

# Saddest Family Gathering

Jamie Campbell

October 25th, 2016. Red/yellow/orange leaves descend. Buildings pass by. Sleep calling me. Left, right, left. Pocket begins vibrating. Screen reads, Dad. "What're u doing?" Letters create words. "Headed to Helser. Need nap now." "Come home today. Going to Marion. Grandpa's not well. Grab your sister. Leaving at 3." No discussion necessary. I'll be there.

Thoughts creeping in. Grandparents get sick. They frequent hospitals. We never visit. What's different now? Start calling Macy. Interruption- incoming, Dad. "Headed for you. Macy's here too. We gotta go."

Still in limbo. Dad's gone mute. Flying by fields. Corn, soybean, wheat. Nevada, Marshalltown, Tama. AJ Foyt driving. Texting, calling, driving. Phone lights up. Tina, Danielle,

Jim. Severity seeps in. Uncle never texts. "Is grandpa okay?" Need to know. Stomach turns upside-down. Twisted in knots. Sweat begins forming. "He'll be fine. He's holding on." Holding to what? 15, 30, 45. Mile markers blurred. 15 more left. Dad's messages increase. He floors it. Car turns rocket. 80, 85, 90. Speed limit irrelevant. Fuck the cops. Nothing against them. Places to be. People to see.

Hospital in sight.

Last spot secured.

Race to entrance.

Lost in corridors. Left or right? Useless confusing maps. Dad's stress oozes. Asking the receptionist. Directed towards grandpa. Aunt finds us. Rushed greetings only. Not prepared yet. Still not informed. Door looms ahead. Should I enter? What's waiting behind? Grab sister's hand. Take the plunge.

Who is he? That old man. Needles, tubes, machines. Who is she? That old woman. Gripping man's hand. Grandpa and grandma? MY own grandparents? Grandpa's usually quiet. Not this much. He's not conscious. No "Hello's" exchanged. Raspy, gritty, a-pack-a-day-voice. That was before. Before the tubes. White coat enters. Finally- some answers. He says heart-attack. He says dehydration. I say bullshit. Make him better. Give him medicine. It's 2018 damnit. Cure my Cubs-loving-cane-wielding-motorized-scooter-riding-grandpa. I'm not ready. Tears held back. This isn't real. Throat closes up. Decisions, choices, options. Pleading, crying, begging. Face still blank. Holding family tight.

To continue, or? No quality life. 5% survival rate. Tubes, machines forever. Or, let go. "If's" floating around. Doctor needs answer. 12:00 pm deadline. Siblings meet together. Aunts, uncles, dad. Dad finds voice. Truth flows out. "He'd want this." Grandpa's spitting image. Grandpa's little replica. Makes hardest choice. Let him go. He understands Grandpa. What he'd want. No more suffering. Free in Heaven. Best Cubs seats. Limber limbs again. New guardian angel.

Everyone gathers near. Hands find hands. Giant group hug. One final kiss. One final good-bye. Gone without suffering. Gone, Gone, Gone. Wrinkled face smoothed. Monitor becomes unplugged. Beep, beep, silence. Tears leak out. Mountains of Kleenex.

Family holding on. Family letting go.