Until Everything Goes Blurry

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I'm never awake this early. October sunlight, in through the window low and flat, warms my feet. Already, chain saws whine, the crews still cleaning up after the hurricane that hit here a month ago. That's what wakes me, I think, the chain saws. I hear birds, the early morning kind. Outside, metal doors meet up with metal latches and car engines cough to life. Out on the street, my neighbors exchange tentative, muffled hellos. I'm jealous of the coffee that must be in their aluminum mugs with the plastic tops. I want coffee, too. Thick with whole milk and a spoonful of sugar to blunt how strong I'll make it. The sun makes everything drowsy and warm and content and for now, just swirling my legs beneath the covers is enough. I breathe through my nose, slow and easy.

I think of a girl in my British literature class. Hips, curly hair, and soft, pale skin that I do not know. I think about how her cheeks flush red when she raises her hand. How her question comes out stuttering, but if you wait it out, full of insight and wit. I pull the covers close to my chin and settle into the bed. I lie there like that, the chain saws buzzing. The phone rings.

This thought: either someone selling long-distance plans or something worse. The walk to the kitchen is therefore pregnant.

"Hey buddy." My dad's voice. "Did I wake you up?"

"No," I say, and this time, this one time, I am not lying. With the phone between cheek and shoulder, I move automatically, taking the coffee can down from the shelf and fishing around in the drawer for a spoon. "I was up."

"Sorry to call so early."

I clear my throat. "No, it's OK." I clear my throat again. "How are you?"

"Pap passed away last night," he says. Immediately after he says this, I notice that he is not crying.

"Oh, no," I say, staring at the spoon I've heaped with the tiny brown crumbs. I hold it like that for a second, conscious of not letting the grounds tumble from the top of the little pyramid. It's a balancing act of the hand muscles and then, in a strange flash, I realize that I'm good at it.

"He called out for Sis around four," my dad says. "By the time she got downstairs, he was gone."

Neither of us says anything for a moment. "Oh, no," I say again. No other words come.

"We think it was, you know, congestive heart failure."

"I'm sorry," I say. I can see a little of my grandfather now, his eyes behind the thick glasses, his blue Post 13 Legion hat up top. "He was a wonderful man." Only now am I awake, now, after I remember this: Pap, hooked up to his oxygen tank, grayer and more wrinkled than I'd remembered him, coughing each time he laughed, which was often. That was two, three years ago?

"How are you doing?" I ask.

"I'm OK," my dad says. "Keeping busy, I guess."

"He was a good guy."

"I know, buddy," my dad says. He takes a deep breath. "I'm OK. Ryan's taking it pretty hard." Ryan, my younger brother, whom Pap called "Ry Guy." Ryan, the college baseball coach, the kid who started shaving his head three years ago because he got bored with combing his hair, who reminds me more and more of a wisecracking drill sergeant, is crying right now. I try to imagine what that sounds like, but I've never heard it before.

"What happens now?" I ask.

"Pap wanted to be cremated," my dad says. "But no service. Not much to come back for, really."

I do cold math. My students have their midterm on Monday. My friend Rutledge can cover that. Then Norfolk to Baltimore in four and a half hours. Stop at my older brother's place, get some gas and maybe a sandwich, a Dr. Pepper. Then Baltimore to Cumberland: another three hours, some traffic heading west. All very clinical, logical stuff.

"No, Dad," I say. "I'm coming home."

"Don't feel like you have to. I know you're busy."

"I'm not that busy," I say. "I'm coming home."

I hang up and go back to bed, the municipal-sized chipper-shredders now harmonizing with voices that belong to big men in charge of other big men. I prop pillows behind my head, tug on the covers, and wait for the warmth to come back. I feel the sun on my legs first. I decide that I

should try to cry. A chill shoots up my left side, from the top of my foot to my scalp, where it lingers. I will myself into being sort of sad. But that's all I get. Nothing else comes.

So I get up, go to the fridge for the butter and the eggs, and then I switch on the coffee maker. Fifteen minutes later, when I pour a cup, I forget to add the milk and sugar.

]I'm coming home. Norfolk is not home. I've never kidded myself about that. I am exactly half way through my graduate program, living exactly the life a graduate student is supposed to live. Three days a week, I teach 23 19-year-olds about thesis statements, transitions between paragraphs, comma splices. I take graduate classes and in between I eat poorly, drink slightly better, and spend too much money on specific luxury items such as used books and the No. 2 Combo (with chili and onions) at Dog N Burger on 20th Street. I don't spend much on condoms or things like that.

I'm coming home to Cumberland. Home to a used-tire sort of town. By late October, I know, the leaves have already fallen, and the place and the people have turned dirty and rusty, just as all little Appalachian cities do. In middle school, I learned that Cumberland had a chance, once, to become something like Pittsburgh. But the railroad made the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal quaint before it ever turned a profit, and the money never came to that far-western part of Maryland.

What held on was a town that scratched itself into the hills along a big bend in the Potomac 130 miles west of Washington. It kept holding on when I went to high school there, even after the tire and textile plants closed and the new kids with the new names stopped transferring in. The people in Cumberland kept going to church, and until a little while ago, the preachers and the voting devout made sure that businesses stayed closed on Sundays. And with Protestant fervor, the town held on to those earnest, gray steeples you can see from I-68. During the rest of the week, the people in Cumberland kept faith in their cathedrals of oak and hickory, where they hunted deer, turkey, squirrel, pheasant, groundhog, two kinds of bass, three kinds of trout, and soon, if Annapolis gives the go-ahead, maybe they'll start in on the black bear, too.

So, in Cumberland, in late October, camouflaged men can be seen sipping coffee from Styrofoam cups, pumping gas at Sheetz after dark, their tailgates down because the antlers won't fit. At night, the people there get drunk on the popular country songs and stumble to their F-150s and

Chevy Cavaliers still holding half-gone longneck dollar-twenty-five domestics. Sometimes it snows in late October, and by January it's given up on melting and only hardens to gray, the exhaust-pipe soot layering into a dry powder that hangs on all the way through spring baseball practice.

I'm coming home to all this. I'm coming home to my two brothers and my mom and dad, to a hard little bent bottle cap of a town, to the place I left when I was 18 so that I could learn to love record stores, girls in glasses, stoned musicians, Jewish kids, and black chess players whom I never would have met in Cumberland. And I'm coming home to my grandfather, to the man who used to let my brothers and me fill a five-gallon bucket with bluegill, who drove to my rec league games in his brown pickup with "Datsun" in white across the back, who beat cancer twice, and who before that killed Germans because he had to. I'm coming home to Pap, who straight-armed Alzheimer's while he read every Western the Race Street public library could get. I'm coming home even though it's not Thanksgiving or Christmas. This is the place I come from. This is an unscheduled stop.

Early the next day, the day after my dad calls, I stuff warm clothes and a toothbrush into a backpack and grab my gray suit that passes for black. I get ready to leave, for a while, graduate school's books and writing classes and educated worldly people, Norfolk's 70-degree autumns, and its seagulls standing sentinel in its parking lots.

I follow, in reverse, the road that got me here. I drive west, fast, all the traffic headed the other way, into the city. I play my music loud, the morning Atlantic heat at my back. At Richmond, I angle north for the straight burn up the flat eastern half of Virginia, up I-95 with its trucks and its sterile speed and the hot garage smells that make breathing tough with the window rolled down. I think of my students, deadlines, bills: routine. I fill my head with what's easier to think about.

I circle the DC beltway at midday, in between both ends of rush-hour traffic. From the road, I call my brother Jake in Baltimore. "I'll be another hour, tops," I tell him. I know I've woken him up because his voice is still deep and he seems a little confused.

"Sure, OK," he says. "We'll get something to eat when you get here."

When I knock, he answers the door in a sweatshirt, boxers, and white socks that are loose around the toes and sort of hanging limp. His black curly hair stands at strange angles the pillow made. I follow him to the liv-

ing room, where he falls to the couch in one practiced ass-first motion. "Sportscenter" makes everything in the room pulse electric blue.

"There's bacon in the fridge," he says. "And there's still some coffee from this morning."

"Suzanne's at work?" I ask.

"I'll call her from the road," he says, rolling onto his side.

"We should get going," I say. Jake grunts something and then coughs. He's got some sort of chest thing, he says. He gets dressed, one article at a time. It takes 20 minutes, and when he's done, he gathers up the parts to his darkest suit and swallows some cold medicine with giant slugs of orange juice. I notice that the pills aren't the non-drowsy kind. We weave through two-o'clock Baltimore traffic and make it onto I-70, heading west.

We're a half-hour out of the city before Jake says anything at all. Clouds have begun to form ahead of us, but the road is clear and straight and I'd be using cruise control if I had it.

Jake sighs. "Bummer," he says.

"Yep," I say.

"He was a good man."

"The best." And that's all we say.

By the time we pass the new townhouses outside Frederick, Jake is snoring and wakes up only to cough, his chest rattling with what sounds like more than a cold. He has pushed his seat as far back as it'll go, his long legs stretched out in front of him. He's using one of my old sweatshirts for a blanket. He talks a little in his sleep—bits of conversation about groceries. As for the rest of my brother's thoughts, I can only guess. I've got my own.

Two nights ago, the night before my dad called, I had this dream. It was about my favorite songwriter. I always thought of Elliott Smith as the saddest man in the world. He hid under knit hats pulled low and always wore too-tight thrift-store T-shirts. He kept his hair shaggy and thick, the acne scars deep and shadowy in his pale cheeks. In this dream, I sat cross-legged next to him on the sidewalk, trying to play rhythm on an acoustic. I had the impression he was a friend and that I hadn't seen him in a while. He seemed glad to see me.

The news reports say that his girlfriend came out of the bathroom and found the knife stuck in his chest. Then she pulled it out. Elliott Smith, 34, gasped for breath, took a few steps, and collapsed. He died at the hospital, something like 79 minutes later, some exact, awkward number like that. He died the same night as Pap.

In college, my roommate and I listened to his albums one after the other, drunk, night after night. "That guy needs to go ahead and kill himself," Dave had said one time, a High Life warming between his legs. And I had laughed.

So two nights ago Elliott Smith finally did it, and though I wasn't surprised, I stayed up late on the Internet and read everything I could find. It must have been all the obituaries that fueled the dream and I wonder, in the car, if maybe his family is already at a funeral service. In cities around the country, I know that fans—young, pale kids—are holding candles, trading favorite lines, the thinnest and saddest girls probably crying. One of his lyrics sticks in my head. It's the one about watching the Rose Parade in Portland: "And when they clean the street," he says in the song, "I'll be the only shit that's left behind." The line lingers with me, circling, and then gets so quiet that I can't hear it. But it stays with me, maybe just the suggestion of a melody. A part of me is almost glad that my roommate was prophetic. I'm almost glad that this saddest man in the world has run out of reasons to write lyrics like that.

When we pass the Hagerstown outlet mall, Jake is still snoring, but his face looks at ease, his lips open and relaxed, his eyelids unconcerned. For a moment, I'm jealous of his peace. So I take the hills alone, their radio-towered heights making the windshield colder each time I put my palm to it. I turn up the music a little and crack my window. I'm pointed now toward that part of Maryland that stretches like a finger from Baltimore into the beginnings of the Appalachians, where it dead-ends in the high, quiet hills of West Virginia. And if it weren't for the feeling way down low in my chest, the whistling air inside the car would be my only company.

Pap was of that generation of men—that last, great wave—for whom talking about feelings and such was not done. So he never mentioned his own wars. It was as if to do so would spoil the life he had built for himself, the life that revolved around bagging limits of fox squirrels and watching his grandsons play baseball. He fished. He fed the chipmunks outside the dining room window. But he never talked about the asthma that, in his later years, kept him in and out of the hospital, the tight chest he passed on to my dad and then me and against which we both flail. Toward the end, he fought his bronchitis, never complaining, and plugged into the oxygen when spring came and left everything with a thin coat of yellow pollen.

What I learned about Pap came mostly from my dad. When I'd watch the grainy World War II footage on TV, my dad would say the same thing. "Pap had to kill a lot of Germans," he'd say.

I know Pap kept the M-1 he brought back from Europe. He kept it in his gun cabinet in his bedroom, next to the upright piano with all the Westerns piled on the keys. While visiting one Christmas when I was in high school, I picked up the rifle. Pap lay on his bed, and my dad sat in a chair next to him, both of them watching a basketball game. I'd shot a rifle before—my dad's big muzzleloader in the backyard—but this thing was heavy. I held its guts of wood and steel made by callused hands and loud machines 50 years before. I messed with the bolt and then aimed out Pap's bedroom window. With the gun to my eye, I could make out the tiny, random scratches that lined the barrel.

"What do you hunt with this old thing?" I asked.

"That's not for hunting," my dad said. Pap, watching the basketball game, didn't hear the question.

I never saw Nanny walk. Every time we'd visit, my grandmother sat in her wheelchair, her Italian forehead alive and expressing everything multiple sclerosis couldn't steal. What I remember most was the way Pap would shift her in the chair when her legs fell asleep. Pap, 70, 75 years old in my memories, his hair still dark, would get behind her, thread his arms under her armpits, and with a gigantic, sudden jerk, lift his wife into the air for a second before letting her broken body settle back in.

"Oh, Frank," she'd yell, her voice still sharp. "You never do it right."

"Hell, woman," he'd say, his voice still rough from the cigarettes he'd given up long before I was born. "You'd complain if I was Charlton Heston." But then, every time, he'd look at me or Ryan or Jake and give us a wink, his smile still there after MS and bedpans and after his wife's body had failed her.

I remember Pap when he was quiet, always watching. The way he'd sit in the bleachers, always in the top row, spreading his legs only wide enough so that the tobacco juice didn't stain his polyester slacks. How, around the third inning, I'd look up from second base and see that he'd gotten into his sandwich and plastic bottle of tap water, his pocket notebook by his side so that he'd always know the score.

My team was loaded my last year of summer ball, good enough that the final few games of the season didn't mean much because we had already clinched the top playoff spot. My dad, the coach, let me pitch one of those games. I was never better than an average ballplayer, but I was 18 and my arm was still whiplike then and by the fourth inning I had control of their hitters, knew where to pitch them. Our big guys hit some early home runs and we built up a lead. They only got two hits off me, one of them a fluke

double down the right field line. They didn't score a run. A month and a half before I left for college, before I quit baseball because 19-year-olds are too old to play games, I peaked. I had my first two-hit shutout.

After the final out, the game ball deep in my glove, I shook hands with my catcher, then my dad. The other guys patted me on the butt. As I walked to the bench, Pap came around the back of the dugout, a big smile on his face. He gave me a cold can of Pepsi and then he, too, shook my hand.

"A two-hitter's like a sore pecker," he said.

I smiled and hung my hat on the fence. "How's that, Pap?"

"You can't hardly beat it," he said.

I saw less and less of him after that. Whenever I visited my parents, something always came up—an early drink at the bar with Jake, a late throw on the street with Ryan—and I rarely dropped in to see him. After I went out west three summers ago, I mailed him a picture of Michelle and me standing at the base of Devil's Tower in Wyoming. I included a note, my handwriting in black felt-tip marker and the letters oversized, twice as big as normal. A month later, he sent me a check—just the check—for 20 dollars, his script blocky and jittery. And after that, everything I heard came through my dad, about how Pap was forgetting things like the hot dog he'd eaten for breakfast or the orange juice the Legion bartender had poured for him. Pap sort of faded away. I let him fade away.

It's almost dark when we crest the final hill east of Cumberland. Jake, still asleep and snoring louder the closer we get to home, is stretched beside me as we descend into the little city, riding high on the Crosstown Bridge that public money built decades ago so the houses below wouldn't have to be demolished. When I was a kid, they lowered the speed limit to 40 in this stretch through town because so many trucks were ramming cars trying to merge. With traffic light on a Friday evening, I ease into the rightmost lane. To my left, Fort Hill High looms long and dark behind Memorial Hospital, the football field's big lights towering like skeletal beacons over the valley. I pass my dad's work, the "Cumberland Times-News" sign still white and clean. Past that, the same Moose lodge at the same bend in the interstate where it's always been, men and their wives shuffling in for the same meatloaf, green beans, draft Budweisers. Ahead and below, the Potomac, the same muddy brown, sweeps its silence east, past Washington and into the tidal waters that will swirl with the Chesapeake, then down to Norfolk before the river's ancient silence meets up with the Atlantic, and is gone.

A half-hour later, Jake and I walk through the front door and find Ryan, his bald head shiny in the low evening lamplight, in the middle of telling a story to my mom but mainly trying to keep from laughing his face totally red. I hug my dad, our arms slapping backs and my three-day stubble sounding like static against his.

"Good to see you," he says. "Missed you."

"Glad to be here," I say, and then I shrug. "You know, considering." I don't know what else to say so I put my arm around his shoulders.

"It's good we're all together," he says. We stare at the floor for a moment. "You hungry?"

While my dad is busy fixing two bowls of the chili he's just made, Jake is working himself into the couch, his eyes tired. I hug my mom and then Ryan. I sit down next to Jake. Ryan is back to his story and my mom is listening, laughing because he is laughing. My dad brings out a tray from the kitchen and Ryan pokes him in the belly. He grabs my younger brother's finger and fake-twists it a little. He rubs Ryan's head and then both of them are laughing. I sit on the couch, back in the living room where I grew up, not saying anything, and pretty soon I'm laughing, too, because it feels like nothing has happened at all.

The next day, we go to Pap's house, the brick one on South Street where he played solitaire on the dining room table after Nanny died. Aunt Sis is there, along with her daughter and nine-year-old grandson. They all lived in this house. The boy's name is Darius, and his father is black. It took a little while, but Pap got over that.

I hug Aunt Sis, my dad's short, round sister, who looks more like Nanny than I remember. Darius is playing one of the three video game systems the women have bought him for Christmas and birthdays. The rapid-fire colors on the TV make me dizzy.

"Look who it is," Aunt Sis says to me. "You should come by and see us more often."

She's right, of course. I should.

My dad has his point-and-click in his right hand, and he poses us with his left. Aunt Sis as the fulcrum, sitting in her easy chair. Jake behind her, Ryan on one arm, me holding her other hand. We smile and my dad takes the shot. I'm still holding Aunt Sis's hand. She starts to cry.

"He loved you boys so much," she says, her face cinched up. She looks at the three of us, me last.

"I know," I say.

"He was just here. I can't believe he's gone," she says.

"I know," I say, wondering if I can say anything worth saying.

A little later, in the kitchen, I dish up a square of the lasagna the neighbors brought over. The stuff Pap liked to eat is all around, crammed between shelves, on top of the fridge. Simple food: the potatoes, white bread, and baked beans he ate as a kid in West Virginia and never found reason to give up. A little later, Aunt Sis walks into the kitchen, her eyes still red. She puts her arms around my middle.

"When are we going to get some meat on these bones?" she asks.

I laugh. "Maybe when I'm old," I say. And then she laughs too.

"Let me get you some more lasagna," she says, the spatula already in her hand. And I let her fill my paper plate again, thanking her, though I'm not all that hungry.

It's been raining all morning, that gray late-October rain that makes everything cold and that turns the front yard into a sopping carpet of brown-and-yellow dogwood leaves. Jake comes with me. Mom, Dad, and Ryan take another car.

The service is at the veterans' chapel out at Rocky Gap State Park east of town, and I think I may run out of gas before I get there, the needle low and threatening. It seems, lately, as if the needle is always the same half-notch above empty. The little chapel with the red-and-blue stained glass is almost filled, mostly with scattered family and old Legion guys in their two-pointed hats, some of them hooked up to oxygen like Pap was. The chapel has the strong, mixed perfume smell that I remember from church and, later, Thanksgiving dinners at girlfriends' parents' houses. I know that the perfume has, by now, worked its way inside my dad's lungs, triggering the involuntary muscles around his airways, his chest tightening. I wonder if he's brought his inhaler.

I am hugged by lots of women, and I shake hands with six or seven of Pap's hunting buddies, all of them dressed in full body camouflage, a final tribute. They take their seats, making a phalanx of brown and army green about six rows back. Then the five of us sit in the front row, next to Aunt Sis. I sit between my brothers, Jake in his business suit and Ryan in a tie but jacketless, his big digital sports watch wrapped around his wrist that years ago grew thicker than mine. The watch says "11:02."

The Post 13 chaplain reads from scripture, adjusting his glasses after he stumbles on passages. I can't help but smile a little. Scripture for Pap. Scripture for the man who said of St. Mary's Catholic Church—Nanny's church that stood a block from their house—"Can't go to church. Can't get any reception for the ball game." Five guys from the Legion march up to the folded American flag in front of me and, one by one, salute it. "Goodbye, Frank," the last one says, and then Aunt Sis starts to cry. The men, all in dark blue suits and standing straight, line up along one side of the chapel, their rifle butts at their feet. One of them opens the door. The sound of the rain on the pavement outside startles me a little. The chaplain, standing in front of me now, makes a slight movement with his hand, quick and sure, so small that you can't see it unless you're sitting right in front of him.

Behind me, through the door, out in the rain: "POP!" Aunt Sis is crying louder now.

"POP!" I see my mom take my dad's hand in hers.

"POP!" and Ryan bows his head a little.

There is silence broken only by an occasional sob in a woman's voice. Then the bugler starts in. The first note is unsteady, but somewhere outside, out in the rain, he finds the second note and then I too bow my head and all I can think to do is stare at Ryan's watch. It says "11:14."

It is a song designed to tear you up inside. It is a song designed for 26-year-old men halfway through graduate school who don't feel much, nothing much at all, until the bugler sounds out those first, sad notes at a veterans' chapel east of Cumberland with the cold October rain steady outside. It is the one song that makes my eyes go funny enough that I can't focus on the folded-up flag sitting on a table six feet in front of me. It's the song, I realize now, that I've been waiting to hear since my dad called at eight in the morning. So my eyes burn and I get the tingle in the back of my throat. That's all that happens for a while.

And then the bugler plays his final note and the chapel is quiet again. People stand up from their folding chairs, and I hear the muffled sounds of consolation: hands hugging backs, sniffles, low voices. I hug my dad.

"He was the best grandfather a kid could have," I say.

"That's the truth," he says, in a voice I've never heard before. I take a step back and look at his face. His glasses cover his eyes, but he's trying to smile a little. The chaplain's given him the three spent shells, and my dad is holding them, the gunpowder still fresh enough to color the air inside the chapel. I look up at my dad again and someone else is hugging him.

I slip my hands in my pockets and turn away so I can let the burning in my eyes take over. I look to the ceiling, the lights up there going blurry, and then I take a deep breath, surprised to find that for the first time in a while, I can breathe, really breathe, my lungs filling up all the way to the bottom.