



FAMILY

“Box of Chocolates”

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EVERY SUNDAY MORNING, THE LOCAL STARBUCKS plays host to what my mom likes to call “mother-son bonding time.” This Sunday is no different. My mom and I sit down with our regular Chai Latte and Caramel Frappuchino, and absorb the aroma of the coffee beans and the gentle rays of the winter sun.

“So Alex, what are we going to do for dad’s 50th birthday?” When my mom asks a question about upcoming plans, she doesn’t expect an answer; she already has something in mind. Many years ago, my mom started a family tradition of making gifts personal: poems, songs, skits. At first I didn’t understand why we were wasting so much time when we could just buy a gift card from the local mall. But my outlook changed when I turned twelve. For my birthday, my parents gave me a poster, a product of their many hours on Photoshop. With long hair, sideburns, and a slim suit, I had become the fifth member of the Beatles crossing Abbey Road. Every morning when I wake up, this poster opposite my bed is the first thing I see, and I start off the day with a smile. Since



then, I have needed little persuasion to start working on the next gift project. Actually, I even look forward to these times, when my parents find their inner children, and the trivial worries of life simply whisk away. My dad, both figuratively and literally, ditches his office suit and proper manners, and dons a red woman's wig and high heels to practice a scene. My mom stops scolding my sister and me, and joins us in our ruckus, doing the jitterbug and blowing on a harmonica. These are the moments in my family when there are no children or adults, just four people who give in to their creative urges.

"How about throwing Dad a party, and making him a movie?" my mom asks as I use my straw to fish for any remaining coffee at the bottom of the cup. "Just think of a movie you like and we'll parody it." A big fan of "the-life-is-like-a-box-of-chocolates" theory, I suggest my favorite movie, *Forrest Gump*. She smiles. "OK, but only if you play Forrest."

When we come home, my mom takes down a box, heavy with the dust of age, scribbled with messy Russian lettering. I peer over her shoulder as she empties onto the living room floor the contents: my dad's life story in black and white. Within minutes, I am completely immersed in the photographs I have never seen before. As I gape at a picture of a bearded teenager laughing with his friends, I do a double take. Is this the same clean-shaven man who helped me to prove the theorem that all right angles are congruent and always tells me to tuck in my shirt? I shake my head in disbelief as I thumb through some pictures of my dad and his friends with guitars in the forest singing songs around a camp fire. My mom explains that the Soviet government didn't approve of these songs, so the woods became their only refuge. I am now starting to understand why my dad, limited in what he could sing or say as a youth, pushes my sister and me to ask probing questions, survey news from all sides of the political spectrum, and watch controversial movies. Looking down at one of the pictures of my dad in the forest, it just hits me: the movie should be called "Forest Guy."

With each picture comes its own story, and collectively, they create a collage of my dad's past that I had never known. But even more surprises await me as I watch documentaries about Russian leaders in the 20th century. To truly parody *Forrest Gump*, some "great" Communist leaders must be part of Forest Guy's life, just as Kennedy and Nixon were part of *Forrest Gump's*. Coming up with bizarre ideas of how



my dad met the Communist leaders is the most entertaining part of our moviemaking. My stomach throbs with laughter as I conceive the impossible notion of my dad bullying Gorbachev into destroying the Berlin Wall.

Along with Russian history, I also discover part of my family's: while discussing the horrors of Stalin's reign with my mom, I am shocked to hear that my father was born in exile, and one of his uncles died in Stalin's concentration camp for joking about Communists. It's hard to believe that someone can be killed for cracking a joke, when cracking a safe will only get you a few years in jail. Luckily, when I am joking about Lenin and Stalin in my film, my only worry is crowd response.

It is the day of the party, and as I look around at the apprehensive crowd, my instincts yell, "Run, Alex! Run!" Soon, the lights dim, and my anxiety grows. I am watching the viewers as intensely as they are watching the screen. As each joke is met with uproarious laughter and table slapping, my breaths become calmer and my fingers stop shaking. Twenty-five minutes later, I hear the long awaited ovation. I gaze from table to table at the sea of smiles, but one face catches my attention. It is my dad's, showing complete disbelief that something so grandiose could be done about him and for him. All these weeks I had been so focused on the guests' reactions that I never thought about my dad's. Although he is trying hard to contain himself, I see a tear sneak from the side of his eye. It is the first time I have seen my dad cry.

Yes, life is a box of chocolates. Some are delicious, some too bitter for your taste. But the best are like the one I picked that day; they seem like any other chocolate, but when you bite into them, they surprise you with an unexpected flavor.

ANALYSIS

In this extraordinarily creative essay, Alex reveals a gift for storytelling that jumps nimbly from seriousness to humor, cavorts from one surprise to another, and weaves in vivid descriptions, evocative metaphors and historical references. Many people might find it hard to imagine an essay that begins in a Starbucks and takes us through Forest Gump and Stalinist atrocities to end with a metaphor about a box of chocolates. However, Alex's ability to tie all these memorable details together coherently makes this essay stand out.

Alex opens with an introduction that stimulates our senses: we can smell the fragrant "aroma of the coffee beans" and feel the "gentle