

Grand

I am an ugly crier. I can't deny it (only because I can't ignore the uncomfortable giggles it triggers from the people around me). You may be imagining a wrinkly, squished crying face, but that's not what I mean by ugly. You see, my face is not what makes me an ugly crier; although, I will concede my face is not easy on the eyes once my tears have made it puffy and soggy, like moss on a tree. I am an ugly crier because of the noise my body emits. The sounds that emerge from my lungs, throat, and nose are similar to what I imagine a bear sounds like when struggling to keep its head above water. There are sporadic snorts, raspy croaks, wet hiccups, and brief moments of silence when one might be concerned if the creature is still breathing. The worst part is, I can barely breathe while all this is happening because my body periodically gulps air through my diaphragm, causing my chest to expand and contract like when air is sucked in and out of an empty juice box.

For a more accurate visual, picture those four-year-old kids you've seen at Target with the shiny tomato-red faces, who are squeaking along a few feet behind their parents. You want them to be quiet, but what you don't know is that they want the same thing. These noisy kids, whom I have terrific sympathy for, already know they have lost whatever fight they were fighting; the issue is they can't help sounding like they are only sucking in air and never getting any out. It hurts them physically just as much as it hurts your ears. I know this because I was that kid. Unfortunately, I still sound like that kid. But while I'm on the topic, I would like to have it on record that these sounds are entirely involuntary. My body just thought "Hey you know what would be really funny? Making her sound like a toddler whenever something upsets her for the rest of her life!"

And here I am.

Unfortunately, I was in a church when I realized I would be an ugly-crier for life and understood it was not just some adolescent trait I'd eventually grow out of. Now, I don't know when you were last in a church, but these days the acoustics in those things are insane. They are definitely meant to have everyone in every corner of the room hear whatever is being preached. You can't turn a page in a book without every person in every pew hearing you. It turns out churches are also designed so every person in the room can see the front, where the podium and stage are. To achieve maximum visibility, the rows of pews are placed on an incline, so the first row is at the lowest point of the church and the last row is at the highest point.

My luck that day had me sitting in the center aisle about three rows from the front. This means not only could every person in the room hear my excessive struggle, but they could also see me. If you were standing in the farthest corner you would have thought I was crying right next to you. There was even a slight echo chasing each high-pitched huff and grunt fleeing my body. The worst part was I had no chance of being mistaken for someone else, and no chance of escape. I couldn't crouch or hide in the pew because I was in the aisle. I was in the aisle because I was in a wheelchair. I was in a wheelchair because I had broken my hip about a week earlier. I was not able to excuse myself from the room because the incline was too steep for me to roll my own ass up the walkway without help. And I was crying because my grandpa had died.

In the month of August 1996, I was born, and my dad's father had a stroke. Life began for me, and his as he had known it ended. I was not even a few days old when my parents carried me to Grandpa's hospital room; that is where we first met. Once he was able to leave the hospital, Grandpa spent my next and his last fourteen years in a different room. The biggest room at my grandma's house. He was paralyzed on the left side of his body, unable to produce words, and reduced to watching constant re-runs of "Law and Order." We visited Grandma's house to

see the two of them about once every month or two, which I feel is a normal amount of times to visit grandparents.

I only walked into his room when my older sister, Sam, went in. We always approached the right side of his elevated hospital bed -- our right, his left. I'm not sure if we did this because the door to the room was on that side, or because we were avoiding the chatter of the machines on the other side. Sam always greeted him first. I would wait right behind her, as if I was in a single-file line at the DMV. She stepped forward, said "Hey Grandpa. How are you? Miss you," while resting her head gently on the side of his chest, and laying her left arm across his tummy to mimic a hug. Grandpa opened his mouth to force a smile, rubbed his right hand on his tummy, and moaned and sighed few times to show he was happy. Then my turn. I stepped forward, said "Hey Grandpa. How are you? Miss you," while resting my head gently on the side of his chest, and laying my left arm across his tummy to mimic a hug. He opened his mouth to mimic a smile, rubbed his right hand on his tummy, and moaned and sighed a few times to show he was happy. Then, he looked at us both. His eyes grinned from behind his big glasses.

Everything was gentle. My touch, my voice. All of it as if I was greeting a small child. I was reserved, I held back. I couldn't look him in the eye. I'm not sure why I was so scared to touch or be around him, or what first made me feel so uncertain. Maybe it was the room. The paper white tiles, the sky blue walls, the machines, the crisp sheets, the tall bed, the crinkly medical mattress. Maybe it was the smell. The chilly air entering my nostrils, the bitter medicines, the unscented soaps, the microwaved food. Maybe it was his stillness. Maybe it was the way he looked at me, with eyes open and excited, as if he knew me, as if we'd ever shared a conversation.

Sam and Grandpa shared experiences during the four years before I was born. The two of them loved, laughed, played, and joked -- based on the photographs I have seen. On a road trip they sang "everywhere we go there is buffalo poop, poop!" -- based on the story I heard. But I was late. I was too late. But for some reason my time of arrival never bothered me as a kid. I never thought twice about what I had missed. I just looked at him for a moment at a time -- but never for too long, because I would get nervous and turn away. I think it could be a childhood thing to not consider the past, or what could have been. I mean, it's difficult to wonder about the past when you don't have a very long one yourself. I was a curious kid, always asking too much, yet I don't remember asking about Grandpa's past. Obviously, I knew he had a past, and I knew people spoke fondly of him. But I never asked.

I have a theory; it has to do with the room, the one Grandpa was confined to after the stroke, and until his death. I think that room stopped my mind, like a force which can't be understood until it's gone. I never saw him outside of it, and so I never really considered that he existed outside those walls. However, I don't think this only happened to me. It froze other people's perception of him too. You see, my father and I are very close, yet we rarely talked about Grandpa in depth, at least not while Grandpa's existence was limited to that room. Maybe it was because I was so young, or maybe, just maybe, it was the room.

The first time I heard my dad talk about Grandpa with a true sense of reflection, memory, and pronounced emotions was at Grandpa's funeral. Dad had said goodbye to a version of Grandpa fourteen years before, but never had the chance to mourn the man his father was. All those years, the room was merely a holding place, nothing more than a pause button on Grandpa's death. It's confusing, as if someone said "He is gone now, but just don't get upset yet. He will still physically be there to look at. Just put your emotions on hold." No one knows how

to talk about the dead while they are still living. There is not a *How to talk to Half-Living Loved Ones for Dummies*, so instead my father just waited.

But once that room was empty, once Grandpa was gone, there was only empty space. The bed, the machines, the TV, the dinner tray, all of it, gone. For the first time the room was just a room. My dad was able to feel his father's absence. He felt total absence.

Even though for fourteen years my dad had experienced some half-fulfilled mourning period, I had not. While Grandpa was in that room, in my eyes, he was a mute stranger, not a love one lost. He was someone I was supposed to love. He was a still figure with intentional eyes. He was someone I misunderstood. I never know why he looked at me through his frozen state, why he looked so alert amongst the silence of his body and quiet of his mouth. I was too detached to comprehend everything his eyes said, and he couldn't speak, so I only heard the machines, "Law and Order," and the groans he made. Until the funeral.

My dad gave the eulogy at Grandpa's funeral. He talked of Grandpa's passion for his family and grandkids. He told the crowd that Grandpa talked about how much he loved me and my sister before we were even born. He told the crowd that when my dad brought me to Grandpa when I was born, Grandpa's eyes smiled through tears. He told the crowd all of this, but it felt like he was telling me. I bet you can guess what happened next... I lost it.

I went into full toddler-in-Target mode. I cried as if I had not cried in years. I ugly-cried hard. I ugly-cried for a man I never really met, for a man who never spoke a word to me, for a man who saw me and everything I could be, even when I was not able to see him. All of a sudden I could feel him. I felt the tenderness in every gentle touch we shared, and felt the translation of the grunts and moans he made when he saw me. For the first time, I understood the

way Grandpa looked at me. His eyes cared. They longed and desired to tell me he loved me. For the first time I knew Grandpa love me unconditionally, and I made the whole church listen.

Everyone expects their grandpas to die before them, but no one really expects them to be alive while they begin to disappear. You never think about what it's like to see strong, brilliant, loving men lose themselves before they've even lost their life.

On the other side of my family, my mom's father is still alive. His name is Vernon. He and my grandma, Shirley, (I know it's weird I don't have cute names for these grandparents, but we grew up calling them by their first names) are the loveliest couple. If you've ever seen an old, southern couple with matching white hair while you're running errands, and thought to yourself "Holy shit, they are adorable. I want that kind of love," then you might have seen Shirley and Vernon. Their relationship is what movies try to recreate. But, I digress.

Vernon's love for everyone in the family can't be topped; he loves each person individually and with devotion. He does not just love you to make you feel good, he loves you because he believes in you, and he lets you know it during many long conversations, or rather questionings, about how you are doing, what you are going to do, if you are doing something you love, and if you he can help you in any way.

A little over a decade ago, Vernon retired. During his career, Vernon's passion and support extended beyond the family and home life. He was a cardiovascular researcher, a professor, and the president of a few medical societies which I can't spell and don't understand. He was brilliant, revered, and highly educated. I remember going to work with him when I was a kid. I would wear my purple corduroy overalls -- for some reason I felt this was my "best impression" outfit. When we walked down the halls, he'd stop to talk to his fans, but he spoke about me much more than the listeners wanted (he always wanted me to know he was my biggest

cheerleader). Everyone had to nod and smile to whatever he said in order to make a good impression with Dr. Bishop. To me, he was a celebrity; I was a big-shot just by holding his hand.

But those were different times. Vernon has Alzheimer's now. He has had it for years. He still loves to talk and learn about people, but his brain can no longer find the words he wants to use. Communicating with him has turned into more of a puzzle than a conversation.

But he hasn't lost his brilliance. Vernon's mind invents some pretty exciting new words. For example, the word purse might be replaced with capsule, pen might be trigger, shoe might be bump, sink might be system, food might be stuff, toes might be tackertins, folder might be gurrtifs, TV might be hitcherd. Sometimes "you are looking as a potato" means "you look pretty," and "hey lady" means "who is that large man in the house." You never really know what he will say next; it keeps you on your toes. He has even started new fashion trends. I think his styles would belong in a catalogue titled *Best of Both Worlds*, because he often wears a formal belt with his sweatpants, two different shoes, and shorts or swim trunks over his pants. He really is quite innovative. You can't help but laugh. You have to laugh, or else you get sad.

I don't feel the same nervousness with Vernon that I did with Grandpa. I feel ashamed to say that, as if I'm boasting. Maybe it's because Vernon and I have the one thing I don't have with Grandpa: a past. Vernon and I fished, pranked, cooked, laughed, teased, and carved walking sticks together. He reprimanded me with silly, obscure tasks when I was in trouble as a kid, believed in me when I felt no one should, and told me countless times to always work hard doing what I love, so that one day I can "get paid to play." We have celebrated countless birthdays, Christmases, Easters, Halloweens, Thanksgivings, July Fourths, and so on.

To be clear though, I still get scared with Vernon. Every time I greet him, I feel how much smaller and more fragile he has become. Every time I leave him, I watch him wave at me

from his driveway until my car is out of sight, like he wants me to know he will always be there waiting for me. His wave is excited at first, then slowly his hand drifts to his side, and he stands there for a moment. My heart beats fast and my face gets tense trying to hold back tears when I watch him from my rearview mirror. I can't help but wonder if this is what everyone else felt with Grandpa while he was in that room for all those years. You are sad when you go, but you know he wants you to go do the most with your life, even if it means leaving him behind.

Both Grandpa and Vernon are victims of the brain. Both of them existed for at least fourteen years in a mind foreign to the one which guided them their entire lives. Grandpa wanted to communicate but couldn't, Vernon wants to but can't. Vernon has had the chance to tell me how he feels about me, Grandpa tried to but couldn't. But the biggest difference is me. How I have touched, talked, and looked at each of them.

Whenever I start to walk out the front or back door at Shirley and Vernon's house – even if I'm not leaving, and am just taking the dogs or trash out -- Vernon grabs ahold of my arm. It is a firm grip but not painful, desperate but not harsh. It's as if he knows he does not want to be left behind, left in the home which he does not remember he lives in, left with the people he sometimes forgets, or left out of his own life. I have to look at him and reassure him he is okay and that he has Shirley to hold onto, even though five minutes later I know he will wander the house repeating "Help. Is anyone here?" because he has walked into a room with no one in it, and does not know where he is.

A similar thing occurs whenever I walk up to Vernon, stand by him in the kitchen, or sit next to him on the couch. He grabs my hand so tight one would think he was falling down. But he's not, he is just grabbing onto something real. He may not remember my name in that

moment, but he knows I'm real, and I'm aware of whatever he isn't. So he holds onto me, or whoever is there. He holds onto a little piece of reality.

Seeing Vernon this way is not easy, but at least I know I look at him with love and hug him with intensity. I did not do that with Grandpa. I did not listen for what he wanted me to hear. I was too scared to give him what he wanted, what he deserved. If Grandpa wanted to tell me to be calm, to be proud, to hear what his eyes, groans, and nods were saying, I didn't hear it. Is this because I had never heard his voice, and couldn't imagine what his words could be? I can never be sure, but I know I can never stop listening to Vernon. I must do everything I can to keep him from disappearing into his body. His mind is lost, I understand that, but it is still inside of him. If I let him feel trapped, then he'll be alone. If he is alone, then he is Grandpa.

I ugly-cried at Grandpa's funeral, so who knows what will happen to me at Vernon's. I can't even consider what noises my body will make. But I know in that cold wheelchair, in the middle of that warm church, I felt Grandpa forgive me for being scared, for feeling uncertain. We connected. He was removed from his body, he was free, and so was I.

The only one still fighting imprisonment is Vernon. So I will love him intensely with my touch, my words, and my eyes. I think Grandpa would want me to make sure someone listens to Vernon's eyes if his mind takes him under.