

Cowboy

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My grandpa's name was Ray, and I didn't know him well enough. He worked long hours on the railroad for most of his life. He met my grandma just before joining the Air Force as a mechanic, and two weeks later sent her a letter saying, "You can mail it, hoc it, or wear it." An engagement ring was tucked in the envelope. He woke at sunrise every morning, ate quickly—a habit from the military—and hand-washed the dishes even when he didn't have to. He carved and crafted jewelry out of silver and turquoise and agate. He held a fortune in stories. His laugh was infectious.

Grandpa Ray was a John Wayne cowboy in a family of Indians. His eyes were clear blue, and he had combed white hair, once blonde. Moviestar handsome. And I knew Grandpa could beat out John Wayne any day of the week. Did John Wayne ride bulls or own a motorcycle? Could John Wayne recount stories that made you laugh 'til you cried? Could he fix damn near anything? I didn't think so.

John Wayne was an actor. My grandpa was a cowboy.

Grandpa Ray died of a brain tumor in the early summer of 2004. While he was sick, we all flew out to Arizona to see him. Most days he lay on a bed by the back living room windows. Grandpa had always been reserved—he didn't waste words—but now he seemed to be somewhere else entirely. He never spoke.

I had the bedside manner of a nervous child and the awareness of someone moving in a dreamscape. My family encouraged me to talk to him, but I couldn't find the words.

One evening we all sat in the living room and talked banalities. I showed some of my drawings to Grandpa. Nervous smiles. My sister Beth read him a poem of hers, and then I read him one of mine. An early attempt, immaturely written, but sincere. When I looked up, Grandpa was crying. It didn't register at first. Before my mind had a chance to process, Grandma rushed in with reassurances for me and a kerchief for him.

That night I lay awake on the fold-out couch bed Beth and I shared during the visit. I asked Beth why Grandpa had cried. Beth said he just liked my poem.

June was still young and cool in the mornings, school still fresh in my mind. Beth was away in Europe, her first time out of the country, with the high school's Spanish class. We didn't tell her until she got back home. We didn't want to ruin her trip.

I remember sitting on the old couch in the living room, sorting through loose change from a huge glass jug. It was all my grandparents' pocket coins from years of living, dumped into the jug each time they came home. Now it was a jumble of memories on the worn cushion, one by one being wrapped into paperboard tubes to be spent or forgotten. From continents away, Beth rang up on the phone, which passed to me, and I talked to her as I sorted change. More banalities. She was in Grenada, Spain, and I foraged for the right words, too aware of what I should and shouldn't say.

Winslow's only funeral parlor was incredibly quiet. The walls were a not-quite warm white, and the rug slept thick and muffling in red-purple burgundy. Nothing so dark as violet or comforting as wine, but roses would be an insult. Plush chairs, a dark wood bench and dusty fake plants had been placed with tip-toeing care in the entryway.

The back room had a round table too large for the space, where the smiling employee helped us pick out a casket and headstone. I paid little attention; that back room churned gray and cold under the fluorescent lights. I just wanted to leave.

The funeral parlor employee showed us sample caskets in a room off the entryway, the same room that would be used for the wake. His sales pitch was the only time I went in that room; I stayed in the hall during the wake and faced the building's other room, with the same cushy rug and chairs. Maybe they sent hysterical parents and spouses in there to regain their composure, I wondered. I sat and pondered pointless things like that, but I never went in for the wake. I was afraid he would look too dead. And I was afraid he would look too alive.

I assured my mom I was okay and just sat on the dark wood bench by myself. I stared at the red-purple carpet while family members and friends filed past. I struggled not to cry. I failed.

I could hear Grandma weeping on the other side of the wall. Then I could hear her yelling, pleading, almost angry. "Take me with you," she said; "I want to go with him, I want to go with him."

My mom came back and hugged me. I cried.

I don't remember the funeral very well. People, many of whom I knew by face only (and then just vaguely), stood and recounted stories. Some stories I'd heard before, some I hadn't. In well-loved words, Grandpa Ray rode his motorcycle down Main Street, up on the sidewalk, and right into the General Store on the corner; he raced bikes through the desert with eggs balanced on spoons in his mouth to see who could reach the finish line with their egg intact. He was courageous, a saint, a soldier, the best damn man you ever met.

He was human.

He was a cowboy.

Cousin Shar played "Amazing Grace" on her bagpipes while we left the church and that vividness—the uneven hum of the instrument before she began, the sharp, sweet-sour flavor of the notes—bleached out the rest of the day.

The Arizona sun shone on the fake grass around the grave, bright green plastic stuff that covers the porches of the cooped-up elderly. The blood relatives held roses as the church-man spoke, and we sat under the uneasy shade of a canvas awning. I turned my rose round and round, looked up at all the faces, turned the rose round and round again.

With speeches finished, we put our roses on the casket lid one by one. Workers lowered the silent, polished box and all the roses into the ground.

It was a long walk back to the car, all cemetery trees and headstone shadows. And the shadow of his marker yet to be placed, the shadow of the cowboy I hardly knew, fell a mile long.