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Ashes

Matthew Haines

Gettysburg College, hainma01@gettysburg.edu

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Ashes

Author Bio

Matt is a junior with a major in Political Science and a minor in Philosophy from Marlboro, New Jersey. He is currently involved in making rap music while writing creatively on the side. He played lacrosse in high school and briefly at Gettysburg and Hofstra and cites Albert Camus as a major influence.

Ashes

Matt Haines

“Matt! Wake up! Matt!”

I got out of bed quickly when my mother called. I wasn't sure what I was expecting and wasn't entirely sure what was really going on. I remember the distance from my bedroom to my parents' bedroom seemed to stretch to an agonizing length that did little but give my fears time to arrange themselves in the room ahead.

I turned the corner and in a picturesque moment I saw my father's corpse lying on the bed, framed in the indifferent light of a May morning. This moment shattered once I stepped forward and leapt onto the bed. It didn't take long to notice that he was dead. As soon as I got close enough, I saw a dried trail of blood stained from the left corner of his lip down to his neck. The blood traveled far enough down to seep into the collar of his gray t-shirt. The last image of him wasn't exactly a flattering one: my pot-bellied father, pale, stiff, and cold, in a pair of white briefs and a bloodstained shirt. It wasn't what I wanted, but it was what was given to me.

“Dad!” I shouted shakily, but I felt numb. “Dad, get up!” I screamed louder and grabbed his shoulders to shake him. In my mind, I knew it was useless, but I didn't have anything else I could do. My hand reached down to touch his cheek, and I was shocked by just how cold it was.

“Matt, you know CPR, do it! I'm calling the police!” My mother howled and picked up the simple white telephone that rested on the nightstand near her side of the bed. My head whipped around to receive her command. I briefly watched her frantic, panicking body move erratically. For some reason, I couldn't be the same way. I almost envied her. I looked back down at my dad.

I remember his face. It's hard to forget. People always tell you how some people look happy, sad, or frightened when they die, that some emotion lingers with their body. Don't let anybody convince you that that's the truth. I didn't see a damn thing in my father's face. I saw a ghastly white doppelganger. I saw one of his cheeks filled with blood that had stopped moving while the other side had a dead yellow tint to it. I saw the dried blood on his chin and his wispy brown hair flowing in all different directions; that's the only thing that really reminded me of him. The rest was just a cruel token that the Grim Reaper had left behind for us.

A dead body has something different about it; my mom slept the whole night beside his corpse without noticing. How could she have real-

ized? Sleep is the cousin of death and they're eerily identical. The only glaring blemish on the face of death is the lifelessness portrayed by a body not breathing. I placed my left hand flat on his chest and interlocked it with the fingers of my right hand on top. I pressed down like I had been taught. My hands moved with the rhythm of a beating heart, begging for his body to emulate it. I pressed harder now but kept a steady rhythm. I had never done this on an actual human being before, but from my learning I knew what came next was fairly common. I pushed down and up, over and over, until his body hissed at me to leave it be. With each thrust, his ribs and sternum cracked under the pressure of my hands. The dead, weak bones inside his body fractured. It moaned, begging to be free of my bothersome attempts to revive it. I obeyed, unable to continue this useless ritual that did little more than desecrate the body of my father.

"Keep going!" my mother screamed at me. "Come on!" she belted out, as if the louder and more shrill she became the further away she could get from this horrible mess watching her only son feverishly pounding into the chest of her soulmate. I worked like a miner trapped beneath a massive sheet of rock. I worked like my life depended on it, when the only person who really felt better from what I was doing was my helpless mother. I worked for as long as I could before I finally accepted to be crushed by the weight.

"It's not going to work!" I roared back at her, sitting on top of my father's body. I saw the pain and confusion in her face. A face that is usually so full of love and joy was now twisted with the frustrating confusion of grief. I felt my voice soften. "He's been dead for hours," I said calmly and looked back down at my father's bloodstained face. I heard my mother put the phone down and scream.

"Oh my God, he's dead!" That about summed it up. I remember the way her voice cracked and rose as the word "dead" came from her lips. She ran out of the room. I looked down at Dad, but no tears came. My father and I sat there on his bed like we had countless nights. It was just like old times. We sat there in silence underneath the white and green canopy bed while I would pry to get inside my father's mind. I got off of him slowly and stood beside the bed looking down at the body. It wasn't until then I had realized his right leg was hanging off of the bed. Did he try to get up? Was he getting back into bed when it happened? My mother and I talked about it, and concluded that he was getting back into bed after a typical, late night bathroom break, and before he could get underneath the blankets, it ended. Maybe we only convinced ourselves of that. Maybe he did try to get out and call for help. Maybe he was scared. Maybe he knew it was coming. Maybe he didn't. I try not to think about it. What difference would it make anyway?

I must've been awake when my father died. I was up late that night; I remember I was talking to my girlfriend. I was totally unaware of the events unfolding down the hallway. If I had just walked down the hall, like I did every once in a while, maybe I would've had a chance to save him. Maybe breaking my father's chest plate like an ape would've amounted to something then. Maybe it wouldn't. I try not to think about it. What difference would it make, anyway?

Every story like this has a profound, heartwarming memory. This one does not. The day before my father died was just like any other day. We walked through the house without saying much to one another, him trudging around in briefs and a striped rugby shirt, myself in a t-shirt and shorts. We sat in separate rooms, ate in separate rooms, and went to sleep in separate rooms. We were in separate rooms too often.

After briefly dealing with the police that had arrived, I walked back up to the bedroom slowly, but steadily, forward. I felt the hallway to be much shorter this time around. As I turned the corner into my mother's bedroom, I saw the body underneath the blankets now, with the blood wiped off of his face. I guess my mother couldn't handle seeing her only love like that. I came around beside him and knelt down. My head fell down onto his stomach and I looked up at him. That was when the tears started to come. It was no gushing geyser or desperate deluge, just a few drops that landed on the blanket covering his body. I stood there for a long time. I would've remained there until every last bit of his body decomposed; I would've stood there until I died next to him, but I didn't get the chance. The EMTs entered abruptly; one quickly apologized when he saw me in there and promptly moved a few feet out of the room to give me privacy. It was at this point that I realized this would be the last time I would ever see my father again; from this point forward, I would only see pictures, videos, lifeless reruns of his life that had ended so suddenly. I couldn't hold it in. I started to cry for the first time in a long time. The tears left me, but it didn't feel like enough. I wish I could've given more tears, more screaming, and more anguish, as if to show his lifeless body how much I would miss him. It was no use. After I quietly told my father that I loved him and said goodbye, I left the room. That was it. My father was nothing except a pile of ashes now.

The last thing that came out of my father's mouth was not love. There were no words of wisdom or gentle goodbyes. The last thing that left his mouth was not hate. There was no violence or fevered tantrum. The last thing that left my father's mouth was a few droplets of blood and a final breath that carried him away to wherever one ends up when their time is over. I knew my father was afraid to die. I knew he, like myself, was an

atheist. I don't know where he is now, but I know he's gone forever. I won't waste my time trying to convince myself otherwise.

I'm expected to say how appreciative I have become since then, how I've never taken a day for granted. I'm expected to say how I've found God, and that I believe that my father will guide me into heaven. I can't do that, though. The truth is, I've become cold, colder than the corpse of my father in that early morning. The truth is, I don't want God. I never did, and I especially don't anymore. The truth is, I think I might be better off this way. I may never be truly happy if I keep on like this, but I'd rather live a sad truth than a wonderful lie.

My father didn't live to see me turn twenty years old. He didn't live to see me marry a woman I love, or feel the touch of his grandkids. My father will never ever know what type of man I will become. He will never know the pain or joy I feel, the heartbreak or elation. He's nothing now, and I've accepted that. I don't know what the hardest part about all of this is. There are too many things to mention.

This is the last memory of my father. My life began and ended at that moment. I can't count how many times I told my father I loved him, but I can tell you that it wasn't enough; I'm left with these words forever stuck inside of me. I'm left with heartache and days thinly veiled with assertions that I'm doing just fine. I'm left with nightmares and dreams that give me no comfort. I'm left with bruises worth their weight in gold and memories worth their weight in ashes.