

How Can I Keep From Singing?

May the road rise to meet you,
May the wind be ever at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
And the rains fall soft upon your fields.
And until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of his hand.
~Old Irish Blessing

There are no other cars on the road now; the moon still graces the morning. I drive north along the rolling hills of the highway. When I glance to the sides, I can see eyes in the trees. Dusk and dawn are when deer accidents are most common. I grip the steering wheel a little tighter, but do not slow down. I am determined to reach the lake.

Small rays of light begin to dance their way up and over the treetops to my right. Now, as I drive over the hills, I begin to see the horizon. But the view only lasts for one fleeting moment before it is masked as the car descends down the inclined pavement. The bottoms of the hills are still dark. The sunlight has not yet reached them. When I ascend to the top once again, the sight is brilliant. The forest looks so tiny, like the landscape of a dollhouse. The light upon the leaves has illuminated their emerald shade. And the long journey ahead does not look quite so menacing. The road is rising to meet me.

It is a four-hour drive for me to reach the water, but I left early enough to escape the crowds of a spring beach. I park my car next to my grandparent's house, and step out softly. It is too early to wake my grandma. I look around. The dew-drenched grass is glistening. The moist smell of the morning air brings back the memories of childhood. I remember waking up as early as possible and running outside, certain I had awoken

before my grandpa. As I sprinted towards the beach, I'd see him sitting on his chair in the backyard, just staring at the water. He'd smile at me and wave as I ran by, amused at my young enthusiasm. He was always up with the sun. Come to think of it, I don't think I ever saw him sleep.

My grandfather was a tall, strong man with a kind face that could turn to stone when I misbehaved. His laughter could melt even the iciest moods. He had a tattoo on each arm, which always made him seem tough. On one arm was an eagle, which he said represented his relationship with my grandmother. On the other arm, there was the Marine Corps seal etched into his near-ivory skin. He epitomized the joyful, Irish soul as well as the stubborn, Irish attitude.

Now, I walk respectfully calm, towards the lake. I look at the shells and seaweed that have been washed ashore. I step over them and sit on the damp, firm sand. I take off my shoes and let the chilly waves pass over my bare feet. I swear it was never this cold when I was younger, or maybe I was simply more resilient to the water back then.

I feel a refreshing breeze come off the bay and I can still hear the heavily accented voice of my grandpa quoting the Old Irish Blessing. That was my first sailing trip. I was five years old, and the women in my family thought it was too dangerous for me to be on the water just yet. But my grandpa sternly, but eloquently reminded them that he was a Marine and that he could handle anything. He almost sang his words when he spoke. He chose his phrasing with the utmost care and let the words roll out of his mouth with a constantly rising and falling tone. Despite his melodic speech, his point was not to be missed, and as usual, no one dared to argue with him when he brought up the Marines. There were only two holidays my grandpa truly celebrated, St. Patrick's Day and the

birthday of the US Marine Corps. When my grandmother and aunt conceded my grandpa's point, he smiled and winked at them while carrying me to the water. His pride was American, his temper was Irish, and his heart was ours.

At first the air was still, and I was exceptionally bored. I asked my grandpa why we weren't moving, and he said we had to wait for the wind. I don't remember seeing much that trip. My grandpa was holding me so tightly that the orange life-vest he made me wear was coming up to my eyelevel. I do remember the sound of his laugh when the wind picked up, booming with delight. I remember the water splash up slightly over the bow of the little sailboat. That's when he leaned in close to me and whispered, "May the wind be ever at your back, Love."

I need to get away from the water. I stand up and gently brush the sand off my black dress pants. I pick up my shoes and start to walk towards the woods by the side of the house. I acknowledge that the tiny stones and twigs must be hurting my bare feet, but I am so eager to lose myself in the forest that I don't care. The sun on my face disappears as the trees hide me from its warmth. The sunlit jade of the new leaves creates a stained-glass effect within the forest. I soon realize that my attempt to escape the shadows of my past was flawed in direction. I look to my right and see four giant cone-shaped figures made from large tree branches. That was the play village for my sister, cousins, and me.

We had just come back from seeing the Disney movie, "Pocahontas," and we all wanted to live in teepees. While my mother, aunt, and grandma chuckled at our meek, but comical attempts to build an indoor Indian Village, my grandpa was coming up with a plan. He went outside for about an hour and then returned with a triumphant smile. "Come on!" he said. "We have work to do!" Outside, we saw a huge pile of fallen

branches from trees and a gathering of freshly cut grapevines. My dad, uncle, and grandpa were out building with us all day long. We'd dig little holes in the ground, and then place the branches vertically in them, forming the shape of a teepee. We used the grapevines to tie and secure the branches. Once, the main structures were up, my grandpa decided that we needed to use the remaining sticks to build extra rooms in each teepee. The perpetual squeals of excitement from the grandchildren were followed by loud belly-laughs from my grandpa. Looking back, I'm sure that my grandpa, dad, and uncle had other things to do that day. But from the sounds of it, the most important thing in the world to them was making sure that the teepees were of the utmost quality. Before we knew it, our village was complete. We each had sun burnt cheeks, scratched hands and arms, and our own personal teepee. My grandmother later told me that she had never in her life seen grown men get so excited about anything as they did that day.

I walk past the little village, not surprised that it is still here. The craftsmanship was certainly second-to-none.

Water is dripping from the leaves above me, it must have rained recently. This is when I first notice the mess I've made of my feet and pants from taking this walk. I look down beside me and see tiny footprints in the mud. My grandfather taught me to analyze animal tracks. I learned the footprints of creatures ranging from white-tailed deer to wild cats. I step closer to examine the tracks, but the ground is too wet, and the details of the prints are hidden by collected water. I'm sorry, Grandpa, I can't figure this one out.

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Winters at the lake were just as fun as the summers. Our days were spent sledding, skiing, and drinking gallons of hot chocolate. As I got older, my grandfather taught me to appreciate the beauty of snow-covered nature.

On a particularly chilly day, I decide to set out and explore Petoskey State Park on my own. I delight in the peaceful solitude for hours. At last I grow tired and turn to begin the walk back to my grandparent's house. The snow crunches louder under my boots now than it did on my way to the park; it is getting colder. I take a shortcut across the beach. The sand dunes are perfectly blanketed, tucked in for their three-month slumber. The bay, though frozen, still appears dynamic. There are ice waves, far taller than a man, spotted along the shore. These formations are built over time by white caps freezing in succession, one on top of the other.

In what had appeared to be untouched snow, something draws my attention. I look closer and see animal tracks which I don't recognize at first. There are four toe marks above each foot pad imprint. The footprints come in side-by-side pairs, this animal was running. Upon closer inspection, I notice that the foot pad is two-lobed. I remember my grandfather's animal tracks lesson. This print is distinctive of one animal, the bobcat. These creatures usually aren't that much bigger than a large house cat. I haven't seen a bobcat around here since I was little. Our neighbors, who had small dogs, were always fearful of the bobcat and frequently called the Wildlife Removal Services to have them "painlessly" taken away.

Finally, I make it back to my grandparent's toasty kitchen and fix myself a mug of tea. My family won't be home for a few hours. The snow has begun to fall slightly, and

I sit with my tiny black kitten near the sliding-glass door wall to watch the weather change. I feel the warmth returning to my nose and cheeks as I start to doze off.

The meek but eager mewing of my kitten wakes me. I look and see her sitting by the sliding door, gazing through the glass at a bobcat. I jump to my feet. The kitten and the bobcat look briefly in my direction, and then turn back to each other. The bobcat towers above my six-week-old kitten. But, neither of them seems afraid or angry, just curious. Dumbfounded and frozen in fear, I watch the interaction. The bobcat softly places a paw against the door wall, and my kitten acknowledges the gesture by trying to sniff the creature through the glass.

The facial structure of the two felines is remarkably similar. Both have the quintessential slanted “cat-eyes.” Both have the inverted, slightly rounded triangle-shaped nose. The bobcat’s face appears wider down by its chin. Its soft-looking caramel and charcoal fur puffs out to look like overgrown sideburns. Its mouth seems to be upturned at the sides, creating the look of a pleased expression. There are black spots on its fur, so close together that they almost look like stripes. He has a little white coloring on the bottom of his chin and the top of his chest. If not for the creature standing at about four times the height of my little kitten, I would have certainly mistaken the bobcat for someone’s pet.

It is snowing harder now and the faint humming of the heater in the living room is the only audible sound. Noticing something that I do not, the large ears of the bobcat perk up in alert. The silence is broken by a loud “boom.” I recognize it as the noise of a gunshot. The bobcat frantically begins to sprint away from the sliding-glass door. He

makes it only about ten yards before I hear another “bang.” The bobcat falls to the ground and lays motionless in a patch of crimson-splattered snow.

Horrified, I think I must be dreaming. Who would be hunting so close to a house? Aren’t bobcats a protected species? My grandparents would be furious at this apparent lack of respect. A man walks into my view with a shotgun. He is fixated on the bobcat, he does not notice me. I cover my eyes as he nears the fallen animal and lifts his gun one last time. I hear the shot and slowly look back outside. Snow is now cascading down from the sky, but I can still make out the distinctive orange and blue jacket of my neighbor. Carrying his gun and what appears to be the bobcat, he walks out of sight.

I look back to the red blemish on the fallen snow. I think about the tracks I had seen earlier that day. Slowly, I sit back down, feeling the shock radiate through me. I cannot stop staring at the spot where the bobcat fell. There is now a genuine blizzard outside, which is quickly burying the footprints and the crimson stain. I uneasily close my eyes, and I still see the face of the bobcat looking at my kitten with such gentle curiosity. I see the beautiful combination of tan, ebony, and white in the bobcat’s fur disappearing into the snow as he tried to escape. Then I see the red.

When my grandparents returned home, I told them what I had witnessed. My grandfather thought it was wonderful that I had recognized the tracks and began to quiz me on the other large cat footprints that I might find in the area. I stopped him mid-question and asked how he could have ignored my story about the shooting. The crimson death was haunting me; I was baffled as to how he could not respond to such an event. “Why concentrate on that?” he asked. I told him that it had frightened me and that I was horrified to have watched such a shockingly sad event. “Death is just another part of

life,” he explained. “Don’t reduce that animal to the manner in which he died. Think instead about the footprints he left on this earth while he was alive.”

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I walk past the muddy tracks as I think of that bobcat. I remember how greatly death used to frighten me. It is a strange experience to witness a death. One comes face to face with the mystery of mortality. But, as the Irishman taught me, there is more to life than death. “There is more to a story than its end,” my grandpa used to say, “And life is a beautiful story.” He always did have a way with words. He spoke as though he was reciting a lullaby, even when angry.

On the last morning of my grandfather’s life, the whole family went out to breakfast. He seemed tired, but still strong both in spirit and body. We spent the meal laughing and joking, until I decided I wanted to pay the bill. He vehemently argued that he wanted to pay and grabbed the check from my hands. I sat quietly, waiting for an unguarded moment. When he leaned over to chat with my father, his grip loosened. I quickly snatched the check from him and delighted in my victory. While fishing for my wallet, my grandpa took hold of the opposite end of the check and pulled. I would not let go. He kept pulling until he had lifted me off the ground, single-handedly. Amazed, I let him have the check and fell back into my seat. His smile and joyfully-raised eyebrows told me that his strength should not have surprised me. After all, he was a Marine.

He remained strong up until his last breath that night. After supper, he felt sleepy and retired to bed early. I went in to see if he needed anything. He smiled softly and shook his head no. “Okay, well goodnight Grandpa,” I whispered. He raised his head and hesitated with his response as his breaths grew longer and heavier, “Goodbye Hun.”

My breath catches a little in my chest as I remember his parting words. I slowly make my way back to the house with my shoes still dangling from my hand. As I revisit the memories of my walk, I realize my grandfather was right. I remember his life, not the fact that he is dead. Death has not changed my memories nor the story of his life.

The late-morning sun illuminates me as I step out of the forest. My pants, slightly torn and covered in dirt, are ruined from the ankles down. My bare feet are encrusted with dried mud. My grandma and mother are waiting for me; they are too emotional to bat an eye at my appearance. Besides, Grandpa would not have wanted me to be perfectly primed on account of him. Why waste time on such things?

We stand by the dock and wait for the rest of my family. The water is still, awaiting what is to come. Slowly, a sea of black emerges from inside the house. My sister is holding the urn. We gather by the lake, and I hear the eulogies begin. As his ashes are scattered into the water, someone starts to sing a Celtic hymn. Just as a tear escapes my eye, I feel a soft breeze and then the warmth of the sun. I look into the pristine, blue water and smile slightly as I truly listen to the words of the hymn, “above the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing. It sounds an echo in my soul, how can I keep from singing?” The high-pitched notes cut straight into my heart as I remember the similar melodic tone of his voice. I remember the rises and falls of his speech, how he could make a lecture sound like a sonnet. The music of the funeral fades and I am filled with the music of his life. I hear his perpetually soothing command, “always wear your life-vest, have too much fun, fear nothing, keep holy the Marine Corps birthday, and until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of His hand.”