol71/iss1/14>

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Passing  
Khoa

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Lying on my piss-colored banana-patterned hammock, I peered through the bare window frame into a large room furnished with a singular wooden twin bed. A patchy coat of blue paint and white drywall cohabitated the space. So did Grandpa.

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### ***10th-grade summer.***

A bucket of blue paint, a bucket of white paint and Grandpa were sitting in front of me, interrogation-style. I was sitting crisscross apple sauce, comfortable-style. Grandpa said,

"Put more blue in. It's not dark enough."

I took the blue bucket and hurled half of what was left into a steel pail containing a light-blue mixture of paint. I said,

"Why do we have to do this? They have those machines now that can make custom paint colors."

"We get more paint this way. Look, I got two cans of paint for the price of one of your fancy ones. You kids are just so damn lazy now. That's how they get you to spend more money." As I poured in the paint, he leaned over my shoulder and said, "Look at that. That's the perfect color right there."

His mouth split into a gap-toothed smile. For the last forty or so years, each spoonful of rice always came down with alcohol, not just because it tasted better with it but also because "the shit I drink is strong enough to kill any dirty thing in my mouth. I don't need them damn toothpaste." A month-long liquid-food alcohol-free diet, a pessimistic dentist, and an even more pessimistic gastroenterologist didn't make him give up his old ways. The old stuff was evidently not strong enough. He started drinking even stronger shit.

His smile irked me. I wanted to tell him that doing it his way resulted in the volume of one can anyway because we were not going to use the rest of the blue or white paint and that the color in the pail was about six shades darker than what was on his wall right now.

I decided to shut my mouth.

He bought the paint cans, not me. It was his wall, not mine. He could put whatever color he wanted on it. It wasn't like he could see the difference with his cataracts, and it wasn't like anyone would come visit him.

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### ***8th-grade fall break.***

My first excruciatingly drabby commute to Grandpa's house. We had moved closer to him, and Dad decided that driving 2 hours every Sunday out to his farm was more enjoyable than going to church. As I sat in silence and observed the gradually waning bustle of the city, Dad asked,

"Have you seen how big your grandpa's farm is?"

"No."

"They gave him a large piece of land when he came back from the war. He built the farm from scratch. And he's gonna give it all away." He clicked his tongue. "That motherfucker's getting delirious."

"From scratch?" I asked. "Is it a cow farm? Were they brown cows or white cows? Did his cows make milk?"

Dad let out a light exhale. He said,

"I grew up on that farm. I farmed on that farm. It's mine more than any of the dumb charities he's gonna give the money to."

He paused to look for cars to make a left turn.

"Hey, since your grandma is gone this week, it's your job to take care of him, alright? Pretty easy job, in my opinion. Good bonding time, too."

I imagined Grandpa. A man with barrels for arms, brick-wall abs, and naturally tanned from the very top of his rounded nose all the way to the skin covering the intricate bone structure that protruded from his firm feet.

"Sure!"

After about half an hour, we got to his house.

He was paralyzed waist down, gaunt, pale, with a colossal bald spot in the middle of his gray head and a foul-smelling mouth that wouldn't close. He studied me as I did him—my face, then down my torso and then back up, staring straight into my eyes. His mouth spread into a wide grin. "Hello. Nice to meet you!"

Dad reached out his hand and leaned down to pat Grandpa's shoulder, positioning himself to block my grimace.

"How are you doing?"

"I'm doing just fine. Your mother isn't here. She—"

"I heard, I heard." He looked at me. "C'mon now. Wheel him into his room. We don't wanna keep him in the sun for too long."

I could feel Dad smirk as I wheeled Grandpa into his room. He pointed towards his bed.

"I can climb into it by myself. You see, that's the beauty of independence. There are different levels to it. I may not be completely independent anymore, but I can still do stuff on my own."

His chuckle came with a heavy rasp. He then looked towards me, eyes glimmering, and I let out a grunt. He continued,

"When I was young, I had to do stuff all by myself. Your grandpa—" He stopped and laughed to himself before continuing. "Well, I guess that's me now. Your *great* grandpa didn't care about me. I had to do everything by myself. When I was 13 or so, I was chopping wood, and I accidentally chopped a

piece of my hand off." I noticed him pausing, so I let out another grunt. "I looked down, and you could see my bones."

I dropped him off. His slender arms reached for the far side of his bed, and he pulled himself up. He fell back into his chair, but his arms were still stretched.

"Give me a little push, will ya?"

The beauty of independence. I pushed against his two stumps as he tried again. This time, he landed with a thump, seeming unfazed as he positioned his head on his pillow. I started to walk away. Grandpa smacked the mattress.

"Come. Sit."

I sat on the edge of his bed, facing away from him, to leave him space to move around. That was a lie. I didn't want to be close to him. He said,

"My dad whooped my ass when I chopped off my hand. You kids have it so easy now. You don't get your ass whooped, do you?" He tapped my buttocks and laughed again. He then pulled on my shirt sleeve.

"I bet your parents always get you new clothes. The shirt I'm wearing, I've owned for 10 years. It has holes in it, but who cares? Holes don't kill."

I turned on the fan at the end of the bed, but it did little to drown out the noise.

"You feeling hot? I grew up in this weather without fans. We sweated like pigs; I'm serious."

I pulled out my phone and watched TikToks out loud. He was unbothered. I yawned. I stomped my feet. Once, twice then in an alternating pattern. Still unbothered. I scratched the side of his wooden bed frame. I tapped it, then knocked on it, and then slammed it. Nothing. Nothing could stop that man from talking.

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### ***Death, summer before college***

He lay in a maroon casket, his hands covering the very liver that failed him just days before. He donned a long-sleeved, buttoned-up black shirt. His black silk pant legs were filled with newspaper, or perhaps a prosthetic limb; I was hesitant to look because whatever was underneath could make the yellowing of his body that much more striking.

I glanced at him, promising myself it would be the last, the same promise I had made five seconds ago and five seconds before that.

Dad stumbled in, hugged me with one hand and said,

"Come here, kid. I love you so much. Your grandpa's giving me the house and the farm to pay for your college."

A familiar stench quickly slithered through the paint cracks on the walls until it became part of the room's ambiance. I took my gaze away from Grandpa. As Dad's eyes met mine, they fluttered

uncontrollably, partially concealing his bloodshot pupils. I held onto his torso tightly with my hands and wrapped his hands loosely around my shoulder in case he needed help keeping his balance.

"Grandpa died, and you're still drinking?"

"It's a Saturday. Chill the fuck out, kid."

He leaned forward. His gray stubble grazed my cheek as his head stooped to rest on my collarbone. The weight felt uncomfortable.

"Are you going to sell Grandpa's farm? I thought you wanted to keep it."

"I'm making a sacrifice—" He picked himself up from my shoulder and took a step back. He lifted his right arm and shoved his index finger against my nose bridge. "—for you. Be grateful, kid." I swatted his hand away. His head tipped forward, his mouth stopping just short of my right ear.

"I told you our weekly trips were gonna work."

His body convulsed as he giggled. He let out a loud burp and stumbled out.

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### *After Grandpa.*

I took down my hammock and walked inside. Dad was playing poker with his drinking buddies.

"Dad, let's go."

"No, no, no. No. Let me finish a few more rounds. I'm doubling your college funds. Be grateful." He shook with laughter and finished the half-full shot glass beside his lap.

"Your grandpa's in heaven blessing the fuck out of me right now."