

The week's lack of sleep showed when I pulled clothes from my carry-on: khakis, a semi-sheer shirt, and strappy red heels with silver buckles. I dressed, but stalled a moment in my childhood room, looking in the full-length mirror remembering past Christmas battles, "You can't wear black, this is Grandma's holiday," or "You can't wear that, it's not appropriate for family." Yet when I met up with the rest of my family in the living room, Mom said I looked very nice.

The transportation division had grown standard since my brother had begun driving and my car had been sold: Mom and Dad in the Infinity J30, and Andrew and I climbing up the sides of the Tacoma flat-bed with the blue flame decals he had designed. We'd all have fit in one car, but two meant a getaway vehicle. I scanned the local radio stations my morning alarm had been tuned to in high school. Andrew and I did our routine, quoting lines from movies and old educational computer games. I asked about his job, he asked about New York. We did not talk about Grandpa.

I had made my position known to my parents the night before, "I'm not walking up to it." My prior experience had been with Mom's extended family. I had been the age when you don't leave your kids at home, and mostly I remember folding chairs, women wearing gold earrings, and platters of sliced meats. I once walked into a room with the newly widowed and her child, and saw a reversal of caretaker roles that confused me. My first Catholic viewing had been for Mr. Sheaffer, everyone's favorite high school geology teacher. I was there for the viewing, and there I saw a dead man. Had Jim, the man with the bulging biceps poking out of his perennial wrestling coach polo shirt, the man who called his desk the candy counter ("You do *not* go behind the candy counter"), the man who survived poisonous snakes, a failed marriage, and numerous spelunking adventures but was felled by a snowstorm and a clogged artery, had he seen how much makeup he was wearing, someone would have got a "whoopin." It was the Madame Toussaud's version, frightening in its resemblance, but somehow altogether wrong, and it

plastered itself all over the memories I would have had of his sparkling blue eyes and the space between his front teeth.

“I’m not walking up to it,” I’d said, and prepared for a fight, but none came.

The drive was not long enough. We arrived. I stalled departing the truck to allow distance between Dad and myself. I had felt a sense of danger in getting too close. This had been my tactic since arriving the night before.

Inside a small reception room a retinue of tall, dark-haired Kesslers had gathered, each carrying his memorial to Fritz in the very structure of his face and the thickness of his eyebrows. It was strange for the family to convene outside of Christmas. Seeing each other in a foreign setting, in a foreign season, without the passing around of envelopes too spacious for the twenty-dollar bill contents, left us with little to say. We did not talk about Grandpa.

Still, I would have stayed there. Light drifted in from the main entrance, and I could see the shadowy side room, but Dad gestured us on. The room, darkened by heavy curtains, was dressed in various shades of non-color (beige: dress it up, dress it down; mood of hope, mood of death.) We would be spending the next many hours in this room. However many hours we’d paid for to get a big group of friends and family in and out of their final goodbyes. When we entered, the coffin was at the back of the room. I was shocked to see it just sitting there. Like turning the corner and seeing The David. Like everyone kept one in his living room. My breath caught and I spun in the opposite direction. Andrew walked right up to it.

Grandpa had been my playmate. He used the expression, “I says.” He was a championship golfer and bowler and kept a standard and bumper pool table in the basement. I don’t know when the shift came, but the towering 6’4” man with the fullest head of shiny white hair, always seated in his arm chair across from a golf match, stopped being intimidating, and started being my buddy. From then on, I leaned over him in his chair, and kissed his cheek goodbye at the end of a

family visit. The final time, I wrapped my arms around him and didn't let go. "I'm not gone yet," he had told me, his voice only slightly colored by his second stroke.

Grandma had spotted my arrival. I bent down to hug her. She whispered in my ear, "Your buddy's gone," and pulled away with red eyes and an unbending stare. Yes, I had understood. She had an entire room to care for, and moved on. I was limited, self-expelled to the back of the room, as far away as possible. I sat in a chair, and since there was only the one, being a seated person made me stand out just about as much as my 6'1" heel-elevated frame. The added inches below my feet left my knees akimbo and rising up to my belly, like a clown in a child's chair. Dad stayed by Grandma's side. Mom did her caretaker thing passing out butter cookies. People reluctant to take cookies ended up in hugs. The baker of said cookies, Grandma Davidson, whose own husband had died nearly 20 years earlier, found Grandma Kessler toward the center of the room. A renegade beam of light snuck in and fell over the two women in each other's arms, highlighting what I presumed to be a shared lesson in Living Alone. That left Andrew and I talking about mechanics and art, each to each.

So we ran away.

At first we just hung out on the driveway, letting the sun and fresh air remind us that death was not pervasive. The funeral parlor was on a very busy state highway. There was no traffic sign and it was hard for cars to get in and out. We made a mad dash for the Walgreens across the street—heels and cowboy boots clunking away at faster speeds than the moseying for which they were intended. We pooled the money in our pockets and settled on the \$1.99 pack of gummy bears. We cruised the Walgreens parking lot tearing colored limbs asunder, playing gods, making Technicolor gummy monsters. If a piece failed, there was always more to choose from. And for the first time, we talked about Grandpa.

The crowd was dispersing as we crossed back, and there were more people in the driveway, saying extended goodbyes with catch-phrases we've been taught for times like these: promising strength, promising help, promising God.

When we returned to the room, people were filing out, and a smaller crowd meant a clearer view. Mom had taken my chair, so Andrew and I added our heft to holding up the walls. I can't recall what she said, but I snapped at Mom, who immediately sent Dad to see me. He asked if Andrew and I would "run like hell" if we were released. I said we would run like hell to the car, and then we would drive like hell. We both laughed, and since he spoke to me in the language of a friend, I lost all the tension that had kept me a rigid Good Daughter, and broke down crying and hugged his waist. He held me, the avoided connection forged, and I felt his sorrow through my lungs. I caught my breath.

If Andrew and I got to leave, Mom was going to leave too. We would take the Infinity, because Mom doesn't like the truck. I collected cookies and a couple of bouquets in an effort to help clean, choosing the one with red and yellow snapdragons.

Mom drove, I sat in the front resuming control of the radio stations, and Andrew squeezed himself into the back. The time between Grandpa's third stroke and the funeral had been exactly a week, toward the middle of which, as I had received call after call of updates, the Rolling Stones' song, "Out of Tears" became the soundtrack to my inner monologue. Then, eventually, a broken-record purgatory of just the final, plummeting chorus, "I'm out of tears, out of tears, out of tears." Now the Stones played through real radio waves, and a much younger and rockier Mick than the one stuck in my head shouted, "I can't get no!" and so we laughed, as the snapdragons in my hand, bopping left and right, opening and shutting their cavernous mouths, sang along.

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