

Meeting Woody

By Kimberly Reynolds

When my husband and I bought our house on Barth Avenue in the summer of 2014, my grandpa had been gone about four years, Woody only a few months.

We hadn't really planned on buying Woody's house, but not wanting to waste our realtor's time trekking to the neighborhood on a Saturday for just one showing of a different house, we scheduled a walk-through to make it worth his time.

To be sure, Woody's house was no masterpiece. Aging carpet everywhere, wood shingles inside the house, layers upon layers of wallpaper covering crumbling plaster, wood paneling on any wallpaperless wall. But Woody charmed us from the grave, and for me, it felt like home—or at least, my grandpa's home.

My grandpa's house, the house my mom grew up in on the northwest side of Grand Rapids, Michigan, was nothing like our house in Indianapolis. It was small, a little salt box house built in the 1940's, and Woody's house was unexpectedly large—bigger than it looks on the outside—and built in 1915. Grandpa's house stood at the top of a towering hill, Woody's on a flat, straight Indianapolis street. Woody and my grandpa, of course, never met, but they're something of kindred spirits.

I didn't think about my grandpa often before we bought Woody's house—when he passed away I had already lived hundreds of miles away for several years—but that changed when we moved in. Woody reminds me of him, plain and simple. The metal screen door grates announcing the initial "V" were my first inkling of it. V for Vandivier at Woody's house, and V for Veenstra at my grandpa's house.

Soon we would tear up the carpet and find that Woody had signed the plywood protecting the hardwoods hidden beneath—something grandpa would have done, proud of his work. He did the same in other places, sometimes inscribing a year, too. Woody's pre-internet DIY projects were sometimes genius, sometimes bizarre, but always make me think how my grandpa would have wished he'd thought of it first. A work-around, a creative way to upcycle building materials—Wood and grandpa didn't like things to go to waste.

Sometimes we curse his decision to lay fake-wood vinyl tile, install corrugated green fiberglass panels on the covered outdoor walkway, or hang plywood from the ceiling before covering it with foam tiles. Other times, he's left us with a house that functions just how you want it to, that lets you get things done and enjoy life.

Take the garage.

The garage was Woody's palace. His workbench, crafted from old bowling lanes, was what sold my husband on the house. Built-in vises, cabinets with just right cutouts for the broad and powerful footprint of a band saw. Grandpa would be impressed—his garage was his palace, too. One day as we toiled around in the garage, our neighbor Junebug came to chat. He'd grown up living across the alley from Woody, known him his entire life.

"Wanna see a picture of Woody?" he asked. "I look at him every day, on my refrigerator."

When he came back with the photo and handed it to us, my breath momentarily escaped me—I knew then why Woody's house felt like home. He stood in that very garage, next to his pick-up truck, beaming, and he was a spitting image of my grandpa. Dutch men come in two sizes: very tall and very very tall. He towered in the garage, wearing a cap I swear I'd seen my grandpa wear, maybe in a picture of he and my grandma with my sister as a baby or next to his fishing boat with the day's catch.

In Junebug's photo, Woody looked off-camera, smiling at someone he loved or something that made him happy or proud. His wife, his children, maybe the family dog, maybe just a project he'd recently wrapped up—the brick fence, the wishing well grill, or perhaps the little Indiana cutouts he'd hung around the garage. Whatever it was, I'd seen that look before, on my grandpa's face, recounting that big fish he caught, playing with his grandchildren, pruning his prized lawn.

Woody's house is transforming, slowly, as we gut out rooms, replace light fixtures, and apply a newer, more modern aesthetic to the home he bought in 1959. I suspect we'll find relics of his well-lived life for years to come, perhaps behind a wall, underneath a floorboard, or in the back of a cabinet. Grandpa will be there too, tinkering in the garage, tending to his garden, or hauling his strong Dutch frame up the stairs to the attic, where the Christmas decorations are stored.

This home is our home now.

Ascending the staircase to the finished attic, now occupied by a mass of our belongings that don't have another place in the house, I breathe deeply and am ushered back to my grandpa's attic. The familiar smell of decades-old wood weathered by blistering heat and brutal Midwest winters has me climbing his creaky stairs, hoping to rediscover what I already know is there. Grandma's Lane cedar chest, packed with treasures. A Lite Brite. My uncles' old GI Joes.

By the time we saw it, Woody's attic was mostly empty, just a few window air conditioners left behind for the next owner. In the succeeding months, however, we would learn that the attic was once not unlike my grandpa's, housing three children, absorbing bits of their childhood into its floorboards—bouncy balls, toy cars, hair pins. We've kept these pint-sized playthings, hoping they'll bring us the same kind of life we imagine Woody lived.

It's the kind of life I know my grandpa lived and the only one we need—one full of incorrigible laughter, loved ones, and a home that we're making our own.