Songs of My Father

Jeremy Collins

At age twelve I was fond of telling stories about my father's service in Vietnam, even though he, my father, never talked about it. The briefest windows I got into this past were when he'd glaze over and mouth the words to Billy Joel's "Goodnight Saigon" while driving my little sisters and me to school. Turning up the stereo in our 1985 Ford Tempo… *And it was dark…so dark as ni-ni-ni-night!...* he'd stare straight ahead, stone silent. My dad didn't smoke, but deep in those trances a cigarette looked like a good idea.

That year (1988) my dad worked nights as a computer programmer at the IRS. Our four-mile trek through Atlanta's morning traffic was often the only time we saw him in daylight. Riding shotgun, I watched him sink into Joel's lament and disappear completely. His thick forearms and dark stubble shadow made it easy to imagine him a younger man, deep in the jungle with leeches sucking his shoulders as he cradled the heads of his dying buddies in the rain. *And we would all go down together. We said we'd all go down together.*

While my dad didn't talk about Vietnam, I couldn't stop. I detailed for my friends over juice boxes at DeKalb Christian Academy how the Viet Cong heard the hum of the motors, and counted the rotors, and waited for my dad's unit to arrive.

After the Tet Offensive, my dad (age 20) spent hours in his '63 Thunderbird at Asbury College, a cloistered Methodist school in Kentucky, some 9,000 miles from Saigon. Deep into the night he listened to Dylan, The Beatles, and Rolling Stones bring news of a wider world.[1] An 'A' student, chairman of the Political Awareness Committee, and a solid contributor in intramurals, he planned to go into the ministry—a preacher. That was the plan. It'd been the plan ever since his dad said it was the plan. And in 1968, he was giving it up.

He'd lost the fire, the spark. His faith in God—which included an unquestioned belief in the superior craftsmanship of Ford Motor Company and the goodness of the United States of America—wobbled like a castle of cards. He gave up on preaching and his longtime girlfriend gave up on him. This undergraduate melodrama swirled with images of boys coming home in body bags, back-to-back assassinations, American cities engulfed in flames, and the election of Richard Milhous Nixon. It'd been said before,

1 "Without music," Nietzsche writes in *Twilight of the Idols*, "life would be a mistake."

and perhaps it was true: God was dead.

This much is certain: my dad never set foot in Vietnam. His international travel consisted of backpacking through Switzerland. I once found the postcards in the basement of his Indiana boyhood home: Lake Geneva, St. Peter's clock, the Matterhorn covered in snow.

My dad's lottery number (345) was too high for Vietnam. "Thank God," he told me years later. I didn't share his relief. Even when I knew better, even when *I* got to college, I'd let it slip (around beer number three) that my father was a Vietnam Vet. Lost in a soundtrack, I wanted him there. So I drafted him, Swift-Boating him in reverse. I needed words to commensurate with the sadness he carried around my youth like a shield. *Viet Cong, Tet, Hill 937*—these had a rhythm, a certain cadence that *Asbury College*, *Crisis of Faith,* and *Father's Expectations* lacked.

Music cracked opened worlds of feeling for both of us, and there was no turning back. When Elizabeth Owens told me she was moving to Kansas at the end of the seventh grade and wanted to break up, I wrote her a note the only way I knew how. "Someday you'll be sorry," it began. "Someday, when you're free. Memories will remind you that our love was meant to be. But late at night when you call my name, the only sound you'll hear is the sound of your voice calling, calling after me." The lines were from Genesis' "Throwing it All Away." I did not cite the source. Instead of throwing the letter away, Elizabeth handed it to her mother, who read the letter and called the principal at DeKalb Christian Academy, who transcribed the letter, called my mother and recited the letter to her. The administration at DeKalb Christian Academy, with its Taliban-like good humor and pop music knowledge, set its sights on me. I was in it deep—deep doo-doo. No one was sure what prompted my passive-aggressive longings or what had transpired between us for Elizabeth to cry out into the Topeka night. Only one thing was sure: punishment, swift and severe. Somehow my dad caught wind of all this and talked everyone down. "It's a song," he said. "It's just a song. It doesn't mean what you think it means."

My dad grew up in New Albany, Indiana, a small river town in southern Indiana where I live with my wife Alice. We moved here in 2009—a year after my grandfather Collins died—when I got work teaching English at a local university and moonlighting as a YMCA personal trainer. Alice paints and teaches art at the Boys & Girls Club. She's a talented artist and she's wonderful with kids.

In recent months, the younger kids have eyed her tummy with suspicion while the older ones ask if I'm the baby's daddy. For my part, since Alice gave me the news in January, I keep thinking about my own dad. I also keep thinking about his dad. I keep thinking of the truths they tried to teach, especially those truths about the man on the cross, and I wonder what's left—if anything—of those truths.

"Okay," Alice says. "You're having some serious daddy issues."

When my father got the news I was on the way, he was on his way to a PhD in Religion at Emory University in Atlanta. After Asbury he decided if he wasn't going to preach the Bible, he'd teach the Bible. Pouring over Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, reading theory in German, he sharpened his pencils against ancient riddles. He excelled in his classes, but when faced with writing his dissertation, he blanked. So he read more. He researched more. He wandered deeper into the wilderness of footnotes.[2] When it was time to write, he picked up crossword puzzles, re-read Updike, and watched afternoon soaps. At night, he listened to Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks* and wondered why he couldn't pin down a direction. New urgencies arose (me) and my parents needed income. My dad closed the books, learned computers, and got a job at the Internal Revenue Service.

2 I was home from college for Easter 1999 and announced to my parents that I wasn't going to church ever again because *Jesus Christ was the only true Christian. It doesn't matter if I go to church or what I believe. All that matters is how I live.* With this "groundbreaking," undergraduate insight, my mom teared up and left the room. Dad, who didn't go to church, never went to church, told me to go to church with my mom. Afterward, he suggested I take a look at the works of Rudolph Bultmann and Paul Tillich. "If you think you've stumbled onto an original idea," he said, "don't worry. There's a German somewhere who has already said it in a footnote." Years later I found Nietzsche and his passage in *Anti-Christ* (1887), "The word 'Christianity' is already a misunderstanding—in reality there has only been one Christian and he died on the Cross…It is false to the point of absurdity to see in a 'belief,' perchance the belief in redemption through Christ, the distinguishing characteristic of the Christian: only Christian practice, a life such as he who died on the Cross lived, is Christian," (163). After reading this, I closed Nietzsche's book, put on my coat, and took a long walk around my shabby apartment complex. Back at my desk, I wrote the passage down on a scrap piece of paper and slid it into my wallet where it remained for a long time.

"I went from being a Pharisee to a Tax Collector," he recounts.

Now, he's a grocer and works the organic foods section at a Kroger in Metro Atlanta. The books sit in his study where they've sat for years. As a boy, the brick-like volumes filled me with mystery. When I visit now, I probe the pages on Hebrew prophets, Greco-Roman history, Jewish law, the early Jesus movement, and trace my dad's fading notes as my questions blend with his. Reading, I imagine the burden he felt to please his father and the need to let go of that weight.

His days are heavy enough. Certain that management is looking to fire anyone over the age of 45, he works off the clock if nearing overtime. If there's a big truck delivery, he'll pull an all-nighter unloading stock, his iPod loaded with Springsteen and Mellencamp. At home, after dinner, he studies inventory spreadsheets, calls out *Jeopardy!* answers, pops an Ambien, and sinks into bed. His sleep is shallow, a perpetual hangover from 3rd shift. Sometimes during the night, thick in an Ambien fog, he'll appear wandering through the house, like the ghost of Hamlet's father—wolfing down a bowl of ice cream—if the ghost of King Hamlet wore boxer-briefs and had developed a high tolerance to lactose.

Back at the store early he slices meaty chunks of organic mangos for tooth-picked samples. He stocks shelves of tofu and rice bowls, steel cut oatmeal, sunflower seed butter, and fields questions about chocolate almond soy milk from tennis-clad housewives. He feeds them. He feeds their families. And they are grateful.

"Only in America," my grandfather, Bill Collins, would say as if riffing on Don King's motto. I'm not sure he knew of King, but he should've. When the wind kicked up, the white hair on the back of his head would shoot skyward and my barrel-chested grandfather, with his hard-charging optimism, resembled a paler version of King. "Only in America can you do *that*." This miraculous "that" consisted of me showing him how to update his Tiger Woods computer game during Christmas 2007 (his last Christmas). He loved games. Games, stories, and the good news he found at church. Now, I can't decide what I miss more. Mostly, I just miss him.

Here's a story I heard versions of in bowling alleys, on municipal golf courses, across card tables, between tennis sets, badminton sets, and sets of Ping-Pong.

In 1939, my grandfather (age 16) left the family farm in Columbia, Kentucky after a dispute with his father over money he'd earned for school supplies. His father was keeping the

money. The family needed shoes. His father also wanted him to quit school and work the family's soybean and tobacco farm. If not, he'd have to find a new home. My grandfather said goodbye, hooked up with the CCC, and drove a steamroller across America—paving roads—all the way to Idaho and Washington State. "Potatoes and apples boy, potatoes and apples like you've never seen."

He worked the shipyards in Seattle and learned radio repair, skills that served him well months later as a radioman in a B-26. For over fifty sorties, he watched for artillery fire and Luftwaffe across the prairie of sky. Midway through the war, because of his proficiency, he was reassigned on a special bombing run with a new crew. Later that day he learned his regular crew had been blown apart by German artillery fire. At night his hands began to shake. He took up boxing at the Army Air Force base to calm his nerves and promptly got his nose flattened.

After the war he worked the assembly line at Ford in Louisville. The noisy shifts were cramped with greased men in black leather aprons who moved like shadows through the darkness and flames. After work his hands gave him fits. On weekends, he gambled in basement parlor games of chance fueled by gin and often settled with fists. "Back on the line my tongue was cow-thick, my head a jack-hammer, and my pockets were empty."

On a whim he attended a revival at Silver Heights Camp across the Ohio River in New Albany, Indiana. He'd heard plenty of preaching but this preacher spoke in great rhythms, great words, on how God sent his son on a divine rescue mission to save the world from sin. From a plow mule to a steamroller to the belly of a B-26, he'd survived. But how? How, if not by God's grace? He staggered to the altar and fell to a knee like a prizefighter, dazed. *Christ whose glory fills the sky*, the old Methodist hymn goes. *Triumph o'er the shades of night*.

Born again—the drinking, gambling, brawling, and trembling fell away. He courted Mae King, a beauty from Shelbyville. For their first date he took her to a wrestling match in Louisville where a masked man wrestled a live alligator. "Barely alive," he told me in the summer of 2005. "They sedated that gator." I asked my grandma—who was dying of cancer that summer—about this first date. "When he knocked at the door," she said. "I should've sent out my sister."

The front porch swing I sat on that day overlooked the land he'd cleared with long saws, axes, and dynamite. He built a house for Mae, who was pregnant with my dad, in

1948. His days belonged to Henry Ford; his evenings were God's. He started a mission in New Albany, The Hour of Power, to feed the hungry and give the gospel. Before church on Sundays, he preached at the county poor house and took along his son Travis, who sat in the front with his Bible in his lap and sang along with every hymn. For ten years, after work, he took night classes at Indiana University Southeast and got a degree in Finance. He rebuilt the revival site at Silver Heights, and in 1973, a civic group named him the Indiana Man of the Year for his Christian works.

Throughout it all, he'd tell friends and family that Travis was going to be a preacher someday. With the encroaching shadow of global Communism, preachers were the light of the world.

"It made sense that your daddy become a preacher. Good speaker, always reading. So I nudged him that way," my grandfather told me in the summer of 1995 as I was set to head to college. "Later it made sense for him to teach. But pick a major you can *use*. You hear? Your daddy's got sheepskin nailed to the wall. Several of 'em. But those skins are just gathering dust."

My dad and I sang along as we, the sparse crowd at Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, put our spin on the anthem's end…*the land of the free and the home of the Braves*. My dad leaned down and pointed to an American flag in center field. "Remember," he said. "It's a great country. But it was built on the backs of black slaves." As our not quite lovable losers, the 1988 Atlanta Braves, jogged onto the field in their tight polyester jerseys, it was hard to imagine such a country. Our first baseman Gerald Perry, with his half-fro poking through his cap, slung his arm around Dale Murphy, our Mighty Mormon outfielder. They chatted, shared a laugh.

"The flag stands for freedom," my dad said. "But we took this land and freedom from the Indians. Where we're standing now was once Cherokee land. And it was theirs for a long time."

I looked across the diamond and the vast, manicured green to the empty bleachers that formerly housed the tipi of Chief-Knock-a-Homa. The chief was a Brave who came out to dance whenever the Braves hit a homerun. This causality was torturous for a child not yet schooled in the arts of overt mascot racism and subjected to hours of live baseball. *Hit a homerun! Please! For the chief!* By 1988 the tipi was gone, the Braves were in last, and the chief was working a casino in Carolina.

"Was the chief a Cherokee?" I asked.

My father nodded. We took our seats, and he took a long sip from his beer. The Braves' chubby fastballer fired his warm-up pitches as the infielders smacked their gloves and spit in the dirt. It was rare for my dad and I to get a moment like this. It'd be rarer as years went on. My father worked. When he was home, he worked. Work was sacred. And this sense of the sacred was handed down. My father's last memory of his 94 year-old grandfather was watching him crawl across the garden at the old Collins place in Columbia, Kentucky, unable to walk, picking weeds. My dad and granddad, locked in this gravitational pull, worked jobs into the ground. When we did spend time together, we rode the roller coaster of his rhetoric—politics, history, music—and only with music could I keep up. In the synthesized, sentimental sounds of the 1980's, we found a common language. Sometimes we just listened and I imagined the notes moving across his mind. Other times, he filled me in on the spaces between the notes.

When John Foggerty's "Centerfield" was piped through the stadium speakers, my dad explained that it wasn't Fogerty's best work and then delivered a detailed history on CCR and Foggerty's split with the band. Between innings when David Lee Roth's voice wheezed through the stadium, my dad explained why "Fortunate Son" was a great song and why "Jump" was not. After the seventh inning stretch and Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA", my dad pronounced, "Getting, spending, forgetting. We won't survive half as long as the Cherokee."

I nodded and wondered if he was taking Chief-Knock-a-Homa's exile harder than I was.

Even then I knew I wasn't the intended audience of his speechifying—some echo of a debate with my grandfather raged. Throughout the *Go-Go-Get-Yours*-1980's my dad weighed God and Country and found both wanting. Our time together resembled a Cal Berkeley Humanities Summer Youth Camp. Inspired by Springsteen's "Born in the USA" or Mellencamp's "Rain on the Scarecrow," he'd rage at our greed, hypocrisy, and the televised kingdoms of Falwell, Sweigart, Robinson, and Reagan. Later in high school, I rebelled by becoming a card-carrying member of the Republican National Committee (literally, there was a card; I carried it). But back then, these talks only gave me an uneasy sense that things weren't as they seemed. Including my old man. Except he wasn't old then. Just unhappy. He needed a congregation or a classroom. Instead, he had me.

As his captive audience, I didn't ask for explanations, clarification. He left that to the evangelical teachers of my youth at DeKalb Christian Academy.[3] Years later, with some regret, he described his parenting policy as "Benign Neglect." He told me, "I banged around my dad's rules and tripped over his expectations so I decided not to set any for you. A low bar, I know, but a bar you've so far exceeded." In place of rules, he offered sparse personal and spiritual counsel, packed in Zen-like paradox. He let mistakes be my own and allowed theological questions and confusions to come as they may. And they came.

3 "Whoever writes about his childhood," Orwell cautions in *Such, Such Were the Joys*, "must beware of exaggeration and self-pity." With caution, I report that my religious education (K-8) at DeKalb Christian Academy (The Crusaders) was not without its own confusions. In the first grade, a joyless woman whose daily halitosis was inspired by liver and onions paddled me as something of a hobby. Her plywood paddle (with small holes for greater velocity) had fine calligraphy stenciled from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth: "God is Love." The Pauline text was taken to my backside for offenses like "laughing out of turn." In the second grade, your correspondent took to signing his initials on papers "j + c," as he was developing more than a slight Christ complex.

"There are two types of people in this world," my grandfather said as we sat in the front seat of his Lincoln Continental at a McDonald's parking lot, eating ice cream cones. We were marking the end of Vacation Bible School in New Albany, 1989. He rotated his cone between his thumb and index finger, a perfect pyramid of vanilla. "There are people who know Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior," he said. "And there are those who don't."

At age twelve, I knew what kind of person I was. Around my granddad, the usual drag of compulsory religious activity shook off its dust. He swept me off to vacation bible school, prayer breakfasts, church dinners, church retreats, outreach, visitation, and afterward, we'd putt-putt, play tennis, ride go-carts, toss horseshoes, hit up the batting cages, shoot pool, shoot HORSE. We played hard. We churched hard. And when we bowed to pray, I imagined God the Father: vaguely British, wise, not unlike Alec Gunniess as Obi-Wan-Kenobi in *Star Wars*. I saw Jesus too—a blissed out reluctant superhero, more Jedi than Jew, who used intense kindness instead of superpowers, *But he's got those too so watch out.* Jesus' story had a happy ending. Around my granddad it was impossible *not* to believe in happy endings. He'd blazed trails west,

shot Nazis out of the sky, returned home to do God's work and enlisted his family in the cause. Sitting in the front seat of the jumbo-jet-like Lincoln Continental, the force was strong with me.

Thanksgiving, 1992. My dad searched the FM dial of our Econoline van as we drove north through the night to Indiana. In the cloudy peaks of Mount Eagle, outside of Chattanooga, we stumbled onto a preacher *firin' and brimstonin' heavn' and hellin'*. My dad lowered the volume. "There are two types of people in this world," he said. "There are those who make gross generalizations and there are those who don't."

There are two types of people in the world, I thought as I drove my '88 Thunderbird around the perimeter of Atlanta in the summer of 1996. *There's the living and the dead*. I was nineteen and months earlier I'd survived a single car, drunk driving accident that killed my best friend and college roommate, Jason Kenney. Memories of the wreck are spotty. I remember not fastening my seat belt after we left a beachside bar. I don't remember Jason flipping the vehicle. I remember waking in a hospital, my parents at my bedside, and my granddad leaning against the wall, holding a coffee from McDonald's, wearing a Members Only Jacket, aviator sunglasses, and a hard smile. The cavalry had arrived. It was the only time I ever saw him force a smile.

In the long summer of 1996, the forces that shaped my grandfather and father collided in me. I read and re-read the Gospels, looking for answers. After working evenings at a local bookstore, I drove in circles around I-285, an Autobahn loop surrounding Metro Atlanta. As the hum of the tires hugged the highway, I replayed CD's, memories of Jason, and images of Jesus' weeping over Lazarus. I repeated Jesus' words in John 15:12—"No man has greater love than this—that he lay down his life for his friend"—and imagined going Lazarus on myself. Driving in this nighttime air of friendly fatalism, I wore out the sentimental songs of the 80's I'd learned with my dad. In Tracy Chapman's fast car, on U2's streets without names, past Don Henley's dead-head stickered Cadillacs, I sped all the way through Springsteen's *River* and *Nebraska*, and imagined hurling my Thunderbird into a concrete highway divider like a smashup music video.

My parents didn't ask where I went on those nights, but they kept a bedside lamp burning until I pulled into the drive and cut the engine. Trying to sleep, I went back to

the Gospels where the friend I thought I had in Jesus was a victim of Multiple Personality Disorder. He was an intense loving carpenter. He was a Bully Boy. Bully Boy spoke like a pro wrestler and warned about his return. He was the son of a Bully God who told Job from a whirlwind, “Gird up your loins like a man.” Piercing the sky, Bully Boy rode a white horse of apocalypse, showing off. This couldn’t be the same man who delivered the Sermon on the Mount or the sage who drew in the sand and saved the life of a woman through a finely tuned turn of words. I wanted the quick-witted, compassionate rabbi who rendered unto Caesar only what belonged to him and the man who sought the hurting and the broken. I couldn’t reconcile these two figures or the split I felt.

Before I went back to college, my dad suggested we change the oil in the T-Bird and take a look under the hood. In the sticky August garage we talked Braves baseball and waited for the oil to drain. As he checked the battery and sparkplugs, I shared my theory of the Two Jesus’. My dad wiped his hands in the oil rag, and smiled. “Who said there was only two?” He must’ve caught the look on my face. “Listen,” he said. “Here’s the good news. You don’t have to solve that. You hear?” I told him okay, but it wasn’t. I wanted, like all who are heartsick with grief, to see the dead again. I wanted the man from Nazareth to work nothing less than eternal magic.

I was twenty-two years old and visiting my grandparents during Christmas 1998. In the years after the accident, I grieved Jason’s death through literature and my own scattered writing attempts. In stories and essays, I found a home for my grief, a home I couldn’t find in the Christianity of my grandfather or in my father’s music. I’d decided to study English and between frames at the Hoosier Bowling Alley, I gave my grandfather the news.

“English?” he said.

English, I said.

He made a face.

I told him I wanted to teach and write. I wanted to tell stories.

“Sell stories?”

“Tell stories.”

“What kind of stories?”

“True stories.”

Again, the face. Perhaps it was a ridiculous answer, but saying Literary Nonfiction seemed more ridiculous. I didn’t mention I was trying to write about my dead friend. I didn’t tell him I’d also been jotting down his stories in a notebook. Or that the more I wrote, the closer I got to him, the more of a mystery my

grandfather became. I wanted to understand his experience in the war. I wanted to know why he'd left home over the principle of an education and if that's why he pushed my father so hard. I wanted to understand their uneasy truce. And I wanted to understand his unshakable faith, a faith whose certainty I could only envy.

The next day, as I was packing for Atlanta, he put his arm around my shoulder and steered me to the dining room. "I want to give you something," he said. My mind raced. Perhaps he understood my urge to write. Perhaps he trusted me. Trusted me enough to show me his war chest: primary documents, maps, photographs, letters, medals, and journals. I'd snooped for clues in that house for years. He reached above an armoire for a glossy hardback book. "I want you to know," he said. "I met this man. Shook his hand. And looked him in the eye."

My grandfather handed me a copy of *Standing Firm*, the autobiography of Dan Quayle.

On the cover, a creamy, photo-shopped Quayle stood against a fence rail, wearing a sweater and an expression that attempted "Rugged, Thoughtful." I was no longer a card-carrying member of the RNC; I didn't carry any cards, and for a moment, I thought he might be joking.

"I figured a good story might help you with some of your own," he said, gently.

I flipped through the pages and tried to muster my own look of enthusiasm.

"I'll be sure to check it out."

"Promise?" he asked.

I promised.

When I left Indiana, I left *Standing Firm* behind. My grandfather propped the book back on the top shelf between the family Bible and a picture of Mae, pregnant with my dad. Each year when I returned to southern Indiana the visage of James Danforth Quayle—the obedient son—kept watch. A watch that lasted a decade. A decade where my grandfather and I consumed bowls of Texas Gold Vanilla Ice Cream, played cards, debated the war in Iraq, the Millennial Return of Christ, and attended the demise of my grandmother. Now, the man with the alabaster face and sensible sweater looks out from my bookshelf, imploring: *Read me. You've been on page 58 for two years. You promised. I know I'm not a "good" book, but here I stand, firmly. I don't bite. I'm just words on a page.*

Sitting in the kitchen of a funeral home as my grandfather laid in wake wasn't the time to bring up the pages of my dad's unfinished

dissertation from thirty years past. But I didn't. My dad did.

"I wanted to finish, but I didn't know how to start," he said before taking a long sip from his Diet Coke. "I wanted to write about these tensions between the poetry of the Bible and its divine sanctioned violence—the Sermon on the Mount with the violence in Revelation, the sweeping narratives of Genesis with the genocide in Joshua. But my own questions got in the way. Pressure grew. My motivation got mixed up. I'd always wanted to please my father, but I thought—is this what *I* want? I felt I owed it to him. But I couldn't justify my days *not writing* while your mom worked. Writing and research suddenly seemed like an indulgence. I'd worked my whole life. I knew how to work. So I went to work."

I sipped my stale Diet Coke and watched my father's wheels turn. He hadn't cried for his dad and wouldn't that weekend or in the coming weeks and months as he spun through stories about his father. A year later, when those wheels finally slowed, I'd find him in the garage listening to "Leader of the Band" by Dan Folgerberg, coming apart. Or I'd call and he'd answer with a shaky voice and explain he'd been listening to Mellencamp's "Minutes to Memories," Springsteen's "My Father's House," or Mike and the Mechanics "In the Living Years." It wasn't Mahler, Mozart, or Brahms, but these were his songs. And to sing, Augustine wrote, is to pray twice.

On that night in the funeral home, I asked if he regretted not finishing his dissertation.

"Regrets pile up. A man is not a mule. Meant only for work. I wish I'd indulged those abilities more. It would've made him proud, but I also owed it to myself."

I'm not sure I heard his encouragement that day. I'd just finished grad school and was trying to write while cobbling together part-time jobs in a full-time life. But I listened, nodded, and my dad said we should get back. His father's body was surrounded by visitors. Standing up, I almost said that when we get down to the heart of the matter it is all about forgiveness, but I realized I'd be quoting Don Henley. Instead, I put my arm around my dad and tried to screw on a smile. We walked into the nauseating room of bright flowers, warm bodies, and the casket in the front of the room that held the man who was somehow both a question and an answer.

Studying the headstone of my grandfather's grave in Shelbyville, Kentucky, in the windless summer of 2011, I take measure of my life with his. It's a comparison that does me few favors. I step onto this scale often while working

evenings at the New Albany YMCA as a part-time personal trainer. Walking around the indoor track with clients after their workout, I can see out the large windows and the line of people filing into the Hour of Power.

The storefront church across the street sits next to a vacant used-car lot and an empty warehouse. The folks in line—the unemployed, underemployed, the addicts, ex-addicts, from New Albany's projects and Louisville's West End—await soup, iced tea, cornbread, and good news. My grandfather's legacy walks that line. As I walk with my clients, I counsel them on body mass index and love handles. I detail the virtues of Pilates, strategies for washboard abs, exercises for 'yoga butts,' and suggest to all who have ears, all who will listen, healthy alternatives to cheesecake (*try Greek yogurt with fresh fruit!*).

It was across the street in his Sunday school class in January 2008 where I last saw my grandfather. He taught the Bible lesson to Alice and I and a dozen ancient smiling Methodists. The class, once numbered over fifty, had taken to calling themselves The Widow and Widowers Club. Alice and I were the only people in attendance under the age of eighty. My grandfather quoted scripture from memory as his massive hands rested atop his Bible with its cracked spine. His voice carried the ease and conviction of a speaker doing what they love most. This love he'd tried to hand down to my dad. And perhaps it was my dad he was thinking of when he smiled at me and said, "Will you please close us in a word of prayer?"

The ring of grandparents beamed in my direction and if I felt powerless to say, *No thanks,* I also felt powerless to say anything. My grandfather smiled and bowed his head. A few nights later, his heart, that beating muscle, would seize and stop, but on that Sunday morning it was my tongue that twisted in the old struggle. Alice squeezed my hand. *Dear Jesus*, I said. *Give us the courage to face our many selfish attachments in this world of impermanence. Help us to pick up our own crosses that we might walk in your footsteps and help others.* The radiator creaked. Someone coughed. And I remembered, *Amen*. I wasn't sure how my prayer—the banal prayer of the Christian-Agnostic-with-Buddhist-sympathies—played until my granddad boomed, *Amen*.

Standing in the graveyard, I lean down and wipe flecks of dirt away from my grandparent's headstones, say a few words, and walk back toward my truck. Passing rows of strangers, I think of a headstone in Röcken, Germany—the resting place of Ludwig Nietzsche, the

philosopher's father, a country pastor, who died when his son was eight years old. In 1885, toward the end of his writing life, Nietzsche, who lived in obscurity and out of a trunk and suitcase, won a small lawsuit (seven thousand Swiss Francs) against his publisher. (His book sales were tepid). Nietzsche paid his bookstore debts and used the remainder to have his father's headstone engraved. Nietzsche's gravestone for his father quotes the Apostle Paul: "Love never fails."

Love never fails, I repeat, wanting to believe as I turn the key in the ignition of my Ford Ranger. *Love never fails except when it does*. "*Never*, *always*, *only*, *all*…big words, Jeremy, big words. Absolutes. Avoid those," my dad once said while proofreading a paper for me, sounding like Yoda quoting Strunk & White. I drive through the winding country cemetery, thinking of both men, my radio silent, before turning onto the state highway, back onto I-64 westbound toward Louisville, back to New Albany, back home to Alice, and into a future where I'll have my own failures as a father—failures large and small—as all fathers do, and all fathers must.

A young man comes to Jesus and Jesus says, "Follow me." The young man hesitates. His father has just died. He asks for time to bury his dad. "Let the dead bury their dead," Jesus says. The invention of the wristwatch was eighteen hundred years away, but it's hard not to imagine Jesus looking at his wrist at this precise moment, distracted, concerned with deadlines all his own.