**Empty Cards**

My grandparents’ house is exactly 24 minutes away. 5 hours and 26 minutes for walking distance. Or at least that’s what my app on my phone always read when I punched in the address every time we drove down. Growing up, I always thought more than five hours was a bit dramatic when it came to walking there, but now that I’m older I’ve realized I didn’t have the best concept of time. Yes, the younger me was an optimistic child. Maybe even a bit credulous, but it all came from a good heart, I promise.

Just recently we took another trip to see my grandparents for a family dinner. All five of my family members had taken their time slowly getting out of the house and taking their somewhat assigned seats in the car. When we had all successfully gotten settled, we started to drive. Of course, we were 15 minutes behind schedule, but that was usual for us. Quickly, I started to fall into my usual routine when it comes to car rides. I shoved my AirPods into my ears and played my favorite type of music. I even peered out the window to watch the scenery, like how they do in movies. I like how cars make it look like you’re observing the outside world in fast motion. Almost as if you’re in charge, watching everyone’s days go by.

Through the car window, the trees told me it was almost time for winter. They contained half their usual bundle of leaves and their other halves remained on the ground. The disregarded leaves were even prettier somehow. The different hues of red, yellow, and tan were complementary to the weather. The light breeze continuously lifted the leaves up, danced with them, and then set them down gracefully to a new destination. The same leaves then waited for the next gust of wind to take them to a new place. Those specific leaves could make it all the way to Paris, and we wouldn’t even know.

We had finally arrived at the house. It was a simple home, not too big but not too small either. The exterior was painted a dark blue and the window shutters were painted a deep red. At first glance, it probably seemed like a very patriotic family lived there. At second glance, however, the house was comforting. It was a typical colonial house with decorative flowers around the perimeter. The swirl of colors surrounding was captivating. Roses have become my favorite flower because of this. I was the first one out of the car. Like always. We walked up to the door and rang the doorbell. Naturally, the dogs went crazy. Oh boy. I looked through the stained glass that was the clear focal point on the door. It was always my favorite part of the house although I couldn’t even tell you why. The glass was almost in the shape of a lotus flower, but something about the design made me think it wasn’t on purpose. It had undertones of pink, purple, and blue. The best feature, however, was how it distorts whoever's face is on the other side when you look through it.

Unfortunately, for my grandma, she came to answer the door. I forced myself to suppress a smile and wondered if anybody else had noticed how cruel the stained glass truly was. The door swung open, and we all rushed inside at the same time to save the dogs from running away. This too was typical of us to do. My little sister was practically kicking me through the doorway. I made a mental note to get her back for that. The two labs my grandparents owned were medium-sized dogs. One silver and one black, but both too excited to contain their excitement. The smaller of the duo was a younger silver lab named Sophie. I always found how ironic her name was. It was a sweet name for a psychotic dog. They had taken turns jumping on each of us as if we were entirely new people they had never seen before in their lives.

My grandma greeted each of us with a hug and a kiss on the head and then rushed back to check on the dinner. Typical routine. I took my shoes off and dropped them into the corner under the big flat-screen TV. The flat-screen had a glitch off to the right of the screen, which was a result of my little brother showing off his new soccer skills in the house. Other than that, it was beautiful and took up most of the west wall. I watched as my older sister and parents sat on the couch with my grandpa and my little sister and brother played with the dogs. As for me, I followed my grandma to the kitchen and headed straight for the coffee.

After a dinner of pasta and homemade pasta sauce (a passed-down recipe), my grandpa and I were the only two left sitting at the table. I sipped on my coffee while he ate a slice of cherry pie. My grandpa and I have always had a good relationship. At every family gathering, he would be the family member I spent the most time with. He would always let me pick the dessert, and he always brought my favorite foods. Hence, the cherry pie we had for that day. I took another sip of my coffee and my grandfather put down his fork. He cleared his throat.

“Mena, look what I picked up for you guys.”

My grandpa turned to the empty chair next to him and picked up a square tin. He handed it over with a satisfied smile. I took the box in my hands and noticed the smooth texture. The top of the box had a beautiful winter wonderland scene on it. I took one look at the frosty characters smiling back at me and felt instantly joyful.

“What is it?”

As much as I loved the box, I was curious as to why exactly he gave it to me.

“Open it.”

I slid the lid off the top of the tin and set it aside. Inside were many cardboard squares. Some had Christmas scenes and others were blank. Next to the papers were wooden sticks carved into points. It was about 100 of those scratch art papers you can design.

“I know how much you guys used to love them during Christmas time. Just something to keep the holiday spirit.”

The gift was thoughtful. My grandpa isn’t the most sentimental person, so I could tell it meant a lot. The holidays were always hard for him.

“Thank you, we love it.”

I smiled and called my siblings in so they could get their share. I examined each scene and chose my cards carefully. I gave my grandpa some to work on, too. I knew at one point he had secretly loved the cards as much as we did.

As I started to scratch away at the reindeer scene on my card, I couldn’t help but be reminded of a Christmas that came around 6 years earlier. It wasn’t like the usual Christmas we had; it was different. Sadder. Like a shade across my memory. I glanced up at my grandpa. My grandpa was a unique man. He’s best described as a polar bear. He looks absolutely terrifying. He’s a big and tall man with practically no hair on his head. Yet, he has a heart of gold and the best sense of humor. But at that moment, I could tell from the way he was staring at his blank card, he was reminded, too.

I strained my memory and thought back to that Christmas many years ago. My grandparents’ workplace always hosts a Christmas party. It’s a big family event and something I look forward to every year. During this time, I had just turned 9, and my family and I met there with my grandparents. I was excited to see all the pretty dresses and decorations. Since it was the middle of December, it had been snowing as we walked inside. My mother had talked to me and my older sister in the car while it was parked. She reminded us that grandpa probably wouldn’t be able to have much holiday spirit this year.

“He’s trying his best,” My mother would say.

“That’s all anyone can do.” My father would add.

That’s what everyone would say.

At the time I never truly understood why. I had never really thought much of death. Or how much it can affect just about everything. I was too young. There’s a sort of advantage when you’re a kid since our brains can’t possibly understand as much as they can when we grow up. I was lucky. I didn’t fully understand what it felt to lose someone you love the way my grandpa did.

My grandpa lost his father at an early age. In fact, he witnessed his father die. He grew up with 9 other siblings. A total of 7 girls and only 3 boys, and a single mother. Alice. Grandma Alice was a light. She held her family together and she did it well. Grandpa loved his mother very much. He knew how hard she worked and everything she sacrificed for her family. He knew her pain. He even had to watch her pain. Grandma Alice had been in the hospital near the holiday season. Grandpa stayed with her for most of the time she was there. He watched as his siblings could hardly say goodbye. He watched how her pain was hurting them, chipping away at tiny fragments of their hearts, until it eventually even hit a nerve. In time, Alice’s death finished off what was left.

After the funeral, grandpa was never whole again. It was apparent to us how much damage had been done. Having to watch his own mother die did a number on him. Sometimes I thought the grief would be too much, and maybe one day he would just burst into tears and collapse in front of everyone. It was hard to watch, being so young. I wasn’t sure how to help, or if I even could.

As my family and I walked into that workplace Christmas party, we were immediately cautious. I spotted grandpa and grandma and ran over to them. I jumped up into my grandpa’s arms and gave him a big squeeze. He squeezed back as hard as he could and then set me down.

“Well, don’t you all look very pretty today.”

My older sister and I gave our dresses a twirl and giggled.

“Hi Dad.” My mother walked up and gave him a gentle hug. She did the same for grandma.

“How are you feeling today, good?” My mother tilted her head to the right out of sympathy.

“I’m good, I'm good.” My grandpa nodded his head and shrugged his shoulders.

“He’s doing better,” My grandma whispered to my mom. She always was a loud whisperer. I figured it was the Italian roots.

“Is he okay? To be here today I mean?” My mother's eyebrow shot up out of concern, still whispering.

“I think it’s good for him to be with the kids.” My grandma gave a sad smile.

I noticed something odd about my grandpa that day. He looked the same. He sounded the same. He acted the same. Yet, something was missing. As we headed back to the craft table of the party, I immediately picked out my favorite activity: two design scratch cards. I brought them back to where my grandpa was sitting. I took the seat next to him and gave him the supplies to create a masterpiece like usual. He took the card and thanked me. He lifted the wooden stick off the table and placed it on the card. In turn, I got to work and made what was supposed to be a snowman and looked more like a weird hat. As I checked on my grandpa’s work, I noticed he hadn’t drawn anything yet.

“What’re you going to draw?” I asked him out of excitement. I wanted another pretty ornament from him to hang on the tree.

My grandpa had this look in his eyes. It was a look of sadness and realization. He looked exhausted.

“I’m not sure. I just don’t know what to draw.” He put the stick down and turned to me and gave me a soft smile. He then started a conversation of how school was going and what I wanted the most for Christmas.

During the car ride home that day I watched the snow out the window. I watched as the snow trickled down and shimmered, like how my grandpa’s eyes twinkled when he was excited. I realized that’s what my grandpa was missing. I realized how much *I* missed it. I continued to stare out the window and hoped everything with my grandpa would work out. I was sure he would feel better soon, right?

I was jolted back to reality as the wooden stick slipped off my card and made a horrible sound. The living room is warmer now. Someone must have turned the heat on. I looked over my drawing. I had no space left. My card was all decorated with holiday scenes. It looked beautiful. Satisfied, I looked over my grandpa’s card. He was the true artist in the family. He never failed to make a work of art within seconds. It had been a while since I saw one of his designs, so I scanned the table, waiting to be amazed. A familiar wave of shock rolled over me. My grandpa was still sitting how he had been years before. Wooden stick in hand, scratch card resembling his expression. Blank.