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Kristopher Luke O'Dell
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Tuesday Night

by Kristopher Luke O'Dell

(English 101)

The Assignment: Write a response to Carol K. Littlebrandt's "Death is a Personal Matter" (1976, *Newsweek*): "We all celebrate or commemorate the landmarks in our lives – births, marriages, deaths." Write a narrative showing how a person or groups of people faced one of these major events.

I was twelve years old. It was Tuesday night, an event that, up until that evening, I had always loved. It was the one night of the week I truly anticipated. It was the one night of the week that my father would gather with his two older brothers and about half a dozen of their friends. They would gather, sit and talk in a cigar-smoke filled room that reeked of beer. On occasion, we would play cards for nickels, dimes, and quarters. Poker nights were always my favorite, probably because I liked to win.

These Tuesday night gatherings have been going on since the early seventies. I have always held them in high regard. Initially I liked the gatherings so much because I got to stay up late with these men, even if it was a school night. I took this gesture as a great gift and a rite of passage because I looked up to them so much. So when my parents divorced in 1994 and held equal custody rights over me and my four year old sister, naturally I wanted to be with my father more often--completely opposite from my sister. Therefore, I made it a point to be at my father's house on Tuesdays.

These fun, liberating Tuesday nights were quick to change on a fall night in 1997. We were playing poker and I was winning, for once, when the telephone rang. It was too late in the evening for the telephone to ring and I knew something was awry. I hesitated to answer it. My father's best friend, Joe, decided he would answer the telephone in his typical comic fashion. The horrid change from humor to cold seriousness on his face set my fears in stone. He looked at my father oddly, almost questioningly, and my father slowly nodded and handed the telephone to me. It was my mother telling me my father needed to drive me to Good Samaritan Hospital. My childhood best friend, my childhood hero, my 83-year-old grandfather on my mother's side had died.

I went through the typical "this is not happening stage" on the short, quiet trip to the hospital in my father's black Ford pickup. Only the two of us rode in the truck, and my father-- who was usually talkative and cracking jokes--was silent. That bothered me the most. Silence usually meant adults did not know what to say, and that has never been a good thing in my experience.

As we slowly walked through the green-canopied hallway to the entrance of the hospital I could not help but think how unnecessarily long this green tunnel was. It seemed like a mile, especially in the silence. We went through the automatic doors and I suddenly remembered how my grandfather had always said, "Open Sesame!" at every door. Early on in my childhood I always thought he held some sort of senior citizen power that allowed him to open doors by command. But childhood days with my grandfather were now only a memory, and he was gone forever. Deep sadness hit me, and I could not even bring myself to look at the smiling, pink-clad candy striper at the front desk. My father gave my grandfather's name, and she cheerfully gave us his room number. Her enthusiasm seemed ill timed. It made me nauseous.

The elevator hum was annoyingly loud due to our unconscious oath of silence. Suddenly, my father broke the oath and offered a peppermint Altoid to me. Chewing mints was a habit we picked up in order to calm our nerves when my other grandfather had a heart attack. I do not know if it really did calm me, but the crisp, cool mint took my mind off reality for the rest of the elevator trip.

As we stepped off the elevator, the sickening smell of hospital food and cleanliness hit my nose

and the remarkably bright floors and ceilings blinded me. Before we reached my grandfather's room, my father offered me another Altoid, almost to numb me for what was to come. I took two more cool, minty psychological buffers and turned the corner. The sight of my mother, obviously upset, hurt me. Oddly, I continued on as if drawn by my grandmother's cracking voice, calling me like the snakes to Saint Patrick. Nothing, not even the whole tin of Altoids, could prepare me for the scene in the room.

The room was small and dark. What I could distinguish between my grandmother's sobs was, "Come see him, he's gone, he's gone Kris. Forever." Then she laid her hands upon his, and I was seeing a dead body for the first time. Even more shocking was the way my always happy, optimistic grandmother very quickly broke down. That was when the knot in my throat came, larger than ever before. It was going to block off my breathing if I did not do something.

I had never seen any male role model in my life cry. I was not about to cry either. My twelve-year-old self felt it was my responsibility to be a man and support my hysterical grandmother. She then did something that made me realize that the pain I had experienced entering in the room was only a hint of what was to come. She took my hand and placed it on my grandfather's cold, clammy hand. I looked at his face and for once, it looked very tired. He needed a shave, his hair was a mess and resembled cumulus clouds, and his mouth was wide open like he was snoring. Again came the painstaking, ear splitting silence. The knot grew twice its size and I realized I had to leave the room and could no longer be the man. I could not support my grandmother even after her husband of over fifty years was gone. I left the room, went back into the bright, clean smelling hallway, and had another Altoid. My father took over in my place and did not fail as I did.

Outside the room, my mother was complaining loudly to the doctors and nurses about something I did not understand until weeks later. The hospital had no real explanation for my grandfather's death. The memory of the events at the hospital, coupled with the memories of his wake, when the undertakers closed his casket and asked us to leave so they could incinerate him, still leaves a void in my soul. When my grandmother died one year later, on yet another Tuesday night, I was better prepared. But despite the best preparation, life and death, much like a poker hand, are often out of one's control, something I first learned when my mother and father divorced.