

A Pile of Dinners

Jim Wisneski

“Hey, Jimmy?”

Alan turned his head and looked at his grandfather.

“Yea Pop?”

“You remember the first time we drove a car? Beautiful. Shiny. Black. My father was crazy; keeping it so clean.”

Alan took a deep breath.

“I remember.”

Alan never drove the car, but he had heard the story over a dozen times. It was one of four or five stories his grandfather would constantly repeat. Before Alan turned his head, his grandfather was talking about a fishing trip they went on when Alan was fifteen. Those were rare stories to hear, and only came when the Alzheimer’s took a break.

“Jim,” Alan’s grandfather said with a soft chuckle in his voice.

“Yea?”

“What the hell ever happened to you? I remembering signing up together and going over together. Then I lost you. Came back, and hell, I can’t even remember the last time I saw you.”

Alan looked down. He cupped his hands and let his face rest in them.

Jimmy was James Wallace, a soldier who was killed in World War II. Jimmy was also a childhood friend of his grandfather, Alfred Muliensky. It pained Alan that Jimmy had been dead close to seventy years and his grandfather remembered him, but Alan was sitting right there and his grandfather had no idea who he was.

“You know how things go, Al,” Alan replied.

If Alan played into the “stories”, they would end quicker. If not, his grandfather would go on and on and end up confusing himself and become upset.

Alfred turned his head and looked out the window.

“Looks like snow is comin’, I can feel it in my knee.”

It was the middle of August. They were in the height of a seven day heat wave.

“Might be six inches tonight,” Alan said.

“Eh, they’re never right. Prolly a foot.”

Alan picked his head up and stared at his grandfather.

The sun pierced through the window and created a silhouette of his grandfather’s face. The look was ironic; his grandfather was there, but not really. Alan tried to think about how life got to this point so fast.

It all started when his grandfather began forgetting the days of the week. Everyone said it wasn’t anything to worry about as some older people tend to forget things. Then Alan saw the change; it wasn’t gradual. At first Alan was hopeful because he thought by catching everything early, medication could have helped. But now, he wished it could have been gradual.

Right after forgetting days, Alfred’s calendar was the wrong month, food was left cooked, untouched in pans. When asked about it, Alfred said his wife, Betty, cooked it and then left. Betty had been dead for years; she died before Alan was even born. Alan booked the doctor’s appointment, again, hopeful. When he picked up Alfred, Alan was

no longer Alan. From the time they left the house until they arrived at the doctor's, Alfred called his grandson Pete, Tommy, Chuck, Willy, and Boot Strap. After the third name, Alan stopped asking questions and just agreed with whatever his grandfather said.

Then, at the doctor's, he was back to normal. He talked to Alan like nothing was wrong; he even thought they were at the doctor's for Alan.

"Okay, Al, I'm going to say a few things," the doctor said. "Just repeat each word after me as I say it."

Alan and Alfred nodded.

"Apple."

"Apple," Alfred replied.

"Banana."

"What is this, second grade?"

"Pop, just listen to him," Alan said.

"Alright. Apple."

The doctor's eyes met Alan's.

"Pop, he said banana."

"What?"

"The doctor said banana."

"Did your grandmother leave to go get the car? I told her I'd get it."

Alfred sat shaking his head.

"Al," the doctor said, "Cherry."

"If she floods that damn Oldsmobile again, I swear to god. . ."

"Pop?"

"Tommy, you old sailor!" Alfred exclaimed.

Alan looked at the doctor again.

"Okay, we'll stop. Al, can you look at me?"

Alfred looked at the doctor and smiled.

Alan touched his grandfather's shoulder.

"You okay, Pop?"

"I'm fine Alan, why?"

Alan felt like he was in a movie. After that, the course only got worse for Alfred. As the memories slipped away, so did his family. Alan became the unspoken caretaker for Alfred. It didn't bother Alan as he always loved being near his grandfather.

Three months after the first doctor visit, Alfred was placed into a home. It was a harsh reality that it would be the place he would remain until he passed. Alan couldn't afford the monetary costs nor the emotional costs of having his grandfather live with him.

Alan looked at his grandfather's eyes as they stared out the window. Small lines crept along the side of his face. His skin was beginning to really droop and his once strong looking face now resembled a worn man.

"I remember you pulling that bass in," Alfred said. His eyes were still focused on the outside. "Took you ten minutes to pull it in. Your father was so mad at me that I wouldn't help you."

"Yea, that was fun."

"I'm sorry about him, Al. Kills me inside trying to understand what he did. Stupid. Makes me feel like I failed as a father."

“Pop, you were a great father. And grandfather. It’s his loss. Stuff like that shouldn’t even be on your mind.”

“Yea, his loss. Hey, I’m glad you came by today. It was getting boring sitting here all week alone with no visitors.”

It was Tuesday. And it was the twentieth consecutive day that Alan had come to spend time with his grandfather. His wife was mad at him for it. She adored Alfred, but couldn’t understand why Alan would put himself through so much pain. Alan thought about it too, but not visiting would have been worse.

Alfred finally turned in his chair. He leaned forward and grabbed Alan’s knee. His eyes came alive, they shined straight at Alan. It was the first time in a while that Alan felt like he was looking at his grandfather.

“Listen, I want you to know that I’m proud of you. Damn proud. I may not understand what’s going on right now, but I know I love you. And no matter who says what, I remember everything about you. I remember the day your parents brought you home from the hospital. I was like a kid in a damn candy store. You took your first steps in my living room. You rode your first bike without training wheels on my sidewalk.”

Alan swallowed hard. His grandfather hadn’t spoken like this before.

“I remember everything, Al. And when you finally plopped that bass into the boat, the smile on your face was amazing. Those are my favorite memories; watching you grow up.”

“Pop, I love you,” Alan said.

“How ‘bout some dinner?”

Alan’s heart sank. He let out a breath, stood up and pulled his grandfather’s head into his chest.

“I love you Pop,” he whispered.

Alan kissed his grandfather’s head and walked towards the door. He already knew what his grandfather was going to say next.

“I’m hungry for a burger and fries,” Alfred yelled across the room.

Alan nodded and turned and was faced with a pile of dinner plates. This would be the seventh burger and fries meal that Alfred had wanted since Alan showed up. Each time he brought the plate back, Alfred said he wasn’t hungry. Each time Alan came back into the makeshift hotel room sized apartment his grandfather called home, Alfred was no longer Alfred. However, for Alan, there was still a glimmer of hope because as a kid, Alan and his grandfather loved to eat burgers and fries together.