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An Intergenerational Christmas Tale

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When the police asked me for my father's dental records via email on December 23, 2013, my heart sank. It was two days before Christmas and the ill-timed query was, to put it bluntly, inconsiderate. Although the police didn't outright say they suspected my father was dead, and they needed his teeth configuration to identify old remains, their line of questioning strongly suggested it. Lack of consideration aside, and apart from the identification issue, I understood why the detective contacted me right before Christmas. I had reported Dad missing four months prior in September, something my family could not do for 34 years because of grief and denial, and his missing person's investigation was now bearing its grim fruit. Moreover, the detective was simply trying to resolve his last bits of work before the holidays and the New Year. I couldn't blame him, it was timing. But still, his blunt inquiry had ruined this year's Christmas by sending my mind reeling into a thousand tragic scenarios about Dad's demise. It was a

reality I didn't like to entertain at any time, especially Christmas.

As I read the detective's email my mind drifted back to holidays at my grandparents' house as a young boy. We always had such reliable Christmases in the old Thistle-McKenzie household. At 7:00 a.m. we kids would rush downstairs to open our presents; some gifts were greeted with gasps of genuine elation and squeals—the recipients truly astounded they had actually received what they asked for, no expense spared—but most were welcomed with the half-hearted smiles of disappointed children, sour that we got practical items like underwear, socks, or some cruddy oversized long johns. It was, after all, Christmas with my grandparents, and they always bought us grandparent-like things. At 8:00 a.m. we had our customary bologna, bacon, egg, hash brown, and pancake breakfast. We kids would eat until our little bellies were bursting and our vision blurred from way too much corn syrup. Corn syrup, for those who don't know, is the ghetto equivalent of real maple syrup, and our humble household had it by the bucketful. And we kids always made sure to toss the extra scraps of food under the table so Yorkie the Wonder Dog, our most trusted friend and ally, could partake in the morning gluttony, his frenzied grunts, wet licks, and frothy chomps our only thanks. Then at noon our extended family began to arrive. One by one they came, accumulating over the course of the afternoon, absorbed in the boisterous conversation, embarrassing stories, cruel jokes, and ceaseless laughter in

my grandparents' squished house. They were such good times. Secretly, though, amidst all the holiday cheer and Christmas spirit, in the back of all our hearts and minds, we waited.

I remember wishing Dad would come home the instant I opened my eyes on Christmas morning. I always pictured him arriving in a black overcoat, with rosy-red cheeks, a gentle yet rugged Marlborough man-esque look about him, and a long knitted scarf like Tom Baker from Doctor Who. His grand entrance always occurred at the perfect time—just as we little boys were unwrapping our treasured gifts. He would pause in the front alcove for a moment, scrape his boots on the doormat, brush the imagined gigantic Hollywood-style snowflakes off his broad shoulders then look me right in the eye and smile—all without saying a word. Then we kids would dash aside our yearly bounty of G.I Joes and Transformers and rush into his open arms, the toys rendered worthless in comparison to the prospect of seizing our long-lost dad. Before we embraced though, my brothers and I would give him “what-for,” berating him for abandoning us in Sudbury. He would retort with all the right answers and all the sweet apologies we longed to hear, and he always finished by promising never to leave us again, and we always believed him. Afterwards, we would hug and all would be forgiven; father and sons together after all those lost years—that was my yearly Christmas wish.

My grandmother also dreamed the Thistle-McKenzie Christmas dream. Every year she waited, just like us boys, for her lost son to return

home and every year, fuelled by boundless motherly hope, she over-prepared in the kitchen making way too much turkey, mashed potatoes, carrots, veggies, holiday cookies, and butter tarts. We watched in awe as she marshalled forth a formidable armada of gravy boats followed by a parade of squared sandwiches armed with little plastic hors d'oeuvre swords; and all was to be washed down by wave after ceaseless wave of coffee, tea, punch, milk, and eggnog laced with rum. The sheer volume of food was ridiculous and quite impossible for our mid-size family to eat. Sadly, we all understood what the cornucopia of food really represented, but none of us had the courage to name it and stop its annual inundation: it was my father's welcome home feast, befitting of his princely arrival. It was so sad. I remember sitting at the dinner table watching my grandmother out of the corner of my eye. Between laughter and smiles she discretely and periodically scanned the front door, poised to spring up at the turn of the knob, ready to welcome her lost son home with a slather of kisses, forgiveness, and love, but that never happened. Instead, Christmas passed and she carried on, as she always did, and the extra food and drink she laid out for his triumphant return was collected, embalmed in cellophane, then interned in the fridge, to be periodically exhumed as leftovers well into February. Similarly, the unopened presents addressed to her beloved "Sonny Boy" lingered under our abnormally long-erected Christmas tree until about mid March. Food, gifts, and a St. Patrick's Day Christmas tree were omi-

nous yearly reminders that something horrible had happened to Dad and that he wasn't ever going to come home. Yet, my grandmother, conscious of the emotional torture she put herself through, just couldn't stop herself from her enacting the annual Christmas ritual. It was her way of dealing with my dad's disappearance and, in its own compulsive way, probably preserved her sanity.

My grandfather, however, had a different way of dealing with it. During Christmas he sat glued to his purple armchair swilling snub-nosed bottles of Labatt 50 beer, silently cursing my father until his speech slurred and his inner thoughts became belligerent public announcements. To his credit, he did joke and laugh sometimes, but for the most part on Christmas he looked like some intoxicated cross between Archie Bunker and Fred Flintstone: an injured alpha male without the comic relief. I knew why he drank so much, it was no secret. He was a stubborn man, and he could never show weakness or admit to himself—sober or drunk—that it was his unforgiving iron expectations and fist that had driven his firstborn son, my teenaged dad, to needles, addiction, and ultimately death. No, he couldn't face that reality. Instead, Grandpa hid from the truth on Christmas, his ritual involving denial and alcohol, and lots of it, and every year he did the same thing—just like Grandma.

The detective's ill-timed email had taken me back to those repressed, bittersweet memories, and after the sorrow in my heart dissipated, I bowed my head and mourned for Dad's death, thanking the police for their hard work. The emotional pain that

seared in my chest was almost unbearable, but ultimately I knew it was healthy. It made me think of Dad during Christmas again, and that was a good thing. Thinking of Dad was something I dared not do since my grandparents died and I got sober for fear of relapse. I had to be cautious when I evoked the spectre of his memory; reminiscing about Dad had always made me want to use. It was a massive trigger that had on many occasions driven me into the streets seeking amnesia in the form of chemical or alcoholic oblivion. But this time was different, something within me had shifted. Thinking of Dad this year didn't mar my mind like before; the tone and subject of the police's email had changed that. The request for his dental records made me realize that I didn't have to wait for Dad this year, and it gave me a real reason to forgive him for not coming home all those Christmases long, long ago. It wasn't that he didn't love my brothers and me, something I had believed my whole life since childhood—no—he didn't come home because he couldn't, he was dead and probably had been since he went missing in 1982 when I was four. I thought to myself: what better excuse could there have been for a father not coming home to his waiting sons? In an instant I understood that all those painful memories, all those unknown lost years, all those resentments, they were all lies. I had only believed them because they were all I had, explanations conjured up in the mind of a broken little boy who was confused about the loss of his father, and now the truth of his disappearance was with me—the darkness finally fading.

As I sat in my study chair with teary eyes, a clarity of thought descended upon me and I realized that those tragic Christmases, those loveless childhood lies, those malevolent and deceitful spirits, they were much older than me, my father, or my grandparents; they were something ancient, something supernatural, they were living manifestations of intergenerational trauma passed down through our family, and we were by no means unique. Something I now understood from my own research in the field of historical trauma. The denial, the shame, the unresolved grief, the shunning, the misogyny, the mental health issues, the incarceration, the physical abuse, all had been standard practice in the Thistle-McKenzie household way before my brothers and I ever came around and all were characteristics of intergenerational trauma known to plague contemporary Indigenous families, and that was what really had taken Dad away all those years ago. In knowing this, I truly came to forgive Dad and I felt him smile on me for the first time in many, many years. I could feel his heart glow white-hot within my heart, filling every corner of it; it was the same feeling I had when I was three and he carried me on his shoulders, or when he'd tickle me, or play hide and seek with my brothers and I. With the back of my hand I wiped the tears that now flowed uncontrollably down my cheeks then shuffled through my bedside drawer searching for his picture, the only one I have of him. In it, he is only about 8 years old, five years older than I was when he was taken from my brothers and I. "I love you, Dad," I

whispered. “I miss you.” I then fit his photo in the silver picture frame Maria, a dear friend and close kin member, gave Lucie and me as a wedding gift and placed it next to the bed. In an instant, sweet childhood memories flooded my mind, memories that had been locked away for this very moment, memories I thought I had lost.

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When Walking is a Prayer

My right foot still hurts ten years after “the accident.” I guess it always will. Every morning when I place my foot on the ground, a shock of electricity shoots up my leg and spine into my brain like a bolt of chain lightning striking a rusty country weather vane. That first step is always the worst, always the most torturous, and the jolt of pain it produces hijacks my cerebral cortex and causes my face to wince as I try to gain my balance. Once I find my bearings, I hobble lop-sided toward the bathroom with my hands braced on the apartment walls; the cat slithering between my legs. I must look like a wobbly peg-legged pirate caught in a sea storm tangled up with a cat as I pivot down the hall. Sometimes when I can’t face the pain I simply hop on my left leg, leaving my right leg dangling behind me like some useless limb injured in a long-forgotten war. Bone grinding on wire, grinding on surgically constructed upper right ankle joint, grinding on deformed calcaneus bone (heel): that is my morning cup of coffee, that is

what wakes me up every day, and that is what reminds me that the fall from my brother's three-and-a-half story apartment window was real and that I'm lucky to be alive. The pain also keeps me sober by reminding me what it was like ten years ago when addiction, infection, and homelessness almost did me in after a failed surgery. For the constant physical pain in my foot and the harsh reminders it brings, I am thankful. The psychological pain, however, is just too much to bear sometimes. Occasionally I have nightmares where my leg is amputated just below the knee and I'm begging for change on Rideau Street and no one hears me. Other times I dream that a colony of maggots is eating the gangrenous flesh around the surgery incision and my toes are nothing but exposed bone. And sometimes I dream that I'm scraping the skin off my dying foot like I would scrape soft candle wax off a glass table with my thumb. When these nightmares visit me, I feel like I'm drowning in some uncharted region of the North Atlantic; I feel asphyxiated and helpless and utterly alone—just like I did when I was homeless. It's like the ocean surrounds and pulls me down then robs me of my breath and strength while I helplessly flail my arms and legs; and, just as I'm about to give up and lose consciousness, I awake gasping for breath, sweat soaked, and frightened. When I have these kinds of nightmares, I always wake up frantic and cast aside the blankets to catch a glimpse of my foot to see if it's healthy, that all my toes are there, and that it's still attached to my shin and knee. Without fail, my foot is always there waiting for

me; my toes smiling back, wiggling and full of flesh, assuring me that we've made it, and that Leviathan can never drown us as long as we're together.

My wife, Lucie, is equally if not more assuring than my toes. She always knows when I've had one of my nightmares. Her method of comfort is always the same: she smiles, rubs my back, and tells me it's OK, then she shuffles across to my side of the bed, opens the covers, and pulls me in and squeezes me until I fall asleep. Lost at sea, the bastion of her arms has rescued me from drowning on several occasions. She's also there in the morning when I step on my foot to receive my morning jolt; however, she's not so understanding then, as she almost always shoos me out of the room to catch those precious last five minutes of sleep. And when the pain in my foot is too much to bare after a hard day of construction work, Lucie is there to offer me an arm to walk with, or she makes me wear my special brace from Dr. Gutzlaff in Germany, which helps ease the pain.

I often wonder how I came to run marathons with my foot the way it is and people often ask me how it is possible (the doctors told me I'd never walk on my own again without medical aid). The truth is I don't know, I don't have those answers, but what I do know is that my mangled foot and the pain it brings has forced me to challenge and push myself when I was utterly defeated; it taught me to trust my body, myself, and my wife; and everyday it forces me to remember what happened when I gave up and blamed the world for my

problems and expected something for nothing; when I let addictions take hold of me. In these ways, the pain in my foot, and the nightmares it brings, has been a blessing, and, although it sounds cliché, I value each and every step I take. Every one is as a gift, is sacred, and, in its own little way, is a prayer for me.

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