

# The Secret Heart: A Memoir of My Grandfather Thurman Cooper's Life

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*Thurman Cooper photographed in 1943 (source unknown)  
know.*

*“Across the years he could recall  
His father one way best of all.  
In the stillest hour of night  
The boy awakened to a light.  
Half in dreams, he saw his sire  
With his great hands full of fire.*

*The man had struck a match to see  
If his son slept peacefully.  
He held his palms each side the spark  
His love had kindled in the dark.  
His two hands carved apart  
In the semblance of a heart.  
He wore, it seemed to his small son,  
A bare heart on his hidden one.  
A heart that gave out such a glow*

*No son awake could bear to*

*It showered a look upon a face  
Too tender for the day to trace.  
One instant, it lit all about,  
And then **the secret heart** went out.  
But it shone long enough for one  
To know that hands held up the sun.”*

*- Robert Coffin*

*Q*uiet, reserved, and detached. That is how I could recall my grandfather as a child.

There are moments of him that stand out, that I can clearly picture now eleven years later. Brief echoes of visiting the house my mother grew up in, walking in the heat of day through the small garden surrounded by tall, unkempt grass. A recollection of times we had visited him in the nursing home, in a weaker and more fragile state. And the cold, firm marble of the mausoleum on the day of his funeral.

My grandfather, Thurman Cooper, passed away when I was only eight years old. I knew little of who he was other than that he was my own mother's father. In conversation he would sit quietly and I never knew quite what to ask him. My mother would talk about the weather and take turns praising my sister and me about our school grades and other achievements, while he would sit and offer little more than a nod or a mumbling of something I could never make out.

In early years when we would visit him at his house, I can remember him eating the same meal everyday. A banana, chopped ham, and saltine crackers. As a child, I couldn't help the scrunching of my nose at the smell of the overly processed meat and the sight of the fruit's peel, a darkened brown with specks of yellow littered throughout. I remember sitting on the floor on my mother's childhood mattress, surveying the dimly lit room whilst running my hand along the carpeted floors and listening to the soft buzz of the television as my grandfather watched the news. And I can remember leaving, slowly backing down the steep gravel driveway and watching my grandfather's face fading from view as he watched behind the screen door.

Now, fourteen years later, I can still remember those memories but I have since learned that my grandfather's life held the story of a man much more tragic and heroic than I ever knew him to be. On occasion, my mother and aunt would offer memories of his life, moments that, for me, would come to define him. I would search through boxes in my mother's closet to find

pictures, papers, and poems — anything I could find to keep his story alive, I held onto. Tales passed down by relatives and my late aunt's writings of his *secret heart* and what was buried inside it are the moments that make up the life of Thurman Cooper as I have come to know him.

*Y*outhful, diligent, and obedient. Born on September 16, 1925 in Jolo, West Virginia, Thurman grew up on a farm. My mother described to me the dark beginnings of my grandfather's childhood through the memories that he revealed to her throughout his lifetime. Beginning at the age of four years old, each morning his father would call him out of bed before dawn. In the sheer darkness and quiet of the early morning, Thurman would stoke the fire and milk the cow before sunrise. My mother asked him once if he was ever scared as a young child, traversing through the woods and fields without any light and no hand to hold. He answered that, no, it never scared him because he found the quiet and stillness of the early morning to be the most peaceful time he had known.

Thurman's childhood was bleak. His own father had a chilling temper and once when he was twelve his father had backhanded him so forcefully that he went through a glass window in their home and landed on the ground outside. It was something he carried throughout his life, his father's abuse, and for that reason he vowed to never physically reprimand his own children. His mother, although not abusive, was not overly caring for her nine children as growing up in the Great Depression left little room for nurture and more dependence on survival.

My grandfather went to school until the seventh grade. In West Virginia at the time, schooling ended at the eight grade, but Thurman's father removed him from classes a year early in order to gain more help on their farm. My mother would tell me that a lack of education haunted my grandfather for his entire life as he valued an education as the most important thing

one could obtain. He would always be strict with my mother and her two sisters, pushing them to advance in school and refusing to allow them to date until they had graduated high school as he saw boys only as a nuance and a distraction from the success his daughters deserved.

He grew up with eight siblings, some of whom he was closer to than others, and spent the rest of his teenage years working on their farm. Until the age of eighteen when he was violently plunged into seeing the true horrors and carnage that mankind was capable of, horrors that forever altered his life.

*B*rave, selfless, and honourable. My grandfather sacrificed himself to serve in the U.S. Army during World War II at the age of eighteen. One of his brothers, Gus Cooper, was drafted to serve in the U.S. army in 1943. Gus was Thurman's older brother, but he was treated as the "runt" of the family and so my grandfather had always looked after him. Gus had recently gotten married, and so to spare him from leaving his budding life and new family, Thurman volunteered to join the army in his place.

My mother recounted to me what little my grandfather would speak of about the war. He told her of his training, a brutal awakening and foreshadowing of the years that would lie ahead of him. A moment he remembered vividly is when he had been taken out into the deep ocean in training for all of the soldiers to learn to swim through deep waters without drowning. Miles out from shore, their goal was to make it back to land. But, my grandfather had never learned to swim. He had never been close to a large body of water in his life, and neither had many men on the ship. They were left with two choices: to jump into the depths below or to be pushed in by their officers. Thurman told my mother he believed he could swim, so he plunged in.

Once in the water, he realized he was drowning. But by natural instinct he quickly figured out how to float and began to tread water towards the shoreline. A man who had jumped in next to him, however, was not as lucky and Thurman could see him beginning to lose his struggle in the water. My grandfather approached the man, determined not to see him die, and had to knock him unconscious in order to prevent him from causing them both to drown in the man's frightened and bewildered state. Thurman swam with the man's body all the way back to shore, dragging him until they both reached land and lived.

Years later, he was fighting alongside his platoon in France against the Germans. During the battle, an explosion knocked him completely unconscious and he did not wake up for several days. To his horror, he awakened in a hospital bed in France where he would learn his entire unit had been killed leaving him the sole survivor. The army would send word to his family that he was killed in the line of fire and for 6 months he was presumed to be dead.

But, true to his nature, he had survived. He spent several months in a makeshift hospital inside of a home in France being nursed back to health by a French woman named Margaret. He fell in love with her and made plans to marry her after the war ended. He also sent letters to his family during these months, telling them he was alive and well. The only response he received from his mother and father was their anger at being denied his checks for months because he was presumed to be dead. They told him that if he lived through the war, he was never to return to their home as they valued the money he had sent to them more than their own son's life.

My grandfather returned to battle after his wounds healed and fought in the remainder of the war until the Germans surrendered. Relieved, he made his way back to France eager to find Margaret. All that he found where her home once stood was rubble, as it had been demolished by

a bombing in the city. Margaret was dead. Heartbroken and with only the memories of war and death, he returned home.

*B*roken, traumatized, and forever-changed. After returning from the war, Thurman turned to alcohol in order to cope with his post traumatic stress disorder. Mental health at the time was very stigmatized and as a result many of the soldiers returning from World War II were left with an illness they didn't know how to treat. So my grandfather would self-medicate, looking to cope in any way that he could. Family members told my mother and aunts he changed after coming home from the war. In his sleep, he would have nightmares and would wake in his room screaming in terror. His brothers would have to strap him down while he slept, as he would attempt to fight them when his nightmares would occur.

For the rest of his life he lived in an emotionless state, unrecognizable to those who knew him most. He went on to work any job he could to support his family, working in factories and coal mines until his retirement. He lived a simple and quiet life until his death at the age of 85.

*A* man I am proud of. That's how I recall my grandfather now. I know of his life story and the brave man he was. My grandfather was a hard worker, he was someone who was beyond honourable and selfless, and he was someone who had to suffer the consequences of the sacrifices he made for others. Exactly a year ago, I found a poem written down by my late aunt titled, "The Secret Heart" by Robert Coffin. When I read it, I like to think she was writing it down to give to my grandfather, telling him of the heart and courage he possessed but kept hidden. The more I learned about his life, the more I came to know his heart. To me, he is no

longer a quiet man I barely knew and only remembered in fleeting memories. He is my hero and his story and legacy is a secret that I can no longer keep.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Samantha Matney grew up in Southwest Virginia and is currently studying English as an undergraduate student at East Tennessee State University. Samantha has always been passionate in her pursuit of writing and has experience writing both fiction and nonfiction works for various literary mediums. Having spent her entire life in Appalachia, producing literature that captures and honours the experiences and narratives of the lives with stories untold is a legacy she hopes to leave behind as a writer.

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