

## Papa

I'm sitting at the small desk next to window in my mom's classroom. My brother, Zach sits at the computer desk. "Joel's been texting me about Papa," Zach quietly says to me. Joel is our cousin. I look at Zach's face for a moment and then drop my eyes to the papers sprawled out across the desk surface. After a couple of minutes of silence, I look toward my mom who is sitting at a round table as she eats lunch with her co-workers.

"What's the news on Papa?" I ask her abruptly. Zach looks to our mom with a forced patience as we wait for her response. She looks at us as tears fill her eyes.

"I didn't want to tell you guys at school, but it isn't looking like he's gonna make it." My heart starts beating out of my chest and a sick feeling overtakes my body. "They gave him blood thinners for the heart attack," she takes a shaky breath, "But the blood thinners caused bleeding on his brain." She uses a napkin to blot under her eyes. Zach pushes his chair from the desk and walks out of the room. I decide to follow him. I hug my mom and then leave the room to track my brother down. I can see him walking quickly down the wide high school hallway. I jog to catch up with him. We don't talk. We just walk in silence.

We walk up the stairs and down a hallway filled with teenagers. The walls are made up of green lockers, and I watch as the locker numbers decrease as we make our way further down the hall. Every five feet there is another group of people gossiping over the drama of the day. I look up at Zach and see his head hung low, his eyes fill with tears, but he blinks them away before they can fall down his cheeks. I don't know if its shock, or if it's the nurturing and protective feeling I get, but I don't

cry immediately in emotional situations. That always comes later for me, when I have time to be alone and process my own thoughts.

A group of senior guys shoot nods to Zach and shout out to him, "Nubbin!" Zach nods back, and lets out a single breathy laugh. After we pass by them Zach's face drops again. Usually with bad news, I would sulk and shut everyone out, but this time I feel the need to lighten the mood.

"Nubbin is the worst nickname," I say to him in a joking tone.

"Yeah, I know," he says with another breathy laugh. The nickname started when they were underclassmen on the football team. His teammates started calling him Kennubbin for some reason, and overtime it shortened to Nubbin.

"So is Life Alert. You got some shit nicknames, man," I tease him. He laughs again. They called him Life Alert because he dislocated his hip during a football game his sophomore year, so you know, he fell and couldn't get up. The bell rings and students start slamming lockers and make their way to their next classes.

"Well, I'll see you at practice. Hang in there Livi," Zach says to me.

"Yeah you too." We part ways and go to class.

"Liv!" My eyes pop open at my mom's yelling and the beeping sound of my alarm enters my ears. I smack the alarm clock and pull myself out of bed and make my way downstairs. "I don't know how you sleep through your alarm like that," my mom says to me.

"I don't know. It's six in the morning." I say as I enter the bathroom. I push the shower curtain out of the way and turn the shower on to heat the water. As I

shower, I think about how everything around me feels normal, but my body feels heavy as yesterday's news weighs on me. Every time I move I feel out of breath.

I shut the water off and reach my arm out to grab my towel off of the towel rack. I dry myself off and wrap it around my body. As I step out of the tub, I hear the phone ring. The sound instantly makes my stomach churn and my muscles tense. The ringing stops and I can faintly hear my mom talking in the kitchen. I stand frozen, water droplets from my hair falling to the floor, leaving a small puddle. I take a deep breath and walk to the stairs to go to my room. When I reach the stairs I look into the kitchen and make eye contact with my mom. Tears pool inside her eyes and she shakes her head. I turn and walk up the stairs. When I enter my room I shut the door and a shock washes over me. My body is sore and there is a lump in my throat, but I don't cry.

We go to school, just like an average day. My mom tells the staff the news, so all of our teachers know. They don't say anything to me about it. Instead they give me soft compassionate looks when I walk into their classrooms. At track practice the head coach asks me "How's your dad doing?"

*He just lost his father, so how the fuck do you think he is?* "I haven't really talked to him but he's okay, considering. I guess." My dad is the sprint coach for the track team so all of the coaches are aware of the situation. Later our triple and long jump coach comes to talk to Zach and I as we stood together waiting to do our run-throughs.

“I’m sorry to hear about your grandpa,” he says kindly. I nod and Zach thanks him. “It’s tough going through this kind of stuff. This is your first loss of a grandparent?”

“Yeah. It sucks,” Zach says with a single forced laugh.

“Well if you two need anything let me know.”

“Thanks,” we both say.

“And tell your dad I’m thinking of him.”

“We will,” Zach says with a nod.

Zach and I pull up to our house after practice to see my dad’s truck parked in the driveway. I’m not ready to see him. I try to prepare myself for what awaits inside by breathing deeply, but the truck feels suffocating like it’s refusing my lungs of oxygen. I manage to collect my emotions and we walk inside the house to see my mom and dad sitting in the kitchen. Their reddened eyes look towards us and my heart shatters. I make my way to my dad and hug him. I can feel his body tense. Tears form in my eyes, but I blink them away just as quickly as they appear. My dad tries to smile at us but tears form in his eyes.

“It’s gonna be hard, guys,” he says to us through tears. We nod at him as tears form in our eyes. Zach breaks down and my dad hugs him. My mom is crying and pulls me into a hug.

“So what even happened?” Zach asks.

“Well they gave him blood thinners because of his heart attack but they said if there are weak blood vessels in his brain they could break. He started thing Mama

was his mom and shortly after he never fully regained consciousness.” As my dad is telling us this story I watch his eyes pool with tears, then he blinks them away. He looks tired. “There wasn’t much they could do except keep him on life support but there was too much damage to his brain and he wouldn’t be the same person. Of course your Uncle Mike wanted to keep him on life support. He said he would take care of him, but it was up to Mama and the rest of agreed he wouldn’t want to live that way.” I watch his tired eyes as they hold back the hurt he feels.

I lie in bed, unable to fall asleep. The image of my dad’s eyes as he told us what happened is keeps replaying in my mind. I squeeze my eyes shut and when I open them the tears come pouring out. My body shakes and I bury my head into my pillow to muffle my sobs. The crying worsens when I realize the last time I saw Papa was at my track meet in Lander, just one day before his heart attack. I was messing around with friends when I realized my grandparents were leaving. I tried to catch up with them before they drove away but I didn’t get there in time. The last time I saw my grandpa, I didn’t even get to hug him bye and tell him I loved him. (On Christmas Eve this same year, I will have a breakdown and tell my dad this has been weighing on me. He’ll be my emotional rock and tell me that Papa knew I loved him. Then he’ll hug me, and I’ll get a nosebleed and stain his shirt. You know, just the perfect way to end an emotional moment). I wake up in the morning with sore muscles and a massive headache. This feeling reminds me so much of Colton’s death. I wonder how long the pain will last. I wonder if proper goodbye would give me more closure. But does anyone get proper goodbyes?

It's the nineteenth of May, the day after my brother's eighteenth birthday, and we are on our way to Fort Washakie for my grandpa's funeral. The radio is barely audible through the sounds of static and rain pelting the Chevy Silverado's metal armor. I watched the water stream across the truck window; the wild overgrown plants are just a moving blur in the background as we travelled down Wyoming Highway 28. I think back to when Zach and I were kids and pretended to be in control of dragging the water across the window's surface with our totally awesome but pointless superpowers. Our fingers dragged across the glass in the direction the water flowed, our arms and hands tensed, our faces scrunched in overly strained expressions. I turn my head to glance at Zach. He is sleeping with his head resting on my pillow I let him borrow. His heavy breathing has caused condensation on the window. I lay my head on the headrest and shut my eyes, forcing myself to sleep.

I'm startled awake when Zach punches my arm. I glare at him as my lungs calm and my breathing slows. He looks away as if nothing happened. I shut my eyes again. "Stop breathing. You're fogging up the windows," I say to him, my words drenched in lethargy. I open my eyes a few minutes later to see *Olivia sucks* scrawled into the mist across the window accompanied by a male appendage. I shake my head and lightly chuckled before going back to sleep.

I'm woken up again, this time to my dad's voice. "Liv, we're here." I look through the window to see the old, white trailer house sitting on the large weed covered lot that sits within the Fort Washakie Reservation. My mom is brushing her hair with the small brush she keeps in her purse.

“Do you want this to comb out your hair, Liv?” She asked me while looking into the small mirror in the sun visor.

“No, I’m okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, it’s just gonna get wet in the rain anyway.” I open the truck door and step onto the gravel ground. I quickly walk toward the white gate that leads into the yard, dirty puddles of water splashing underneath each step I take. When I was a kid I could never figure out how to open the gate because the latch confused me, but now I swiftly lift the latch and jog up the ramp to the front door that my dad is holding open.

I look around at the trailer and it looks empty. All of the Virgin Mary and Jesus knickknacks are still there. The many drawings by us grandkids are still on the wall. Photos of family members are still dispersed throughout the house, but it just seems so different. My eyes lock on Papa’s recliner. Vacant. Even through the small dogs are barking at us, it seems quiet. The T.V. is off. There isn’t the usual aroma of coffee wafting through the air mixing with pipe smoke. My grandma hugs my dad. They held onto each other for a moment. She seems a little disoriented. Lost.

“Oh hi, Olivia,” she says just before leaving a big kiss on my cheek.

“Hi Mama.” As I wrap my arms around her small frame, my breathing hitches and a lump is lodged in my throat.

We all grab our bags that held our funeral clothes. My mom and I change in my grandparents’ bedroom. I’ve probably only been in this room once before. I enter the room and instantly look at the bed. The twin sized bed. That’s what I

remembered about his room from the first time I was in here. It's such a tiny bed for two people. *Well, now for one person.* I wonder what it must feel like to lose your partner of 52 years. Mama had been in love with Papa since she was 19, and now he's just gone. I look at the rosaries sitting on the nightstand. *It must be comforting to believe he's watching from above. I'm glad she has that belief to cling to.*

After getting changed into my funeral clothes, I walk out of the bedroom and join my brother in front of the wood stove. The heat instantly warms my frozen limbs. We used to plant ourselves in front of this stove while our family sat in the living room and talked. It was the same scene every time we visited. Papa sat in his recliner, his handsome features still prominent on his wrinkled face. His witty smirk was indicative of his personality. He was always the funniest person in the room. He teased my gullible grandmother and even after 52 years together, she believed everything he said. My dad joined in on the teasing. They were a father, son comedy duo. When she'd finally figure out they were messing with her, she'd laugh and shake her head. Papa looked from person to person, appreciating the smiles he had caused on each of our faces. He laughed at his own joke and then turned to the T.V., brought a pipe to his lips and took a puff.

I look at my dad across the room and I see the same handsome features I always admired in my grandpa. The lump in my throat comes back. It hits me in this moment how hard it must be to lose his dad. I can only imagine, but I try not to.

The Blessed Sacrament Church is full of people saying goodbye and paying respects to Papa. Honestly, the whole funeral is a blur to me. I remember there being flowers. I remember seeing Papa's two remaining brothers and one sister saying



their goodbyes. I remember my dad's siblings crying over the loss of their father. I briefly remember singing hymns. My dad tells me we sang "Gather Together", "Immaculate Mary", "How Can I Keep From Singing", and "Holy God Praise Thy Name". These titles don't mean much to me since I'm not particularly a religious person, but I'm sure they comforted my dad's Catholic family. I remember seeing my Papa lying in a casket. His face was expressionless. No witty smile. He had red paint on his cheeks, a tradition of a Shoshone burial.

Papa was buried in a private family lot on their land on the reservation. Everyone was standing under umbrellas, the rain pouring down on us, our feet coated in mud. It smelled of wet soil and foliage. My parents, Zach and I were crammed together under one umbrella. My dad's sister and one of his brothers were weeping while singing some hymn. My dad's other two brothers stood with their wives under umbrellas with tears in their eyes. My cousins looked back and forth from each other to the grave. The priest concludes the burial and everyone makes their ways to their vehicles. Two of my uncles assist the priest to his van and when he takes off he drives right into a ditch and gets stuck. My mouth spread into a smile, my cheeks fought to stop it but couldn't overpower the light vibrations that rumbled through my body erupting into a fit of laughter. My dad starts laughing, then my mom and Zach.

Papa would have found that funny.

Ten days later my brother graduates from high school. Friends and family from my mom's side and dad's side are in our home celebrating. Zach's artwork is

presented around the house and yard on tables, chairs and easels. Mama is looking at all of the paintings and drawings when she sees the drawing Zach did of Papa. She becomes emotional and my dad comforts her. Tears form in my eyes not just for Mama, and her loss of a partner, but for my dad as well. My dad's strength has been unwavering throughout this time. (A strength I hope to emulate in future struggles). I sometimes don't realize how much he's hurting because he acts as a rock for everyone else, but then I remember how good I am with suppressing my emotions, and I remember whom I get that trait from.

My mom has been an amazing of strength as well. She's there for Zach and I, and also my dad. When my dad needs her, she acts as his rock. She had to fight with the school administration to get a day off for her and my dad to go to the funeral, but she won dammit. When I asked her what she remembers from all of this, she says she most vividly remembers hugging my dad when she got home from work, and them crying together. She can see the pain my dad is feeling more than anyone else.

I see bits of Papa in my dad everyday. His facial expressions. His tendency to tease people, simply just to catch them off guard and make people laugh. My grandma now lives in a senior home. When visiting her, my dad teases her by saying, "You gonna go on any hot days with any of the men in this place?"

"Oh, there's just one man for me," she says shaking her head with a laugh.

My grandpa on my mom's side often talks about the respect he has for Papa. He'll say, "Your Papa," as he points at Zach and I, "was one of the kindest men I've ever met. He was a great man. You know who else is a great man? This dad of yours."