

Twelve Minutes

At the end, Donna told me, he talked. He whispered something at the ceiling, and they all held hands in a circle around him. They bawled. Told him they loved him.

“He kept looking up. Like he heard an orchestra of angels. Like he saw them right there.” Donna points up at the dim fluorescent lights of the hospital hallway. Donna’s my brother Buck’s wife. Not even blood related.

“I swear the room got brighter,” Buck says. “Didn’t it, Shelly?”

My sister Shelly is hanging back, looking up and down the hall like maybe someone she knows will show up and take her out of this place. “I guess everyone has a different experience,” she says.

Buck gives her a hard look. He rubs his moustache with two fingers, the way he does when he’s about to say something you wished he wouldn’t.

“It was like a miracle.” Donna sniffs. “I’ll never forget it.”

Buck’s wife is a cow. I’m not being a jerk. I mean Donna’s wearing this black-and-white sweater with black pants and white tennis shoes. And she’s big, so yeah, there’s that. Even her bleached hair has black roots. Every time I look over at her I think *cow*.

And then I think how I should have been holding my Pop’s hand when he was on his way out of this world instead of a cow named Donna, and it almost makes my skull explode.

Now a nurse—I guess he’s a nurse—comes out of the room where Pop is still lying, cold and blue now I imagine, and hands me a clear plastic bag. “These are your father’s effects, sir. I’m real sorry for your loss. You can speak with a chaplain here, if you like. Sometimes watching someone pass can be a hard thing to—”

“He didn’t watch.”

I turn around, and Buck’s glare jolts me.

“Didn’t get here in time,” he says. “Twelve minutes too late.” He pulls the bag away from me.

The nurse eyes him for a second, then says to me, “If you’d like to come in and have some time with him now—”

“No.” I say it before I even really think about it. But, no. “I saw him last night,” I say. “We had a good talk.”

He nods.

“Sure you did,” Buck says. “Pop got up and danced the cha-cha too.”

Donna takes Buck’s arm and pulls him toward the waiting room. She lifts the bag from him and sets it on a chair, and then the two of them stand in the light of the soda machine, hugging.

The nurse clears his throat. “We need some papers signed.” He gestures to the nurse’s station. He’s a stocky guy with a shaved head and those big black circles in his ears. I don’t mind what people do. Or think or say or believe for that matter. But it turns my stomach, looking at those things.

“I’d like to have his watch,” I say to Buck, loud enough so he can hear me over the buzz of the Coke machine.

He pulls away from Donna and looks over at me. “You’re out of your mind.”

“Buck—” Donna says.

He points at his chest. “I’m the oldest.” He stares hard at me and then he looks down at the floor. “You can have his Mason ring. Shelly can have the wedding band.”

I don't move, don't say anything.

"I can sign the forms," Shelly says to that nurse. She follows him over to the desk.

"Let's go get a coffee," Donna says to Buck. "You want one, Timmy?"

I shove my hands in my pockets and turn my back on them. I hear their footsteps head down the hall.

Twelve minutes. He'd timed it.

It's the cat's fault. I promised Pop last night I'd bring the cat to visit today, and damn it, I was going to make good on one thing, finally. But Stewie wasn't having it. He had me chasing him all over the house this morning before I finally caught him. Then, halfway to the hospital, he unlatched his crate somehow and pounced right on my shoulder, claws sharp as box nails. I could barely keep the van on the road. Then he hopped into the back and I haven't found him yet. He's still out there in the van, padding around in the clothes and food wrappers and half-filled plastic water bottles while I stand here in the hall with my hands in my pockets.

Shelly walks back to me now and says, "Come on." She takes my elbow and pulls me to a door at the end of the hall, pushes the exit button, and all of a sudden we're outside in the cool-blue air. After the alcohol and piss and coffee smells from inside, it's like breathing in heaven.

We stand near the doors and watch people come and go in the parking lot, cars moving in and out of spaces. Shelly lights a cigarette. Even that smells good for a second, just that first puff of burning as it drifts into the sky. It's barely October—the first. I guess I'll always remember this date now. Yeah, even me, old Timmy who can barely recall his own name these days. For the last few years, my troubles have been a mystery—Epstein-Barr, fibromyalgia, Lyme disease—never anything they could diagnose for real, least of all fix. Add to that the nerves, stress, depression so thick I can't stand up sometimes, much less keep a job. They've got me on

fistfuls of meds that are supposed to help. Too many, probably. I couldn't even remember how to get here to the hospital today, another reason I was late.

Shelly squints at me, her hair hanging over her eyes. It's gotten grayer, I notice. Used to be nearly black, and now it's streaked silver.

"I *was* here last night," I tell her.

She sizes me up like she's deciding whether to believe me or not. My baby sister, who used to look at me like I knew the meaning of life, hanging on every word I uttered.

"It was just before midnight," I say. "I had to go through the ER to get in."

"What happened?" she asks.

"I sat by his bed and talked. Told him how sorry I was I hadn't been in to see him. I tried to remind him about the virus and how no one was allowed to come until yesterday, when they called us."

I hadn't understood at first. When the charge nurse phoned to tell me Pop had stopped eating and drinking, and that family was finally allowed to visit, I thought she meant we needed to get over here and spoon feed him, help him drink from a straw. Not say goodbye. I told him all this last night—except for the goodbye part.

"He took a few drops of water from a spoon," I say. "His lips were cracked they were so dry."

I don't tell Shelly the next part, because I don't think she'll believe me. But he talked to me too. When I finally told him I had to go, he whispered "Okay." And when I left, he said "Bye" in this breathy wheeze.

Doesn't matter. They had their goodbye. I had mine. Still, I wish I'd made it in time today.

“Did he really talk?” I ask Shelly. “Did the room get bright?”

She puts one arm across her bony hips and takes a long drag off her cigarette. “All I saw was him trying to sit up in bed. Panting. Like he was desperate to get in his last breaths. His eyes were open. But they weren’t really seeing—” Her hand shakes while she draws another hit. “It wasn’t like the movies, Timmy. I didn’t see any light swell up or anything. I just watched him struggle to breathe and heard that awful rattle—” She wraps her sweater around her tighter. “Be glad you missed it.”

The glass doors whoosh open beside us and that nurse comes out. He gives us a nod, then walks on down the sidewalk a ways before he lights up a smoke himself.

“You’ve been through it, taking care of him these last three years,” Shelly says. “Maybe now you can concentrate on yourself. Get better.”

“I did a crap job with him,” I say. “Mom too.”

She doesn’t know what to say to this, because I just repeated what she and Buck had told me nearly every day these last few years. But who else was going to take care of our folks—the kids who got married and moved away, or the one who never left home?

They wanted Pop to go to the nursing home too, to be with Mom. I couldn’t do it. It was hard enough letting her go this past summer, but after two broken hips, dementia, afib, all of it leaving her bedridden, even I knew I couldn’t care for her anymore. Pop could still stand and walk, though, and some days his mind was sharp. When he was still able, he’d make coffee in the mornings before I got up. He’d pour two cups and set one on the table by Mom’s chair, forgetting she was gone. He was my hero—World War II vet, cancer survivor, savior to me when I lost job after job, when I was sick in bed for months. So I fed him canned soup, helped

him onto the toilet, brushed his teeth, made sure he was warm in bed with his blankets and his cat, and listened to him ramble on about the war. That never went away.

Shelly and Buck would stop by maybe once a week. If it was a good day, we'd all sit at the kitchen table and have sandwiches. We'd talk to Pop and toss treats to Stewie. But most days they'd just raise hell—about the house being filthy, about Pop and me still being in bed at three in the afternoon and him not having had his morning meds yet. Somebody even called Adult Protective Services—I suspect Donna. But they only came inside, made some notes, and left. Then last month, after Pop fell in the bathroom and broke four ribs, we had to bring him here. And then he did exactly what I feared most—wasted away alone, without me.

Shelly puts her hand on my shoulder now, and for a second I feel like I'm going to sink right down onto the sidewalk. Then she yanks her hand back and looks at it. "What the—" she says.

"What."

She shows me her hand. It's bloody.

"Oh, yeah. That cat," I say, which doesn't make sense, I know, but I can't think how to explain. "He got out of the crate. He ambushed me while I was driving."

Shelly's eyes go wide. She stares across the parking lot at my blue Caravan with the broken back door and the missing taillight. "Wait. You brought the cat here? Seriously, Timmy?" Her voice catches in her throat. "Is that why you were late?"

Shelly is a horse. A nag. Her long face and toothy mouth.

Cat. Cow. Horse.

Pop is a hummingbird. I know that as well as anything. He changed the water in his feeder every day like clockwork, even when he couldn't remember who I was, when he needed a walker to get to the window and I had to help him slide it open because his hands shook so bad.

Shelly throws her cigarette down and stamps it with her foot, then she walks back inside the hospital.

I stare at my dirty sneakers, at the cracks in the sidewalk, the wilted pansies someone planted in the gravel by the drive. After a minute, I hear someone walk up and I see that nurse standing beside me.

"Need a smoke?" he asks.

I shake my head.

He moves over to where Shelly was and sifts through his pants pockets. He's got a little whisk of beard on his chin, and a gold chain peeks out from his shirt collar. "Listen," he says. He pulls out a lighter and a pack of Camels. "I don't know you or anything. But I've been working here a long time. And I've seen it."

He turns to the side to light up and I get a glimpse of blue sky inside that hole in his ear. I wait for the sickness to hit me, but it doesn't this time. "You've seen what?" I ask.

"How sometimes they decide when to go and all," he says. "Who they want around when it happens. You know what I mean?"

He stares at me through the exhaled smoke. I just shrug. I shake my head.

"Sometimes they don't want that one person there. Okay? The closest one. The one who'll be run over the hardest."

He stands still for another minute, studying me. "I'm just saying," he says. "You can beat yourself up all you want. But maybe you weren't *supposed* to be here. Maybe he didn't want you

to be.” He drops his cigarette, twists his foot over it. Then he picks up my hand and pushes something cold inside it.

I can feel the watch before I even open my fingers.

I look down at its silver band, blue face, feel the weight of it against my skin.

When I look back up, the nurse is already walking to the entrance. I watch him head down the sidewalk, his short frame and wide hips, arms close to his sides. When the doors open, his head turns in one smooth motion to look back at me. And then he’s gone.

Owl.

I lean my head against the wall behind me. The bricks are warm and I can feel the sun they’ve soaked up all morning as it spreads across my scalp, my back, my sore shoulder.

I let go and cry then. Not so much because Pop is gone, or because everything feels broken and lost. But because there’s a little bit of warmth there, a trace of comfort, right where I’d least expected it.