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23 yrs.

The Night I Met My Grandfather

The day was February 7th, 2009, the day after my dad's fifty-ninth birthday. I pulled myself away from the hectic haze that is my undergraduate studies at the University of Manitoba to come home for my dad's birthday. This is a rare occasion since for as long as I can remember my focus has been getting into med-school and my family has taken not only the proverbial backseat of your standard car, but a greyhound bus.

As I was driving home, nearing the third quarter of my return trip, there appeared a detour sign noting that the road had been flooded-over up ahead. I sigh with frustration, as the side road would easily add an hour to my trip back to Winnipeg.

I clicked the turning signal and proceeded down my new path (pointless in this area as I know I am the only car around during this time of the night). The clicking signal keeps time with a Kris Kristofferson song humming from my iPod, a song I chose in homage of my mom and dad. So as Bobby McGee and I set our pace down the road I begin admiring the cool blue scenery that hovers above the snow. I haven't seen a sight like this in forever as the snow I see in the city is either full of street salt or comprised of old ladies that have lost time with their cautious sidewalk shuffles, falling helplessly into the snow banks.

My song playlist ends and as I reach for my iPod I feel a slight heave in the car's equilibrium with the highway. Suddenly, another hiccup occurs and I begin to fear the worst. For three years now, the gas gauge on my car has been broken and I have perfected a system of monitoring the kilometers for my next fill-up. My not-so-trusty Neon slowly collapses like a dehydrated runner at the finish line of a marathon and I shout, "Ashley Prince I am going to kill you!" It seems my lovely little sister didn't top up the gas entirely after her late night runabouts, but did however manage to reset the odometer to zero.

I pull my phone from the cup holder and begin to dial home when the little blinking 'No Service' icon hinders my dialing. "Ugh! Stupid Telus, where DO you work?" I shout sarcastically.

The squeak of my door breaks the silence of the open road and I hear my dad's voice echoing in my head, "Better get some WD-40 for the hinge." I walk the four steps to my trunk and fiddle with the key to open the stubborn lock that only cooperates fifty percent of the time. Like the curtain at a Broadway show, the trunk hood lifts and reveals the night's main performer – a small red, plastic jug. I reach for the jug when a voice from the calm chimes in.

"Need some help young man?" asks an inquisitive baritone voice. Startled, I one-eighty to find a tall, black haired native man about ten paces behind me, perched at the

side of the road. He's wearing what can only be described as cloth, no real color or design, but the entire ensemble seems to mesh into a single piece of clothing resembling my youngest nephew's pajamas.

"Wow, how did I not hear you coming?" I exclaim with a nervous tone.

"Ha, it's easy when you're yelling as loud as you were! Might I ask who Ashley is?" he chuckles.

"Just a girl I used to lend my car to" I say with flustered syllables.

"Sorry. I'm William, what's your name?" I say in hopes of redeeming my last disgruntled reply.

"Oh, I have many names" chimes the old man with a clever grin. "Friend, Father, Leader, Chief, some even call me Grandpa" he adds.

Great. The one night I break down on the road is when the crazies have decided to take a countryside vacation. I'm going to get stabbed for a friggen jerry can.

"Don't be afraid my boy" the old man peeps.

Yep, definitely stabbed.

"Ok, look man, I really need to make my way back to the road so if you don't mind I..."

He interrupts my awkward attempt to escape.

"William, my son; my strong, beautiful son. I see the fear that paints your face and I must assure you that there is no need to be afraid. Truth be told, I am your Grandfather. My name is Chief Peguis and many, many years ago I stood on this very strip of land we are on tonight. You are the son of Edward, whom is the son of old Edward, whom is the son of Albert and so forth. All of these men are pieces of me, your Grandfather. You are a Prince my boy, and I am here to tell you the answers to some of your questions."

The old man speaks with a commanding boom that forces a wave of fear and panic on to my shoulders. A chill goes down my spine and a lump forms in my throat as I begin to assess the situation.

"That's not funny man. I don't know who you are but if you don't get the hell away from me right now I can't be responsible for reacting to how you're making me feel."

My mouth feels as if it is filled with cotton.

"My, what authority and passion you portray my son!" he chuckles.

"Ok, seriously, cut this "son" crap. I'm not your son and you better be getting back to 'the mental' before I leave you lying like a snow angel in the ditch" I scowl.

Snow angel? Really, Will? That's the best you could come up with?

"Ha, ha, ha, my, you really are old Edward's grandson aren't you?" he laughs.

I stand nervously and ready to pounce like a cat as he smiles at me. He rubs his wrinkled hand through his long black hair and closes his eyes during a deep inhale of the cold evening air.

"My, my, my" he mutters. "Tell you what my boy, ask me anything," he says with an intriguing confidence. "I have watched you since you took your first breath. I watch all my children and surely there is something I can do to make you believe in me."

I stand resting against the back passenger side fender contemplating whether or not to encourage these ridiculous antics. Surely there is no way this can be happening; I am a scientist for God's sake!

“Ok, Chief” I say with harsh disdain. “When my mom and dad were going for their kidney transplant in December, I sat alone and said something to myself by the elevators in the hospital. If you have this all seeing power, what did I say?”

The old man sighs and his eyes appear to be glossed over. He looks at me as if regretting his proposition.

“Well?” I say pompously.

Well it's finally happened Will! You have studied yourself crazy and you will now join Chief 'Stands on Road' in a fine, padded facility for the rest of your days. You are talking to a strange old man in a 'one-sie' as if he really has an insight into your life. Go get the damn gas and get out of here!

There is a long pause after my reply. I sit and wait as the man fumbles for a way to produce his next sentence.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought” I scoff. “No answer.”

I grab the gas can and turn away from the stranger in the road.

“You said, ‘don’t let this be it’” he replies.

I freeze in place and begin to wonder if there is any way I could have possibly heard what I think I heard.

“You walked to the elevators alone because you had been fighting with Ashley a lot and you felt you couldn’t talk to anyone else. You said, ‘Don’t let this be it’ because you felt that you hadn’t accomplished enough with your life. You were scared that your parents would leave without ever having witnessed your hard work pay off. You stood alone thinking not of all the reasons they are proud of you, but of all the things you weren’t able to do for them. You also felt guilty. You promised yourself that if they made it through the surgery you would try harder to make more time for them.”

My ears go hot in the cold night air. I feel the lump in my throat grow to the size of a tennis ball and I fight with every fiber of my being not to break into tears. Before I can say anything, he continues.

“William, my boy, I am here tonight to tell you that you don’t need to worry so much about the future. When I was leading our people through the harsh terrain of the forest and prairies, I was worried too. I felt the weight of many people on my shoulders and not all of them agreed with my actions at all times. I made many happy, but I also upset a few others because of my dream of a better life for us. You are just the same my boy, and I am here before you to tell you that everything will be all right. Your friends and family see how hard you work and they understand. The only thing you need to work on is allowing yourself to be happy. If you do not pursue your dreams with a happy heart, they will be regrets when you finally reach them.”

The sound of hard plastic scrapes the frozen ground as I stare the old man in the eyes. My jerry can slides to the wayside as I close the gap between him and I. I extend my arm hesitantly, in shock of his repetition of my exact words and thoughts on the most vulnerable night of my life.

“Geez, you’re harder to convince than your grandmother!” he laughs. “I can convince a nation to follow me through the wilderness but it takes this long to get a hug from my grandson?” he adds with wild charisma. He pulls me towards him and starts to laugh just like my dad.

I embrace the old man and for the first time in years I feel a comfort set in that reminds me of the days when all I cared about was the next hockey tournament and where my mom and dad were taking Ash and I for supper on Saturday night.

“So what do I do, granddad?” I ask.

“Lead, my boy” he responds.

“You have my blood in your veins, William. I led our people through the mud and rain before; you can do it again by staying focused on your dreams. I’ve seen what has happened to our home over the years. Drugs, alcohol, and corruption of our leaders have left our people feeling they have no other option but to stay still and accept their situations. Inspire the uninspired by being patient and kind. Use the advantages your mother and father have provided you with to move your people like I did to a higher ground. You have a community, friends and family that believe in your ability to succeed. Now it’s your turn to once again believe in yourself.”

I stand astonished at the words coming from my grandfather’s mouth.

“Now that I have clarified your purpose, it is time that I leave you to fulfill what you were born to do. Lead, my son, and know that I am always with you and helping you along the way. I love you, my son. I love you.”

He turns and begins walking into the newly formed dark of night.

“But grandfather, what do I do first?” I shout towards his fading silhouette.

I hear that same familiar laugh boom from the darkness.

“Get some gas!” he cries.