



Or I, I Know

From A Hyphenated Life: And Other Disjointed Things

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At the traffic light, just before Hulen Road, the road that runs under the I-20 overpass, we waited, as we had waited at this light on this road under the overpass hundreds of times over the years. The only thing that changed, beyond the light that changed, were our ages and the make of the car in which we waited. But the light, as lights typically do, remained the same, even when it changed, and it changed multiple times a day.

I always drove. That is, at least for four years I always drove, ever since he trusted me to drive and, more important, no longer trusted himself. Our destination was always the same, lunch at Harrigan's, because, and only because, he liked the free warm cheddar biscuits, and the biscuits were enough for him, not for me, to eat as a meal. The drive, which for four years at that point I'd been driving, usually consisted of unremarkable talk, and typically began with unremarkable talk like the Texas weather in October when the weather is unremarkable, and ended with him insisting that we not park in the designated handicap parking even though his plates were designated as handicap plates and he, as many his age, needed a handicap designation.

But back at the light, we waited. And I remarked, waiting, remarking only to myself, that this drive was, as it always had been, perfect. It was perfect for how perfectly unremarkable it was.

You know, son, he said to me as he patted me on the leg, I always thought you would be my preacher boy—something he had said to me, and only me, my entire life. But this time, the time he said it to me, because of the way he said it to me, I knew would be the last time.

I recognized, the moment he said it to me, that the unremarkable perfect of those moments was forever gone. His words, the words of my grandfather, the words of a man who I loved

more than most anything else, were, and I knew it right then, that those words were the forever dividing, the before and forever after, the moment of a great shift. I knew it would be the moment, forever. And I knew, above all else, that there wasn't a response, that he knew what I knew, that there was an impossibility in his words, but more than the impossibility of his words, we knew the impossibility of my response.

It had been, though it had never been discussed, three years since my grandfather, the morning he was to preach a sermon, read that his grandson—his chosen one, the one he had selected, his daughter's son—was gay. It had been three years since, at his kitchen table, with a cup of coffee and the local newspaper, my grandfather realized the reality was far different from the reality he had envisioned and that this new reality precluded any possibility that his grandson, his heir apparent, his favored one, would be, as he so desperately wanted the reality to be, his preacher boy.

His morning words, the morning we waited for the light to change, were, in his way—the only way he knew—a way of saying without saying that the change of things was OK. His words were a letting go, an acknowledgment, a setting free, a way for him, after having come to terms with it himself, to let me know he himself had come to terms with it. It was his way of telling me without telling me that he supported me as I found my way, and that he would, though maybe I just wish this to be, no longer stand in my way of finding my way. He no longer had thoughts, as he once had thought, of my being his preacher boy and in this moment, the moment just under the overpass, he let me know, shifting tense and tone, that his thoughts were no longer the thoughts he thought before.

Six years later, almost to the day from that day, at night and in his sleep, my grandfather passed away. He would never, from the day six years prior just under the overpass to the day of the night he died, say the things he said that day again. And again, from that day to the day he died at night in his sleep, my grandfather was, and remains to this day, one of the greatest men I have ever known. And I will never know again.

On the day, just a few days from the night he died, we—and by we I mean me and my mother and her sisters, and my brother and the other grandchildren, and my grandmother, the greatest woman I have ever known and will never know again—laid him to rest. And resting, reposed, just below the pulpit, the pulpit from which he preached, the pulpit from which he once thought I, his preacher boy, would preach, there in the church, just he and I, while the rest of the we chattered in the lobby, it was me, I said to him, one of the greatest men I have ever known and will never know again, that on that day, that day six years prior almost to the day from the

night he died, on the day he was taking me to lunch and I was driving because he no longer trusted himself to drive and we waited for the light to change on the road under the overpass, that on that day I knew that he knew that it would not be me who would follow him in the pulpit. I told him, as he lay, that my truth, the truth he discovered three years before we waited under the overpass, was, though painful for him, far better than the lie it would have taken me to live the life that would place me in the pulpit, the pulpit that he and I were sitting under. And I told him, as we sat below the pulpit from which once he preached, that the day he said to me that he always thought I would be his preacher boy, that that was the day that set me free. The day he acknowledged my truth, I said to him, he set me free from the expectations that he once expected of me.

It has been twelve years since we sat under the pulpit from which he preached, and nearly nineteen years from the day, long before the night he died, he freed me from his dreams. He never lived to see the me—free to live my life as me, the authentic me—as the me who would find a way to reconcile my me with the faith he gave me. He, Granddaddy to me, would never know that someday, not long from the day of the night he died in his sleep, the me who found me after so many years of hiding from the real me, would be free from the heavy darkness of the closet and addiction that burdened the me who came before me, the secret me.

And I, far from the we who chattered in the lobby on the day he and I sat below the pulpit from which he preached, just a few days from the night he died—thanks to the lessons he instilled in me—have learned, though it took many years to learn and it was a lesson he never intended me to learn, that it was never me who needed to change. Instead it was them—the we to me—those in the lobby that day, the ones who never accepted me for fully me and don't to this day, who needed change. And though he, dead he is and has been for eleven years and some change, never said that they, the we in the lobby that day, needed to change, I am sure that he, like me, based on what he said to me that day when he and I waited for the light to change, did not believe, or no longer believed, that I needed to change.

I do believe, and I believe he believed, that on that day, the day he said what he needed to say, he was saying to me that the me who would never be the preacher he wanted me to be was perfectly free to be the me I needed to be. And he knew that I, the singular without the we, the them, needed his permission, or perhaps more accurately his blessing, to be the me I needed to be. Because that day, just a few days from the night of the day he died, as we sat just below the pulpit, just Granddaddy and me, and I told him, though he couldn't hear me, though I like to think he could, he'd set me free on that day, and though this sounds crazy, as crazy as my hope he could hear me, just before the we in the lobby came to join me in the pew, I heard him say,

the last thing he said, and I swear these things are true, as true as the truth that set me free, dead though he might be eleven years now and some change, and as dead as he was that day just a few days from the night he died, he said to me that day, though he did not say out loud, I could hear him say, that he loved me for me and though I would never be his preacher boy I would always be his. That's what I heard him say to me that day, and I hear him say to me to this day, that nothing, including death, and nothing beyond death if there is something beyond the nothing of death, would stop me from being his. And he, though no longer with me, would always be with me and beyond always, always still, to the beyond beyond the nothing of death, always he and me

—or I, I know it's I.