**ON CIGARS, SEX, DEATH, AND EGGS**

 My maternal one-kidneyed grandfather slipped on ice at the age of ninety-six breaking his hip. Ten days into his hospital stay, the top of the bell curve for improvement, he developed pneumonia. His doctor suggested I take him to the medical unit at the retirement community where he resided with my grandmother so he could die at “home.”

 I don’t think any of us thought my grandfather would, or actually, could die. His only child, my mother, remained at her winter isle in Florida. Almost a centenarian, my grandfather had a Teutonic disposition fired in the igneous veins of pain and disappointment. He seemed to derive more pleasure from planning an event than actually doing it. He spent eleven months each year mapping out a trip to Europe and returned thirty days later steeped in bicker and complaint and a facial expression like he’d fallen on hard ground. My grandmother liked to say he’d been weaned on sour breast milk, but even levity couldn’t soften his ire.

 Spending most of his days seated in a taupe, damask covered chair wearing a wool blazer with Sigma Chi pin, club tie, and corduroy slacks, my grandfather crossed his right leg over left and sat in silence gazing out a picture window to his past, living almost entirely in his mind. I imagined he’d spent most of his life this way, and the more he dreamed, the further the dream eluded his grasp. I believe he surmised the fractured relationships in his life could not be set and healed like broken bones, but were to remain splintered and shattered, and so he sat alone and smoldered in resentment. But a flame can’t burn indefinitely. Eventually winds will shift, fuel will deplete, and the fire will consume itself.

 On the day he died, my morning started a little after 3:00am when my four-year-old daughter required a breathing treatment for her asthma. Fifteen minutes of the thrumming compressor followed by twenty minutes of back scratching eased her to sleep, but left me wide awake. Knowing efforts at further slumber were futile, I headed to our basement office and processed payroll for the week, did some last minute editing on proposals, and deposited the pile on my secretary’s desk.

 I left an hour before sunrise driving south. My sales manager had placed a cigar with a note of good luck on the console between my front seats. I had only smoked once before, during finals at college, and it kept me up all night juicing me through a fifteen page term paper.

 I was scheduled to meet with a prospective client on the southeastern shore of Maryland. It was the last business push before the winter holidays and our third largest deal of the year. Meeting with a widow, I desired to purchase the holdings of her late husband to resell to my biggest client. We had been introduced through a third party who described the woman as strained.

 Two years prior, she found her husband and his secretary engaged in coitus in the new artist’s studio he built on their property as a twentieth anniversary present. The wife responded by brandishing a gun, making lethal threats, and then abruptly leaving for the grocery store demanding the concubine be gone forever by the time she returned.

 An hour later the wife pulled into the driveway in her Volvo station wagon just as her two daughters exited the bus from school. The three of them found the husband in the front yard, his head blown off, brain matter in the apple tree, the shotgun still in his hands.

 They ran to the kitchen to call the Police and found the paramour sprawled in the pantry, shot in the chest and a solitaire diamond engagement ring clutched in her fist.

 I arrived at my prospective client’s house shortly before eleven, a sizeable property with a three story brick manor house, Georgian columns, green paneled shutters, and several matching out buildings. A handsome woman in her late forties met me in the driveway wearing designer sweats with her chestnut hair pulled back in a tight, severe bun. Thin with high cheekbones, delicate and smooth like blown glass, she possessed hazel eyes and long tapering legs. She struck me as part of the horse crowd.

 “Call me Elaine,” she said extending her manicured hand.

 She confessed she had just finished her morning run and suggested I get started. She led me to a two story building behind the house. Of newer construction, it had an iron hinged Dutch door opening to a urethaned brick entrance hall.

 “This was my husband’s office. Everything you need is in there,” she said pointing to a partially closed door behind a receptionist’s desk. “I need to freshen up.”

 I discerned the usual post run affects, such as perspiration and flushed cheeks, were absent. I watched her walk across the yard looking back over her shoulder several times as if to make sure I wasn’t leaving. Her glance was one of serpent fascination, and I could tell she was used to having men come at her like hornets to treacle.

 Once she entered the main house, a morbid curiosity came over me. I poked around searching for traces of the murder-suicide tragedy. The secretary’s desk and credenza were barren of personal mementos, recently dusted, and the smell of lemon cleaner in the air.

 In the husband’s wainscoted office, I found the usual array of contemporary IKEA furniture, cabinets and cases, and four imprints in the carpet where the sofa might have been. Several picture-less hooks surrounded by the specter of absent frames remained in the wall. A young birch tree was planted in the front yard. It’s paper-like white bark peeling, the tree divided into three shoots at the trunk and was staked on four sides.

 The widow checked on me several times during the day with tea and scones. Her hair remained pulled back, but she had changed into a translucent blouse, snug fitting blue jeans, and low open toed black heels. Lipstick and eyeliner adorned her face, and she wore pearl studs over tiny diamonds earrings. Each time she left the room, the smell of Chanel #5 hung in the air.

 Late afternoon, I heard the brake squeal of a school bus and looked out the window as two teenage girls in the plaid and whites of Catholic school uniforms entered the house.

 I finished my paperwork by 5:00pm, already dark, and knocked on the back door finding the widow and her two daughters in the kitchen. She introduced me to both girls, a sophomore and a senior, the older one observing me as she washed celery in the sink.

 Tired and feeling stale, I wished to review and sign the documents and get back on the road for the four, probably five with rush hour, drive home.

 “My girls and I were just starting to make you dinner. Can’t you stay?” she said closing my briefcase and letting the back of her hand brush across my shoulder, her sexual currency.

 “Thank you, but I really need to get going. My daughter was up during the night.”

 “Your wife’s home. An extra hour won’t matter. My girls would be so disappointed.” She cocked her head at an angle and feigned a pout with her lower lip.

 I didn’t want to have to come back a second time, and I sensed she wouldn’t sign the contracts until after we ate, “Dinner sounds wonderful. Thank you.”

 “Be a dear and select a bottle of red wine. They’re in the pantry.”

 I opened the double doors half expecting the lover to be still in there and retrieved a bottle without looking at the label.

 The meal proved a nightmare. The girls argued over artichokes in the salad, and I tried not to spill clumps of undercooked spaghetti on myself. When the youngest, with hair spilling over her face and eyes of perpetual sorrow, rose to clear the main course, her older sister crept her bare foot under my pant leg and then refocused her toes towards my crotch. The widow, sitting to my right, placed her left hand under the table working it further and higher inside my thigh.

 All I wanted was to execute the documents and get the hell out of there. I had already decided my sales manager would handle all future communication.

 Two and a half hours into the meal, the younger daughter excused herself for homework leaving her sister and mother dueling for my attention – each aware of the other’s motives.

 I felt relief when my phone chirped a tone indicating a text message. As I sought to untangle myself from the women’s appendages, my phone chirped several more times almost simultaneously heightening my concern. It was the same message, “Please call 610-525-3400 as soon as possible.”

 “Use the den for privacy if you wish - for your call,” said the widow pointing down a darkened hallway.

 An operator picked up on the first ring and confirmed my name. Before I could inquire as to the nature of the call, she transferred me. A lady answered with the flat reverent tones of a female minister or middle school therapist, “Good evening. I’m so sorry to disturb you, but I’m afraid I have some bad news. Your grandfather has left us.”

 My first thought was he had stormed out demanding return to his villa. I had visited him two days before, and he was riddled with complaints. It was her silence hanging like a Pine Barrens fog that allowed me to process the euphemism she had used for his death.

 “When?” I asked.

 “About ten minutes ago. His nurse went to see if he needed a sleeping pill, and he was gone.”

 Another euphemism.

 “He gave me instructions eleven years ago on what to do. I’ll call the funeral home to pick him up.” I knew the process. It had been drilled into me annually.

 “I’m sorry. We can’t release your grandfather until you identify him and sign some papers.”

 “Why do I have to identify him? You called me. He’s lived there for nine years.”

 “I guess we could call your grandmother to come up.”

 “No. Don’t do that.” Nana was ninety-four. She and Pop had slept in separate bedrooms since a miscarriage in 1932, and even though they didn’t appear to like each other, they had been married for seventy-one years. I had no idea how she would react. ‘I’ll tell her myself, later,” I said.

 “We’ll prepare him. When might we expect you?”

 “About four and a half hours. I’m in the far corner of southeastern Maryland on business.”

 “Oh my. I’ll tell night shift you’re on your way and about when they should expect you. Again, I’m so sorry.”

 I hung up and exited the den. The Widow stood several feet away her head reaching out for my shoulder, another button undone on her thin blouse revealing the summits of milk white breasts, “Did you lose someone too?”

Her voice was soft like a warm towel after a bath.

 “My grandfather died.”

 “Oh no.”

 She hugged me, and I felt the pressure of her nails in the flesh of my shoulders as she

pulled her groin into my hip. The eldest daughter sat at the table, staring at me with pearlescent

eyes, a seafoam green, sucking on her finger in a simulation of oral sex, her own nascent

sexuality a practiced weapon.

 “I really must go,” I said. “Can we take care of the paperwork now?”

“When will you be back? There’s still some more things to go over before I’m completely

comfortable.”

 “A few days at most,” I lied. My sales manager was definitely the one returning. “But I

need to present executed documents to my client to keep the deal alive.”

 As we looked over the contracts, she kept a hand on my waist working a finger under my

shirt and into my pants that were hidden by the kitchen island counter. The daughter wrapped up

a half dozen brownies and started the dishes keeping to her mother’s backside. She sprayed

water on to her white uniform shirt and rubbed herself until her womanhood pressed through.

 Signatures acquired, I shook hands with the Widow who grazed her palm across my

crotch as I turned for the door. The daughter blind-sided me with a hug grinding into me as she

whispered in my ear, “Ignore the old hag.”

 Once on the road, I called my sales manager to convey the insanity of the evening as it

was not a story I could share with my wife over the phone.

 As we chatted, exhaustion curtained over me, the adrenaline of the day expired. Had it

not been for my grandfather’s death, I would have pulled over and slept for an hour or two. We

concluded the conversation with a congratulations, and my sales manager suggested I smoke the

cigar for closing the deal. I considered such as a means of staying awake as I drove north.

 Ten minutes into the cigar reminded me why I didn’t smoke. My hands shook, my heart

pounded, and I tossed it out the window watching it explode into hundreds of flaring embers as

it was seized by the sixty mile per hour wind and ricocheted off the macadam like orange

fireflies taking flight.

 I arrived at the nursing home well into the night shift. I knew that even having driven the

last hour with my window open to stay awake, I probably still smelled like cigar. I had loosened

the top button of my shirt, and my tie had un-nested an inch or so. In the reflection of my car

window, I saw the wrinkles in my clothes from a long day. I tucked my shirt in an effort to

look presentable.

 I draped my suit coat over my shoulder and walked into the nursing home’s medical unit,

the double set of automatic doors releasing the smell of warm decay in two stages reminding me

of why I was there and adding another aromatic layer to the fibers of my wool suit.

 The fluorescents beat hard on my tired eyes. Pupils that preferred rest in dilation

constricted under the double rows of hallway lights. I didn’t acknowledge the woman charting

at the nurse’s station and proceeded to my grandfather’s room.

 Halfway down the hall, feet pattering, she caught up with me, “How are you doing? They

told me you had a long drive to get here.”

 “Okay, thank you.”

 She placed her hands on her hips, tilting her head forward looking at me from above her

bifocals, “He’s at rest, at peace now. Would you like some company?”

 More euphemisms. “No thank you. I’d rather do this alone.”

 She squeezed the spot on my shoulder the widow had latched onto earlier, “The call

bell is on. Press it if you need us.”

 Other doors I passed in the long corridor had cards and bows taped to them, and I felt

guilt before the unadorned entrance to his room. Walking in, it smelled of baby powder and

was stifling warm from having the door closed all evening.

 My grandfather lay on his back, hands folded across his chest atop a yellow cotton

blanket framed by a crisp white sheet tucked under the mattress with military corners. I knew he

was dead. I had never seen his face so relaxed. The corners of his mouth drew up into a slight

smile, something he rarely offered. I wondered if he was happy at the end or if a nurse had

positioned is lips arcing upward, one that didn’t know him.

 I stood at the end of the bed studying my grandfather as if looking for answers to

questions I had yet to pose. I waited for a cascade of emotions the way one anticipates a sneeze,

but nothing came. In an effort to feel something, I put my hand on his covered foot, unfamiliar

contact with a man who preferred distance.

 Absent of feeling and thought, I decided to pray doing what I thought would be right by

appearance. I took a knee at his side and reached out putting my hand over his. It felt cold and

plastic like a gallon of milk.

 I said several “Our Fathers” and “Hail Mary’s” as a warm up thinking God might have

to fine tune the new frequency and then a direct plea to admit my grandfather into heaven all

the while feeling as plastic as the milk jug, a hypocrite because I didn’t suppose for one

minute my grandfather stood before the gates of St. Peter.

 I crossed myself twice to make up for not doing so in the beginning and opened all

three windows to let fresh air into the room. I pondered his still reflection in the dark glass

gazing at what was now my past.

 I pressed the call bell, and the same lady returned, the chain on her glasses swinging

back and forth like her ears were jumping rope, whispering to me as if my grandfather was

sleeping, “I know how devastated you must be. I heard he was a very important man who loved

his family very much.”

 I smoked a cigar that night. I wondered what she had been smoking. “I’ll call the

funeral home and will wait for them in here.”

 She touched my shoulder again, ‘Push the call bell if you need us. When they get here, we can take care of some minor paperwork. Again, I’m so sorry. I know his passing has affected you. I can read your eyes.”

 Another euphemism, and what she saw were eyes that had been up almost twenty-three

hours.

I called the funeral home. A service answered which kept me on hold patching me

through to a sleepy voice trying to sound awake, reverent, and sepulchral. “We’ll be there in

less than thirty minutes to assist you in your time of need.”

 Like a Domino’s pizza - only he didn’t offer bread sticks.

 I’d about had it with the euphemisms. We both knew the funeral home attendant on call

was being roused out of bed, one I hadn’t found, to come pick up a body that happened to

be my grandfather.

 I hung my coat on the IV pole and pushed the door mostly closed, part for privacy,

and part adhering to the unwritten rule that the dead were not to be seen by other patients. I

settled into the lounge chair alongside my grandfather’s bed and found controls that allowed

me to recline. As my feet elevated, I kicked off my shoes feeling the cool night air rain down

from the newly opened windows and settling between my toes.

 Wrapped around the lowered side rail was the remote for the wall mounted television.

I surfed a myriad of infomercials, a few late night talk shows bashing the President, and a choice

of the movies “Carrie” or “The Poseidon Adventure.” I settled on “Hogan’s Heroes,” a favorite

sitcom of my youth.

 Two minutes into the program, I recognized the plot. Sergeant Schultz impersonates a

General so Hogan’s band of saboteurs can blow a bridge, and Hogan, at twenty-three minutes

after the hour, kisses the beautiful maiden of the French Underground. I’d seen it dozens of

times, and it was familiar and comfortable. It reminded me of my childhood like the taste of

sweet potatoes and the smell of Johnson’s shampoo.

 I melted lower in the chair and turned the volume down so it couldn’t be heard in the hall

as if maybe I should be doing something more associated with death and loss and grieving. By

the first commercial, the night air had cooled the room too effectively, and feeling lazy,

rather than close the windows, I reached over and untucked the yellow blanket from my

grandfather’s mattress pulling out the excess until it covered me too. I allowed myself to drift.

 I woke to searing white fulminating in the back of my eyes and the concussion

flowing out through my ears. Pressure on both shoulders held me down immobile like

a sudden descent in altitude. My first thought – I was still driving and had fallen asleep at

the wheel. Then, the smell of ammonia.

 “Sir. It’s all right. You fainted,” said the voice from earlier.

 I bent my arms at the elbows, my shoulders still trapped, swatting away at the

inhalant being waved under my nose. “I’m fine. I’m fine.” The back of my tongue swelled

hot and cold at the same time, what I imagined it felt like if I swallowed dry ice.

 “I knew I shouldn’t have left you alone,” said the lady from the front desk. She

had put on a lavender sweater with large purple buttons. “Seeing your grandfather lying

in state after a long day put you over the edge. I’m so sorry my dear boy.”

 I felt my voice surging past my vocal chords, “I did not pass out. I fell asleep, and he’s

not lost, at peace, gone, at rest, or passing, or any other code words. He’s dead; dead-dead-dead,

heart stopped dead, and knowing him, when he saw that portal, he ran for it, sprinted through

the opening, arms held high in victory because he was getting the hell away from us.”

 I surveyed the silenced room as if someone had paused the video. Two men,

both in need of a shave, donning pin-striped suits stood as either end of an aluminum

stretcher with a black foam mattress dimpled in the middle from use. Four women,

three in polyester blend scrubs, a kaleidoscope of pinks, purples, yellows, and greens,

rounded out the audience.

 I looked at the mirror on the opposite wall angled down and saw what they saw.

I lay reclined in a chair, shoes off, inches from my deceased grandfather’s bed, sharing a

blanket with his corpse. The whistled theme song from “The Andy Griffith Show” wafted

about the room, sounding canned from the small TV speaker in the hand controls.

 “We’ve got it from here,” said one of the suited men, a small defiant cowlick

resisting the water he had thrown on his hair in haste. His chin asserted forward and

elevated as if trying to catch something.

 “Why don’t we take care of some paperwork,” said the purple-sweatered matron

extending a hand.

 The second attendant unfolded and unzippered a black nylon bag reversing it on top

of the cushioned stretcher. They intended to put my grandfather in that sack, and suddenly

after thirty-three years, he became mine, my Pop, and I didn’t want to leave him for that

final indignity. He had died alone. No one held his hand. No one shed tears as he rasped his

last breath, face slipping below the water line, and somehow I loved him. “I’ll stay.”

 “But sir, we prefer - ”

 “If need be, I’ll call someone else.”

 The nursing staff exited, and it was just the men - like Thursday mornings at my

grandfather’s club in the “Cricket Room” under the veranda.

 I took his feet, blued and arthritic, and slid him onto the gurney. I stepped back as

they folded up the sides of the bag around him, encapsulating his body until just his face

showed enshrouded in black nylon. A hand reached across, watch dangling, and started at

the bottom, pulling the brass zipper, oxidized green, towards the head, link by link. It was

the loudest sound in the room, and I smelled the salt air from my grandfather’s shore house,

the odor of fresh broken quartz when Pop took me rock hunting at the quarry, and the aroma

of his special scrambled eggs as a late night snack on Thursday sleep-overs of my

childhood.

 ‘I’d prefer to do that,” I said seizing the attendant’s wrist which paused and retracted.

 I pulled the zipper up to his neck and looked into his face, his open milk glass eyes. I

wished he had known that this moment would come, that one of us would die. Maybe then he

wouldn’t have left the farm in Pemberville to head east, to marry for money; he’d known that

the world goes on forgiving no one and forgetting everyone, that photographs of a

sheepherder in Greece don’t trump photographs of your only daughter, that adopting

her did not convey a sense of debt or obligation, that one day it would be her son who’d

share a blanket with him that could warm only one, the son who’d close the zipper over

his face.

 He could’ve stayed on that farm, settled for working the land and the soda

fountain at his father’s drugstore, loved the girl the next farm over, the one with honey hair,

blue eyes, and smelled like vanilla and cinnamon. Their lips would brush for the first time

like flitting hummingbirds, and the experience would be the sieve through which all their

future experience would pass. She would’ve loved him, bore him children who would have

borne us. Maybe he would have found her outside one day, barefoot in a floral dress, hanging

sheets on the line because she knew he liked the smell of sun dried linen. She’d turn, catch

him in his sweat catching her, and they’d make unbridled love in the tall grass of Ohio that

blew like ocean swells behind the chicken coops. He could’ve stayed on that farm.

 I walked the five minutes to my grandmother’s villa rehearsing how I would tell her

about Pop, that her husband of seventy-one years was gone. I ran through the euphemisms

trying to select which was most palatable.

 I found the front door unlocked, and the television in the living room threw blue

and gray shadows on the walls. I removed my shoes in the tiled entrance hall, careful not

to disturb the vigilance of the night nurse sleeping on the couch, the remote control

balanced in her palm.

 I tiptoed down the hall flanked by framed certificates marking my grandfather’s

career. My grandmother’s door was ajar, and I sat on the side of her maple four post bed

waking her. “Hi Nana.”

 “What?” she creaked and rolled over turning on the bedside light, a wired fluid

lamp with a red glass vessel and alabaster vase. Hand-painted dogwood blossoms decorated

the shade. She retrieved her glasses from the night stand and tilted her travel clock for a

better vantage, “It’s almost three in the morning.” Her face, swollen with sleep, looked for

an answer that is always concealed in language.

 “I know,” I said grabbing her hand. “Pop’s dead.”

 She released a long breath, held it, and then breathed normally again. “Come back at

eight-thirty. I’ll have breakfast ready, eggs and scrapple, your favorite.”

 My grandmother returned her glasses to the table and turned off the light indicating

the conversation had ended. I kissed her on the forehead and waited, listening to her breathing,

rhythmic and slow.

 “Go,” she mumbled. Seventy-one years married, and she grieved him in one breath.

 I arrived home, turned off the lights as I went upstairs and slid into the warmth of my

bed pulling close to my wife. The long t-shirt she wore had risen up, and I felt her

nakedness.

 Sensing my presence, she pressed against me, “You’ve had a long day,” she said

rolling over entangling her legs in mine. “How about a quickie to help you fall asleep.”

 Afterwards, I buried my nose in her hair, draped my arm across her chest, and nooked

my knees in hers.

 “You smell like cigars,” she said.

**THE END**