

Dropping Bombs

I squeeze my mom goodbye for probably the fifth time that day. We have caught up on as much as we could; I fill her in on finals and work while she fills me in on the lives of my step siblings. She lives in Pennsylvania, and I always hate to see her leave. Our goodbyes always seem to drag out this way, as if we are never really ready to say goodbye for real. When I was growing up, I never expected to have such a healthy relationship with my mother; I hug her one final time and tell her that we're actually leaving this time.

"You know, I grew up with an alcoholic. If you need to pick my brain, or ask any questions, give me a call." She says as a goodbye with the snap of a Tupperware lid. Her comment makes me stop in the doorway of my grandmother's kitchen. It almost feels like it is the first time I have heard the word "alcoholic" spoken in the home before. On top of that, her nonchalance catches me off guard.

"Are you sure?" I ask, surprised.

"I think it's about time we talk about his story, don't you? Just let me know."

Later that evening, I text my mom and she reassures me that she's totally fine with answering some questions. The anxiety I feel about starting a final project over from scratch is quickly overcome by the inspiration and curiosity I feel about the prospect of learning more about this person, my grandfather, who meant so much to me. Growing up, my brother and I never knew our grandfather as an alcoholic. We knew him as the man with the booming laugh, the one who never turned down a good joke, and the one with the very best hugs; never the alcoholic. But I always knew he was a fighter. When we were younger, he beat throat cancer. Because of this, it made it even harder to believe that we lost him to cancer just a few years ago.

I take a deep breath and send her the short list of questions I could come up with. Hitting the 'send' button on the email was harder than I expected it to be. Now that the opportunity was in front of me, a part of me was afraid to hear what my mom had to say. I wasn't afraid that my opinion of any of them would change-- that thought never crossed my mind. Hearing about those you love hurting and suffering are never easy stories to hear. But when it comes to life, you have to take the good with the bad and make the best of it. That was something he would have done anyway.

My first question: Did he start drinking during or after the war?

Whenever the topic turns to Vietnam or the way our soldiers were welcomed home comes up, my grandpa was always my first thought. Much like his alcoholism, the war was another topic that always seemed to be strictly off limits. Because of this, I often wondered if his drinking started because of Vietnam. Although, before he passed, the war was something that he started to talk about more freely.

Her response: His drinking definitely began *in* Vietnam. The military and the war were the beginning of his addiction. After the war was over, the soldiers coming home were unwelcome and accepted with little celebration. This combined with the demons he brought back from Vietnam hurt him too much, and he turned to alcohol.

This has always been an image that bothered me, and one I tried to forget when it came to my own family. In my head, I saw the general public at least welcoming *my* family back home with open arms. I knew this wasn't the case, but imagining the opposite is just too difficult.

My next question focuses on her. "How old were you when you first knew he was drinking?"

She tells me a story about when they lived in North Carolina on a houseboat. "As long as I can remember I knew he drank. I remember he was angry and got really mad at times, but I did not connect it to the drinking. I think the first time I realized he had a problem I was in first or second grade. We were vacationing on our house boat and he was over on someone else's boat drinking. Grandma took us with her to try and find him. When he was getting off of the other boat, he fell in the water because he was so drunk. Grandma had to carry him to the van to take him home. Kat and I were so scared. He sat in the back of the van crying and rambling. We both sat beside him crying too; we just did not understand. Grandma was silent, she did not say a word. She just drove us home. It was then I started to connect the drinking to his behaviors. Thereafter, I lived in fear each time he drank heavily, we just never knew where it would take us. Now that I am older, I can remember always feeling sorry for my daddy and being so angry at my mom. She was always yelling at him, and clearly, he had a problem. It was not until now I realize the pain she had to carry. It breaks my heart to think about it."

As I read over this story, my heart breaks and my eyes begin to well with tears. I have to step away from my laptop to process the words I have just read. This didn't sound anything like the man I knew, and I can only imagine the pain and fear my mom, aunt, and grandma were feeling. My grandpa was a proud man, and through this story, I'm beginning to realize why he never wanted to share these struggles. As his granddaughter, knowing the person he will become, I don't see it as something to be ashamed of.

I ask about his recovery and if he went to AA because I never thought he went. I'm surprised to learn that he did.

According to my mom, my grandpa went to AA several times. She tells me about how his sponsors were more like close family and how she even called them aunt and uncle. He fell in and out of drinking several times. It was worse in North Carolina because his sponsor lived in Ohio. My mom writes, "He never went to AA there, which was my high school days. I honestly could have cared less what he did, I had so much anger toward him. North Carolina was his bottom, that is why he ran us all back to Ohio. He continued to drink until I graduated, but he did not seem as bad. He seemed to have more peace on Ohio. When you were born, he stopped and never picked up a drink again. As Kiona saved all us when he passed, I think you saved us all back then. Everything turned around then, we all started to heal. And life as we know it began. There truly is something to be said for new birth."

It's at this point when I have to close my laptop completely. I allow myself a moment to sob and the tears don't quite stop as I begin to type again. I've carried so much guilt since his passing that I can't tell if her sentiment makes me feel better or worse. I wasn't around nearly as much as I should've been due to my own stupid situation my younger self had found its way into, and I still haven't forgiven myself for it. Kiona is my now adopted cousin whom my aunt began to foster right after my grandpa passed. She brought so much healing and light to the darkest time in our family's story that I almost don't feel like the comparison is fair because of my own insecurity.

When I finally manage to pull myself together, I ask her how long he was sober.

"Grandpa was sober as long as you have been alive; he stopped then." She continues on to say, "He was at peace; he was less angry and more loving. He drank because he did not love himself. He always seemed to have that battle raging in him. That battle lessened over those sober years. It's funny, they drink to cover the pain, but in the long run, it just intensifies it. Makes it worse."

I never realized that I shared this struggle with my grandpa. For years, I've carried this same battle, hating myself for lost time and opportunities due to poor decisions. To be honest, my battle might have been easier if I knew someone so close to me understood it. But as someone who understand that battle, I know how hard it is to admit that to just yourself, let alone anyone else.

As I've written this out, I think I've come to understand why alcoholism was such a taboo. It was for my sake. My younger brother's sake. We were brought into a world, a family, where that man, my mother's alcoholic father, didn't exist anymore. I never knew the man my mother talked about, but I knew the man he became.

I only wish I could have heard his story in his own way and in his own time. I wish I could have told him that his past was nothing to be ashamed of because of everything that he overcame. I wish I could have seen the smile on his face when I overcame the battle myself.