

Reaping Day had arrived.

I didn't know the official name, and I doubted many did. For weeks, the anticipation had kept me awake at night, wondering but not daring to hope. My two brothers and I dressed in silence, a sort of morbid excitement hanging in the air. As was the common tradition for good luck, we wore our best clothes, pressed and crisp. When we were ready, we hurried downstairs and congregated around the front hallway to await the man of honor.

My grandfather appeared, clothed in his finest tuxedo, his thinning hair combed neatly to the side, still adjusting his bow tie. His hands trembled, and his eyes flitted back and forth like fish in a miniature tank.

“Happy birthday!” My older brother flashed his goofy grin. “Lookin' sharp.”

“Thanks, Hammond,” he said, his voice gruffer than usual.

My mother appeared from the side room, wearing her fanciest green dress that she had last used for my cousin's wedding. She approached my grandfather with a tentative smile and laid a hand on his shoulder. “Don't worry, Dad. They'll say at least thirty more years.”

“We're about to find out.” He took a deep breath. “I'd just like this over with at this point. The suspense is too much for this frail old body. If they say 'today' I'll know why.” He gave a meek smile.

My father entered a moment later in his navy business suit and slicked down hair. “You have everything?” he said to my grandfather. “All the paperwork and the check?”

My grandfather patted his chest. “Got it all right here.” He scanned the room, making a mental note that all were present. “Everyone ready to go?”

I nodded, too awkward to say anything. I wanted to give words of encouragement, but they all sounded flat and forced in my head. I let the silence speak for me instead. It was my

grandfather's big day, the one for which he had saved his entire life, and I didn't want to chance spoiling it.

Even at age fourteen, I had started putting away some of my allowance to save for my own Reaping Day. My sixty-fifth birthday seemed so far off as to be meaningless, but it was how my parents taught me. They had started saving at my age. Everyone did. It was expected.

We all piled into our minivan, my grandfather taking the seat of honor in the front. He sat there clasping and unclasping his hands and smoothing his hair. I could only imagine how he must be feeling. I was glad I didn't have to think about my Reaping Day for a long time. As the minivan pulled away from the curb along its automated route, a pang wrenched my insides.

Today was the day my grandfather would find out when he would die.

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The ride to the government building was a slow, deliberate twenty minutes. I focused on the passing scenery out the window to escape the suffocating tension. While we drove, my mother leaned forward from the seat behind my grandfather, her hand resting on his shoulder. As we pulled into the parking lot, she gave him a squeeze and said, "Let's go put those anxieties to rest."

My grandfather nodded and opened the door. We followed him out into the dizzying lot, packed with so many cars it was a trek to cross the gleaming metal forest. I had never been here before, and as we drew closer, I stared up at the four-story, looming brick building with its towering windows that stared back. Its angular and utilitarian design was cold, inhuman.

We filed through the sliding double doors and were greeted by a line composed of other nervous-looking families that crept toward a reception desk. A clock hung in view of the entire line, and I found myself glancing at it often, watching the seconds and then minutes tick by.

Moving at a sloth's pace, we shuffled our way toward the front of the line and, at long last, were beckoned over by a blinking light to the first available employee.

"Welcome." The receptionist greeted us with insincere warmth, directing her attention to my grandfather. "Do you have a completed application, two forms of ID, and a check?"

Releasing a breath so deep it seemed as if his whole body shrank, my grandfather handed over a check. I could not see the number written on it, but I knew it represented a hefty sum saved over the course of his sixty-five years. Without a second glance, the receptionist took it, along with the other papers, and fed them into a scanner.

"Your forms are all in order," she said. "You may sit in the waiting area until your number is called." She handed my grandfather a small electronic device with the number 209 displayed in red on it. Then she gestured to an adjoining room that was again filled with people, this time seated in chairs.

We took seats in a few of the remaining chairs facing a large digital display with the current number: 186. The next half an hour was a blur of people shifting in and out as the numbers crept along, all in an endless cycle of hope, anxiety, relief, and despair. I kept myself occupied trying to guess each person's answer as they returned. #191 with his shoulders slumped? Next month. #194, breaking into a smile upon seeing her family? 15 years. Those that were hard to read absorbed my attention longer as I watched for subtle expressions and gestures.

When the display reached 208, my heart began to pound. The number changed. 209. A woman stepped into the waiting room and gazed around at the captive audience. "Mr. Abdul Redford?"

"Good luck, Dad," my mother whispered as she gave him a pat on the back. "See you in a few."

“Thanks, Andy,” he said, pushing himself mechanically to his feet. “Now that it's actually here, it doesn't feel real. Guess I'll know the truth soon enough.” He approached the woman who was waiting for him, and together they disappeared into a side door.

More people were called. My brothers started a game, but I was too anxious to join. After what felt like the definition of 'eternity', my grandfather reappeared. I scanned his face, struggling to glean a clue as to the knowledge that he alone now knew, yet his expression was flat, unreadable. He walked calmly over to us.

“Well, what did they say?” my father asked, rising from his seat.

My grandfather looked around. “Let's go outside first.”

We walked with restrained excitement through the front doors, all of us glancing at my grandfather as if hoping to get an answer by sheer will. When we were alone in the parking lot, he handed a slip of paper to my mother. She took one look at the paper and burst into tears, wrapping her arms around him and sobbing.

My father gently took the paper, and my brothers and I sidled up to him to peek at what it said. I skimmed down the page of text until I saw a date. October. Of this year. And it was already May.

My vision blurred as I glanced up at my grandfather, whose face remained stoic. “Is it possible they're wrong?” It took a moment to realize the words had come from my own mouth. Everyone was staring at me, and I knew my cheeks were burning. I dropped my eyes to the ground, wishing I had kept my mouth shut.

Little was said on the ride home. My brothers and I disappeared into our room while the adults went to talk in the kitchen.

“Is Grandpa really going to die this year?” My little brother stared at us with round, moist eyes.

“Yes, and it's best he knows so he can get everything in order and say goodbye properly,” my older brother replied, reciting the flyer that the government sent around each year. “It's sad, but not knowing would be so much worse. How terrible would it be for him to just drop dead one day and for us to have no idea it was coming? Just like Grandma. Do you remember what it was like when she died? How terrible that was? If only we could have known ahead of time, but she was a year away from Reaping Day.”

My little brother nodded and wiped away a tear. My older brother gave him a hug. “Trust me, it's easier this way. That's why the government started this program.”

“I'm going to miss him, though.” My little brother sniffed. “When he's gone.”

“I know, we all will,” my older brother said. “I think it will be easier if you start letting him go now.”

I was oddly detached from the whole scene as if I were watching a prerecorded event on a screen. I was glad they didn't expect me to say anything.

Everyone who had less than a year left received the complimentary video entitled *Saying Goodbye: How to Make Your Last Days Your Best Days*. When we booted it up in the living room, we were greeted by a smiling family gathered around two grandparents. Each of the family members gave their elder relatives a warm hug and told them how much he or she loved them. They reminisced about their fondest memories and all the times they had spent together.

“You will live on in our hearts forever,” the father said with dramatic flair.

“I am so thankful to have had all of you in my life,” the grandmother told her family. “When I go, I couldn't be happier.”

The video ended abruptly, plunging the room into an uncomfortable silence.

“Well, we don’t have to worry about that for a while,” my father said in a failed attempt at sounding upbeat.

No one spoke. I glanced around at the solemn, introspective faces, and after a moment, each of us left the room a separate way. I never found out what happened to the video.

The next few months passed in a kind of timid uncertainty. Each of us adopted a different attitude toward my grandfather. My mother tried to pretend like everything was normal. My father was more respectful. My older brother grew distant while my younger brother looked sad and lost. Myself, I didn’t know what to do. I often found that I was at a loss for words, and with increasing frequency, I would avoid whichever room my grandfather was in for fear of the awkward scene that would usually follow.

Maybe because I was so focused on myself, I never really noticed how my grandfather was handling the news. The only incident that comes to mind was when my family was startled by the sound of shattering glass. We all rushed into the living room to find my grandfather in a heap on the recliner, the broken remains of a mantelpiece decoration on the floor opposite him. His breathing was heavy, and his fists were shaking. I remember feeling a vague sympathy and hoping that he would be okay again soon.

As the days passed, a disquieting sensation began gnawing at me, a nagging irritation like I had forgotten something in the other room. One time I found my mother crying at the kitchen table. When I asked what had happened, she laughed through her tears and said, “Oh, it’s nothing. I’m just being silly,” at which point she turned away and began rummaging through the refrigerator. A few days later, after the hundredth time my older brother left the room without

making eye contact, my grandfather almost growled after him, "I'm still here." When my brother didn't respond, he reached toward him, thought better of it, and let his arm drop.

Yet, still, after all that, no one spoke to him about the news. He was going to be gone soon, and despite knowing this to be true logically, no one appeared to accept or believe it. The date was in a mere two months but could have been a hundred years for as real and urgent as it seemed.

Then it was two weeks away. Then a week. Then two days. Then tomorrow.

I was awakened on the second to final day by a shout, followed by a crash downstairs. I ran with my brothers to the railing of the second floor to see what was going on. We caught a glimpse of our ashen-faced grandfather striding down the hall. He flung open the door and slammed it behind him.

A sullen silence fell over the house. We crept downstairs to find my parents staring at the door.

"Should we go after him?" my mother whispered.

My father stirred. "He probably just needs a few minutes to cool off. He's understandably upset."

But he didn't come home. I sat in my room alone, listening to my mother pace the hallway. Hours later, she answered a call and spoke in a hushed voice. I tiptoed out of my room to find her putting on her jacket, the worry lines on her face etched deeper than I had ever seen.

"Did you find Grandpa?" I said quietly.

"He... had an accident."

I knew by the way she said it that whatever had happened to him had been no accident. And I suspected why. The Reaping Day prediction only foresaw death by natural causes; ‘misfortunes’, as they were called, could always happen first.

“He's in the hospital,” she continued, “but he should be okay.”

That was when reality slapped me in the face. And I had had enough of the charade. “He should be okay?! He's going to be dead tomorrow!” I stormed out of the room, refusing to turn back even when heartrending tears of agony burst out behind me.

My mother came back that night pale as a ghost. Her hand motioned to place her keys on the entrance table, but they clattered to the floor. I stared at her with dread, the unspoken question clear on my face.

Her eyes met mine, and when she spoke, her voice was barely a wisp of air. “They found out his Reaping Day prediction was tomorrow. So they... So they... didn't bother to save him.” She collapsed in the entrance, covered her face, and wept.

As I watched her, paralyzed with the inability to process what was happening, the same thought kept wriggling around my brain: *What if, this time, it was wrong?*

When I returned from the funeral two days later, I shuffled like a robot to my room where I kept the small wooden chest that contained the savings for my own Reaping Day. Opening the lid, I removed the wrinkled bills, stuffed them into my pocket, placed the chest on the floor, and stamped my foot on top of it as hard as I could. The wood cracked as the hinge broke off with the sound of snapping chains, and for the first time in months, I took a deep breath.