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A NEW HOME

Reid Richmond

I do not remember much about when I moved to California, but I do have enough memories that will stick with me for the rest of my life, that have shaped the person I am and will become.

In August of 2001, my family and I moved to California, from Texas, to take care of my dying grandfather. My aunt, who lived in the adjacent city, couldn’t take care of him because she said she’d had to take care of my grandmother and it was my mom’s turn to take care of someone. My grandmother died September 15, 1997, six weeks before I was born, as a result of her second stroke. My grandfather said, from that point on, he intended to smoke and drink himself to death. He had smoked and drunk prior to this event, but he just decided, when my grandmother died, to kick it up a notch.

I was three at the time of the move, but I was about to turn four in October. My grandfather was a heavy smoker and an alcoholic. He was suffering from emphysema and cirrhosis of the liver. When I knew him, he was nothing but miserable and difficult to deal with. I do not remember any time when he was nice to me, but I am sure there was one in the two-year period I lived with him. Don’t get me wrong, he never beat me or hurt me in any physical way, he just would say the meanest things.

For example, when I was younger, I could not say my ‘R’s’ correctly and they sounded like ‘W’s’. He would mock this and snidely ask, “Where did you learn to talk? The Elmer Fudd School of Diction?” Elmer Fudd is a Looney Tunes character. He used his famous line, “You Wacally Wabbit!” when he was trying to hunt Bugs Bunny.

One day my grandpa lit his cigarette and started to smoke it. The cigarette burned more and more, and I didn’t understand why it was shrinking, so my four-year old mind thought that he was eating the cigarette, and I asked him, “Grandpa, why are you eating your cigarette?”

“I’m not eating it god-damn-it!” he yelled.

My mom then came to my defense, and I promptly asked her another question. “When are we going home?”

“This is home now,” she responded.

I was shocked and heartbroken because, for me, Texas was home, and I couldn’t understand, and didn’t want to comprehend or imagine the possibility of calling this new situation home. I repeatedly, day after day, asked her this same question, hoping and wishing that maybe she was joking or would have changed her mind, but her answer never changed as I hoped it would.
A couple of months after the cigarette-eating incident, I saw my grandfather reading the newspaper. Again, I was four and I did not realize that people’s eyelids would partially close if they were looking down at something to read it. I then asked him, “Grandpa, why are you asleep?”

“I’m not sleeping, I’m reading!” he screamed.

My dad saved me this time, and calmed down my grandpa. As you can tell there was a theme as to what got me in trouble with my grandfather.

My grandfather was not always like this. My mom tells me stories about him all the time. The man she talks about is not the man that I came to know. He was born in 1930 in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. He met a Welsh nurse in Nanaimo, British Columbia, would end up marrying her six weeks after their initial meeting, and this would be my grandmother. They would have two daughters, Mary Ann (my mom) and Megan (my aunt). He moved his family to California when my mom was 15. He would get a job teaching a reading class to prospective teachers at Whittier College, where both of his daughters, my mom and my aunt, would end up attending. He was intellectually brilliant and charismatic, but, because of his sarcastic and caustic brand of humor, was not the most loved person in the world. My grandmother suffered a stroke early in 1997 and later that year, died as a result of her second stroke. My grandfather was absolutely devastated and at her funeral, made his terrifying suicide pact with himself.

When I moved to California, he made some good progress with his pact. He could never breathe, was on an oxygen machine twenty-four hours a day, but would still smoke cigarettes. When he had to go to the bathroom he couldn’t make it because moving at any pace was so physically exhausting for him. I don’t need to say what happened, but suffice it to say that he would not accept the responsibility for the accident, he would proceed to blame our dog for the mess. I didn’t understand what was happening to him and I just thought he was the biggest jerk on the face of this planet. I couldn’t possibly understand how miserable he was and the fact that he was a jerk was because he was suffering so much emotional pain and depression, that he lashed out at anyone and anything that gave him half a chance to do so.

In June 2003, my grandfather was in the hospital and had been for quite a while. The doctors did not give us a great deal of hope for his recovery. That night my mom prayed to God to do something definitive; either let my grandfather be healed miraculously or let him die. The next day, when we were at my cousin’s high school graduation, he died. It was finally over. He no longer had to suffer. There was a silent beauty in his death. He had wanted to die for six years, and he had suffered for every minute of those six years and he finally got what he wished for.
At his funeral, I was restless. I couldn’t stay still, and my mom and dad would tell me to stop wiggling in my spot on the pew. For me the funeral was never ending and I just could not stop moving, no matter how much I was told to stop. I also distinctly remember walking in the cemetery where he would be buried and I stepped on someone’s headstone. I got quite the scolding for that one. He is now buried next to his wife, at her side, where he wanted to be all along.

I am not describing someone that I hate or I have no feelings towards, but I am describing a man that I have forgiven as I try to understand what he went through. I find myself constantly thinking about him, and wondering, if he had been healthy, whether he would have liked me. I wonder if he would be pleased with what I have accomplished. Would he and my grandmother be happy to see what I have done and where I’m at today? Are they happy with what my future holds? The truth is that I am sometimes brought to tears when I think of these questions, and I wish I’d had a little more time with all of my grandparents because I did not know any of them except for my mom’s dad.

Even though those two years with him were not the best or the easiest, it’s helped shape me into who I am today. I cannot imagine calling anywhere else home except for California. California has become my home and a place that, no matter where my future takes me, I will always have a special place for in my heart. All of my friends live there and most of my family is in California. My grandpa has taught me a lot about myself. I have learned that I never want to smoke and I saw firsthand what could happen when you do smoke. It’s traumatizing to a degree, for everyone involved. He acted very selfishly. My parents raised me to treat others how you want to be treated and just try to be the best person you can be. Be respectful and keep others as well as yourself in mind. My grandfather was addicted. His addiction, in and of itself, was selfish. He wanted to kill himself, and didn’t think of his family before he decided to do anything. He thought of himself and his pain, not the pain that his loss would cause his family. This bothers me even until this day. He drank and smoked without any care for his living family, the people he raised and his grandchildren. Maybe he wouldn’t have been so miserable if he decided not to swallow his feelings with his beer.

I don’t want to end up like him, because I want to be there for my family, no matter the circumstance, and I’ve seen it happen, it would be all too easy to turn to a substance to numb the pain and put you in a happy place. I don’t want my family to have to forgive me for what I have done in this life. I want my legacy to reflect the happiness I brought my family and to be remembered in a good light.