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Bottled

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Bottled

Stephen Lin

It wasn't until after I arrived that I realized I was completely sober. Twenty-something black suits and twenty-something black dresses fill a small fraction of the room with their murmurs and their sniffles; rows of empty chairs far outnumbering the mourners in attendance. Twiddling my sweaty thumbs, I sit in the front row with my mother and father as family and friends of uncertain relations drop by to pay their respects. My parents are an odd pair of contradictions: my mother, a mere five feet of fury, usually brimming with opinion, today maintains a solemnity, acknowledging each passerby with an affirmative nod, while my father, the gentle bear of a man that he is tries his best to hold his own, but every once in a while a sob escapes his quivering mouth, the tears tracing wet lines across his big, round face. The cluster of grievors disperses as the clergyman takes his place. As the last whisper of fond memory and sympathy dies out, he begins, "We gather here today to not only mourn the loss, but also to celebrate the life of Terry Chen: a brother, a son, a husband, and forever a good friend."

He went on reading the footnotes from the Odyssey that was my uncle's life. I say Odyssey because my uncle had lost everything in his late thirties and fought for the rest of his life to get it all back. Well he finally got what he wanted: His wife and kids had just enough decency to show up to his funeral. I couldn't even bear to approach them. Where were they during the hardest and loneliest years of his life? The next hour was filled with stories, some heart-felt and some rather fake. As the anecdotes of "what he would have wanted" and bullshit of "a better place" drowned the atmosphere, I remembered the flask of bourbon sitting snug in my coat pocket. Ignoring my mother's disapproving look, I pulled it out, took the cap off, and gave a silent toast in memory of my uncle, because it was after all "what he would have wanted."

Warm numbness permeated throughout my body as I took my first sip. I gagged and my uncle slapped me hard on the back, bursting in laughter. It was the night before my first day in high school and uncle Terry felt like breaking a few rules. So sure enough, half an hour earlier I heard a knock on my window at two in the morning.

"Uncle Terry, I can't! I've got school in five hours!"

“I don’t see the issue here,” he replied. He was right; there was no issue and I had already begun to put on my socks. Anything sounded better than waiting restlessly for school to start and adventures with uncle Terry were always worth it. I threw on a sweatshirt and snuck out the back door, giddy with excitement.

We drove past my school and my uncle waved his middle finger around like the queen. He hated the suburban wasteland that was our town. Uncle Terry was meant to do great big things in great big cities, but he sacrificed that life for a failed marriage and two kids he never got to see. The radio kept cracking with static, but I was too nervous and excited to care. One steep hill and an abandoned playground later, we found ourselves in the parking lot of an old church, in God’s blind spot. Looking back on it now, everything about that night sounds like the opening of a murder mystery, but there is nothing I will ever regret about that chilly September event.

“You ready for your first beer? Cause believe me, in college they only get worse and worse.” He was also right about this, too, but it wasn’t until four years later and after I had had my first PBR that I realized the truth in his words.

Later that night, the sun was just rising and we had downed a six-pack each. I let out an elongated burp and my uncle smiled a drunk smile.

“You know you’re always gonna be my best bud, right?”

“I know,” I replied, clinking my dark green bottle to his. The amber liquid fizzed over, soaking my jeans, but I was too drunk to care. I woke up the next morning with a headache and horrible breath, but I felt like a man.

It’s funny how those two words, “I know,” became a sort of promise or a sacred bond between the two of us. From the parking lot behind the church, we consecrated a holy ground with its drooping streetlights towering overhead and the graveyard within eyesight. This was a place devoted to empty bottles and memorable hangovers. This nightly ritual of six-packs continued for another two years in high school. We drank after his first divorce, we drank after aunt Linda got custody of the kids, and we drank when uncle Terry bought his bachelor pad. He drank to forget and I drank because I was his best bud. He looked so strong with his proud beer belly and adamant refusal to weep about his losses.

When my parents found out about my drinking habits, uncle Terry and I had a bit of a falling out. My mom tried to convince me that it was uncle Terry’s fault that my GPA had been on a steady decline. My grades improved and I stopped hanging out with uncle Terry, but this did nothing to end my alcoholism. I continued to drink to forget about the loss of my best bud and eventually, several six-packs later I forgot about him, too.

Uncle Terry smiled at me from inside the picture frame sitting by his casket as I made my way to the podium. It was one of the few pictures in which he managed to get out of bed, shower, shave, and get dressed. He looked so healthy and young back then. I unfolded my eulogy and the mic screeched as I bent it toward my mouth.

“Uncle Terry died doing what he loved best: Pounding a six-pack.” No one laughed and a lump filled my throat with embarrassment. Nice start.

I loosened my tie and dove into the story of my first beer and the audience chuckled politely, flashing me their pity smiles as I continued to read my drunken eulogy. I spoke shamelessly of how much the divorce had hurt him, glaring daggers at aunt Linda, and I spoke of the tremendous strength he showed during his struggle. As my mouth spewed kind words of what a role model uncle Terry was to me, I remembered something he told me the night he lost custody of his kids.

“Remember buddy, tears and all of that sad crap is a choice. If you choose to be strong, nothing can touch you.”

Nothing touched me for the next ten years. Three failed relationships and one college transfer later, the only thing I ever felt was the warm numbness of my first beer.

“I just want to know that you feel something, want something,” they would tell me and all I could do was shrug and apologize. I found myself content pouring all of my emotions into the bottle. All the love that I needed was in the cheap carbonated form of ambrosia.

It wasn't until this moment, and this moment only, that I had ever wanted to feel sadness so badly. Looking around the room, each of these people had tears to shed for uncle Terry. I wanted to show uncle Terry that I too, missed him desperately. As I closed my pathetic eulogy, I reached to my left breast feeling for my pulse, searching my heart to summon some pain, sorrow, anything, but my hand only found the cold metal of the flask.