

An Instant for a Lifetime

It was early in the evening, and the sun was fading into the night. Yellow, orange, and brown leaves blanketed the crowded parking lot. I opened my door gently, trying not to scratch the colossal SUVs that surrounded me, and gingerly slipped out of my car. The streetlights overhead began to flicker as an army of miniature zombies, princesses, pirates, and ballerinas—all holding plastic pumpkins, flooded past me, and into the adjacent building. A woman with a vaguely familiar face was waiting for me near the entrance. Faded black lines striped her cheeks, and her eyes were red and swollen; it was my stepmother. She asked me if I was ready to go in, and I nodded back in agreement. As automatic doors opened, I paused to look back to her, and she said, “Remember, no tears.”

The room was cold, and the air had a stale taste. Up in one of the corners, hanging from the ceiling, was a TV airing some sort of golf tournament. Next to where I sat, there was a dinner tray with a Dixie cup filled with warm milk and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich that was mostly intact, minus a tiny bite taken out of one of the corners. In the center of the room was a bed with wheels, railings, and a full panel of buttons. Lying in the bed was the withered image of a man who I once knew to be larger than life. My mouth became dry, and I struggled to swallow the lump in the back of my throat. “No tears,” I reminded myself. I knew in that moment; I would never be the same after leaving that room.

Nerves and an awkwardness enveloped my body. What does one say in this situation? Other than the brief smiles when I entered the room, we exchanged no pleasantries. Instead, we both just stared at the television. Before long, my vision became skewed, and the golf game turned into oblivion. Everything felt far away, as if I was looking through the wrong end of a telescope, and the peanut butter and jelly sandwich seemed miles away from me. The muffled

sound of people talking in the next room became as clear as the voices coming from the TV, and in the distance, echoing of tiny footsteps chirping up and down a hallway. A voice startled me, which brought me back to attention, “Strange place for trick or treaters.” It must have been some sort of nurse who came in and left before I could get my bearing. Before long, I was again gazing off into space, and there I could finally see clearly.

On my first day of junior high, I got into a dustup with a ninth grader. It did not feel like a big deal to me; however, the p promptly handed down a punishment and sent me home for the week. When I stepped into the house, my father was waiting for me in the living room. He asked what happened at school that day, and I arrogantly responded, “He started it. I finished it.” My voice was unapologetic—he was not quite as impressed. His eyes glared towards me, and an eternity passed before he broke the silence. He leaned back, and in a calm voice, he said, “You know, being a man isn’t about how much ass you can whip, how much liquor you can drink, or how much tail you can chase. It is about how you handle yourself in a crisis.” My father always had unique ways to humble me a bit.

Earlier that summer, I was doing what most 13-year-olds did, spending as much time as possible hanging out with friends and as little time as possible at home. When I *was* home and not sitting at the dinner table, I was usually in my room with my headphones on or jabbering away on the phone, until one evening when I came in late, tossed a handful of wet and sandy towels into the laundry room, and proceeded towards my bedroom door, or shall I say where my bedroom door once was. Confused, I asked what happened, and a strong voice coming from the garage said, “When you decide to spend a little more time with your family, you can have it back.” I sat in the living room the next few nights dejected after all of my protests about needing my privacy had fallen on deaf ears. We watched a lot of baseball. He would sit in his armchair,

with his book and occasionally give me a lesson on how baseball used to be, while I pretended not to be interested.

“You two behaving?” my stepmother asked. I do not remember what I said in response—I probably just nodded and gestured towards the golf tournament. She was great in these moments; she always kept it together, at least in front of him. “Will you eat some of your sandwich?” He did not seem to hear her, but she persisted. “I don’t want anything,” he finally gasped. The weakened and labored voice was unfamiliar to me. It did not sound like the voice that commanded the attention of everyone in the room, the voice that I knew my entire life.

Unlike myself, my father was an extroverted person. When I was young, people would refer to him as the life of the party. He had an infectious laugh that you could hear from across the street, and everyone gravitated towards him. He always had a great story to tell, and his delivery was on point. When he spoke, people listened. There was not a thing he could not do, somewhat of a jack-of-all-trades. He could change the pistons in a rusty old truck and make new kitchen cabinets out of reclaimed wood. Give him a hammer with a box of nails, and he could build you a house—while editing your dissertation. He always had a book going, and I will always envy his ability to write and articulate his thoughts.

The hallways had quieted down. It seemed as though the little candy-seeking hooligans had finally called it a night. The golf tournament turned into some flick with Denzel Washington seeking revenge on a group of kidnapers. I could hear a low murmur, and I noticed my father had fallen asleep. That was the first time I had really looked at him. I had always heard the expression “Shell of himself,” which I never understood until then. His hands were long and frail, his chest caved inward, and his skin had become translucent. How could this be the same

man from my memories? What happened to that authoritative father who always knew how to handle that arrogant teenager? The sight was too much for me to bear any longer.

Once again, my stepmother came in. I noticed the swelling and redness of her eyes had faded, but the months of stress and sleepless nights had not. During the commotion of me telling her goodnight, he woke back up. This was what I had been dreading all night, the moment nobody wants to experience—it was time to say good-bye. I wanted to hug him but my body would not let me, and my throat was too swollen to get out the words I wanted to say. I took in a slow breath to collect myself, and I finally reached down to grasp his hand; his grip was still strong. I looked at him straight in the eyes, and finally said—goodbye.

I think this is part where I am supposed to say that through this experience I have learned to cherish the time I still have with the people I love. While this is true, I cannot tell you whether this incident is responsible or if that is just a product of age. In truth, I left that bleak room on a cold October night a little more cynical and less spiritual. However, it did teach me how to deal with some of the harder issues in life, and I grew up faster because of it. I have discovered that even years after that night, he is still teaching me lessons, and I am still learning. However, sometimes I think about what he told me when I was a teenager, “It is how you handle yourself in a crisis,” and I reflect on that moment when I could not muster up the strength to give my father a hug and tell him that I loved him, instead of that stranger-like handshake. I have spent years wondering what he was thinking in that moment, and I have never stopped asking myself, did I fail?