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English 325.008

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March 25, 2015

3,099 Words

### Bumpa

It was November of 2011; the holidays were fast approaching, as was the University of Michigan's decision deadline. I had applied in August, and was anxiously awaiting the email from U of M as much, if not more, than Christmas. On my mom's birthday, my whole family gathered at my grandma and grandpa's house to celebrate. We were all sitting in the kitchen and ten different conversations were going on. I tried to stay quiet, but I couldn't hold it in anymore. Excited, I announced I had already been accepted to one of the two colleges I applied to. Smiles appeared on everyone's faces, but before anyone could say anything my cousin, Jacob, butted in. He had applied to 10 colleges and heard back from 8, all admitting him and giving him significant scholarship money.

Everyone replied in awe: "How amazing!" "We're so proud of you, Jacob!" "You are so smart!" Most of this awe was coming from my grandma, who can only ever focus on one thing at a time, which explained her lack of response to my announcement. My aunt and uncle proudly gave more information about the scholarships to my parents and my grandpa sat in the corner, silently dozing off as he often does in the afternoon. Meanwhile, I waited for anyone to ask me about the schools I applied to. I sat in the

corner of the kitchen, rolling my eyes, watching as my cousin basked in the glory of his praise.

I should have expected this to happen. My cousin was the same age as me and I was always being compared to him. He beat my 3.85 high school GPA with a 3.99 and put my ACT score of 30 to shame with his 35. He received his varsity letter two years before I did and was considered a prodigy when it came to playing the piano. I've spent my whole life being compared to this super-genius who couldn't let me be the best at anything. It was annoying, to say the least.

"Hey, Kaitlynn," my grandpa spoke over the chatter in the kitchen. "What schools did you apply to?" The room went silent—we all thought he was still asleep.

"Well," I muttered quietly, "I applied to both Michigan and Michigan State. I was already accepted to Michigan State, but I won't hear back from Michigan until December 16<sup>th</sup>."

"How wonder-" my grandpa began.

"I got accepted to MSU, too," my cousin interrupted. "And U of M is one of the schools I'm waiting to hear back from. The other is Yale."

Yale. That was all it took for the conversation to leave me in the dust once again. I looked over to my grandpa, who we all refer to as "Bumpa," and he rolled his eyes. He began making funny faces, referring to members of our family. He pretended to flip his hair while pointing at Jacob and then mimicked my grandma by pretending to talk and making over-exaggerated facial expressions. This was why Bumpa was my favorite. He had the best sense of humor.

Later that afternoon, I was sitting by myself in the living room. Bumpa came up to me and told me how proud he was of me. I shook my head back and forth, and told him to be proud of me once I got my acceptance from U of M. He said not to worry, and then challenged me to a game of go-fish. Card games were our thing; we played anything from war to euchre (when we had enough people). As he began to deal the cards, I noticed his hands were shaking more than usual. “Are you okay?” I asked him. He just smiled and began telling me a story about letting a donkey loose in his school when he was my age. He always knew how to make me laugh.

Life went on per usual until the next Wednesday when my mom got a call from my Grandma. Bumpa was in the hospital. He got sick right after we visited and wasn’t getting better. The next day, my mom picked me up from school and we went to the hospital to visit him. When we walked in, the happy, jovial Bumpa I knew wasn’t there. He looked extremely frail and as pale as a ghost. I gave him a hug and tried to act like everything was normal. We joked around, as usual, but he lost his breath each time he tried to laugh. It was clear he was in a lot of pain.

My mom and I were playing Go-fish with him when he told us the news—his cancer was back. He had first been diagnosed two years prior, with skin cancer. But now, he also had Lymphoma. Tears began to fall down my mom’s face.

I will never forget what he said next, “I can’t fight anymore. This is it, I won’t be coming home.” I burst into tears. I couldn’t tell exactly what I felt at the moment: a lot of anger and disappointment at first, for sure. How could he say that? Why would he just give up? But after looking into his eyes, I realized how much pain he was in, and I was overcome with fear and helplessness.

Between my sobs, I cried, “You can’t go before I hear from Michigan!”

He reached for my hand; “I know this means a lot to you. I’ll fight through Christmas, but that’s all I can do.” I nodded and gave him a hug.

Thanksgiving rolled around without much happening in-between. At dinner, the conversation once again focused on Jacob and his scholarships. He spent a whole twenty minutes contemplating whether or not U of M would give him scholarship money since he only got a 35 on the ACT, instead of a 36. As he boasted, I couldn’t help but convince myself I wouldn’t be accepted. I began preparing myself for the rejection email. I came up with scenarios in my head of how I would respond to my failure.

After an hour of hearing about my cousin’s accomplishments, I politely asked to be excused from the table. I went into the living room and found one of Bumpa’s many sketch pads. He loved to draw silly pictures for us kids.

My mom and I visited my grandpa the next day. We asked him how his Thanksgiving dinner was and he started to joke about how he couldn’t die yet because he needed his last meal to taste better than whatever “shit” that was. He laughed and once again lost his breath. He asked my mom to help him with his water. She walked over and held the water as he drank it through the straw.

All of the sudden, he began to cough. It escalated quickly from a small, clearing of the throat, to a gasping for air. Everything was happening so fast, I didn’t know what was going on. My mom hit the emergency button on his bed, while I ran to the halls screaming for help. Nurses rushed in, gave him the Heimlich, and took a bunch of tests to make sure he was okay. When my mom asked him if he wanted us to stay, he said he would be okay, but it would be best for us to come back another time.

As we walked through those halls, I was overcome with sadness. I asked my mom if she thought Bumpa would be able to make it through Christmas like he had promised. She was silent. She put her arm around me and pulled me in close, as a tear ran down her cheek.

The next couple of weeks were rough. Not a day went by without a phone-call about Bumpa. He began having episodes like the one my mom and I witnessed on a daily basis. My mom wouldn't let me go with her to the hospital anymore. She didn't want me to see him suffering. Each time she came home, she would be in tears.

Wednesday, December 14<sup>th</sup>, was the first time she my mom came back and wasn't crying. She pointed at my brothers and me, "Get ready, you're going to the hospital." I knew right then that he wasn't going to make it through Christmas. I ran upstairs, tears running down my face, and found one of the pictures he drew for me when I was in elementary school. It was a man with a blue hat, an orange mustache, and brown hair coming out of his ears. It was the one thing that summed up his humor and our relationship perfectly.

When we got to the hospital, my mom told us to wait outside while she made sure it was a good time to visit. There was a picture of a purple flower with the acronym IRIS below it. I asked a nurse walking by what it stood for: it meant "I Require Intensive Supervision."

"Hi, dad," I heard my mother say.

"Natalie," he replied, "you look so beautiful!"

My mom's voice began to shake, "No, Dad, it's me, Barb."

The room went silent. I peeked in to see if everything was okay. My mom signaled for my brothers and me to come in. Apparently he could only stay awake for short periods of time. My youngest brother was the first to go and talk to him. My mom woke Bumpa up by shaking his shoulder, and he stayed awake long enough to say “I love you, Colton” before he lost consciousness again. Next, my other brother went over; Bumpa said, “I love you, Kenny” then fell asleep once again. It was my turn. I didn’t know what to do.

I walked over to the hospital bed, my mom shook his shoulder, and he opened his eyes. “Hi, Bumpa, it’s me, Kaitlynn,” I said softly. “Do you remember me?”

“Of course,” he said slowly. “Have you heard from Michigan yet?”

I was thrown off-guard; I didn’t expect him to remember. “No, I won’t hear until Friday.”

“Well you call me right when you find out, okay?” His words were becoming more long and drawn-out as he began to drift back into a slumber.

My heart filled with happiness knowing he was still trying to fight. But at the same time, I saw how sick he really was. I began to think he wouldn’t make it. I was about to stand up when I realized I still had his picture in my hand. “Wait, Bumpa! I forgot, I want you to keep this here with you!”

“What?” he asked, in a state of half-consciousness. I handed him the drawing. “Oh, yes, I remember. Very nice. Love you.”

We didn’t stay at the hospital much longer after that. We each gave him one last hug, said goodbye to our grandma, and then left.

The next day and a half flew by incredibly fast as I distracted myself from thinking about my admission decision. Then, the day I had long awaited arrived. It was finally Friday, December 16th. After I got home from school, I sat on my computer, refreshing my email every five minutes. At 4:55, when I pressed refresh, a new email entered my inbox. There it was: “Your University of Michigan Admissions Decision.” I closed my eyes and double clicked on the email. I waited 30 seconds before slowly opening one of my eyes to peek at the content of the email.

I jumped up and down with absolute excitement. I let out a noise that I couldn’t replicate even if I tried. It was at such a high pitch, it was barely recognizable by human ears. My dog sprang up from the couch and began running around in circles around the house.

“What’s wrong?” my mom yelled from downstairs.

I didn’t answer, I couldn’t answer. I opened my mouth and words wouldn’t come out. There was no way to express the complete and absolute joy I was feeling at that exact moment. My mom came running upstairs out of panic.

“Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

I began jumping up and down. I pointed at the computer screen since words still weren’t coming out of my mouth.

“Congratulations Kaitlynn—You’re IN!” My mom began screaming with me. I jumped around for a few seconds more, but then I paused. “I have to call Bumpa. He has to know.”

I dialed his number as fast as I could. I was so excited to tell him the great news. I anxiously waited for him to answer the phone.

No one answered. My gut sank. His phone was always next to his bed, or with my grandma. Why didn't either of them answer? I called again, no answer. A tear slid down my cheek. "Honey, don't worry about it," my mom said gently. "He is probably just asleep. Call up your dad and tell him the good news."

I sat on the counter in the middle of the kitchen for a minute, wondering what I should be feeling. Of course I was beyond excited about getting in to U of M, but the only person I wanted to tell wasn't answering. After staring at the ground for a good ten minutes, the phone rang. I jumped up, hoping it was Bumpa.

I answered the phone so quickly, the caller ID hadn't yet displayed who was calling. "Hello?"

"Hey Kaitlynn, I got my email, did you?" It wasn't Bumpa. I told Jacob my good news, and held the phone a few inches away from my ear as he let me know that he received his email *much* earlier than I did and that he was accepted to the engineering school, which was *much* more prestigious than the school I had been admitted to. I decided to stroke his ego, congratulating him on his accomplishment, and hung up as quickly as possible.

I finally called my dad and he was thrilled when I told him the good news. We were only on the phone for two minutes before the home phone began to ring. "Gotta go, love you bye!" I dropped my cell phone and ran for the home phone.

"Hello?!" I answered once again.

"Hi Kaitlynn, it's your grandmother," she spoke very quietly, trying to hold back tears.

"Is everything okay?"



She didn't respond.

"Hello?"

"I heard you got into U of M, congratulations!" She sniffed her nose in-between every word.

"Thanks, does Bumpa know?"

She didn't respond.

"Hello?"

"He always knew..." she began.

That wasn't the answer I was looking for. "Grandma?" I began to cry.

"He fell asleep this morning and never woke up." She began bawling. "He tried, I promise he really tried."

My tears stopped when I realized he would never know I was accepted. I stood at the phone, emotionless. My body just stood there, and I couldn't even think. "Oh," I replied to my grandma. "Well at least he knows now." Unable to come up with any other words, I handed the phone to my mom.

I stayed in the same state for the next several days. In one day, I had experienced the most joy and the most pain I had ever felt. I couldn't tell if I was supposed to be thrilled about my exciting new journey in life, or depressed because one of the most important people in my life was no longer there to share my joy. I carried on with the next few days, void of emotion, until the day of the funeral.

My cousins, my brothers, and I were called to the front of the church to say a few parting words about our grandpa. One by one, we shared our favorite things about him as

we stood next to his open coffin. One of my cousins loved his stories, another loved listening to him play the piano; all eight of his grandchildren spoke.

When my turn came, I just stood there for a moment. I started to think about my favorite memories with Bumpa. I began to think back to the days I played soccer. One time, I sat for an entire game. He hadn't been feeling well, but wanted to cheer me on anyway. I didn't play a single second in the game, yet when it was over, he congratulated me. "You did everything you could!" he laughed. "They didn't even do their job! They lost!" This wasn't specific to me; he fully supported my brothers, my cousins, and me. He was the kind of person who wanted everyone to be happy. He found his happiness in the happiness and success of his grandchildren.

Immediately, I began to regret asking him hold on until I heard back from U of M. It was so selfish. He didn't need to know whether or not I got in; no matter what, he was proud of all of my accomplishments. My emotions finally caught up to me. I began bawling in front of everyone. "I loved that he was proud of me no matter what and he had confidence in me even when I didn't."

When I got back to my seat, I wiped the tears off of my face. I realized that it was silly that I had been so upset about not being able to tell him about Michigan. He had been suffering for so long, and tried his hardest to fight through. All that mattered was that he had confidence in me, and I didn't need to prove anything to him for him to be proud of me. Similarly, just because he was no longer around, didn't make my achievements anything less to be proud of. I still got into U of M, which was awesome, even if Jacob was there to outshine me. I now knew, no matter what I accomplished in life, Bumpa would be proud.

After the funeral, everyone went out to lunch. We were sitting at the table, waiting for our food, when my mom yelled across the table, “Hey, Kaitlynn. Tell everyone your good news!”

Everyone turned to look at me. My voice went up an octave as I squealed, “I got into U of M!”

“Congrats!” everyone replied.

I smiled, enjoying the attention for just a second until my cousin spoke up, “I got accepted into U of M’s engineering school, which is even *more* prestigious.” Once again, everyone began to bask in the glory of Jacob. I just rolled my eyes and sat back in my seat, laughing while I imagined the faces Bumpa would be making at the table.