

High School Winner
The Happiest Days of Our Lives
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Grade 11

In the last year of my father's life, he spoke very little of the war. On good days I would wheel him out into the courtyard and we would talk of God, our faith, and the love for Christ that he instilled in me. On bad days he would stay inside and try to sleep through the pain, only to be greeted with more of the same. I could hear him cry for help in his sleep, his mind like a film reel that readily replayed sickening memories of the horror and anguish that has haunted him ever since battle.

Every day I could ponder whether to wake him from the recurring nightmares of his time on the front, for I knew sleep was hard to come by for my father. At times I regret letting him sleep. But even on his worst days, he would smile, with tears on his splotched cheeks and sorrow in his eyes, and struggle through the pain to articulate how much he appreciated me not waking him from he desperately needed slumber. Between the respirations of his breathing machine, he would use what was left of his strength to tell me how much he loved me and how proud he was to be my father. I would place my hand on his and tell him how much I love him, and what an inspiration and hero he was to me and everyone else who knew him. The joy of this seemed to overwhelm him, almost greater than on the day in 1945 that he returned home.

I used to visit my father at the nursing home every day. Being that we had always been as close as a father and son could be, I felt I at least owed him that. I thought at first that I traveled there for him, but realized I was the one who benefited from our conversations and time together. From a medical standpoint, my father needed the cancer that was devouring his body to cease fire. If you asked him what he needed, he would tell you his friends, his family, and most of all, hi Lord.

His heart was feeble and had been since my mother passed away. The doctors gave him six months. In late November, nearly three years later, he died of a heart attack in his sleep. The sensation of sadness that came over me that day was like a waterfall of ache and pain. I kissed my father on the forehead, a forehead that held the very tart and pungent smell of death, spoke in a quiet whisper a prayer for him (although I knew he was too good a man to need it) and told him to go in peace.

On a cloudy day in December, one that was as frigid as it was windy, my father was buried in Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. I made sure that before his casket was closed he had the golden, dented crucifix that kept a Nazi sniper's bullet from piercing his heart many years ago. He had willed the life-saver to me, but I knew it needed to be with its rightful owner, so I tucked the gift into my father's right breast pocket before they closed his casket. The ceremonial shots pulsated through the hallowed grounds, as powerfully and fiercely as the spirit they signified. As the smolder of gun powder cleared, so did the observers. Eventually, I stood on the sacred ground by myself, while the wind wrapped me in its embrace. The amount of time that passed as I stared at the chalk-white marble tombstone that held the engraving of his name, I'll never know. How could I possibly say goodbye to a person so dear to me? The tears couldn't even roll down my face, as they iced-over half way down. I turned to walk away, and then looked back to the raised earth containing my father. As grief slowed my breathing to a near

stand-still, I gave the miniature flag staked next to his grave one last salute, so honored and grateful to be able to do so. "Goodbye, Dad. Thanks for all the memories."

I then journeyed home, to a house as empty as my heart. I slept only three hours that night, and when I awoke I managed to fight through the tears to pray. As I gave thanks to the Lord for being so blessed to have such a person in my life, I asked if He could be kind enough to also bless me with the ability to make my father proud and live up to his name. When I finished, a series of knocks disrupted the deafening silence. I rushed to the door to be greeted by no one. However, just when I was about to close the door, I noticed a package addressed to a *Mr. Thomas Anderson*, so I knew the delivery was no mistake. I fumbled to untie the knot of twine, decorating the package with my tears, my heart stopped the moment its contents emerged. It was the journal my father kept during the war; an item that I never even knew existed. Inside the front cover lay the dented crucifix that I left with him before he was buried. There was a note attached to it which read.

Dear Tom,

I know you'll take good care of this, the way you did me. Thank you for being my bright light in a cruel world.

*Love you with all my heart,
Dad*