

M A D E L Y N T A Y L O R

Until the Wristwatch Is Taken from the Wrist

Five years before my grandpa died, an employee at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife crashed their tanker truck of approximately 11,000 live Chinook salmon into a power pole in Eugene, Oregon. When the truck rolled, and the shocked, slippery cargo flew into the Mackenzie River Highway—their permanently astonished expressions, for once, appropriate to the occasion—the interstate was sheathed in a layer of smolt, a silver-brick-road of floundering fish that blocked both lanes of traffic. Unfortunately, the Mackenzie River Highway is not as suitable for supporting aquatic life as its namesake, so of the approximately 11,000 passengers traveling in the ill-fated tanker truck on December 30th, 2014, only Ray Lewis, the salmon chauffeur, survived the crash. State troopers found Lewis soon after, surrounded by dead salmon, with a broken shoulder and a blood alcohol concentration over three times the legal limit.

In the years between Ray Lewis's crash and my grandpa's death by complications of the same diagnosis, Lewis became the man every news article references when discussing "auto-brewery syndrome," or gut fermentation, a rare medical condition characterized primarily by its unbelievability. Lewis drank

no alcohol the night of his DUI; instead, without his knowledge, his gut bacteria churned all the carbs and sugars from his previous meal into ethanol, sending his blood alcohol level to a staggering .29. His body brewed its own beer, and 11,000 confused salmon strewn across an Oregon highway only highlighted the preexisting absurdity of the situation.

Lewis's story almost perfectly captures the surrealness of a medical phenomenon that is funny until proven fatal. Those who can identify the symptoms early enough often develop extreme food restrictions to avoid the discomfort of chronic intoxication, permanent Paleo diets but without the fruit. Their stories exhibit near biblical sacrifice: before diagnosis, some sufferers report fasting for days at a time just to maintain their sobriety. It is not pleasant, but please, let's acknowledge that there is *some* humor in a diagnosis of miraculous drunkenness, as if God Himself were telling its sufferers to loosen up a bit. Because when I tell you that my grandfather, a devout Christian who had never downed a glass of alcohol in his life, spent the last six weeks of it unintentionally plastered, I want to know I'm not the only one who laughed.

When Grandpa announced, after only two weeks on the no-sugar, no-carbs diet that his doctors recommended, that he'd had enough of broccoli, thank you, and he'd rather be drunk and happy than healthy and miserable, my sister and I did not take this news as the death sentence it was. While waiting for updates on his eligibility for a liver transplant, we imagined our mother's father into sitcom-scenarios: Grandpa tipsily teaching his seminary class the virtues of moderation while struggling to stand straight up for more than 40 seconds at a time; Grandpa appearing on his favorite TV show, a special episode of Alaska State Troopers, comically failing to pass a field sobriety test; Grandpa watching college football and commentating with no inhibitions, whatsoever. Oh, the wonderful secret thoughts, unspoken passions, that late-onset auto-brewery syndrome would

reveal! I still haven't learned very well how to react to absurdity with anything but awkward amusement and at the time, the idea of grandpa dying seemed more unlikely than divinely attributed intoxication.

I do not want to write a eulogy for my grandfather. The world is full of stories about flawed but endearing elderly men. What I want is to be *able* to write a eulogy for him. I want to say his life touched mine so often that reaching for him, in life, in the casket, in grief or in prayer, was automatic. I want to say I cried loud and long when he died, and that the tears were anguish and not confusion, not frustration at another one of his questions I did not know how to answer.

To put it bluntly, my Grandpa and I were out of touch when he died, an uncomfortable position to be in at a funeral, which exists to celebrate the ways the deceased have touched us. As I knew him, my grandfather constantly teetered between piety and childish humor, and I'd spend most of our time together scrambling to decipher his moods, to find the appropriate response to his mumbled, potential sarcasms. He was always a kind man, but he preferred to let you know this through actions and out-of-context winks in your direction. He did not tell you he loved you, only that your call was extremely convenient or that he thought you *probably* weren't going to Hell. He'd leave whoopie cushions on the dining room chairs when the grandchildren visited and once, my aunt said, after spotting a fire-and-brimstone preacher yelling at joggers from atop a park bench, he shuffled straight up to the man, his shins meeting the bench's lip so he had to tilt his whole head back to meet the man's eyes, and he shouted. My aunt told this story at the family gathering before Grandpa's viewing, scrolling through her phone to find the picture she'd taken of the moment: him shouting at this man, *Have you read the Book of Mormon?*

In the picture, Grandpa gazes up at the startled Doomsday-ist, jaw hanging open in cartoonish awe. His next words might

be “Wow, Mister!” or “Jeepers!” and if they were, I could understand the whole encounter as a prank at the park preacher’s expense. I could laugh the laugh reserved only for Grandpa’s jokes, equal parts amusement and relief from the tension of not-knowing how to respond. But instead, Grandpa earnestly, though perhaps cheekily, inquired after a stranger’s eternal salvation. When he died, the funeral home provided my grandpa’s favorite candy, an unnecessarily large bowl of Skittles, at the viewing, of which the younger grandchildren eagerly grabbed handfuls, and which we found ground into the carpet later. My mother spent the gaps between the viewing and the funeral, the funeral and the burial, explaining in detail what she wanted when she died—to be cremated, and then all you girls can go fly to Loch Lomond or something and throw me into the lake, and wear yellow because I love that color, and make sure there’s a Jell-O bar and funeral potatoes. My dad drove in for the burial, then dove back into work. Who am I to say that any of these responses were inappropriate? Too flippant in the face of loss? Even after his death, I do not know how to respond to my grandpa. When faced with the absurdity of human life, I only know how to point at 11,000 misplaced salmon and laugh.

So my grandpa and I were out of touch. Denotatively, we lacked information or an abstract awareness of each other in the months before he died. He knew I was at school and I knew he was in Idaho, but beyond that, neither of us could provide many details. In Daryl Hall and John Oates’ 1984 single, “Out of Touch,” which my mother played in the car as an example of the kind of music she wanted at her funeral after-party, the term “out of touch” transcends intelligence, embracing the tangibility of the phrase’s individual components, “out,” “of,” “touch.” *You’re out of touch*, sings Daryl Hall, *I’m out of time. But I’m out of my head when you’re not around* (Hall & Oates). To be “out of touch” literally refers to things that are so far from us, we cannot feel them. But if we shift the word “out” in our language,

ask it to wear all its meanings at once, the phrase implodes. What is it to be physically out of touch? Do we run out? Are we allotted a limited amount of touch in life, and one day we will completely exhaust our supply? Had Grandpa, who touched so many people, simply run out of touch to give? Or rather, because I've never seen Grandpa run in his life, did he stumble out of touch? The way most of us stumble into it?

As a pair, my grandpa and I began with touch. I know this because there is photographic proof; I met him when I was two years old, when my family moved to the United States from Germany where I was born, and there's a photo of him holding me on his lap. But when you're that small, touch is almost a default. Nothing is too sacred for the sticky worship of toddlers, everything is worthy of greeting by sausage-finger fists, or better yet tiny tongues, which have more nerve endings and the added benefit of taste.

Years later, when I was still young enough to believe I knew everything, and I knew that adults in movies did not sleep in Barbie Rapunzel nightgowns, my sister and I crawled into the bed we shared in nothing but our underwear, giggling at our rebellious act of adulthood and starting at all the new ways our tiny bodies interacted with the world when there was no layer of clothing between us and it. We compared the freckles on our bruised legs, hip to hip, and propped the largest book we could find across our two bare bellies, imprinting a long red line from one belly button to the other. We camped there until our older sister found us huddled together, nearly nude, and, for reasons she probably didn't entirely understand herself, was scandalized. She gave us both such a look that even today I am embarrassed to tell the story. When I was young, I thought growing up meant being outrageously vulnerable to a world of touch. In reality, the older I get, the less touch—physical, emotional, spiritual—feels safe even to talk about. And it is unfair, frankly, how we cannot talk about touch without implying innuendo.

The grand majority of touch is asexual, the touch of a car steering wheel or teacup or doorknob. Even between two romantically committed adults, the word touch, like so many verbs, refers to both physical and non-physical action, like the verbs “to move” or “to carry” or “to love.” In both our language and our religion, what is bound on earth is bound to a non-physical existence.

The last person I shared my bed with was a roommate who for one semester we could not trust to sleep alone. So we hid the knives in my sock drawer and traded off nights holding her until she fell asleep, flinching violently whenever we shifted too much under the covers. To be out of touch, or outside of touch, implies there is a way to be inside it, a stark line between the two worlds of idea and action. Maybe the dead are just outside touch. If you believe in a soul, in a spiritual consciousness that continues once a body stops responding to itself, then death is not the end of existence, only the end of physical touch. Our roommate survived the winter because of therapy and medication and a short hospital stay, not because we held her. But I want to believe, I think, that we kept our roommate in touch long enough that she found a reason to stay there.

These days, there are enough beds at home that I do not have to share with my siblings anymore, but when I can, I still slip in beside my youngest sister, who was premature at birth and tiny ever since, and I wrap her whole, limber frame in my arms until one of us overheats and pulls away. The joy of platonic touch, of holding someone you love, is an anchor to a physical existence that we maintain in hopes of one day finding non-physical meaning. Because as soon as you start to believe that the physical world, at least, has rules that it maintains, that our bodies are more comprehensible than whatever non-physical matter makes up the slippery things we call our souls, the physical world will stop making sense just to spite you. Cause and effect are tenuous at best and sometimes your piously

Christian grandpa dies with more alcohol in his system than a frat boy on a Friday night. In his final days, my grandpa could not muster the balance to stand in front of the toilet without toppling drunkenly into the bathtub. What does seventy-five years of sobriety mean if your reward is not an equally sober farewell? In the last photo I have of my grandpa, my youngest sister is sitting beside his hospital bedside, praying that he'll recognize her before he dies. What is a life lived for one's faith in God if you cannot share that faith when it is needed most?

You can trick yourself into performing most tasks by pretending you are not actually doing them. When it came time for the viewing, I did not want to see the dead body of my grandpa. I told myself I was headed to the mortuary's bathroom, which happened to be across the hall from the viewing room. I searched for my sister in the crowd. There was a particular chair I wanted to sit in, a flower arrangement that caught my interest. Suddenly I was staring at the casket, at the traditional religious apron Grandpa was dressed in for burial. I took an extreme interest in my grandfather's watch, still ticking on his wrist and I wondered how long it would continue its happy clicking underground.

So much of funeral work seems to be pretending that the dead are still alive. The coffins are sealed closed to prevent earth from getting in. The body is pumped with chemicals to fend off decay. Grandpa, it appeared, would be buried with his watch so for however long the battery lasted, he would have a way to keep track of the time he'd been gone. Perhaps we protect the physical remains of our lost loved ones as a final tribute to every doorway they walked through, every grandchild they cradled, every mutiny of personal bacteria that shaped their earthly experience. We can only really experience each other through the flesh and nerve endings we are born with. Even spiritual connection is communicated through lingual acrobatics, with lips and tongues or hands or brows or tears.

In front of me, Uncle Devin's large fingers grazed Grandpa's. He leaned over to kiss his forehead and I finally looked up at Grandpa's face, which looked nothing like the man I knew and everything like the silicon mask Arnold Schwarzenegger's stunt double used in *Terminator: Dark Fate*. It was my cousin's turn and he patted Grandpa's folded hands. It was Grandma's turn and she kissed him on his purple lips. It was my turn and I realized there are some tasks you cannot trick yourself into performing. I could not, for the life of me, touch my grandpa. I don't know what that means.

In a small side room, before his memorial service, all of Grandpa's living friends were given a chance to say one last goodbye to his body. *I know it's unusual for us, said my mother, but can you grab the hand of someone next to you? Can you hold their hand for this last prayer?* I held my sister in my right hand, a stranger in my left, while my mother asked God to touch those of us who could still reach out towards one another. Afterwards, the director solemnly lifted Grandpa's hand to slip the wristwatch from his wrist. Which is when we discovered that unbeknownst to us, the youngest of the grieving had made a game of stuffing Skittles between Grandpa's frozen fingers, so in the final moments before the casket closed, a cascade of rainbow candies spilled out from beneath his lifted hand, over his pristine, white suit, and into the burial box's many, unreachable crevices while the whole room burst into wet, gasping laughter.

Works Cited

Hall & Oates. "Out of Touch." *Big Bam Boom*, RCA Records, 1984.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D00M2KZH1J0>