

Ashes and Smoke

by David Cirillo

Every problem can be solved if you smoke enough cigarettes.

That's what my pops told me anyways. Told me when I was twelve as he blew a ring of grey smoke around my head.

But the old man's dead now. He's in a coffin right in front of me, his skin grey like smoke—dull like ash. I'm the last one at the funeral home. The friends have left, and my ex-wife—God bless her miserable, beautiful heart—left a few minutes ago. Patted me on the hand and told me to call if I needed anything. Nice of her, and I mean it. She didn't have to come. But now, it's just me and the old man.

I light up a cigarette—I figure why the hell not. The old man's dead, and I'll be joining him in twenty years or less. So why the hell not? Besides, I'll spray Lysol when I leave. It's the least I can do.

I sit in the third row of chairs overlooking the casket. A few times over the past few days I've stood at the casket—but not often. There's something about a corpse, the gelatinous matter chuck full of chemicals, that scares me. I can't say why. Maybe I've seen too many zombie movies or maybe it's because the hair is the only thing still alive. I read that the hair continues to grow, even after the body is buried. If this is true, Pops won't be too happy. He loved his crew cut, thought hair on his head was as natural as a beard on a baby. He was probably right.

I'm about twenty feet from the casket, and while I refuse to get close, it doesn't mean the memories aren't close. Because they are. Right there. Lingering, hovering. And it wouldn't matter how far away from the casket I got—the fifth row or six millionth row—the memories would still come.

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The first time he told me this I was twelve. The second time was at Mom's funeral. I was twenty-two and he fifty-five, and we had a smoke right after the funeral mass. We stood there, the church steeple pointing to heaven, Pops leaning against the crucifix, me standing opposite him. He told me we'd get through this if Philip Morris had a say.

In a way, he was right. For weeks and weeks, we both smoked a few

packs a day. We didn't talk much, but together our voices got raw and our lungs turned black, and we drank shots of whiskey and played gin and listened to baseball on the radio. And sure enough, we both got through it. Didn't forget or cope or properly move on, we just got through it.

But I guess I'm an orphan now, huh? A forty year old orphan. And because of this, I want to get closer to Pops' body. So I do. I move up a row, but I don't sit. I can see his hands folded, resting on his stomach.

My father would tell you, if he was alive which of course he isn't, that he wasn't the perfect dad. He smoked too much, drank too much, cursed too much. He used to smack me around but no more or less than I deserved. We never really talked about this, about what kind of dad he was, but a few weeks ago at the hospital, he apologized. Not for anything specific—just a general apology. He said the bills had piled up, that he didn't have enough insurance, so he wouldn't be able to leave me much. Then again, he said, he wasn't John D. Rockefeller, just an electrician. He wouldn't have left much anyway. He laughed when he said this, but that turned into a phlegm-filled cough. His throat constricted and he couldn't say much afterwards. But he did say, "So, you know, sorry. About everything."

When I left the hospital, just a few weeks ago this happened, I didn't know if I was thankful or angry about the apology. Was he sorry for everything? For siding with Penny—my ex-wife—during the divorce? What about telling me I was a worthless bag of marbles when I dropped out of college? He had great hopes for me, and I let him down. I get it. But come on. What dad says that?

But in that moment it wasn't the past that bothered me. It was the apology. Did he think I needed it? Did he think I hated him or begrudged him for something? Did he think I harbored hate and ill will? Did he?

Because I didn't. It's so easy to say now, but I loved him. I love him. And I didn't need his apology. Didn't need it then, don't need it now, and never will need it.

I move up another row. Something draws me forward. Some force exists between my bones and that coffin. From the new row, I can see his face. The eyes closed, the lips thin, more pink than red. I can practically tousle his tightly cropped hair. Gray now, when it used to be jet black.

I've never been the same, not since your mom died. That stuff gets in

your head, son. Brings the demons with it.

When he told me this, I didn't see it coming. Dad never got too personal and certainly not confessional. But when he said it, that Mom's death brought demons, for the first time I saw how much he loved her. Even facing the specter of death, his mind went to her. Only her.

It made me wonder about myself: Was I a terrible son? Because how did I not now this? How had I never seen the pain and anguish her death caused him? I know the answer. I couldn't see beyond my pain to see his. So I ask the question again, was I a terrible son?

At the hospital, I remembered an incident not long after Mom died. I went to a bar called the Lighthouse, a little nook of a place stuck in a rat-infested building maybe four blocks from home—I still lived with Dad back then.

I went one night after a fight with Penny. She and I had been dating for half a year, and I got jealous about something, screamed, and stormed out. It would be the trademark of our time together, our marriage, and our divorce. Anyway, I showed up at the Lighthouse figuring I would shoot some stick and put on a good drunk. That's what I did back then, drank and yelled and got into fights.

The second I walked in, I saw my dad. He sat at the bar next to a woman ten years younger. She had on a short, red dress, red high heels, and a matching red bow in her hair. Pretty. As close to my age as my dad's. I noticed his left hand moved up and down her thigh.

I walked right up to him and didn't say a word. Just stared. He didn't even notice me at first, but when he did, he looked away. The deepest sadness filled his face, and in an instant, he looked twenty years older, almost like Grandpa. My eyes went from him to the girl in red and back again. When he finally was able to look at me, the youthfulness had returned. He said hi and introduced me to Cheryl. She giggled and shook my hand. None of us had much to say.

I stayed for only a few minutes, but at one point, I leaned in so only Dad could hear, and I said, "What are you doing? Mom just died."

I hurt him, I knew it, but he blew it off. Shrugged and said, "I don't know what to say. The world is broken, son."

That night, I waited up for him. I yelled at him, wondered how he could

do this so soon after she left us. I never cried in front of my dad but I did that night.

“Sit down, son. Let me tell you something. Maybe it will explain, maybe it won’t.”

He went to his room and returned with a statue of the Virgin Mary. A tiny thing made of plastic he could put in his front pocket.

“It’s my talisman,” he said. “I bought this the day after your mother’s funeral. I keep it in my nightstand, but each night, I hold it and say a prayer or two and think about her.”

I asked him what that had to do with the woman in red.

“It’s what gets me through,” he said. “The cigarettes and booze help. But this thing, this stupid piece of plastic, it’s what keeps the demons out of my head. You understand me?”

I did but I didn’t. “But what does it have to do with Mom? And being with that tramp so soon after she died?”

He said, “I told you at the bar. The world is broken, son.”

I didn’t hear him or listen then, but now I know what he was saying: “I’m broken, son, not just the world. And I’ll never be fixed.”

I step up to the coffin and glance at the yellow rose stuck in his lapel. My eyes go to his folded hands resting on his stomach. Those hands, marked with moles and age and scars, strangely tell the story of his life.

I take a drag from my cigarette, the thing nearly burned to my fingertips. I can barely look at the old man—at Pops. What is he now, anyway? Nothing but simple gray matter, like smoke and ash, ash and smoke. The spirit has flown, leaving the shell.

Yes. That’s it. Nothing here but a shell.

And so I take my cigarette and crush it hard against his hand. The skin smolders; smoke flits into the air; the air smells like chemicals, like death.

I leave the cigarette there, soldered to his hand, and put down the casket lid. I walk away, my eyes bloodshot, the smell of dead skin stained into my memory.

I reach into my pocket; I have the small statue, that of the Virgin. I think of my ex-wife, Penny.

“You were right, Pops, it is broken,” I say. “But maybe it doesn’t have to be that way. Maybe not always.”