

One Last Thing

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Three days before Pops dies, he tells me, “My name isn’t Bob Whitley.” Pops is sixty-seven but the cancer doesn’t care that he’s too young and I’m too young and neither of us are ready for this.

I stop by the hospice facility almost daily. The day’s work keeps me away are terrible. Before hospice, Pops and I had never gone a day without seeing each other.

I bring him food he’s not supposed to have though no one says a thing. When you’re dying, rules are meaningless.

Hospice is a miserably quiet place. Everyone speaks in whispers here. The halls are carpeted to muffle footsteps and the air is heavy with disinfectant and illness. Some rich old Carson City widow donated her fortune fifty years ago so dying folks would have a nice place to die. The nurse behind the reception desk greets me like we’re old friends, pointedly ignoring the fast-food bag in my hand and the smell of grease and fat wafting through the foyer. I sign my name on the guest log and follow the carpet hallway to the fourth room on the right. For a place of death, it has a lot of light.

“Sunshine, I was thinking I might miss you today.”

Wendy is Pops's favorite nurse. She's in her late sixties, dyes her hair henna red and wears a lanyard decorated with Disney pins her grandkids send her.

She's standing in front of a closed patient room, scribbling away on a clipboard. "He's been counting the minutes 'til you got here," she says and pats me on the arm.

Pops is staring at the television when I knock once and push the door open. He turns his attention from the screen and my throat goes tight at the familiar smile he gives me. Pops has always had a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, like he's in on some big, cosmic joke.

Pops was once invincible in my eyes. He stood taller than most men, broad shoulders and barrel chested from years working at the plant. To me, he was as strong as any comic book superhero. Seeing him in this sterile room, sitting up in bed with all the weight gone from his frame, hits like a fist to the sternum. I turn my back to him for a second to catch my breath.

"There you are," Pops says. His face gets bright, an impish light in his eyes "What did you bring me?"

I want to run.

At home, in the ranch house with all of Pops' belongings, I pretend he's away on business, or visiting Fran in Dayton. I wear his favorite University of Oregon hoodie, sit in his recliner, and ignore the truth.

In this room, despite the windows looking out onto a landscaped garden and the floral curtains framing the view, ignoring the truth is not an option.

I square my shoulders the way Pops taught me. "Don't shrink away from the world," he'd say. I turn to him, holding up the grease-stained Jack in the Box sack.

"Is it Wednesday already?" he takes it from me and peers down at what I've brought him. He doesn't have much of an appetite these days. At most, Pops will manage a few bites. But it's worth the drive, the five dollars and the heartache when he shimmies his shoulders in delight.

Pops pulls out the hamburger in its wax wrapper and a handful of napkins.

"You're my favorite grandkid," he says, the same line as always. The lines around his eyes are deeper now. His face is gaunt, skin slack from the dramatic weight loss in so short a span of time.

I'm not in the mood for the *I'm your only grandkid* refrain. I sit in the big ugly armchair beside his bed and watch him dig into his burger.

The first time I brought him food, I'd included a burger for myself. I can't eat here. My stomach turns from the scent of disinfectant and death. Watching Pops struggle to breathe, the pain lining his face, leaves me unable to do anything but focus on holding it together.

We're running out of time. He can't sit for very long and most of his time is spent asleep. If we have only days or hours left together, I'm not going to spend it melting down when he needs me most.

"Tell me about your day," Pops says, wiping ketchup from his chin with a wrinkled napkin. The sweatshirt Fran gave him for their first Christmas is decades old, faded and stained and hangs off his frame.

I tuck my feet up under me and lean back. "Nothing to tell. Only got called a fag once today, and Randy punched the asshole in the face, so that was nice."

"Hope he got one in for me." Pops pauses between bites to catch his breath.

I came out to Pops a few months after my sixteenth birthday. He's a good guy with a big old heart, but he never really left the seventies.

"I'm nonbinary," wouldn't have meant a thing to Pops. I could have told him I was a unicorn and that would have made more sense to him. *Nonbinary* was gibberish.

Instead, I said to him, "you know how I was born a boy, and some boys decide they're meant to be a girl?"

Pops flicked the television off and gave me his full attention. "Like Sandra over at the Silver Dollar," Pops said.

I nodded. "That's me, Pops. Only, I'm not a boy, but I'm not a girl, either."

I was never afraid to come out to Pops. When his son, my sperm donor, decided he'd beat the "fairy" out of me, Pops took out a restraining order and told him, "It'll be a cold day in hell before you come near my grandson again."

When Pops got serious, the space between his eyes furrowed, almost comical with his bushy grey eyebrows and cartoonishly big eyes. "I'm not sure what you're saying, Michael. What's left then?"

"I'm not a *he* or a *she*. I'm a *they*."

It took Pops a while. He'd forget, refer to me as his grandson, but he'd always put a hand on my shoulder and say, "damn it, Em, I'm sorry. I'll keep trying."

Pops has been in hospice for just shy of a month now. In the beginning, they gave him a couple of weeks before Heaven's gates welcome him home. But Pops has spent his life being stubborn and if he's not ready to go, there's no taking him.

I think Wendy's the reason Pops keeps hanging on, days longer than expected. I get why he likes her. She's got a bawdy sense of humor, a voice like she's lived on two packs a day for forty years and calls him on his bullshit. For the last few weeks, she's spent hours after her shift, sitting with Pops. They share a love for old westerns, Clint Eastwood and "back in the day, when country music was good."

Pops takes a few minutes during each of our visits to get serious. The only way I'm getting through all of this is by not thinking about it. Pops put me first from the moment I was born, a month early and addicted to heroin. Putting him first now is no hardship. There'll be time later to cry and scream and ask *why*.

Once he's finished as much of his burger as he's going to and I've taken care of the trash, he reaches for my hand. "Now, now," he says when I start to open my mouth. "I know you hate when I get maudlin, but I'm not dying without you knowing this."

He squeezes his hand around mine. We have the same color eyes - pale blue passed down from his Swedish grandfather. They're a little misty, which always makes me fucking uncomfortable. "I'm sorry I never had much to give you," he says. "I wish I could have given you a better life."

Pops has said a version of this nearly once a week for the last month. I know he wishes life was easier for me, but I don't know how many different ways I can tell him, *it's not your fault*. The world is a hard place if you don't fit into a box.

The first time I came home from seventh grade, bleeding from my mouth and a shiner blooming on my cheek, Pops sat me down and said, "listen, if I could take this pain away from you, I would." He gripped me by my shoulders and kissed my forehead, fierce in his love. "I can't, but I can teach you how to protect yourself. Do you hear me? You don't deserve this so from here on out, you fight back."

"You're a good b-." Pops cuts himself off to cough into his handkerchief. I pass him his water and after a few moments he begins again. "You're a good person, Em. Not like your old man, and sure as hell not like me."

This is one of a dozen things about Pops dying that I hate. The hospice therapist told me that dying makes people introspective. That may be true, but I can't handle Pops spending even a minute thinking he could have done better.

We're to the part of our chat where Pops is blinking up at the ceiling like it contains the answer to where he'd gone wrong.

I untangle my fingers from Pops' hand and take his between both of mine. "You're the best," I say and then I can't say anything more because if I do, I'll start crying and never stop.

"Don't make me cry," Pops says gruffly, "or I'll write you out of my will."

The thought of Pops having a will is so absurd I laugh. "You don't have a will, Pops."

"The hell I don't."

"I never heard you mention one."

"I was never dying before now, was I."

"Pops, why are you telling me this now? I told you, I'll figure everything out."

"That's what I'm telling you, Em. Listen to me. How long has it been just you and me, hmm? I swore to take care of you, to give you a life worth having." He stops. There's pain in his eyes. His voice is hoarse when he says, "I've been a coward."

Pops is always a straight shooter but it's rare to see him serious like this.

"I should have told you this when the cancer came." Pops untangles his hand from mine. With effort, he leans over to reach into the drawer beside his bed. "I just always thought we'd have more time."

"I was about your age." He pauses, thinking. "Well, a few years older. Twenty-four." Pops retrieves a faded old envelope and hesitates.

I've never known much about Pops' life before me. He's one of those stoic men who don't talk about themselves. He'll talk about everything under the sun, from why Jimmy Carter deserved a second term to the men he works with at the plant, but never anything more personal.

"When you told me the truth about who you are, I wish I could have done the same. But I've known since you were little that you have more courage in your little finger than I have in my whole being." He takes a shaky breath and says, "my name isn't Bob Whitley."

When Pops was diagnosed, I spent several hours Googling pancreatic cancer. Some cancers spread to the brain, and I waste three seconds thinking maybe that's what's happening here. Maybe Pops is losing it.

"What do you mean? If that's not your name, what is?" There are half a dozen other questions warring for space, but Pops's expression of remorse kills them all.

Pops hands me the contents of the envelope. It's an old photograph, yellow with age.

"This was taken in '78," he tells me. It's of two men, both around the same age, leaning against an outer wall somewhere, a gas station or factory maybe. I can tell from the eyes and same bushy eyebrows that one of the men is Pops. He's slightly smaller than the other. He has his arm around Pops's shoulders and they're grinning at the camera. I've never seen Pops smile like that.

"I changed my name about six months after that was taken."

It's hard to look away from the picture. Pops in the photo is more at ease than I've ever seen him. He and the other guy are leaning into each other, comfortable and casual. I soak in all the details, from the brown loafers on Pops' feet, his collared shirt with the name Michael stitched on the pocket and the way his friend's fingers curl around his shoulder.

"That's Scotty," Pops nods to the photo. "We met in '75. I'd just gotten off a six-month gig on an oil rig and Scotty was working the front desk of a motel in Goleta. I didn't have any plans, or hell, any idea of what to do next. Scotty needed someone to work the night shift. He offered me a free room and it seemed as good a plan as any."

Scotty had classic good looks. His blond hair swept across his forehead, and he had twin dimples on either side of his wide, smiling mouth. "You look happy, Pops."

Pops is peering over my shoulder at the photograph of himself, forty years younger. "Those were good times." He hesitates and lifts his eyes to mine. "Don't you look at me like that," he says, fierce and proud. "I wouldn't change anything about my life, and I don't want you thinking I would."

Pops and Gramma were married for twenty-three years before she developed pneumonia one rainy winter and never recovered. He's been seeing Fran since I was ten. I've always known who he is. But the question raised by Scotty's arm around Pops' shoulder is on the tip of my tongue. Despite never fitting into a box in all my

life, my brain wants to take this photo and make it fit into my understanding of Pops and the life he's lived.

I look back at the photo, at the ease of their body language where they touch from knee to thigh to hip. There's a youthful joy in Pops's face.

"I know you're wondering, and you're too polite to ask." Pops nudges me with his elbow. "The answer is yes. We were lovers."

Lovers. It's such an awkward, old-fashioned word. But I guess it fits, since I can't imagine Pops saying *boyfriend* or *partner*.

"You'll catch flies," Pops says drily, chucking my chin.

I couldn't be more surprised than if Pops told me he was a wizard.

Pops pulls the photograph from my slack fingers. There's a wistful quality to his voice that makes my chest ache. "We were going to say *to hell* with the world, with convention. We had a plan. We had money and we were going to Los Angeles and get a little house with a view of the ocean."

"Pops." The name sticks in my throat, in the lump of sadness there. "What happened?"

Pops lifts a shoulder. "You know." He pauses. "People treat you pretty terrible and I guess I don't have to tell you that things used to be a lot worse. Scotty had a change of heart, is what it comes down to." Pops runs his thumb over the wrinkled photo. "He wanted an easier life than we would have had. He wanted the wife and the kids, and well. I'm glad things are different these days."

Pops is quiet for a long time. Everything I've known about him feels different now, a new lens with which to view him. When I glance over, his eyes are closed, his cheek wet.

"Pops," I whisper, just in case he's fallen asleep. "I'm sorry he broke your heart."

His lips curve in a smile and then his eyes open. "You know, I'm not sure he did, Em. I loved Gramma and I was a hell of a lot more crushed when she passed. It hurt like hell for a little while, but I think things worked out pretty good in the end."

"Pops. You said earlier, you and Scotty had money. What do you mean?"

Pops hesitates, shoulders going stiff. "Hell. This is the part I've dreaded telling you."

That can't mean anything good and I'm not entirely sure I'm ready for any more revelations.

“You know I try to live a good, honest life. I suppose part of that is penance for what me and Scotty did. We wanted to be together, and we knew it wasn’t going to happen if we stayed in Goleta. We were working at the motel and that meant all sorts of people passed through. In June of that year, a group of four robbed a Santa Barbara bank of nearly three million dollars.”

“We didn’t have a death wish but we also didn’t have more than a few thousand saved after busting our asses for two years. Scotty had a way of making even the most harebrained scheme sound like a good idea.” He paused and gave me a wistful smile. “Truthfully, I probably would have done just about anything with him, back then.”

“I still don’t know how Scotty figured out that one of the men was staying at the motel but given that they were all caught a week and a half later, I don’t suppose any of them were all that smart.”

I let out a bark of laughter. “Pops. You can’t be serious. You ripped off a bank robber?” It was so far-fetched, like one of the Western stories he used to tell me before bed.

“We didn’t want to cause anyone harm,” Pops says, his shoulders raised defensively. “And Scotty came up with a plan that worked, cause three days later, we were in Las Vegas.”

Pops is quiet again. The light has gone from the room, and I realize it’s nearly seven. Hospice doesn’t have visiting hours - they let me come and go as I please - but I think it’s probably a good idea to let Pops rest.

I start to get to my feet and Pops says, “When Scotty changed his mind, I decided I didn’t want the money anymore.” He’s quiet, his eyes closed. “We’d taken it to make a life together, and I didn’t want it.”

“What happened to it?” I’m not sure I believe any of this.

“I saved it.” Pops opens his eyes, focused on me. “I know it sounds crazy, and I guess it was my stupid pride. It wasn’t like I could give it back, and I didn’t deserve to spend it. I made enough money at the plant to give us all a decent life.”

I know Pops must feel the need to unburden himself, or whatever, but if this wild story is true, I don’t get why he’s sharing it now.

“You don’t deserve *decent*,” he says with the same fierceness as the first time he taught me to protect my face from a hit. “You deserve to go live your dreams, whatever they are. I couldn’t give you an easier life, but I can give you that.”

If there is any money - if this isn’t just an imaginative tale from a dying grandfather - it doesn’t matter. There’s not enough money in the world to make up for a life without Pops.

“I don’t want the money.”

“Even if I said it was my dying wish for you to, have it?”

I choke on a laugh. “*Pops*.” I’m half laughing, half crying and Pops is doing the same. What a pair we are. What a pair we’ve always been.

“I’m ashamed of what I’m telling you and that’s the truth. I did my best to make up for it, spent my life doing good, working hard. But my time is up, and I want you to have the money. Leave Carson City. Travel. Start a new life in New York, Miami. Somewhere you can be yourself.”

“Just promise me you won’t be sad too long.” Pops pauses. “Well. Promise me you’ll *try*.”

Promising anything right now is impossible. But I hold Pops’ hand and promise, “I’ll try.”

Eleven days after Pops tells me his real name was Michael Blake, me and Fran throw him a grand goodbye party.

“I don’t want a damn funeral,” he said. “Promise me, no standing around being sad.”

Instead, we invite all the folks who loved him to our backyard. Everyone has on cowboy boots and Grateful Dead shirts and we’re drinking margaritas in memory of one of the kindest, full-hearted men to ever exist.

The party is coming to an end when Fran finds me wiping my eyes in the kitchen. She’s no good at artifice or pretense. She scoops me in her arms and squeezes me tight. I cry in the shoulder of her *Black Muddy River* t-shirt. Fran always smells like rosewater and menthol. She’s not Pops but we love each other just the same.

I pull myself together and Fran reaches into her back pocket. "Your grandpa wanted you to have this," she says. She hands me a thin envelope and a single key on a ring.

"You have so much life to live," Fran says. Her voice is hoarse. I hope she doesn't cry. Fran crying will open the dam and I'm not sure I'm ready for that. She pushes my hair out of my eyes. "You look so much like him."

A few hours later, the house is empty. Fran's gone home to Dayton and it's just me in the little ranch house where Pops brought me home from the hospital, where he taught me to tie my shoes and stand up for myself and try to do what's right.

After I've finished cleaning up, restoring the house to rights as Pops would say, I take a look at the key. The attached note directs me to Pops' bedroom at the back of the house, overlooking the small yard. He preferred the light back here. The narrow hall is lined with photos. The one beside his door is the first picture taken of me. I'm three days old and Pops has me cradled in his arms. He's ignoring the camera, looking down at me like's not sure what to make of it all.

The door to Pops' room has stayed closed since he went into hospice. It doesn't feel right to open it now. The room is just the way he left it. I might keep it like this for a while, if not forever. Fran says the house belongs to me.

"You can sell it, if that's what you want," she said to me when we were leaving Pops' room. I'd never seen anyone die and Pops had taken his last breath with his hand in mine. I wasn't ready to think about the house.

Pops wasn't an especially tidy person. His ancient dresser is littered with scraps of paper, loose change, random bits and pieces of daily life. His shoes litter the floor from the door to the closet like a haphazard trail.

There's a small fireproof safe in the back of Pops's closet, hidden behind old winter clothes, a pile of blankets and a couple of boxes. It's been there as long as I can remember.

"That's where my gun is," he said when I found it. I was seven and we were playing an aggressive game of Hide and Seek. He discovered me crouching on top of it, hidden from view behind Grandma's favorite.

I push aside the coats, shuffle the piles out of the way and the safe is there, same as I remember. It takes two tries to get it open with the flimsy key and the lock looks like it's never been opened.

There's no gun.

I get down on the floor, legs crossed. I'm at eye level with the dark interior of the safe. There's a large bundle inside and I reach for it.

The fading light is dim and it takes a second for my eyes to adjust. It's a makeshift envelop that looks like it was constructed out of duct tape. It's held shut by several large rubber bands.

When I get the envelope open, the first thing I see is a note that says, "for Em."

There's nothing written on the other side, it's just a scrap of paper and my name.

Underneath the note are two bundles wrapped in old plastic bags, the kind newspapers used to come in.

I get the first one open. It's a stack of money. I set it on the floor and unwrap the second. More money.

It takes several minutes to count the stacks of bills. It's all hundred-dollar bills.

When all the money is counted, there's two hundred thousand dollars laid out before me.

My face crumples. The tsunami I've been avoiding since Pops sat me down and said, it's pancreatic cancer" makes land and the grief pours out.

I cry for several long minutes, my face wet.

The daylight is almost gone when I use the sleeves of Pops's hoodie to wipe my face. I look down at the stacks of bills again.

And then I start to laugh.