

Safe Harbor

Four white walls have encased me on this Monday morning as I work on the files for the day. The sun is shining through the window producing a glare on my computer screen. One of my coworkers walks past my office, the clacking of her heels on the tiles is deafening. I positioned my computer screen away from the sun's glare and focused back on my work.

“Daniel,” my assistant popped her head in through my open office door, “the meeting is starting.”

I nodded an acknowledgement and she slipped back out the door. The fluorescent lights flickered above as I hurried to finish the last of my notes. A buzzing sound broke my concentration. I glanced at my phone to see it was my mother calling. I ignored the call initially but when she called a second time I answered it.

“Daniel...” her voice cracked at the other end. She sounded like she had been crying.

“I have some really unfortunate news... about your father.”

I already knew what she was going to say. His health hadn't been the best these past years and I had been expecting this call. What I hadn't expected was how the words were like a blow to my chest and it was suddenly hard to breathe normally.

I stared at the ceiling and the flickering light as she described what had happened. He was playing poker with his friends then suddenly had a heart attack. They rushed him to the hospital but it was too late. She rambled on about the hospital details and I remained silent on the other end. I picked up the paperweight he had given me two years ago on their visit to the Oregon coast. A miniature boat was frozen inside the glass paperweight, always still and never getting to

set sail. I ran my finger over the smooth cold glass of it. The paperweight fit just right in the palm of my hand, slightly heavy. My mind flashed back to that vacation. We had just eaten some delicious fish and chips on the beach and were silently watching the crisp, cold ocean waves crash over each other. My father was usually the silent type, not one to strike up conversation with me. This time however, he cleared his throat to say something that had stuck in my mind ever since.

“The ships in the harbor are safe,” he said, “but Daniel, that’s not what ships are built for.” My mother walked up to us right then and I wasn’t able to ask him what he meant. Ever since he said that to me I had this nagging feeling that I was missing out on something. Even my father had been telling me that I wasn’t truly living my life.

“...the hospital did everything they could, his nurse was exceptionally friendly and answered any questions I had...” my mother’s voice snapped me back to reality. She was still talking. This is what she did when she was trying to distract herself. I studied the leather couch that I had recently bought to be placed in my office. One of the stitches on the cushions was already starting to fray.

“Daniel, are you listening to me?” my mother asked.

“Yes, I’m sorry; can you repeat that last sentence?”

My mother quickly picked up where she left off. I wondered briefly if she would still wear her wedding ring from my father, or if it would be too painful to see on a daily basis. I looked down on my own hands. My ring finger had never worn even a promise ring, let alone a wedding ring. The wrinkles were starting to deepen in the crevices of my fingers. My hands were the one place I couldn’t hide the aging process. The years that had gone by spent alone. Like my

last girlfriend had said as she walked away from me broken-hearted, *you will die alone*. I wondered if maybe she was right.

I was lost in a sea of nameless faces as I made my way through the airport. With a one-way ticket to Nashville, Tennessee clutched in my hand, I took the 4 hour flight out of Los Angeles. My mother was there to greet me as I walked out the gate. Hugging her was like finally coming home. She smelled like homemade peach cobbler and fresh cut flowers.

Driving into my hometown and old neighborhood was surreal. Rows and rows of the same houses, with nothing new except different cars parked in their driveways. The neighbors had all grown up but still looked somehow the same. As we drove past, they didn't seem to recognize me though. I hadn't been back home for seven years.

"Here we are," my mother said as we pulled into the driveway. Everything was the same as it used to be, except the house was bright with a new paint job. The leaves were starting to pile up in the front yard. The rake was leaning against the big tree out front, as if my father had meant to clean up the leaves but didn't get the chance. I made a memo to myself to rake up the leaves later in the day.

I made my way to my old bedroom. It was still filled with my childhood baseball trophies and posters of old bands I used to listen to. Pictures of my old high school friends and I sat framed on the dresser by my tiny twin bed. As I set my suitcase on the bed, the mattress sunk and squeaked with the weight of it.

"Daniel, will you come to the kitchen please?" my mother called. I set down the old pictures I had been looking at and strode into the kitchen. As I rounded the corner, I saw a bob of golden bright hair catch my eye. A girl I had never seen before was standing in our kitchen,

chatting with my mother. She was tall, skinny and looked to be around my age. I racked my brain trying to think of who she was. She turned as she noticed me.

“Hi! My name is Melanie, you must be Daniel! I’ve heard so much about you,” she stuck out her hand. Awkwardly, I shook her hand as I peered over at my mother. My mother had turned to leave the room, leaving the two of us alone. Why did I get the feeling that she was trying to set us up?

After a little bit of small talk and iced tea, I headed outside to start raking up the leaves. My father’s funeral was tomorrow and I was supposed to be the opening speaker. My father was a man of few words. Such few words that I’m not really sure if I ever really knew who he was. As I mulled over that, the screen door slapped against the door frame. My head jerked up involuntarily to see that girl Melanie stepping down the front door steps. I nodded a greeting to her while she just stared at me. I looked down and focused intently on raking the leaves into a bigger pile.

“I lost my mother last year,” her voice caught me off guard.

“Oh... I am sorry for your loss” I looked up at her offering my sincere empathy. She walked closer, her face construed as if she was thinking hard about something.

“You know, you never know just when the sadness will hit you,” she looked at me, “It didn’t really hit me until a few weeks later... it was the strangest thing.” She sat down next to my pile of leaves, crisscrossing her legs into a seated position.

“I was perfectly fine during the funeral and throughout all the condolences that people gave me,” she continued, “But one day I went to eat breakfast at the pancake house and they

served me toast,” she sighed, “I asked the waitress for some jam, and she came back with a handful of orange marmalade jelly.”

She stopped her story to look up at the sky. The clouds had just parted to allow the sun to peek out and wash us in a warm glow. She let her breath escape her lips, a real drawn out sigh as if she had lived a thousand years of sadness.

“And I just broke down; right there in the middle of the pancake house,” she said, “It was my mother’s favorite thing to eat every morning. The tears just came and I couldn’t stop them.”

“I’m really sorry...” I began, not knowing what else to say.

“It really is an awful feeling,” she continued, “When you can’t stop the tears from coming out...”

She stood up just then, brushing leaves and grass off her jeans. I leaned against my rake, taking in her whole story.

“It was really nice to meet you, Daniel,” she gave me a quick smile and waved goodbye. I watched her silhouette walk down the road as the sun was setting, to the door two houses down.

The next morning was like a replay of most mornings I had growing up there. I woke up to the smell of coffee and my mother served me eggs, bacon, and hash browns. As I ate my breakfast, I ran the words over and over in my mind of what I would be saying later. I had never spoken at a funeral, let alone had to come up with a speech about my mostly absent father. The childhood memories that I should have had with him would not suffice. My long distance relatives would want a pretty picture painted for them of my father. But that was something I just didn’t have.

After cleaning the dishes from breakfast, I walked into the living room. I found my mother sitting on the old leather couch looking at some photo albums. I sat down next to her and put my arm around her frail shoulders. She was looking at some old photographs from when my father was in the army.

“Oh! Look at him there, with all his old army buddies,” she pointed to a picture of him leaning against the army tank, a cigarette sticking out of his mouth and surrounded by his comrades. They all had their arms crossed, standing next to the tank, and acting like they were tough guys.

“He was always the class clown,” she chuckled, “Always trying to make everyone laugh.” I looked at her right then as her laughing stopped and saw the sliver of a tear slide down her cheek. She looked like she had aged a couple years within only a few days. I hadn’t noticed how frail she had gotten, her arms so delicate and thin. Graying hairs were intermingling with her once vibrant brunette hair. Her wrinkles had deepened with new frown lines bordering her mouth. It really had been too long since the last time I had saw her, so many things had changed.

“I know that you didn’t really know your father the way I did,” she spoke quietly.

“No mom, don’t worry yourself about that right now,” I reassured her.

“No, Daniel, I have to say this,” she turned to look me squarely in the face.

“Your father loved you more than anyone in the world, and that’s including me. All he ever wanted for you was to live a happy life,” she paused to wipe her tear, “I know that he didn’t speak to you much and he was absent throughout most of your childhood, but I can only hope that someday you can see him through my eyes, and see how much that man really loved you .”

I hugged her then as she broke down. I know she was only saying this to make me feel better. She was always making excuses for that man all my life. Every time he missed one of my birthdays, it was always that he was busy with work or was in a business meeting. I was used to her overcompensating for him. My mother didn't know a thing about sports but she was always at every baseball game I had, cheering twice as loud for my father who hadn't shown up once again.

It was half past noon and the church was almost filled with people. Many people that I hadn't even seen since I was a toddler, commenting on how tall and grown-up I had gotten. I spoke with these people kindly and smiled politely even though I really couldn't remember who most of them were.

It came time for the service to begin. I stepped up to the podium, extremely aware of the many eyes following my every move. I looked over at my father's casket surrounded with old pictures of him and his army medals laid on top. I turned towards the crowd to see my mother sitting in the front row. She had been crying, but had stopped to watch me. She looked hopeful, looking expectantly up at me. In the second row I spotted that girl Melanie. She smiled reassuringly at me, trying to put me at ease. I closed my eyes and tried to go back to that vacation at the Oregon coast. I tried to see him through my mother's loving eyes.

"My father Paul was loved dearly," I began, "He will be missed by the many people that have been lucky to have known him in their lives. He was an honorable soldier who loved his country and fought for our freedom. He was a beloved husband of my mother, Cheryl, and a great father to me."

I stopped after that sentence. Everything I was saying sounded so cliché. I felt numb saying these things that everyone says at funerals. I was talking but not really speaking to him. This is how we had been my whole life. We had never really sat down and really spoke to each other about what we were really thinking or felt. My eyes blurred with tears and the people sitting in front of me melted away. I made my way to his casket and laid one hand on the American flag draped over it. I imagined him standing in front of me, as if we were the only ones standing in the room.

“I am mad at you,” I stammered, “I have been mad at you for most of my life. Why weren’t you there when I really needed you? Why couldn’t you be the father that all my friends had?” I choked up at that part and paused for a second.

“I have been mad at you for a long time... but it’s exhausting.” I straightened up and let my hand off his casket.

“But I’m letting go today Dad. I’m letting go of all my frustrations I had with you. My only regret is that I couldn’t say these things to you while you were still here... but I will have to live with that.” I felt a hand on my back and was snapped back to reality. My mother stood next to me and gave me a little smile that said everything was going to be alright. We walked back to our seats together as my uncle went up to the podium to speak of their childhood stories together.

The rest of the service was a blur. By the end of it all, it seemed that everyone had forgotten about my speech gone awry. There was many hugs and condolences exchanged and by the end of it I felt like I could sleep for a few days. We drove home mentally exhausted and all cried out.

The next few days all blended together. I helped my mother with menial tasks around the house and fixed everything that my father hadn't gotten around to. I also cleaned and organized the attic into labeled boxes and took the stuff my mother didn't need to the goodwill. The basement was full of boxes of his old clothes and stuff. Going through that took a whole two days and I took five more boxes of unwanted junk to goodwill once again. I didn't stop my cleaning frenzy until I felt satisfied with the way my mother's house looked.

On Thursday of that week, we went to the reading of his will. My mother was shook up about it but I helped her out of the house driving with her to it. My mother, my uncle and I were the only ones in attendance for the hearing.

To my uncle he left his old army memorabilia and medals. To my mother he left the house, car, and basically everything that he owned. Then he stopped to my name at the end of his will. I had been getting ready to leave then stopped, surprised that he said my name.

"And to my son, Daniel, I leave my favorite possession," he read, "My sailing boat. I wish you happy travels and extraordinary adventures."

Stunned, I took the keys to my father's sailing boat from him. Why would he leave me his sailing boat? I had never even left the country, let alone knew how to sail a boat. We walked out of there silent with thoughts of everything that had just happened.

When we got home I put the keys to his sailing boat on the top of my dresser. For several days I did not touch them again. I saw them every morning when I woke up and every night as I went to bed. Some nights I would stare at them, contemplating what to do. Should I sell the boat and give the money to my mother? Surely that would be the most responsible thing to do. It's not like I was ever going to use it. After my paid time off here I would be back in Los Angeles

working almost 60 hours a week trying to get our products on the shelves. I didn't have time to learn how to sail a boat.

By Monday morning I woke up with a purpose. I was going to go see the condition of the boat and try to price what I could get for it. I took my father's old truck out to the harbor to find the boat resting at its usual docking spot. It was covered in a blue tarp and I gently pulled it off, dust and leaves flying off of it.

The paint was peeling off the edges of the boat and it was definitely a little run down. The letters spelling out the name of the boat "Summerwind" was peeling off on the corners. The leather on the seats needed to be patched up in some places and everything was a little dusty. I descended down the steps into the boat and walked up to the ship's wheel. It was rustic looking and made of dark old wood that was in need of some polishing.

As I stood looking over everything and estimating the cost in my head, a piece of paper sitting on the seat caught my eye. It was an envelope with my name scrawled across the front of it. I sat down and stared at it for a little while, debating whether I wanted to know what it said inside. I didn't want to get my hopes up that it would be anything personal from my father, for all I know it could be just the directions to sailing the boat. I shrugged off my anticipation and slowly tore open the envelope. It was a handwritten letter addressed to me from my father. His handwriting was scrawled in a hurried cursive, shaky in some parts possibly due to his arthritis. I can just barely make out the words he wrote.

It read:

Daniel,

I hope this letter finds its way to you. Let me begin this letter by saying I know I wasn't the greatest father to you. My health is slowly failing and I fear that I will not be around much longer. I am not the most articulate man and I don't always know how to talk to you. I have wanted to call you on the phone but I felt like I cannot ask any time of you when I didn't give you any of my time while you were growing up. I missed so many important parts of your childhood that I don't blame you for resenting me. It's the worst feeling standing in front of your now adult son and realizing that he is almost a stranger to you. Your childhood was over in the blink of an eye and I didn't realize until it was too late and you had already grown up into a man who didn't really know me. For this, I am deeply sorry. I can only hope you can learn from my mistakes. Now in my dying years I can see that I missed out on what was really important in life. Cherish those that love you and don't ever miss a moment that you can spend with them. Money and work can seem like the most important things at times, but don't ever be sucked into that or let it consume your whole life. Please look at my mistakes and don't ever repeat them. I do not want you to be a dying man with regrets. So to that, I leave you my sailing boat. I did not get to teach you how to sail but I can only hope that now you will learn in my absence. Go out and live your life Daniel, take someone with you and sail to places you have never seen, experience new things and laugh again. Live in the present and don't ever waste another moment like I did. I know I can't make up for what I didn't do for you, but I hope that in my death I can change your life from going down the same path that mine did.

Love, Paul

Just then the sound of footsteps on the dock shook me from my reverie. I looked up to see Melanie walking along the dock towards me with a smile on her face.

“Your mom told me you would be out here,” she said as she stepped into the boat,
“How’s it going?”

Silently, I handed her the letter as I wasn’t sure I could form words at the moment. She sat down to read it as I untied the mast and shook it out. I went around checking everything was working and that all the dials were working.

“Well?” she said just then, standing up to face me. I looked over at her, noticing the way the sunset cast an orange glow upon her face.

“Well... what?”

“What are we waiting for?”