

Ten Minutes Too Late

I saw my first dead body when I was nine-years-old. The hospital room was sterile; bleach and ammonia clung to the walls, cloaking its visitors in death. A dull, LED light glinted over his body like a breath passing through his lungs. Each flicker highlighted an arm or shoulder and gave the illusion of life. The green hospital gown contrasted severely with the yellow pallor of his skin. His eyes crinkled at the corners, as if he had not found peace in his final resting place. My father's brothers stood around grandpa, my PawPaw, in a half circle. Most had tears in their eyes, droplets rolling down their faces and onto the linens. The room was thick with silence and one could almost match the pitter-patter of the rain to the tears. My aunts sat in plastic chairs or by my uncles, comforting with their silence. When my parents and I walked into this vacuum of life, I was burdened with a heavy sadness. I didn't see PawPaw's body until I pushed between my parent's legs and stood in front of them. My hands clawed at their thighs desperate to see what was happening. When I broke through their wall, I halted and swayed from sudden shock. His lifeless body lay before me. The tension permeated the air and found me like thick campfire smoke. Its smoking hand reaching out and choking me. Like the calm before the storm, I didn't say a word. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The only sound came from the flickering light above PawPaw's bed. Its faint crackle matched the breaking of my heart.

A day prior, Mom had received a phone call from Dad's family in Pensacola, Florida. I could not understand what was being said, but Uncle Richard's voice was shaky on the phone. My mother ushered my father into their bedroom; dread was painted across her forehead. Her eyes were swollen red. I was sent to bed with no explanations and a hundred questions rattling around in my head. Morning came with staggering steps, my bags were packed, and we were on the first plane to our old, familiar home. We left early, before the moon had taken its final bow. The trip from the hot deserts of Arizona to the humid beaches of Florida was a bumpy one- an omen to my unanswered questions.

As I watched a movie on my laptop and Dad slept next to Mom, my small voice stuttered out questions.

"Why are we going back to Florida? Is something wrong?"

"Remember how PawPaw is sick, Sweetbird? Well, he is in the hospital and the doctors are concerned," My mother's voice strained.

"Is he going to die?" I whimpered, barely controlling the tears stinging at my eyes.

"I'm going to tell the truth honey. He doesn't have much time before he goes up to heaven. Everything will be okay, I promise. This isn't as scary as it sounds. If he does go, it will be peaceful. Jesus will help him."

Her words came out carefully, cautiously. I shrank back from her comfort, afraid to cry. I only wanted to be with PawPaw. To hold his hand again. To eat Vienna sausages with him

again.

“Hungry?” is the only question I can remember PawPaw asking. He would disappear into the kitchen of his tiny apartment and appear with Vienna sausages- a canned delicacy. We ate together on the couch in the living room and it felt like home. I can smell the old newspaper and tobacco in his house, see Bibles resting on the armrests, and a worn chair in the corner, held together by the blanket draped across its front. PawPaw held my hands between his; his skin felt rough from the years of fixing cars. He could fix anything.

For a moment, I was not on the plane, I was in front of the dinosaur of a T.V. with PawPaw, watching Florida State defeat their opponents and screaming, “GO NOLES!” at the screen. Dad sat in the room with us, but I never heard anything more than a greeting pass between him and PawPaw. I could see they loved each other even when they were both too stubborn to show it.

Dad and PawPaw rarely spoke to each other; they didn’t need to. Dad learned his mechanic skills from PawPaw. When they were working on a car, they moved in sync, like two surgeons performing an intricate procedure. They were one and the same person- quiet and stoic men. Working on cars was the only skill PawPaw had to offer this world. He could not afford a nice house or a nice car as cruel fate would have it. Dad and his three brothers grew up in a small home before having to move to “the house in the dump”; my dad was the second eldest of the four. At an early age, my dad began working any job he could to provide for his family, just like PawPaw. Perhaps the only thing my dad had as a reprieve was baseball. My dad was an excellent baseball player and could have gone professional had he not been severely injured during a game. It rendered his arm “useless”. The weight of his family’s financial future had rested on his baseball career. Losing that chance was a failure in my father’s mind. He had failed his family. He had failed his father. I think part of my dad always felt useless for not living up to the expectations his father had of him.

Jolting as reality, the daydreams were abruptly awakened with bustling arms and feet as we rushed to pick up a rental car to drive from Alabama to Florida. I learned the answers to my monster fears as we were headed to the hospital. The rental car was alien-like and foreign to me, or maybe my imagination had gone into a tailspin trying to process what was happening to my family.

“Why hasn’t anyone called us to let us know what is going on?” I asked.

Dad’s lips drew tight and his eyes shut, and from my seat in the back, I could see his self-control was losing the battle. He turned his head around, attempting to answer me, but he just stared at me instead. His expression masked the pain in his eyes, but he couldn’t hide it from me. He had no words.

“I’m sure everything is okay, honey,” Mom said as she tried comforting me. Her hand was resting on Dad’s shoulder as she drove and she glanced at me through the rearview mirror. Even at nine-years-old, I heard the lie-the catch in her voice when she said “everything”. My

eyes saw the truth, and everything meant nothing.

Our long, winding journey into Pensacola was excruciating, but waiting for Aunt Carrie to lead me to the room where I would see PawPaw was worse. The walk so painful my legs became as lead and my head hammered with endless questions. As my aunt walked down the hallway toward us, she tried hiding her tear-stripped face and slumped shoulders, but she broke down like a car on the side of the road.

I found my dad's arm in the chaos of the hospital and clung to his warm side like a spider monkey. Burrowing myself into his leg, I cringed as Aunt Carrie tried to choose her words. We all knew what she was about to say, but we were too afraid to think it. Aunt Carrie approached my father and gently placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Bubba, I am so sorry. Your Dad, he didn't make it. He's gone. He died ten minutes ago," she said.

My father's body went rigid and I saw him for the first time. I saw his anger, his defeat, his sadness; I saw the emotions he had repressed for years. His mask was broken and I saw a piece of him that I think even he had forgotten about. I saw a son lose his father. For a moment, he was not my dad. He was that nineteen-year-old boy trying to provide for his family. His face no sooner matched my aunt's, my mom's, and my own-swollen, red, and wet. His hand grasped my shoulder and I could feel his collapsing weight in the purgatory of the hospital lobby. He made no sound as he wept. His shoulders shook and he shielded his face with the brim of his baseball cap. He struggled to keep his composure as we walked down the long hall, each step closer to a loved one we couldn't say goodbye to or share Vienna sausages with by the T.V. I wanted to take his body out of this place of death. The white walls held the lost lives as prisoners. Posters gave false hope of healing. My reflection in the hospital window was a corpse. I felt trapped, ready to be free of this monster that had killed and would kill again.

The room was cold. Quiet eerily clung to the air; his life was silenced. All that was between PawPaw and I was a steel tray. The room went blurry. I couldn't breathe. My cheeks were wet. Aunt Carrie wrapped me in her arms, picked me up off the floor, and rocked me as I gasped for air between sobs. I held my chest, desperate to keep my heart from falling out. I broke out of her embrace and stood at the edge of the bed. I tugged at the sheets by PawPaw's feet as if he could wake. Hair clung to my face, and I tried hiding behind it from the horrible scene in front of me. I looked to someone for help, but no one would meet my gaze. Everyone was frozen.

My father backed into the far, right corner of the room, hidden by the shadows of the curtains. I heard the rough sobs that came from his direction. Mom, a beacon of grace, blocked the family from my dad's grief by standing in front of him. Dad was never one to show emotion; he saw it as a weakness. Mom guarded him from the family so he didn't have to worry about his dignity being lost. He wanted to be strong. He needed the family to believe he was strong, the "Oak", even in the face of death. He needed us to believe that about him more than we needed to. His hurt grew fainter and a pale, red face emerged from the shadows. My father's

face was pure confusion and anger. He couldn't avert his eyes quickly enough and I saw the turmoil inside, tearing him apart. He had been away from his father for two years since we had left Florida. Seeing his father lay in a hospital bed, weak and wasted away, was too much of a shock. PawPaw's skin was sunken and yellow from the cancer that had ravaged his liver. He had lost a significant amount of weight, and didn't look like the man my dad once knew. Dad stood there, his face twisted with the pent up anguish, staring at the yellow, skinny body that once held his father. He said and did nothing.

"I guess I will take care of the funeral information. Dad talked to me last about what he wanted," Uncle Keith broke the silence.

Everyone looked at PawPaw; his face was not his own. Etched across his face was the pain he had felt moments before his death, worry lines still painted on his forehead. We didn't want to remember him yellow and lifeless. He deserved more.

We stayed there for a few more hours, long after the body had been taken away. I don't know why we stayed. Perhaps we were trying to cling onto the last place PawPaw had been alive. Maybe we didn't want to leave and let that room become just a room. We let our imaginations run wild and believed that his spirit was still with us. Once all the medical affairs and legalities had been taken care of, we had no reason to stay, but walking seemed too much of a burden. Nothing could fill the void in the room or in our hearts. Dad stood silent in the room, hidden in the shadows once again. He still had not said a word.

The next few days spun past me with almost no recollection. We stayed with Aunt Carrie, Uncle Richard, and my cousins. I heard planning for the funeral, but was taken away from the room before I heard important details. Everyone tried to shield me from death as if I had not been in the room where he lay dead. As if I had never seen his dead body. Mom bought me a black dress and shoes, did my hair up in a bun, and silently put me in the car. I played with the black velvet of my knee-length dress in between my fingers, welcoming any distractions. Dad still had not spoken.

The casket was sky blue, with dark blue decals. The hole in the ground was less ceremonial than I had expected. The funeral workers lowered his body down into the ground with a metal contraption that made the ceremony seem mechanic and cold. This man, who had been part of our family for close to sixty years, was being shoved into the ground, never to be seen again. The only legacy he left was in the lives of his sons.

My father still had not spoken since the night of PawPaw's death. We approached the casket to say our final goodbyes, holding hands, when his knees collapsed. Sobs wracked through his body and my dad fell to his knees, bowing under the weight of his father's death. His hands gripped the side of the casket. He softly pounded on the casket with his fists, as if PawPaw would answer. He clamored for air as the sobs took his breath away. His face contorted and spit fell from his mouth in long strings as he lost control of himself. Dad was finally grasping the reality that he would never be able to tell his father goodbye. He kneeled by the casket until he had the strength to face the family. When he finally rose from the ground,

his mask of composure was back.

My father and I never spoke of what happened the day PawPaw was buried. I saw a part of my father that he had guarded from my mom and I. He lost the only man he had ever looked to for approval. PawPaw and dad did not speak much, but they always had a silent understanding of one another. He carried the weight of guilt and resentment for not being able to bring his family out of poverty and his last chance to make that wrong right was robbed from him. Part of my father broke that day. He could not accept the failure. He could not accept that he didn't get to say goodbye. To my dad, not being there for his father in his last moments was another way he had failed as a son. No matter how hard my father worked, he was never able to shake his guilt. Sometimes dreams are shattered, promises are broken, and the plane arrives ten minutes too late to say goodbye.