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Grumpy

My grandfather was named Selwyn Atherton. He was my Mom's father. I never called him grandpa or anything like that though. None of the grandkids did. Instead we called him "Grumpy." Grumpy had been his nickname since well before I was born, and I feel like that's kinda self explanatory. In his youth Grumpy had been a sportsman; competing in tennis tournaments, frustrating his kids by constantly beating them in tennis, that sort of thing.

He also loved golf, and played that sport for as long as he possibly could. Over the years I got a lot of tales about my Dad and Grumpy's golf excursions. Dad couldn't get his ball to go straight for shit but he could always take a firm whack at it. If it went straight it went far, otherwise it went into the windows of people's houses. In fact, Grumpy and Dad were playing one time and Dad blasted a slice into the woods which resulted in the familiar sound of breaking glass. Grumpy rushed over to the cart to get moving but Dad started walking over to the trees beside the fairway.

"Where the hell are you going?"

"To get my ball!"

"Your ball is in somebody's living room right now let's get the hell out of here!"

When I knew Grumpy he was still a sportsman, just in a different sense. When he was at home he would be nestled away in the corner of the living room in "Grumpy's chair" as we called it, with the television tuned in to whatever sporting event he could find and some wine on the table next to him. Of course, Boston sports were his favorites, but he would watch anything.

On multiple occasions my parents and I would walk into my grandparents house, exchange greetings (while Grumpy remained in his chair), and ask Grumpy what the hell he was watching. He would reply with something akin to “women’s collegiate softball,” and when we asked why he would say he had no idea. I still don’t know how much he actually knew about the sports he watched, he would mainly just yell at the tv when something he didn’t like happened, which seems to run in the family.

Grumpy lived up in the Pinehills of Massachusetts with his wife Margery Atherton (who I called Grammy), and if I’m being honest they were really well off. Grumpy had been a banker for a long time before he eventually retired, and by the time that happened he and Grammy had been able to buy some crazy stuff. They had art pieces from all over the world, sculptures that cost more than sportscars, and things that date back way further than I comprehend. Stepping into their house felt like stepping into a museum, or like I was walking around a place that I wasn’t supposed to be in. It was a nice home of course, but I could never be fully comfortable because I always felt like I was gonna screw something up. One time my buddy came over to my grandparents with me and didn’t know if he was allowed to sit down on the couch because it looked so nice.

I mean, they had stuff sitting on the *floor* that was worth more than 6 figures! Like, come on! I was right to be cautious though, because things had indeed been broken before.

My Uncle Mark had been playing football inside the house (yeah, don’t ask, I don’t know either) with a friend when he was a kid, and managed to toss the ball directly at one of the massive vases my grandparents have sitting on a shelf by the entrance. Of course, it shattered, and collectively they panicked until they started frantically grabbing up all the pieces they could find. They started attaching those pieces together like they were making a 3D puzzle and by the

time anyone had gotten home they had that vase back up on the shelf and only looking slightly out of place. It was years before anyone found out about that incident, so they didn't face Grumpy's wrath, but still, I wasn't overly confident in my puzzle skills so I stayed away from most stuff.

Grumpy was an interesting guy to say the least. When visiting our house, he would rumble down the driveway in his big red pickup truck, overshoot the edge of our driveway by about 5 feet, tear up the lawn (he drove the truck through the entire backyard at one point because he didn't want to walk to the grape vines), and then if my Dad was out working in the garden Grumpy would head out there and "supervise." Supervising was an intense job that required a wine glass, the reclining lawn chair, and any dessert we had on hand. If he had been able to get his hands on one he would probably have grabbed a megaphone too so he could relay his "helpful tips" to Dad with ease. Sometimes though, if we didn't manage to hear the commotion that ensued when he visited, he would just sit out in a chair, looking. Because our house was the farmhouse, his farmhouse. It was the house that he and the whole family had gone to to stay in during the summers all those years ago. So when he was here and when he was alone I think he would look out over the yard and sift through his rolodex of memories of this place. I don't know much about those times, but I'm sure he saw a lot of different things when he looked out at that yard. From what I could tell, everyone who had been a part of the chaos that was those summers looked back on them fondly.

Back then, you could see the ocean right from the second floor of the house, and to this day we still have four beds up there, all leftover from those summers. Regardless, when Grumpy would do this we could see him from out our kitchen window, and he looked peaceful. But of

course when one of us stepped outside to say hello we would be met with his gravelly voice saying “Hey how’s it going!? Grab me a glass or red, would ya?” Or, if it was me, he would say hi and then ask me to ask one of my *parents* to get him a glass.

When I was a kid I knew all the different kinds of wine cause of Grumpy. There was zinfandel, chardonnay, rosé, merlot, and all the other ones whose names I can’t remember anymore. He was a connoisseur, well, probably a bit more than that to be honest. Wine was his go to, every time, all the time. Whenever he was around or whenever we were over at his house, a bottle was never too far off. It was like that weird statistic where a spider is always within 10 feet of you no matter where you are, except with Grumpy he was always within 10 feet of some wine.

At my grandparents house they had wine bottles stored in this strange wooden thing that could handle like 6 bottles at a time. It used to be right next to Grumpy’s chair but someone had moved it away at some point and I doubt it was him. Honestly, that was probably amongst the closest someone had been to Grumpy’s chair. Nobody but Grumpy sat in Grumpy’s chair, it was like it had an invisible force field around it. But, if we were over at my grandparents and it was time to leave, I would dare to approach Grumpy's chair. Usually, I would cautiously walk over, then, while he eyed me down I would lean down and give him a big hug while saying “Byeeeeee Grumpy.” I would get a few grumbles and a gentle pat on the back but he never actively protested against this ritual so I think he secretly enjoyed it. I could always smell Grumpy’s sweater whenever I leaned in to say goodbye and I always thought it smelt good. I thought it was just how Grumpy smelt, and I guess it was, but eventually I realized that it was just the smell of wine that had practically bonded with his clothes at that point.

I was just a kid when we were around Grumpy the most, so I didn't catch any big conversations they had with him about his drinking. I assume there were conversations. They probably just took place after I left the dinner table to go stare at the big painting in the hallway of the lady whose eyes my older cousin Ross had insisted would follow you wherever you went. I swear Ross was right, that painting was weird.

Anyway, when I was around it was usually just small comments telling Grumpy to go easy tonight or something like that. He didn't listen of course, but hey at least they tried. Being me I didn't really pick up on any of it though. I grew up thinking it was normal to do what Grumpy did, and nobody really told me otherwise cause I didn't ask. I was usually all focused on all the fancy stuff over there, I didn't have time for questions about that.

The few times I can remember when Grumpy didn't have some wine on hand was during Christmas. Christmas was always incredible. At home, I would rush immediately over to the tree after waking up and harass my parents to get over there, then I would start making my way through everything while they sat with their coffees and watched the chaos unfold. Then, we would all head over to "Hawk's Perch," which is what we called my grandparents house (I don't know why). All the relatives would already be packed in there by the time we arrived. We would all funnel into the basement where music was playing, decorations were strewn across the walls, and presents were aplenty under the sparkling Christmas tree. Just enough lights would be on so that it wasn't too dark, and all the Christmas-y changes to the basement were readily apparent. That was Grammy's specialty, she loved setting up all the decorations. They had so many different things around the house. There were special plates, special Christmas napkins, and a cool snowman that hung from the front door alongside a million other tiny toys and figurines.

They also had an elf on the shelf who was perched on top of the bookcase, who I assume overlooked the whole process.

Right next to the tree were the massive stockings that were reserved for me, and my cousins Ross and Rebecca. All the adults would sit around while we tore through those things, sending wrapping paper every which way. There were some interesting gifts inside those stockings. They were pretty big so I'm sure it was difficult to come up with things to fill it. Sometimes we would get big packs of batteries in there, random soaps, or even deodorant on occasion. Each year though we would all get yo-yo's and at that point we would all stop opening things and start trying to do tricks and failing miserably. Ross was the best at it, but being better than Rebecca and I with a yo-yo wasn't exactly a monumental feat. Grumpy and Grammy would overlook all the commotion, and once the stocking saga ended it was time for everyone to dig into their presents.

There were at least 15 different people down there in that basement by this time so getting everyone their gifts was quite the job. Usually my parents would hang out around the tree and start passing out gifts to everybody. It was like a bucket brigade where you would get handed a gift, check the tag, and then hand it off to someone next to you while you waited for one of your presents to reach you. Once everything was opened and thank you's had been exchanged we would all head upstairs and begin the absolute feast that was dinner. As you might expect, the adults broke out the wine around this time, while I sat there with my milk which I had with basically every single meal when I was a kid. After dinner was over it was dessert time, usually courtesy of Grammy. Grammy always made some top tier desserts for the holidays, and the Christmas apple pie we would get was incredible. Those days were fun as hell, and while it was

probably a nightmare to host I never thought about that. I was locked in on presents, presents, presents, and food.

I think we all wish there had been more of those days, but they were still fun while we had them. I couldn't tell you the last time we had one of those big Christmas bananzas. They mostly stopped after Grumpy passed away. Cause years and years ago Mom told me that Grumpy had fallen over while trying to walk around the house. He had been drinking wine of course, probably a bit too much. He was in the hospital and eventually he got out. But after that he went to the hospital kind of often. And eventually, on one specific trip he didn't come back out. I wasn't there to say goodbye to Grumpy, and I don't really know if I would have been able to handle that. I don't think I could see Grumpy vulnerable like that, it just wouldn't have felt like him.

After that Grammy started going down to Florida to escape the cold, so we didn't have any big family Christmas' anymore. We Facetime her on Christmas day and talk about stuff but obviously that's pretty different. Mom goes to visit her a lot but Dad and I hang back. We don't do well with planes, and we also don't want to leave our dog Blaze alone. But still, I get my Christmas' with Mom and Dad and that's more than what most people get, so I can't be too sad about it all.

They have stopped drinking wine completely at this point, my parents that is. They used to have a glass with dinner every night, but then Mom stopped and started just drinking water. I think that was a bit after Grumpy died. So at the dinner table we had Mom with water, me with milk, and Dad with wine; it was quite the array of drinks. Dad kept at it for a few more months but he eventually switched over too. Maybe they talked to each other about it and agreed, I'm not sure. But it's funny because their big thing was that on all their anniversaries or birthdays they

would just give each other some wine as a default gift. They still do, except they just don't drink it so it sits on top of the cabinets in the living room, and the collection just keeps growing a bit bigger each year.

I've never had wine before, or any other alcohol to be honest. I'm still not sure if that is subconsciously because of Grumpy. Maybe it's because I saw what it can do if you're not careful, I don't know. Cause it's not like I have an aversion to it, I just don't think it would taste that good and I don't think I'd like losing control. I certainly wouldn't expect myself to be able to pace myself properly since I have no idea how to do that. So, I just avoid it. And I mean, a packed bar is my personal hell, so I don't feel like I'm missing out. Like, I don't know any of you guys, it's hot, and I'm just trying to move around, and I can't!

I have a buddy back home who drinks on occasion, and we're kinda in the same boat. He only drinks something if it doesn't taste like alcohol. Every Wednesday me, him, and my buddies Quinn and Ben go to New World Tavern in Plymouth for trivia night. I get water, and the guys don't bother me about it. Quinn and Ben grab some beers while Drew sticks with a seltzer that he mixes with some ice water. I get to hang out with the boys, and walk out of there without paying anything. It's a sweet gig.

Drew says that if I were to ever drink something to start with a seltzer. I might, at some point, but I'm not in a rush. Maybe if my parents still drank stuff I would have tried something by now, but who is to say. I don't think I will ever drink wine though, I don't think I ever could. It wouldn't feel right. It would feel like sitting in Grumpy's chair, it's just not a place I'm supposed to be.

I see Grumpy in my dreams sometimes and we talk, and that's nice. He always looks happy, and he never has any wine with him anymore.