

Numb

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It started several months ago.

My mother called. She was crying. I could hear her dab her eyes. I sensed the relief she must have felt when she finally wiped away the soft mucus that gathers under the reign of tears. Your grandfather died, she said. It happened so suddenly. The doctor said it was heart failure. He said my grandfather had died in his sleep, that he didn't feel a thing. I tried to put myself in my mother's shoes, or even the doctor's. It must have been hard delivering a verdict like that. It was heart failure. For the first time in my life I could honestly relate to my grandfather, or something.

After I hung up the phone my roommate asked me who called. I reported to him it was my mother and that my grandfather had just died. The tone in my voice must have scared the shit out of him. I'd said it as if he had asked how warm it was outside. My grandfather died. Sixty-three degrees.

I remember the hospital.

I was in the waiting room or some room that smelled like a waiting room. And I remember the TV. It was an old Sony. The news was on. A thin, straight line kept creeping upward and out of sight. The picture got fuzzy as it slithered up the screen but every few seconds the line wasn't there and the picture cleared. For a moment I thought the TV was a heart monitor.

A nurse came in to tell me my sister was fine, that my family wanted me to come and see the baby. I heard they named him after you. Jonathan, she said, that's a lovely name. You must be proud. You're an uncle now, you know. I nodded and got up to follow her to my sister's hospital room.

The baby was asleep. My sister was holding her in bed humming little baby hushes. Her husband was on a chair close to the bed, smiling. My parents were taking quiet snapshots. They all motioned me to come in and join my family's new happiness. In the corner of the room, a heart monitor stood bent and folded. For a moment I thought I saw the news on its screen, or at least that thin, straight line.

I was with my girlfriend.

The sheets smelled like cloves. Her shirt was off and her bra lay on the floor next to the bed. She turned on her side. Out of habit I spooned her. Her breasts sank to the left as she reached back to pull my arm over her body. Her thin shoulder blades settled against my chest. Out of habit I caressed one of her nipples. The only sound was the muffled rustling of sheets as my fingers worked her breast.

It felt the same every night, like soft clay that was drying too fast.

We rested. She turned toward me. Her breasts shifted. I love you, she whispered.

I took a deep breath. I love you too, I said, out of habit. Sixty-three degrees.

I'm shaving.

I'm twenty-three years old, old enough to feel something.

I've cut myself three times. My razor harvests. It cuts deeper each time making gashes out of slivers. The blood drips slow as wax. I tell myself it can't be mine. It looks gray, viscous. I don't feel it. The droplets make blood rainbows when they hit the perspiring sink.

It's beautiful outside. I should be throwing the football around, or something.

My grandfather's still dead. I'm an uncle. I love someone. And it's sixty-three degrees...everywhere.