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CHRISTMAS MEMORIES

by

Michael Lang

“It was the day after Christmas, in his living room, he died

On that day. In his house. With his wife

Still I won’t forget the day before the last day of his life.”

-- Mighty Mighty Bostones; The Day He Didn’t Die

Crunch, crunch, my boots pierce the crusty blanket of snow. The sound echoes in my ears with every step. Gray and gloomy clouds scowl down at me, scorning my sudden intrusion into their silent vigil. Crunch, crunch, I plod between the rows of snow-covered marble and granite stones, drifting like a man lost in a dream, lost in the fog of a memory. From the twisted branches of a gnarled oak, a crow cries out in alarm at my approach. It spreads its wings with another raspy cough and takes flight into the dreary sky. Crunch,

crunch, I am alone again, my footsteps breaking the heavy hush of the deserted cemetery. I tightly clutch my offering of evergreen sprigs, smearing another glob of sap across the fingers of my gloves.

Tracing the familiar path, I pass another row of headstones and monuments. I lay a hand upon the cold granite slab and brush away the freshly-fallen snow to reveal my grandfather's name.

"John Donoghue," the carefully-chiseled words read.

I glance down the row, to the other Donoghue grave where my cousin is lying in peaceful slumber. His golf club, a baseball, and shells from the Florida Keys watch over him in solemn silence. I hadn't been there that day in June, the day when Rickie was laid to rest. I had never had the chance to say goodbye.

A cold breeze tugs at my hair and bites through the fleece of my coat. Forcing myself back to the snow-covered rows of Needham, Massachusetts, I stoop to one knee and begin to arrange my bundle of branches and bows. My hands reverently work the ground's icy blanket into a bowl to cradle the holiday offering. Breathing a quiet sigh, I stare at the neatly-carved inscription.

"Hi Grandpa," I hear myself say.

The engraved date reminds me just how many years have passed since that Christmas Day. My mind reaches back through the falling leaves of autumn and the warm days of summer. I slip further back in time, past the rains of spring and the snows of winter until I find myself seated in the intensive care ward on December 25th, 2004, the day that my grandfather didn't die.

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The hospital's dazzling halogen lights seemed blinding compared to the dark, moonless, evening. Two sets of footsteps echoed across the lobby's laminated tiles, my father's squeaky shoes and my soft-soled sneakers, marching in unison towards the front desk. A mousey man with a checkered sweater peered at us from behind the monitor of his computer. He politely answered our questions and pointed a slender finger towards a row of elevator doors.

"Second floor," he kindly explained. "Intensive care is on your left."

"Thanks," my dad replied, turning towards the alcove of awaiting conveyors.

"Merry Christmas."

I wasn't sure who said the programmed holiday response. Perhaps it was simply the large jolly letters scrawled within the lobby's enormous wreath that leapt out at us. It somehow seemed to be an odd sentiment. Merry Christmas, you're in a hospital on Christmas Day. Surprisingly, the visit to the intensive care unit was somewhat of a relief. The big, white, colonial house on Highland Avenue was hustling and bustling with holiday activity, but the hospital's halls were quiet and serene.

The elevator's mechanical doors slid shut with a quiet groan, and we began to slowly rise towards the second floor. Dad and I didn't say anything as the lift climbed upon its cables and cogs. I silently wondered what we would find within the hospital's honeycomb of sterile chambers. Would my grandfather be awake? Would he be covered in IV tubes and connected to beeping machines? The elevator's bell tolled, and a moment later, the doors sluggishly opened. Without a word, we stepped into a gleaming white

hallway and turned to our left. Passing through a shroud of blue curtains, we were assaulted by the sterile stench of the intensive care unit.

My cousin David, the family's skater punk turned Colorado doctor, and his sister, Karen, a teacher in San Francisco, were both crowded around the bed and its array of contraptions. Our grandfather's frail frame lay amid a sea of linen sheets, his mouth opened in the shape of a gapping "O" as he continued to hungrily breathe in a slow and steady rhythm.

"Hi John," my dad pleasantly said, as though we had just entered his office den at the house and interrupted the evening baseball game.

I could almost imagine my grandfather rising from his favorite chair with a warm smile and outstretched hand. His familiar greeting echoed in the depths of my mind.

"What do you say Michael?"

"Hey Grandpa," I said, settling upon one of the room's empty chairs.

For a long moment, we all sat in silence, no one really knowing what to say. What are you supposed to say? It's Christmas Day and your grandfather could take his final breath at any moment. We looked at each other. We looked at the slender skeleton of our strong and stubborn grandfather. Like a dam breached by the surge of an angry storm, we began to pour out the stories that he had told when we were young; what we would remember, what we would miss, the lessons and legends that he had passed on to all of his grandchildren.

"Grandpa, do you remember..."

The stories came to life that evening, bigger and grander than he had ever told them. This time however, he was the listener and his grandchildren were the storytellers. Gathered around his bed with laughter and tears, we told the stories of his life. How he had taken the train as a child to see the baseball games at Yankee Stadium. How he had climbed the fence to sit in the bleachers while Lou Gehrig, Babe Ruth, and countless other Hall of Fame heroes played out the greatest games of their careers. We told the story of how he had pulled the fire alarm at the Avery Nursing Home the previous year and, once outside, had embarked upon the single-block journey towards home on Highland Avenue.

We told the stories of when he and his mother had visited Ireland, the emerald isle from which she had emigrated at the age of fifteen. During their visit, John had given a Kennedy half dollar to his distant cousin. Though she was only four years-old, she had kept the silver coin and, decades later, had shown it to him when he again visited Ireland.

As the stories flowed on, I found myself silently laughing at the memory of being four years-old and my grandfather giving me a two-dollar bill. I could hear his voice echoing in my mind, telling me that it was something special, something that should be saved and never spent. I had treasured that simple piece of green paper, hidden it away like pirate gold in the depths of a cloth bag beneath a hoard of pennies while GI Joe action figures with plastic M16 rifles kept vigilant guard. The two-dollar bill had later moved to the concealed confines of a porcelain duck and then taken up residence in its current home, safe within a metal container alongside my passport. For nearly a quarter of a century, it had followed me from Storrs, Connecticut to Durham, New Hampshire, to college and to all of my apartments, to Minnesota and back.

The steady rhythm of beeping machines dragged me back to the hospital that night. I heard my cousins laughing, another tale had been told, another testament made to our grandfather's long and vibrant life. The laughter faded and a fresh story began—the story of when he had worked as a clerk at the National Archives and Franklin Delano Roosevelt had called to check on whether or not his stamp collection had been moved into storage.

“This is the President of the United States,” the crackling voice announced.

“This is John Donoghue sir—how can I help you?”

His wrinkled face had always creased into a warm smile of pride when he recounted his conversation with the President. Though he had nearly fallen off of his chair in disbelief, our grandfather had spoken to the author of the New Deal, the Commander in Chief, and the longest serving United States President in history. Perhaps that was the reason why on so many Christmas mornings our eager fingers had torn into colorful packages to find forest green binders of government-issued stamps. Perhaps it was his way of sharing that single moment with his grandchildren.

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Another gust of cold wind tugs at my hair. The laughter and tears fade away into distant echoes from the past, and I find myself still stooped before my grandfather's silent grave. Seven years had not tarnished the memory of saying goodbye to him. My mother had accused us of having a wild party in the intensive care ward that night. Why

shouldn't we have been celebrating? Our grandfather deserved nothing less as tribute to the life that he lived. He had served in the Army, attended a year at the seminary, played minor league baseball, had a venerable career as a lawyer, and seen all ten of his grandchildren attend college. He had attended his own wake that night and heard all the words that all too often come too late upon the altar of a church or the grass of a cemetery.

My head filled with memories, I turn once more to look down the row of marble and granite stones and catch a glimpse of golf balls and conch shells. The cold breeze rustles the leafless trees, and I find myself weighed down by a host of gloomy questions.

“Why?”

Why had there been no goodbye on that sunny summer day? Why had there been no final chapter, no conclusion to my cousin's life story? Why could I kneel before my grandfather's grave with laughter and tears, but only feel sorrow at the sight of my cousin's baseball and shell-covered stone? Was it simply the difference between an old man facing his end with stubborn resolve and a young man taking flight in the prime of life? Why do I look back with gratitude on the bittersweet memories of one and mourn the loss of the other? Maybe it's because I had the chance to say goodbye that Christmas Day, the day that my grandfather didn't die.

“Still I won't forget the day before the last day of his life.

I really miss him, he would have loved this, I hope you can hear me.

I hope you can hear me.”