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The Remains

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The Remains

The Oregon sun glared off my breakfast plate, nearly blinding me. My parents chatted happily about the grand family vacation ahead of us, one filled with excitement, love, and good old family bonding. I pushed my eggs around my plate with my silver fork. My phone rang. Thank God. It was my best friend, Katherine. I meekly excused myself from the table with little acknowledgement from my family. Katherine began to update me on all the high school gossip I had missed in the eternally long two days I had been separated from my clique.

"No, he didn't!" she said.

"I swear."

"And she did too?"

"Uh-huh."

"Brett, your breakfast is getting cold!" Not the female voice I wanted to hear.

"Katherine, I gotta go."

Reluctantly, I closed my phone and shuffled back to the table, more interested in the pebbles that danced under my feet than the conversation that was awaiting me ten steps away. I sat down, and again began to pick at my food. My parents started to talk about how they felt my uncle was too overweight, that he wasn't healthy. I wasn't paying attention. I pushed my eggs into the shape of a smiley face.

"How bout some cards?" my mom suggested. My brother and I groaned.

We were in the middle of what seemed like our thousandth game of Hearts when another phone rang. Instinctively, I reached for mine but my brother won this battle. It was my cousin.

"Are you ok?" he asked. His face dropped. He handed the phone to my mom. She was out of her seat the second the receiver hit her ear. She moved towards the door, pausing every few steps to plug her other ear from the hustle of the busy river next to us, her eyes clenched in concentration. As she marched through the glass sliding door, her shadow ran desperately to catch up. My heart began to pound.

"Was everything okay? Was something wrong?" I asked my brother, trying to act only somewhat concerned.

"I don't know," he answered.

We sat in silence. It had been ten minutes. My mom still had not come back to her cards. My dad left the table to find her. I started to follow.

"You stay here," he instructed firmly.

My stomach began to knot. A lump pushed up in my throat while my tongue willed it back down. The relentless sun was beating down on my shoulders yet I had the chills. The hair follicles on my arms raised in attention as my skin began to prickle with worry. I picked up my cards and began to rearrange their already perfect order. My brother tapped his index finger softly on the table, sending a shock of vibration through my resting elbow.

Fifteen more minutes passed and the silence began to hurt my ears. With the creak of the door, my dad took a step onto the patio. I stood up. I tried to read his face but there was nothing. His eyes were blank, his smile, if you could even call it that, was crooked. He locked his eyes with mine in a stare that stung. I held it until my eyes began to burn.

"Uncle Terry died. He had a heart attack."

I dropped to my knees and began to cry.

I lay on my back, letting the life jacket do the floating for me. My legs and arms were limp, sore from my countless falls. The water was now beginning to feel warm from the amount of time I had spent in it rather than up on my skis. I could hear the boat swinging back around to coax my seemingly lifeless body into another go. I closed my eyes, praying that, just maybe, if I couldn't see the boat, the boat couldn't see me. The roar of the propellers got louder as the boat drew near, and then, miraculously, they stopped. Yes, he missed me. I opened one eye with false hope. There was my uncle Terry staring down at me with an evil smile.

"Just try one more time!" he yelled.

My heart dropped. *Not again.*

But without saying a word, I grabbed the rope and held back my tears as the boat towed around me. My butt was killing me from falling down so many times and I could feel the blisters forming on my palms from the death grip I had on the rope every time the boat tried to get me up.

"I know you will get it this time, Brett. You know what they say...the 300th time is a charm." I knew he was trying to be funny but it really wasn't working.

"Here we go..."

The engine boomed, the slack tightened and I was yanked forward. *Don't pull yourself up. Don't pull yourself up. Let the boat do it. Let the boat do it.* My knees began to shake as they straightened out. I could feel the lake water flying off my face as my body finally got out of the water. *Oh my god. I'm doing it.* But I had cracked a smile of victory a second too soon. I felt my right leg drifting farther and farther away from my left. My face broke my fall as it smacked the water first. My skis flew in opposite directions and my life jacket struggled to break free over my head. I laid floating on my stomach, not worried about my lack of oxygen because I was sure the internal bleeding I received from my wipe out would kill me first.

"I have to say, that fall was the best one yet."

I rolled onto my back and looked up at Uncle Terry who was already at the back of the boat with his hand out, ready to pull me in. His mustache curled up with his smile as he stared down at my limp body with excessive enjoyment.

"See. It wasn't that bad was it?"

I could only groan.

He draped a towel around my shoulders and nudged my arm.

"Don't worry, I'll tell everyone you went all the way around the lake. No one will have to know you could quite possibly be the worst water skier Lake Winnepesaukee has ever seen."

Uncle Terry started the boat and I sat gently on the left side of my butt, the right was too tender to hold even half of my weight.

"Hey, where are we going?" I asked.

"Are you kidding? After that performance, you deserve a little treat."

As the shore drew closer, I saw the bright blue Bailey's Homemade Ice Cream sign come into view. Uncle Terry always rewarded me. He always made me feel special, even for being the worst.

When I woke up on the couch, salt had dried on my skin in the same streaks where my tears had been the night before. I checked the time. It was only four a.m. but both my parents were awake. My mom was crying. My dad held her; even he looked like he

was at a loss for words. It made my stomach turn. I closed my eyes tightly until I could feel the wrinkles forming around my face. Maybe if all I saw was the blackness of my eyelids the reality would disappear too.

I felt my leg twitch. I opened my eyes to see my dad shaking my foot.

"Wake up, Brett. We're leaving."

I looked around the room at our belongings piled neatly next to the door. My brother sat wearily on his red rolling bag, headphones in, his cold eyes on the ground. My mom busied herself around the room, checking for what I'm sure was the fifteenth time to make sure we weren't forgetting anything.

I roamed around our terminal, watching the fellow travelers hustle to make their planes, wrapped up in their own lives. They were completely oblivious and unsympathetic to the family tragedy we had just endured. Their faces were serious with determination, as if missing their flight would be the end of the world. I stared with little pity.

Tucked in a corner of our gate, I saw my family slouched in their seats. I sat down next to my dad in order to give my body a rest. My legs were aching in pain from the weight of the emotion they were carrying. No one said much, except for the occasional check-up. "You want to talk?" my dad would question. I looked him in the eyes and looked back down at the book I had been pretending to read. He didn't need a spoken answer.

My cousins' driveway seemed dark, even though it was only late afternoon. Maybe it was just my mind playing tricks on me. I could smell the New Hampshire pine, a familiar happy smell gone sour in the wake of the day's events. My mom led the way. She stopped briskly before she reached the steps. She turned and looked at me. Her eyes were tired, glazed over from either lack of sleep or the constant production of tears. Maybe both. She took my hands in hers and gave them a gentle squeeze. With one final breath of trepidation, she opened the creaking front door.

The first face I saw was Katie's. She stood and walked over to me. I studied her face; her eyes were far too transparent for the toughness she was trying to fake. I could see the grief that pushed down on her shoulders while her strength was trying to hold her up.

When she reached me, she collapsed in my arms. It was the first and only time I ever felt older than my cousin, my idol. The twelve year age gap between us seemed to vanish. Now I was the elder. It was my responsibility to make this right, to be there for her. I always knew this time would come some point, but was I ready for it now?

She buried her face in my shoulder. Her tears soaked through my cotton t-shirt, stinging my skin. She lifted her head and looked at me with pleading eyes.

Take this pain away, they begged.

My eyes stung. I looked down.

The thick green grass showed life while the plot's content showed death. Each shiny headstone mocked our comatose walk to the grave sight. The warm late summer wind kissed at my face as I tried to hide from it, feeling guilty accepting its gentle touch. My mom clutched my hand tightly as if she was worried I'd be the one disappearing into the tiny hole in front of us. I looked away from the hole to the plastic container that held the remains of Terry, a jolly, heavy set man in life, reduced to dust in death.

After all that, I thought, this is where we go. We live life trying to work our way up. We learn at a young age that if you want to succeed, you have to work hard. We work hard in school in order to get a good job; we work hard socially in order to be popular; we work hard in our professional lives in order to make a lot of money. We work, we work, we work. But in the end, we never finish up. We never finish with a big house or fancy cars. We never finish with our family and friends beside us. We never finish above. We always finish under. We finish in a plastic container placed underground in a tiny dirt hole.

After all that, this is where we go.

"As we walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death," my father began, his voice quivering with pain. I looked at the faces in the crowd, most of whom I recognized from years of Christmases and birthday parties spent in North Hampton. All had tears streaming down their faces, obviously thinking as I was: Terry was gone. Never again would he be there to yell at me in his loud, playful way. He would never be there to pick me up when I fell water skiing. His scraggly mustache would never again tickle my cheek as he kissed it lightly in greeting. But worst of all, he would never be there to just hug me with that great bear hug only an overweight man can give. He just left us. Left us to be. Left us to remain. Without him.

When my dad finished the Bible verse, my aunt picked up her husband. She gave the cold plastic one last kiss and lowered him into his eternal home. Friends and family paid their last respects. I knelt down and grabbed a handful of dirt. I squished the silky material between my fingers until a rock begged me to stop. My dad touched my shoulder and nodded. I walked forward, purposefully looking at nothing but my destination. I knelt down in front of the freshly dug up earth.

"Goodbye Uncle Terry," I whispered.

I unclenched my hand and let the dirt fall over him.