

Blackjack and the Buffalo Bills

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I was 13. The Buffalo gusts wrapped around my ears, and my brothers and I were shivering cold. We saw a faint light in the midst of a noon snowstorm—a restaurant illuminated in a hollow and monotonous town. We wandered in. It was even frigid inside, and the woman working the register wore a bulky, violet jacket: she seemed cold too. There were around four people in the place, but it felt empty. Had it been in another city, on another deserted street corner, or even another time, it may have felt like a commonplace restaurant. But we were in upstate New York during a brutal snowstorm. We hurriedly scanned the menu and ordered eight soft-shell tacos to share. Eating was the only way of distracting us from the inevitable: we were about to walk to the cemetery to bury our grandfather.

I looked over my left shoulder and observed my cousin in tears. He was 25 at the time, and, in many ways, his grief was contagious. Before I drove to Buffalo for my grandfather's funeral, it did not genuinely hit me that he was gone. Every other time I had been to the city, I spent time with my grandmother *and* grandfather, but once I stood cautiously next to his plot in an immobilizing snowstorm, reciting psalms, I became cognizant of the fact that I would never communicate with him again. The cold was all-pervading, and I began crying a bit more as my father commenced in his eulogy. He was quoting Bruce Springsteen.

Well they built the Titanic to be one of a kind, but many ships have ruled the seas.

They built the Eiffel Tower to stand alone, but they could build another if they please. But when they built you, brother, they broke the mold.

My brother Dan and I got into his car to go back to our grandmother's house after we took turns shoveling dirt atop his casket. The trees shook vehemently all around the car, and I felt like we were moving at an improbable velocity. Things needed to slow down. As we drove, I could not help but have my eyes sharply glued to the window like I was some vexatious tourist ebullient by sightseeing. Buffalo was tired, and every aspect of it seemed worn down. I caught a momentary glimpse of *Ted's Hot Dogs*, an old-fashioned fast food diner that my grandfather and I had been to a couple of times.

The place seemed non-existent to me now, like a once captivating venue that had lost its allure and wrinkled up under the sky of a lifeless city. We parked on the street, walked up the cracked and powdery brick stairs and entered the house. We were greeted by relatives that I perhaps met once or twice but did not remember. "I remember you when you were this big," they maybe said, though I did not care to hear them annoyingly chatter. They seemed like strangers to me, and that is all they had ever been. It smelled sweet in the kitchen, which was expected since my grandmother had an affinity for cooking desserts. I sat down on a creaky wooden stool, and my grandmother brought me some pie. I could have sworn that the milk

chocolate she used in the pie tasted almost identical to the type that she formerly employed within her company, *Deluxe Sweets*, but then again, I had not tasted any of her products since she took away the family discount code. As I ate, I glanced at some of the old pictures along the bookshelf. They were gray. The television was audible, so I scooped up my plate and retreated to the living room where my dad lay on the same couch my grandfather would scream and yell on as the Buffalo Bills blew game after game. Old-fashioned mints were encased atop a brittle glass table in front of the television, and a wave of nostalgia seeped into my conscious mind as I remembered my grandfather giving me a handful of those same mints years ago. The Bills were losing 20-0.

At the end of the day, my siblings and I shuffled around with my grandmother in her room to take some of my grandfather's former belongings. My brother tried on beige leather loafers and took them blithely. My sister was given a vintage watch and my eldest brother took a pair of Black Nikes that had presumably not been worn since the early 2000s. I did not end up picking anything.

The following day, my family would drive home. It was a long and exhausting weekend, and we had all experienced a whirlwind of emotions. In the car, I thought about my time spent with my Aunt Beth in the living room. She explained to me the time she was on a cruise ship and dominated poker in the basement one night. She

was hungover, she said, and the next day when she walked down the stairs to the tables, everyone was chanting her name loudly:

“Beth, Beth, Beth!”

With my eyes glued to the window again on the way back, I pulled out the 2 of Hearts card my Aunt placed in my hand before I left. It was crinkled now. In the front seat, a cigarette dangled between my sister’s fingers letting in the cold air. Seeing me looking her way, she grabbed the carton in the cup holder, pulled it open, and passed one back with a red Buffalo Bills lighter she had apparently taken from the living room. I rolled down the window and inhaled.