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## More than Popcorn

“You know, your grandpa loves you very much,” my mom said as I robotically nodded my head in response. The words wasted no time bouncing around in my head, and were gone as quickly as they had entered. As we pulled out of the hospital parking lot, dirty, week-old snow covering the ground, I thought about the night’s events. It was a couple of days before Christmas, and my parents had decided to take my brother, sister and I to a holiday concert downtown. You know, one of those concerts you hear advertised non-stop on the radio, but would never attend unless fate had chosen you to win some sort of second-rate raffle? The show was followed by a visit to my grandpa in a nearby hospital. He’d recently had a heart attack, but he had a history of medical problems and it wasn’t really a huge worry. A polio survivor and doctor himself, he’d been well known for being too tough and stubborn to take good care of himself. The visit was somewhat melancholy, and the concert was nothing special, but it had made for a decidedly better Saturday night than most.

You see, every Saturday night until I was about fifteen, my parents had dragged me and my siblings begrudgingly to my grandpa’s house to visit for a few hours. Grandpa lived just a couple of minutes from our house, and frequent visits were one of the perks of my parents’ decision to move from Minnesota back to Iowa. I remember wondering on more than one

occasion why we couldn't just catch up with Grandpa a couple of times each year, like normal families. It was the same drill every Saturday – we would arrive around eight o'clock in the evening, the smell of cigar smoke overtaking us as we entered the ancient house. After some mandatory small talk (“Hi, Grandpa...School is going well...No, I don't have a girlfriend...”), my brother and I would start asking Mom when it was time to leave. Somehow, this strategy never proved successful for us, and we would be forced to sit through another episode of “The Lawrence Welk Show”, a program nobody under the age of sixty should ever be exposed to. At some point throughout the night, Grandpa would inevitably stir from his dusty leather chair. The slight action would always catch the attention of everyone in the room, as the man rarely showed any signs of life over the course of the visit. Like Pavlov's dog, our mouths began to water. His movement always meant the same thing – Grandpa was going to the kitchen to make us some of his extra-buttery, salty-enough-to-give-you-a-heart-attack-on-the-spot popcorn. As his frail, tired arms struggled against gravity to lift his body from the chair, the routine was always met by protests of “Oh, Dad – you don't have to,” from my mom. As if the words were simply a figment of his imagination, Grandpa would continue his struggle towards the kitchen, unfazed. I would turn away from his laborious steps, as if looking away would erase the fact that the man was going through hell just so my taste buds could experience the pleasure of some more of that popcorn. As his shaking hands finally returned from the kitchen to hand me the cold metal bowl, the excess of salt always covered up the bitter taste of guilt.

My reflection was abruptly cut short by the unmistakable bump of the van wheels against the cold concrete of our garage as we arrived home from the hospital.

The next thought I had about my grandpa came a couple of days later on Christmas morning when my mom, tears in her eyes, informed us that he had died in his sleep during the night. If I were a religious person, his dying on Christmas might have had some impact on the moment, but any significance was lost on me. As I gave her my best “consoling oldest son” hug, she told me once again, “You know he loved you very much.” The words stuck around for a moment this time, and I wondered why, if he had loved me so much, he had never thought to tell me. My mom always seemed to play the role of messenger, and I wondered if there was even a message being sent at all.

I’ve never been one for crying, and in fact, one of my earliest memories is of the death of our first family dog, wondering why the rest of my family was able to cry and I wasn’t. It’s not that these types of situations don’t make me sad; the sadness just doesn’t seem to add up to tears for me. It’s not something I worry about on a daily basis, but it does always lead to a somewhat awkward situation for me at funerals. Grandpa’s funeral was no exception. I went through all the customary motions of any funeral, hanging my head when possible to disguise the fact that my eyes were considerably less moist than the waterfalls surrounding me.

The time came for me to take one final look at the body in the casket. This is one ritual that is particularly confusing to me – what satisfaction does anyone feel from seeing the body of their loved one, so pumped full of chemicals and so covered in makeup that they are more of a doll than a human? As I looked at his face, I couldn’t help but notice that it was more perfect and healthy looking than I had ever seen it. While this might have been a pleasant sight for some, I found myself hating them for covering up his imperfections. To me, his wrinkles told the

story of a hard-working young doctor, exhausted from days spent worrying about how to put food on the table for his family. The bags under his eyes revealed the sleepless nights he'd spent taking care of my mom as a sick child. Should I peel back his makeup-coated eyelids, I would reveal eyes that have witnessed eighty years worth of lessons still untold to me. And still, these stories remained covered, so that we could pretend he had a perfect face. My eyes drifted down towards his larger-than-life hands, which seemed surprisingly "real" to me. Cold and lifeless as they might have actually been, I couldn't help but be reminded of all those Saturday nights. These were the hands that had struggled to lift his body from that chair; that, shaking, had handed me bowl after bowl of popcorn. These were the hands that worked painfully hard to satisfy me and my siblings, even if the efforts were not fully understood by us at the time. These were the hands that said what his mouth could not.

My thoughts were once again interrupted, this time by my mom's hand on my shoulder. I wondered how long I'd been standing there, lost in thought. Slightly embarrassed, I started to walk away, stopped quickly by my mom's hand, still on my shoulder. She leaned in and repeated those words I had heard so often over the years – "You know your grandpa loved you very much." Yeah, I know he did.