

One Dead Snake

I sat at the back of the small funeral home, eight rows from my departed father. The priest had just started his lamentation of the good fisherman's death. Behind his voice, the pianist had started "Mary Had a Little Lamb" for the second time. Three days before, I requested the parlor to play no Christian music, to my grandmother's protest, acceptance, and eventual dismay. Two years prior, when I had begun piano lessons, I'd learned the melody myself.

During the priest's eulogy, I was playing Pokemon Black and White 2 on my 3DS for the second time. My father had just gone to jail for robbery a year before. The twin release games are known for their focus on the moral gray, with their names coming from yin and yang. They suggest that behind a bad act, there is a fault in reasoning, a need, or idealism that motivates it. It made inexcusable excusable by way of understanding: *He stole to provide for us? He used hard drugs to cope with pain? He pushed himself onto you because of need?*

When the priest walked down the aisle, I crept down to sit with my grandparents. My aunt sat to the right of them, rapidly tapping away on her phone. It made me feel frustrated. The pianist played "Three Blind Mice" as we assembled a line for the viewing. My grandparents and aunt went ahead of me. When finally it was my turn, I touched his face and scrunched my eyebrows, like I imagined people who were torn over their lost father might.

We sat back down, except for grandpa who stayed behind the coffin. Occasionally another man would stand next to him. During the procession people that I don't know, but that seem to know me, share sorrowful looks with me. I don't know how to feel about it, and my eyes kept darting back to my feet. By the procession's end, three men have joined my grandfather in the back. I do not recognize them either.

The four older men each grabbed a corner of the coffin and pulled it upwards, off the table, and down to their waist. Grandpa had a bead of sweat going down their forehead and past their glasses. Grandma pushed against me gently as if to say “get moving kid,” and I looked over to her in surprise. She points with a half-extended arm towards the row opposite of us, where they’ve begun to follow in line after them. I got up and shuffled forward to the front of our row's march.

The noise of my grandpa’s keys jingling at his side overwhelmed the piano as we walked out of the room. The cream walls and dark gray blue floors followed us past the doors. We passed by three vacant tables of polished cherry wood, four chairs to a table. Their inhabitants were grotesque. Half-eaten mashed potatoes, fried chicken, cake crumbs, and half-empty coke glasses. The tables and their villagers waved us away, us who disparaged the silence they held for their lost. We preferred to play music with house keys for ours. It made me wish to be a half eaten mashed potato instead of a person.

On the way out, staring at the casket, I sipped from internalized animosity. I imagined his face in the casket. It took me back to getting home from school once to see him on the couch watching television. Anyone who would have seen me would’ve known I couldn’t have been older than eight. I wore graphic tees and basketball shorts and preferred to walk barefoot. The noise immediately felt overwhelming. From the TV moans blasted and on screen a girl is giving a handjob to a man that looked twice her size. He looked over and gave me a stupid grin. In the blue light his eyes were watery and red and his face was covered in sweat.

“C’mere son,” he said.

I hesitated, not surprised by the state of him, but of the film, then walked over. When I was close to him he pulled me onto the couch. He pulled me next to him as if to have me cuddle

into his side like we used to do. It wasn't the same when he was naked. I didn't know that dicks looked like that, or that hair grew out of chests, or that adults were so sweaty. With his other hand he continues to jerk his dick like that girl on the television. I squirm to get up and he holds me more firmly. I wanted to protest, but I didn't know what to say. I said nothing.

I'm sure he wouldn't have replied. My skin had burned, screamed in protest, and I couldn't put any of it to reason, couldn't have known why. I pushed against him to try to get up and yelled for Samantha, my oldest half-sister. He put his hand over my mouth and whispered to me to hush. It was a slap to the face that stung. I don't think he meant to. I stopped struggling and didn't make a noise. My mind raced and I couldn't move. I was frozen. I tried to distract myself from what he was doing, but the TV echoed his actions. All I could do was close my eyes. It didn't stop the welling growths of terror inside of me. It couldn't have stopped the internalized loathing I'd have for alcohol, sex, or future would-be-dads.

By the time I shook out of it, we had loaded into the car. We had recently gotten a 2017 Toyota Highlander. The owners of this Highlander were kindly, well-off, and his parents. I don't remember seeing him put into the hearse, but I remember following it in the car. I sat in the middle of the backseats to watch it. My grandma drove. She complained about the red light just out of the funeral home. I felt excited to get home. Friends were waiting online at home.

"Oh hush Debbie," Grandpa said.

It felt like going home from church, the only other thing the three of us were together for. Nothing had changed, sat in that car. Neither had anything changed looking at his body in the home. It made sense looking at his track record. The only personality we could manage in his obituary was "An outdoor enthusiast, he enjoyed fishing, and loved all animals, especially dogs.". An outdoor enthusiast that enjoys fishing. *Okay. He loves all animals. I've gotten that.*

Especially dogs. *Helpful*. But, it is true that he loved the outdoors. It didn't stop him from being callous to it. When I was in my youth, he had all sorts of animals. We had four adult german shepherds. They were untrained. There wasn't enough time to clean the house at the rate they produced shit. At the time that he went to jail, I was the only one in the household distressed. My two half-sisters had gone to living at friends houses, and my Mom was in a drugged stupor so deep the scent could not reach her. And even in that distress, I felt love towards him.

He loved other smelly animals too. When we would explore through the backyard, that blends in my mind with the woods, we would be searching for snakes. The day I have in mind had us catching ten garter snakes and putting them together in a terrarium set at home. The small space and their mating tendencies led to the ten snakes suffocating one another in a great pile only days later, after my dad had left for reasons I don't know. The smell was worse than the shit. Garter snakes, when threatened, secrete a foul smelling musk. The smell wafted through the small house. It was all-encompassing. My mother refused to touch them because she was terrified of snakes due to their 'devilish origins'. I wasn't to touch them because my mom was worried I'd get sick. Eventually, when the smell permeated every room of the house more than any of us could take, my mother took the terrarium and threw it into the dumpster.

It made me so angry that we took those wild things and let them die. Sat in the car, it didn't make me feel anything. That was his misery. He wasn't intentionally an animal abuser. The animals that we left alone got along well enough. We got to see cottonmouths, snapping turtles, boxing turtles, frogs. I loved when we'd find a boxing turtle. They understood me, I thought. They wanted to be left alone. We fished a lot supposedly, but I don't remember it. I still tried to appreciate it.

The traffic was uncharacteristically slow for our small town. Or maybe time was moving slower now that I'm trapped with him in mind. It didn't feel like boredom, like it usually did when time slowed. I looked out at the hearse and counted the minutes. Hot salt water, tears, started to piece my eyes. It did not take long for them to burn their passages and trickle down my face. My mind registered this and collapsed. Without my knowing, it had been rigged to explode.

I was left with raw feelings and a spiraling head. The wet serpents trailed from my eyes down my cheeks and met at my chin. I fought to put them back in their cage, but they wouldn't stop slithering. I had been a cage full of self-loathing and reptiles, and all of it had escaped. I unbuckled and wrapped into a fetal position on the car seats. *It's okay, it's okay, it's okay.*

Quiet sobs turned into raw, unavoidable, surges of whines and wails. Unstoppable, loud, throat-gouging noise made as I forced up the tears like glass. Each sob had been followed by gasps for air to alleviate the growing light headedness. I was drowning in snake trails.

We arrived at the burial service. Only after the last snake dried up and died had I looked out at the trees. I remembered them being as big as cherry poplars, but now they seemed no bigger than a streetlight. They still made me feel small. Their seed clusters adorned the ground to the burial spot. They were small, spiny, and vicious. My tree had been despicable, but without it I felt worse off.

His tomb sat next to Uncle Richards (his brother), Papa, other family members I didn't know. He is a stain on their name, but I don't care about family legacy. His tomb was the smallest. It was pitiful. It seemed fit for a dead toddler. I would shed more tears during the priest's final words. I wasn't listening anyway.

Soon we were up and moving towards him again. This time, I was the first to see him. This time I saw him and not myself. I'm filled with words I wish I could say to him. Some of

which were: *I hate you. You had the audacity to overdose? I hate you. Please come back.* If he could hear my thoughts, he seemed wholly unperturbed. He looked better dead. I don't care about looks.

On his chest sat a flower arrangement. Oranges, yellows, purples. They were supposedly all wild flowers, if my request had been granted. Atop all of them was a pile of dread branches. I took the branches and walked away.

The rest of the procession was a blur. He was lowered, and I think they began burying him. People tried to talk to me, I didn't listen. I just nodded along to their condolences. Soon we had left, and in the car ride home things were quiet. The only noise was the car and my occasional snuffle. They're only being quiet because of me, I realized. I curled up hugging the branches in the backseat. They're all I have left of a man that I think about. Sometimes still, I love him.