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## The Indestructible Man

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# The Indestructible Man

Poppy once told me that all of his hair fell out in the shower. He'd been shampooing, with clouds of suds forming between his fingers. When he went to rinse, suddenly every strand was washed away; they floated across the shower floor and disappeared down the drain. He was left with a bald patch encircled by thinning hair. To hide the premature baldness, he bought a dark toupee that was thick as badger fur. Grammy hated that toupee. When Poppy babysat me, as he often did, he would place it on my head to make me laugh.

Another time, he told me that a great gust of wind blew his hair away. He had walked into the backyard and *whoosh!* It was gone, flapping away on a tailwind like a big, dark bird.

*Once upon a time, there was a scientist. This scientist wanted to do something that had never been done before. She wanted to make a man who could never be destroyed.*

Lexi's white graduation gown was bright against the muted hospital walls. Her cap—also white and decorated with purple flowers and silver jewels—bobbed as she walked in her heels, the gems occasionally catching the light. In her hand was the slim diploma case. The actual high school diploma would come in the mail in six to eight weeks, but for now the case would do. We—my mom, dad, Lexi, and I—were there to show it off to Poppy, diploma or not.

Poppy had been sent to the ER yesterday. He was pale, unresponsive. Grammy called the ambulance in the midafternoon, but I wasn't told until after I finished work. I'd even talked to my dad on the phone earlier that

day, but he hadn't mentioned it. When I asked why he hadn't told me, he explained that he didn't want to worry me, but I should have known. My dad's voice was uncharacteristically light through the phone speaker and he said that he loved me, which he only reserved for goodbyes before a long trip, or when he dropped me off to start a new semester of college.

After a stint in the ICU, the doctors could only say that Poppy had low blood pressure. Their tests had revealed nothing else. Their treatment was comfort, rest, and observation. My dad told us that Poppy was spooked more than anything. He asked the doctors to resuscitate him if need be, despite the DNR on his paperwork. He was just scared and that scared me too, but I understood.

When his vitals were stronger, Poppy was moved into a spacious single room on the third floor. Grammy was inside waiting for us, sitting in one of the square chairs by the bed. Despite her long hours in the hospital yesterday and her long hours there that morning, she was still put together: white capris, white Keds, seafoam green blouse with a green necklace to match. She had withstood many, many hospital stays in the duration of her marriage. Still, she was fighting off tears when she saw Lexi.

"Lexi, you look beautiful," she said, dabbing her nose with a crumpled tissue that had been buried in her purse. "Congratulations."

"Mom, pull yourself together," my dad interrupted. He didn't stop to greet Grammy the way the rest of us did. He went to Poppy and gently shook his knee. "Hey, Pop."

Grammy blew her nose into her tissue, the fabric so thinned from reuse that I was surprised it didn't disintegrate. "Nice to see you, too, Michael," she said and she laughed weakly. My dad ignored her and continued to do so as she said to my mom, "Michael's always so miserable. I don't know how I ended up with such a miserable son." She tried to laugh again.

We didn't laugh, but we each gave her a hug. She told me that I looked beautiful. She told Lexi that she would have been there if she could, but she couldn't go anywhere anymore because of Poppy. We had all grown a little deaf to this refrain.

My dad has always looked larger than he actually is. He is not particularly tall or wide, despite Grammy's constant comments about his weight. I suppose it's because he walks heavily. It makes him appear dense. But he only walks that way because of his bad back and his bad knee, products of a bad accident that left him unable to work. His unemployment was another of Grammy's grips, but I had never minded. Growing up, there was always someone around. And, despite her disapproval, Grammy certainly took advantage.

Buried under Grammy's greetings, Poppy's voice, weak and low, caught my attention as he greeted my dad. Poppy was still Poppy, with a big hooked

nose and ears as long and floppy as deli ham, but he seemed to have whittled away in the hospital bed. His arms and legs were thin; most of his mass centered in his stomach that rounded like a mound of snow under the blankets. It pulled him into a constant hunch. His arms shook, the right worse than the left, from the Parkinson's. The baby green hospital gown gapped around his thin shoulders, the fabric drooping to reveal the large scar from when some doctors in Boston had to cut him open to swap out his old heart for a new one. He didn't notice us at first. I prepared myself for this to be a Bad Day. To be one of the days where he saw trains and gangsters and crying babies, or any of his other now frequent hallucinations. But Lexi gently placed a hand on his shoulder and he turned.

There was a sliver of a moment where I thought he wouldn't recognize us. It was the softly-spoken possibility. Delicately worded, not believed, and always posed as a "what if" type of question. His eyes were foggy and red-rimmed, but they brightened as he said, "Girls!"

Suddenly, everyone could breathe again. Lexi filled Poppy in on the ceremony. We told him that he wouldn't have wanted to be there anyway. There were close to a thousand people. Two hundred and fifty kids had to cross the stage. There was no air conditioning and the chairs were uncomfortable, too. Moving carefully around the beeping hospital equipment and the thick plastic bedrails, Lexi leaned close to Poppy as I took their picture. His color was looking better, and he made silly faces for the camera when Lexi placed her grad cap on his head.

Only a few feet away, Grammy was crying to my mom. "Donna, I can't do this anymore. It's too hard. I can't have a life. He keeps me from sleeping. I can't keep doing this."

My dad interjected. "Then maybe it's time for a home."

This argument had been a snare for our family, ever tightening. It was a decision years in the making, but Poppy had always pulled through in one way or another. Grammy was no help; she talked out of both sides of her mouth, one moment preferring the frying pan, and the next the fire. We knew she was waiting for my dad to decide.

Grammy again whipped out the abused tissue. "I don't want to be in that house by myself." Her words smacked around the room.

"Enough," my dad said. He cut her off and walked out into the hall.

My mom often scolded my dad for talking that way to his mother, but she didn't then. His retirement, as well as our family's physical closeness to our grandparent's house, meant that my dad was the one Grammy called when the TV wouldn't turn on or Poppy needed a shave or the driveway needed to be shoveled or the will needed to be looked at or Grammy needed to complain. And he had heard all the complaints.

My phone camera put little, yellow boxes around Lexi and Poppy's faces. If he became distracted, Lexi redirected him. With prompting, he would make another goofy grin and we'd ignore the slip.

I heard Grammy again tell my mom that she didn't know how she ended up with such a miserable son. Then she began to cry about how only a few weeks ago she found Poppy crawling along the bathroom floor, naked, at half past two.

*The scientist spent days in her lab preparing for her creation, sketching diagrams and running mysterious experiments. What stumped her was this: what should she make her indestructible man out of? Steel was too heavy. Iron rusted. Wood could burn or rot. One day, she came to a surprising conclusion—aluminum. Aluminum was light and malleable. Aluminum didn't rust. Aluminum wouldn't burn or rot. Thus, the scientist began to construct her indestructible man out of aluminum.*

Poppy once had a koi pond. He dug out a spot in his backyard that had previously been the location of the in-ground pool that my grandparents filled in over a decade before. He picked out four koi—one for each of the grandchildren at that time—and let us name one each. I'd like to think that I named mine Merlin, he was cosmic blue and silver, but I don't remember. I really should because a decade later the pond was filled in and the four koi and their descendants moved into a tank in my living room.

The koi were never that exciting to me and Lexi. We were all about the frogs—finding them, catching them, putting them in a bucket. We tossed the bucket of frogs out into the creek behind the house, but they always came back, croaking every summer night in a chorus. There were small frogs and big frogs and forest green frogs and jade frogs. The biggest frog was the Grandpoppy Frog, said Poppy, and all the rest were his kids and grandkids.

Lexi and I had many sleepovers at Grammy and Poppy's house, spending the night on top of an extra tall mattress. On summer nights, you could hear the frogs croaking through the open bathroom window. Thinking of those nights reminds me of stories that Grammy used to tell me and Lexi, particularly one about our great-grandfather killing chickens at their farm in Plymouth; I can't remember her words or how old I was or what our great-grandfather's name was, but I do remember spinning around in circles whenever we retold the tale about the chicken that ran around the farm with its head chopped off.

*The scientist made her indestructible man an aluminum mouth for talking, smiling, and laughing. Short, strong hands for drawing and crafting. When the scientist was finished, the indestructible man seemed perfect. He could talk and joke,*

*make her laugh and laugh at himself. He was a craftsman and built the scientist brightly colored birdhouses. But things were quickly found to be not right.*

Not long after we arrived, two nurses entered Poppy's room, wheeling in a portable computer. They just needed answers to questions regarding his health history. We explained everything to the nurses because Poppy couldn't get the dates straight by himself. The heart attack was in 2000, the transplant in 2005. With abashed politeness, we tried to let Poppy answer the questions. But the words were stuck in his mouth like taffy; some didn't even get as far as his mouth. They were pinned between two brain wrinkles, unobtainable.

"Do you know what year it is, Mr. Canarelli?" one of the nurses asked. This one had big, curly, red hair. She was loud and a bit gruff, but that may have just been from her needing to shout to be heard by Poppy's failing ears.

There was a pause and my family looked at each other. It was almost a laughably easy question, and my dad and I exchanged tight lipped smiles because we both knew what the result of this simple test would be. Poppy replied that it was 2012, only five years shy.

Poppy became more distant with each question from the nurses. The second nurse, this one manning the mobile computer, didn't know how to respond to Poppy when he answered questions no one asked. She repeated herself, once, twice, and then cast my parents a pleading look.

Poppy laughed. He was looking out into space toward the brightness of the window. "What is it, Frank?" my mom asked, smiling. She followed his line of sight until they were both looking out the window.

"Those are the biggest snowballs I've ever seen," he said with a smile. He told us that there were young boys outside having a snowball fight.

I had once volunteered at the rec therapy department of a nursing home where the program director prepared me for what I was going to see. She told me that many of the residents would often see or say things. It was best not to contradict them. They had been through enough already. There was no point to prove.

"Frank!" Grammy cawed, "There's no snow! It's nearly July!" She said July like *Joo-ly*, an elongated coo that forty years away from her Southern roots couldn't erase.

My mom rubbed Poppy's shoulder as she said to him, "Oh really? That's nice. Are you cold, Frank?" She asked the nurse to grab him an extra blanket.

Poppy's face fell from the window as his mouth tightened. He seemed to sink into the pillow.

*While the indestructible man was not too heavy and did not rust, burn, or rot, he dented. Even the slightest battering would ruin his delicate construction. Talking, smiling, and laughing crumpled his face and sagged his lips. He could no longer*

*craft his birdhouses, because his fingers were crushed by the slightest pressure. Despite the scientist's greatest efforts, the indestructible man became more and more dented until all he could do was sit in a chair all day. Every dent had a dent. And those dents had dents. And while the indestructible man remained indestructible, he was crushed into nothing more than a little aluminum ball, no bigger than what could fit in your pocket.*

The nurses ended their questioning when Poppy said that he had to go to the bathroom. He barely had the strength to pull himself out of bed, much less make it to the toilet. They brought him a bidet and everyone exited the room as the nurses attempted to get Poppy onto the plastic seat.

Grammy was already starting to tear up again. "This is what I mean. He can't toilet himself. Clean himself. At home he always leaves a mess..."

"I think that's enough," my mom gently interrupted. She was smoothing my sister's hair with her hands. She knew that no one wanted to hear about Poppy like that.

After a minute, the two nurses exited the room. They told my parents that he hadn't gone yet, but was still trying. They told Poppy that if he needed any help, all he had to do was press a red button.

After the nurses left, my dad said, "He won't be able to go. He's embarrassed."

"They want him to press a button?" my mom asked, dumbfounded. "Is he going to even remember what the button does? Can he even press down on it hard enough?"

"He can't press the buttons on the TV remote anymore," I commented.

My mom elbowed my dad. "Mike, see if your dad needs help."

We all looked at my dad. I wanted to tell him that I loved him even though he was only going into another room and college wouldn't start up for another two months. He sighed, then knocked on the door frame and poked his head inside before disappearing into the room.

Grammy took my mom's arm and squeezed it. "I don't know what I'd do without Michael." Then she looked at all of us and tears welled up in her eyes. "I don't know what I'd do without you girls."

I thought of a silly little fable in the hospital room. Sometimes it's easier to think of things that way. It's easier than thinking of what I do know—pasta dinners, big nose, checkers, koi, and frogs—and what I do not—Grammy said you used to draw once, are you who I got that from? What swear words could you say in Italian? Tell me all of the words you remember from back when that was the only language spoken in the house.

The irony—what the doctors can't succinctly shorthand onto a chart—is that their successes, measured in every day you're still here, are tainted with loss. Every year for five years was our last holiday season with you, last Fourth of July, last birthday. And every year you shrink. And every year I get more used to the fact that I can't talk to you anymore.

At college, I study biology, so I can understand how broken things are, and how the drugs to fix things only break them more. Let's think clinically. Let's think creatively. But let's not think about the rest.

One of the local nursing homes in the area had an open room for Poppy. They fit him in right away. Hospital to the home, without a single stop at his house. Grammy filled up a suitcase with things just for the first few days. Soon we would make his room homier; we made plans to hang a birdhouse outside his window once someone went to the store to buy a Shepherd's hook.

Most days, Poppy sat in an armchair by the big wall of windows in the Magnolia House living room. Many of the other residents were ancient ladies who could barely move. One lady slept all day. Another had an eyepatch and a pit underneath. One lady would laugh randomly every few minutes. "She's a sheep," commented Poppy. "Baa, baa, baaaa."

When I had the time to visit him, I tried not to do it alone. The last time I did, I had no idea what to say. I pulled out a game of Connect Four from a pile of puzzles, but Poppy had little interest. He was occupied, telling me about the game of bocce ball that he played at the community center and about how the whole roof had caved in the other day. Plus, I think that his hands shook too much to properly hold the pieces.

Looking at Poppy, I am reminded of my fable. Poppy is now thin and saggy, with no hair and the jowls of a Grandpoppy Frog. He calls Lexi, my mom, and me "honey," and I selfishly fear that he is forgetting about us. There isn't much left.

With time, the man and his memories become something crumpled and small. They condense until they are a tiny, silver ball that you can carry around in your pocket.