

JOHN CHAPMAN

There Isn't A Word

My great-uncle dealt with his brother's death by disappearing constantly during the four-hour viewing of his younger brother. He was quiet, greeting people when forced to, the words getting stuck behind the clog in his throat, the one that kept him from crying all night. The next day during the service, the muscles in his jaw twitched every time his chest longed to blubber out a deep breath. When the Air Corps soldier presented the folded flag, he held it to his chest, dropped his chin, and he gave two great sobs.

My father needed something to do so he didn't have to slow down and think about what had happened. He spent most of Thursday night scrubbing his father's condo. He dusted and polished all of the tables, cleaned every frame, and cleared out the fridge. He returned his makeshift room back into the computer den. He packed up his clothes and notebooks and the little Christmas presents he'd kept there. The hospice people came to retrieve the medical supplies from the living room and suddenly, without the bed and the pan and the medical reclining chair with layers of blankets, the living room looked like a living room again. Since it had snowed all Friday during the calling hours, my dad spent a good portion of the night shoveling out all the cars so we could get to the funeral on time. It wasn't until Sunday morning, once everything was over and there wasn't anything that needed to be done, when the weight of it forced the tears out of him.

My oldest sister spent hours sorting through pictures, organizing poster boards and a slide show of our grandfather's life. For the first thirty minutes of the calling hours, she and some others sat hurriedly taping pictures to poster boards, my sister the most frantic even as she pretended like she no longer cared. That night when we got home to a driveway with seven inches of thick wet snow and nowhere to put her car, she lifted a shovel with her skinny arm. When I asked her to let me do it, she refused. When I asked her to go inside and change

and said we'd come out together, she kept pushing the snow across the street into a snowdrift. When I tried to get the shovel out of her hand, she gripped it so tightly that I couldn't get it away from her. Her voice wavered and weakly she yelled, "Just let me shovel."

My dad's brother just drank to deal. Now and then his eyes would get red and he'd blink wet eyelashes until it stopped. During one of his visits home while his father was still alive, my uncle, his wife, his sister, her husband, and their son made it through 400 cans of beer in four days. That's fifteen cans per person, per day. Saturday at the luncheon he kept asking in his learned Southern accent, "How long do we have to stay sober?" The family made it to a bar around six where he spent \$421 in alcohol for his table.

My dad's cousin Kerri Lynn had a close, surrogate father relationship to my grandfather. At the luncheon following the funeral, my dad gave her a ceramic angel statue that my grandfather had made for her mother. My father had carefully placed it on top of red tissue paper and sealed it in a small green box. Once in a while, Kerri Lynn would slide off the top and stare at the angel figure of her mother with the same short red-blond hair she used to have and Kerri Lynn would give a tight, sad smile.

It was an open casket for the entire funeral. Intermittently I stared at my grandfather's lifeless body. From afar, he seemed healthy with a soft complexion and full cheeks. But his mouth was all wrong, a mouth that was always animated with a playful smile. When I knelt in front of him, I could see the heavy make-up. His hands looked rubbery, fake, much fatter than they ever were in life. I kept remembering eight years ago, being in the same funeral home, where I hid in an unused room, refusing to go see my grandmother's open casket, and bit down on my lip every time the urge to cry became too overwhelming. At the luncheon, when I saw Kerri Lynn with her ceramic angel, I became overwhelmed by the memory of my mom handing me a cheap Santa Claus ornament. It was the first Christmas present I ever bought my grandmother, which she'd surprisingly kept and cherished for over a decade. I wept until my head hurt and my face stung and just the memory of it made me bite my lip. I can't say that I ever cried for my grandfather – not when my dad wrapped me in a hug and told me about my grandfather's last moments; not when I saw his coffin locked and slid into the hearse; not even that night or the next day when pressure abated – and now I feel as if I've missed my chance.