

Dear Gramps

poem · April 25, 2006

Dear Gramps,

It's been a year since you died.

It seems like so much longer.

I miss you.

I'm glad we were able to say goodbye, properly.

Things around here are really strange.

The void in the wake of your death is immense.

At least

For me.

People carry on as they should,

But I don't know that you were ever properly honored.

I wanted it to be so much more.

Your death should have made a statement.

Like your life.

You have to rely on those left to take care of that part.

I let you down.

I allowed them to run the show and do things as they saw fit.

No one asked me what I thought.

Or how I felt.

But I didn't speak up.

I regret that.

They did the best they could I guess.

There were flowers and pictures and kind words

A few shared memories, stories and tears.

The pastor gave a sound eulogy, probably one of the better ones, and he didn't even know you.

I looked around.

You outlived all your good friends.

Mostly family.

Those that had enough respect to show up.

The rest can't be bothered.
Home—waiting for their checks.
So many mirrored faces.
You were loved much.
And hated.
Clandestine affairs.
Union strong-arming.
Things nobody has ever openly talked about.

I admired that about you.
You didn't give a damn.

As we stood around your coffin
I watched men with shovels
Standing by a white pickup truck parked
A little way down the asphalt cemetery drive
Circling buzzards.
They smoked and grinned and waited.
They weren't fit to throw the dirt that would soon cover you.

The ceremony was short.
I didn't cry.
Not a single tear.

At the end
The ladies were given a carnation from the big bouquet atop your casket.
That was a nice touch.
You always had a keen eye for the lookers.
I took a Carnation.
I didn't immediately understand they were only for the women.
So I had to give it back.
As I turned and walked away
I realized it was over
And I had let you down.
I put empty hands in my pockets.
They should have sprung for roses anyway.

Then we ate.

The church banquet room provided meat sandwiches on buns,
Egg-potato salad, ambrosia, baked beans and little paper cups of Kool-Aid.
Jell-O for dessert.

We all shoveled in the food and shot glances at each other
with chilling smiles
on folding metal chairs at round tables
And talked about how nice it was outside and how we'd better be getting the lawn mowed,
etceteras.

We all asked how we were each doing as though any of us cared.
Meaningless, pointless, strained and manufactured conversations
Politely forced clichés of our society
Echoed right up to the rafters.
Walking on eggshells never sounded so deafening.

I pushed the salads on my plate
Into little mountains.
Then flattened them.
In my silence
I had let you down.
The toes inside my shoes were curled up tight.
My chest felt like the jackboots of a thousand Nazis were grinding their heels
Into my heart.

My father sat at another table
Smiling and
At ease
The relief in his face was evident
He is glad you are dead
He had been predicting it 'any day now' for thirty years.
He can finally say he was right.

It is the longest hour of the day.
The boots were crushing my ribs.
At last we could all go home
and mow our lawns.

I stopped for gas

And decided wine might be good.

So I bought a magnum of Shiraz, 2 bottles of rum, some gin, and a case of beer for back up.

At home, I sat outside on the deck and stared into the trees.

Angry and alone.

I let you down.

I couldn't get drunk.

I was too sad to swallow.

But I felt no sorrow that you were dead.

I was sad we hadn't celebrated your life

The same way you lived it.

I feel like it would have been more apropos

To be in a bar in Tijuana

A truck-stop in Sioux Falls

Or a Vegas convention center

A Union Hall in Chicago

Or Acapulco—Sail-fishing

On a Golf course in Scotland

A Cabin in Saskatchewan

Hunting wild boar in the Ozarks

You quietly died.

And you deserved better than that.

Who is going to tell the stories?

Who will keep them alive?

The tornadoes

And poverty

The great depression

World War Two-through bombs and barbed wire.

The Union strikes, walkouts and midnight negotiations

Jimmy Hoffa and the FBI

And all the people that stepped back

When you walked by.

Pinochle and Cribbage

Hunting and fishing and driving your way

Through life on a path scored with a straight razor

No obstacles.

Nobody wants your stories now

It's what is left behind that they are after.

Your bank account.

The property in Florida

The collectibles

antique furniture

They each deserve it all for themselves

You owe it to them.

For all your philandering and womanizing.

For being laid to rest between your mistress and your wife.

They'll fight and they'll fight and they'll fight what they can get of what's left.

For years.

All they really want is a piece of you.

Of what you were.

None of them are even a shadow of the man that you were.

They haven't the spirit.

The drive

The passion

Or the guts.

They know this.

So they'll settle for what they can eye-gouge and elbow for

Claw and scrape up what's left.

Whoever gets the most

Will feel the most justified.

All I ever wanted when you died

Was the worn-smooth silver dollar

You carried in your pocket for years and years.

Something so identifiably you

To hold in my hand when I missed you.

Like now.

But I don't need what's left.

I'm holding on to the stories and memories.

And I'll tell the world.