

Crispix and Glasses

“So, where would you like to go for lunch afterward?” asked my grandfather from the front passenger seat of my sister’s car.

“I don’t know, Grandpa,” said Lauren loudly. “What do you have here in town? Anything good?”

“There was that small diner on Watson Avenue that you liked when you were younger,” replied Grandpa, slowly.

“Or, there was that gift card you got from the church for Cracker Barrel,” my sister suggested. “We could use that. Do you like their food, Grandpa?”

Sitting in the backseat, I began to take in my surroundings. Anything to avoid the awkward small talk of my sister and Grandpa. At my feet laid half a dozen empty cans of Amp energy drink, with just as many crumpled boxes of Marlboro 100’s on the seat beside me. The ’96 Caprice held onto the pungent odor of cigarette smoke. The powerful stench attacked my nostrils with every breath. Years’ worth of ash and vapors had slowly embedded themselves into the charcoal colored upholstery.

Outside, the beautiful scenery of southern Michigan unfolded. It had been ten years since I had seen St. Joseph. Driving through the town flooded my mind with memories. Everything I saw took me back to those days. The unusually beautiful hospital with large, stained glass windows. A street sign which read “Elmo Blvd.” that always made me laugh for some unknown reason. A snow laden park, I hadn’t seen in years. I think *he* had taken me there to play catch once....

Without warning, I felt a hot feeling in my face. I couldn't hear anything. My world began to spin as the torrent of emotion I had been avoiding for three days began to rush at me like a battering ram, beating into me until I exploded... *NO!*, I thought. I couldn't allow myself to be overcome. Not there, not then. It was still too much for me to face.

Lauren brought the car to an abrupt halt. I glanced out the window to see that we had arrived at our destination. I quickly unbuckled my seatbelt and retreated from the malodorous vehicle. My lungs objected to the icy January air, but my mind found it soothing. The large, sand-tinted, brick building stood before me, the snow neatly plowed from the doorstep.

"Are you ready for this, Alex?" Lauren asked me as she rose from the car.

"I think so," I lied. "You?"

"I'll be alright. Let's just get through this and be done with it." Lauren's animosity reared its ugly head. I didn't blame her at all for her anger. "Are you ready, Grandpa?" she asked, almost at a shout to compensate for his failing sense of hearing.

My grandfather stood from his seat and spoke slowly. "Oh, yes. We're a little early, but it shouldn't be an issue."

I turned toward the building and felt that familiar tension in my chest. The knot pulled tighter with each step I took. The automatic doors slid open soundlessly to allow us entry. The interior wasn't unlike a small ski lounge. The faux brick construction meshed well with the roaring stone fireplace which had been surrounded by an overstuffed brown, leather seating set. Off to the left was a small office which had a stunning grandfather clock standing guard at the door. The timepiece echoed loudly throughout the foyer. From the office came a portly man who wore a mustache and a plain black, satin suit.

He reached his hand out toward my grandfather, who shook it briefly. “Hello, Mr. Martin. It’s good to meet you again,” the man said. “I’m sorry it had to be under such ill circumstances. You have my condolences.”

The funeral director then turned to my sister and me. “And you must be Lauren and Alex, Jr. You have my sympathies. I am very sorry for the loss of your father.”

“Thank you,” Lauren responded politely.

“Well,” the man began, “we still have some time before the service begins. You are free to relax here in the lounge while preparations are made. Also, we must ask that someone please make an identification before the cremation process can begin.”

The director gave a practiced, yet respectful smile and walked back into his workplace while the three of us made our way to the sofas. I settled to the left of the fire. The seat was plush and very comfortable. It gave me the feeling that funeral homes were specifically designed to distract, as if to say that a nice sofa and tall grandfather clock would help one forget their pain. *A peaceful little lie*, I thought.

As Lauren and Grandpa committed themselves to more small talk, I retreated into my memories. I had found out on Sunday, just three days earlier. I was in the process of getting ready for work when I heard the phone ring. Upstairs, I heard my mother rush to answer so I continued dressing. As I made my way out the door, she stopped me.

“Alex, that was your sister Lauren on the phone,” she paused, as if unsure of what to say. “Dad died last night. I’m so sorry Alex.” She looked genuinely sad, even though they had been divorced for most of my twenty-two years. They had separated when I was only six.

I stood there, shocked. Struck with so much at once that I couldn’t focus. I quickly told her that I had to go to work and rushed out the door. I got into my car and drove. I didn’t go to

work. Later on, I would tell my boss that my car had broken down and that I couldn't be in that day. I couldn't form the words to tell him the real reason. I don't specifically recall going anywhere of importance as I drove; I just knew that when I arrived back home, the gas tank was nearly empty and my knuckles were raw from beating on my steering wheel.

Four years had passed since I had spoken with him. When I graduated from high school, my father called me, like he did with ever decreasing frequency in those days. He had asked me how school had been and if I was excited to graduate. I told him I was and asked if he wanted to come to my graduation ceremony.

“Of course, Alex,” he had said. “I'll be there. I promise.”

He never came.

I never spoke to him again, yet I was the last person to see him for who he really was. For years, I had heard the stories from family and friends alike, but I neglected to listen. Three angry children and a string of ex-wives wasn't enough evidence for me. Even Grandpa, his own father, wanted nothing to do with him. I refused to see the truth. My father was a cheat, a liar, and an all around appalling man.

And yet, I could not hate him. From time-to-time, I would wonder how he was doing or even contemplate contacting him. I would even feel guilt after deciding not to call. After all, he was still my father.

I would eventually be told that in the years leading to his death, he began to drink heavily. This led to severe cirrhosis of the liver, which left him hospitalized. After some major complications stemming from the liver damage, he suffered the heart attack that killed him.

And so, sitting there in that overstuffed chair in the highly decorated funeral parlor, I found myself filled with conflict. Love and hate. Sadness and apathy. And fear. Fear was the worst of it all. I nearly cried, I was so afraid. And yet, there I sat, stoic and calm.

It wasn't too long before the funeral director came back over and led us to a large oak door within the same hall as the lounge. "Now we have placed his body in the next room," the director informed us. "He has already been uncovered. You are free to have as much time as you would like."

When I had initially spoken to Lauren about the service, I had little desire to attend. Even at that moment, I cared very little about the memorial. I had come for this moment.

Most of my family had at least some negative feelings toward my father; however, not one of them felt anything close to what I did. Since the last time I had spoken with him, I turned away from him in contact, but not in mind. For those past four years, I had begun to see little similarities between him and me. Like him, I had always been a gifted liar and a smooth talker. I had always been able to steer events into favorable outcomes through my words. More recently, I even found myself steering toward his preferred profession, both in my job and in my college education. The worst came when an angry ex-girlfriend told me I was just like my father, after a nasty fight. Over time, I grew to fear the possibility that I would someday become everything I hated in my father. This was a concept more terrifying than any other. Every time I saw the similarities persist, I would shudder in horror.

As the hefty director opened the door, I felt the cool breeze tickle my neck as I walked through the door. There had been no discussion, but all three of us walked in together. The funeral director closed the door gently behind us.

I couldn't tell how much time passed. There was no clock in the room. The floor was lined with soft, off-white linoleum, and the walls had been painted with a pea green hue. In the center of the room was a long, stainless steel table, upon which laid my father.

From the shoulders down, he had been covered with a sky blue sheet. His black hair had begun to grey at the side burns since I had seen him last. His mustache had also been tinted with an ashy color. His face was sunken and dark, like he had been in water for too long. The back of his head, around his ears, was blue from the collected blood. His glasses rested on the bridge of his nose.

At some point, I heard Lauren say that she had to get out of there. Then it was just Grandpa and me. Eventually, I got past the shock of seeing him and let my emotions run free. I stared down at my father and tried to get mad at him. It was fury unlike any I had ever experienced. The years of neglect and hurt feelings built in layers until it nearly overflowed. Standing there, I got so mad I nearly punched him. But, before my anger got took hold of me like a leaf caught in the wind, I became aware of a seemingly random memory.

I couldn't have been older than five- or six-years old. It was a summer Saturday morning before my parent's divorce. The day was warm and a baseball game was on the TV. Beside me, my father ate a bowl of his favorite cereal, Crispix. We weren't doing anything special. It wasn't a particularly memorable event. However, I felt safe. As father and son, we were whole and together. We were happy. And in that moment, with him beside me with his simple pleasure, a favorite cereal, something I had no reason at all to remember, all was right in the world.

Suddenly, looking down at my father, I couldn't help but smile. It was suddenly clear to me. I saw my father for what he had become. He had pushed everyone he ever cared about away

from himself. He died a solitary death. Seeing him as he was, I knew that I wouldn't follow his path because, in that moment, I saw where it ended. Cold and alone.

I then became aware that my grandfather's hand rested on my shoulder. I faced him to see that he too was smiling. It wasn't a malicious happiness we shared; rather, it was a sign of love, to be genuinely happy to see him one last time. With that, we departed from the small room together.

Shortly thereafter, a priest arrived and held a short service. Fewer than twenty people attended. Dad was not present. It was a typical service in which the priest discussed the quality of the man being laid to rest. Most of the congregation was pleased. Grandpa, Lauren, and I just looked down at the ground and allowed everyone else to accept the fallacy.

After the memorial, I waited around outside the hall as well-wishers offered their condolences. Most were sincere and pleasant. Among the last was the heavysset funeral director. He approached me with a small, black case in his left hand.

"Son, I have here your father's glasses. I was wondering if you would like to keep them as a memento," he said softly as he held out the container.

I felt the words catch in my throat and eventually I forced out a quiet "Thank you." We shook hands and he went on to speak with my sister.

I took the case in both hands, pinched the top between my thumb and forefinger, and pulled. The lid gently slid open, and inside were his glasses. The only thing I had left of my father, my enemy, my missing wonder, and my greatest fear. But, once again, all I could do was smile. I closed the case and slid it into my breast pocket.

As the day came to a close, it came time to leave. As Lauren helped Grandpa out to her car to go out for lunch, I stayed back for a moment to say my last goodbyes. However, as I found

myself gravitating toward the exit, I felt drawn, as if I wasn't done yet. I turned away from the exit door and peered into the empty lounge area. I thought about my fears again as I considered what had come to me. I realized that I would never be able to move on until I told him how I felt. I was still fearful of my potential fate, but I finally felt able to take the first step away from it. *I forgive you, Dad, I thought. Now please, stay dead.*

As I made my way back to Lauren's Caprice, I thought back to that room again. I realized that there was no longer any point to hating him, and that it was alright to love him. It was okay to mourn. It was okay to forget the bad and focus on the good. Even if the bad was an unending list of hurt, and the good was something as small as Crispix and glasses, I chose to hold onto that. It was time to let go. I smiled one more time as I ducked into the backseat of my sister's car.