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“Pop- Pop”

By Alonna Berry
Photos courtesy of the author



*I*t was Christmas break. We always did this—nothing seemed to change. There we were: Ronald, my older brother, on the couch texting someone. Then there was Ryan lying on the forest green carpet playing Madden 2000, or something. We would all just sit around the house watching movies, relaxing—consumed in our own world—while obviously irritating the hell out of one another. There it is. That smell—it always oozes in from the kitchen this time of year. Today? I can smell the crust browning over the caramelized sugar apple bake as the sweet smell seeps through the tiny slits in the half-cooked crust. My mouth is watering already. I’m sitting on that maroon and tan floral print couch with my feet perched up as my laptop carelessly drapes across my lap. And, as always, there’s a faint snore in the background as my dad “rests his eyes.” It was January 1st, 2006... I’ve always wondered why Christmas felt the need to break into the next

month... Did we really have to drag it on?

RING! RING!

-Hello?

-Teresa?! Teresa?!

-Yes Mom, is everything ok?!

-Teresa?!

She was screaming now through a sea of tears. I could hear her from across the living room. What was going on? I felt my heart as it plummeted to my feet. Then it slowly began to crawl up my spine, pounding so hard I thought my back would break in half.

-TERESA?!

-MOM, what’s going on?

The elevation in her voice now caused my breathing to completely stop.

-Teresa! Its Alfred, he fell Teresa, he fell down today. I’m in the hospital in Milford. Dr. Alexander is on

his way....

She trailed off. Then silence.

-Mom, we are on our way, we'll be there soon. Call Sissy—is she there with you? Mom don't worry—we are on our way.

As she turned around the life had been drained from her face. It looked as though death had just touched her.

-We're leaving! RONALD, WE'RE LEAVING!

-What's going on Teresa?

-RONALD, WE'RE LEAVING!

Suddenly her face became a waterfall. I could no longer see her eyes anymore.

-GET IN THE CAR!

She was now screaming. I didn't know what to do. My brothers and I all looked at one another and then to our father in confusion.

-Are we coming, Dad?

Our voices sounded so sheepish against the immensity of the tears.

-We are all going! Just get in the car and shut up.

His voice appeared to be so calm but the slight tremble at the end of his words alerted me of the situations' severity.

As the car pulled out of the drive way I felt as though we were all being left behind. The car slowly began to push its way through, ripping through the air at unimaginable speeds. My body felt so still. I couldn't move. I was frozen, stuck in complete bewilderment.

-Where are we going, Mom?

Silence.

-What is going on, Mom?

Silence.

Mom?

Slowly a small, lifeless whimper began to permeate the car. Its resonance smashed into me.

-Alonna – just stop. Stop now.

Silence again....

We slowly began to pull into the parking lot of the Milford Memorial Hospital.

“EMERGENCY” read across the entrance.

I was scared. We walked into the Emergency Room. As soon as we walked in, everything began to feel so comfortable to me again. I had been here so many times before.

Everyone get ready, the dispatcher just called in a 5-car pile-up in Milford. The ambulances are on their way here now. We need to get through to the families

of the people as fast as possible, and remember to stay calm (because they won't be). As I continued to le papers and folders of new admitted patients, I glanced at the names. Outside of this of ce, behind the swinging double doors... life was being sucked out of people, hearts were being restored, and blood was spilling on

to the oor. Here I am stuck; ling papers for 5 hours a day. Sanchez, Wilson, Zart.

Time to start a new pile.

Blockwood – oh I remember them; the motorcyclist who was riding cross-country with his brother. They had stopped at a rest station in Milford – his kickstand was stuck. He tried to unlatch it and in doing so the latch suddenly slid down, and chopped off his nger. His brother and he came rushing into the emergency room, frantic, with his wife on the phone; his nger in a small Ziploc bag.

-Mom, what is going on? Where is Dad?



-I don't know! I don't know! Teresa, they won't tell me anything. He's back there I guess. They won't let me back!

My Dad deliberately glances over at the front desk attendant. A face I vaguely remember when working a day or two here. It's true she was a bitch. I could only imagine the conversation that has transpired prior to us arriving.

It was Christmas Eve; we always spent Christmas at Mom-Mom and Pop-Pop's. I loved Christmas Eve—it was never fancy, just simple—simply family. Well, anyway he was sitting there—in his rocking chair. The smoke from his Marlboro Red began to graze my nose.

-Pop-Pop, it's your turn to open your gift.

He nodded and extended his arms. He received the small, neatly wrapped gift. He read the tag. "To: Pop-Pop"

"From: Ronald, Teresa, Ron-Ron, Alonna & Ryan."

He smiled, and without tearing a single corner he silently but meticulously unwrapped the gift. Mom-Mom, Sissy (our cousin), Mom, Dad, Ronald, Ryan and I waited.

He paused. Looking intently at that little black box.
-OH SHIT! OH SHIT! OH SHIT! OH SHIT! OH SHIT!

-Alfred, are you okay?

-Oh Shit!

His hand shaking... he slowly pulled out a glistening gold watch. He carefully began to fasten it to his wrist.

-Teresa?! Ya'll got this for me?!

-You said you never had a gold watch before...

He looked up and smiled.

-Mom, just calm down. I'm sure they will let us know when they can. Is Dr. Alexander here yet?

-Teresa, I don't know! I don't know!

-Teresa, from what we've heard, the Doctor is here now, and they will let us back there when he is stabilized.

-Do you know what happened, Sissy?

-They said from what they can tell your father had a seizure.

-Mom said he fell?

-Yes, she told me that he was standing in the kitchen, and fell over. The paramedics said he had a seizure, that's why he fell.

Seizure. The last time I had heard that word was when my doctors were talking to my parents and me after our car accident. I had had a seizure after being removed from the car. I had smashed my head on the seat in front of me. I was knocked unconscious and when the helicopter landed to take me to the nearest intensive care hospital I began having convulsions. After waking up from my coma in the hospital, I couldn't remember anything. I just remember the long list of ailments that they had told me I had suffered; a concussion, an in-head wound, a broken jaw (my mouth was wired shut), a broken forearm, and a coma induced by a seizure (that was my bodies immediate reaction to all the shock).

A Seizure.



A man walked swiftly as he pushed his way through the double doors.

-Primrose? Primrose Sturgis?

-Yes sir, I'm here.

-We have Alfred, your husband, in stable condition. As the paramedics told you, he suffered a seizure. We

are running tests now to determine what caused the seizure. That is all we know right now. For now all we can do is wait. When he is out of testing, we will move him to a room on the second floor. There you will be able to see him. I will have someone let you know as soon as he is moved.

-Thank you, Doctor.

Just as quickly as he had appeared through those double doors, his white coat had disappeared. All that was left now were our hopes swinging in on the double doors trying to catch glimpse of the forbidden world behind them.

Then silence again.



As soon as church ended we would be on our way to Mom-Mom and Pop-Pop's house. It would always seem like a long drive when I was little. My father would be driving with my mother at his side, and most of the time we were stuffed in the back, uncomfortably. When we would pull into their driveway and my Mom-Mom would be standing in the door waving enthusiastically. We would walk into the house and there he would be. Pop-Pop would be sitting quietly in his rocking chair; a small smirk across his face, accompanied by a corner wink.

-Hi Pop-Pop

-Hi sweetie!

(I lean in to give him a kiss)

-How are you?

-I'm good Pop-Pop!

-You coming down here to help your Mom-Mom?

-Yeah, I'm gonna help her with cookin' — I think.

-Primrose! Now don't you work her too hard today...

Mom-Mom walked away without a backwards glance.

-She works you like a slave in there!

He winked. I walked away.

We sat down again. No one spoke. Mom-Mom was nervously flipping through a magazine, my brothers were texting on their phones, Dad was trying to comfort my Mom, but Mom was silent. She was stingingly silent; her silence grazes the hair on the back of your neck like hurricane winds. I had to leave; I couldn't handle the intensity, so I took a walk to the vending machines.

As I skimmed the vending machines, I saw them, Kit-Kat bars... Sometimes my dad would come home from work he would bring home the candy that he had raided from the vending machine at the military base. He would come home and standing in his green army fatigues—he would have a spread of Kit-Kat Bars, Snickers, Tasty Cakes, and all the other terrible sweets. We would all run into the kitchen. Mom would never let us eat them all, it would last the rest of the week, and it would always end with Dad getting a stern 'talkin too' about giving us cavities, and our health.

These sweets didn't look so bad now. In fact they were comforting. I just wanted to smash through the glass. I wanted to remind them everything would be okay, that Pop-pop would be fine. We were...

-Did you need any money?

-No thanks, Dad. I don't think I want anything now.

-Yeah, me either. Are you okay?

-I'm just worried about everyone. I hope pop-Pop is okay...

-He will be, Alonna, don't worry.

After hours of waiting, a nurse appeared in the waiting room. She came to tell us that we could find Alfred Sturgis on the second floor in room 211. If we had any questions we could ask this new nurse upstairs.



She also assured us that the doctor would be up to talk to us just as soon as the test results are in and he looks them over.

I JUST WANTED TO SMASH THROUGH THE GLASS. I WANTED TO REMIND THEM EVERYTHING WOULD BE OKAY, THAT POP-POP WOULD BE FINE.

Then I saw "B" had already been pressed. I looked up.

-Sorry Miss, this elevator was already going down.

-Do you know how long that will be?

-I'm sorry, I don't ma'am. Your nurse upstairs may be able to give you more information. Do you know how to get to the 2nd floor from here?

I did. (I chimed in). I used to volunteer in on 2-West.

-OK then, good luck with everything, Mrs. Sturgis.

My grandmother nodded, and turned away. They all followed and I led them around the maze; corner after corner of white; white walls with blue trim. I led them to the visitor elevator – that would lead us directly to the wing where Pop-Pop would be. We stepped into the elevator.

- Two please. Thank you.

I closed my eyes. I didn't want to be riding in an elevator with a dead body. I was late for work that day, and I was in a rush to get to the second floor. I stepped on the elevator without looking— I just had to get to work. I pressed the number two, and waited as the elevator begun its descent. DOWN? Why is this elevator going down? I quickly looked up and double checked that I had pressed the right button.

I was stunned. I couldn't say anything. I saw it. It was a stretcher; the body was on it, but it was covered. A white sheet carefully draped over the body. I was in shock. I was in the elevator with a dead person. I felt the goose-bumps slowly begin to crawl up my arms.

The silence was killing me.

-Oh it's okay, sir, I was so late for work, I-I-I guess I didn't notice that the elevator was already on its way down. As soon as I finished my sentence the elevator door opened. Thank God!

My voice was so shaky. He nodded as he and the body passed me.

DING!

We were here the elevator had finally arrived at the 2nd floor. I had forgotten how scary this hospital could be. We slowly walked as a family unit to the room. As we turned the corner we passed the nurses' station. I quickly glanced over to see if I could spot anyone that I remembered. I noticed a few names of women I had meant while working on the nurse's

board; but it didn't really look like anyone I knew was working today.

As we walked into room 211, I was halted in my tracks. I couldn't take another step forward. This



was the room. The intensity hit me with a force I couldn't ignore. I glanced in and spotted my Pop-Pop sleeping on that bed...

-Alonna, can you come over here?

-Sure, what's up?

-All of the nurses are swamped today. Do you remember Mr. Smith from room 211?

-Yes...

-Well he lost his battle with cancer today. He was just pronounced dead. Normally when something like this happens a nurse will go in and sit with the family just to make sure they don't have any needs, or need something. Mrs. Smith (his wife) is the only one here right now. Would you please go and sit with her until her family gets here. Thanks.

Before I could answer she walked away. I was only 16! OK Alonna, pull yourself together! You can do this! I closed my eyes, and walked into the room. When I walked in, I could tell that Mr. Smith had just passed away. It couldn't have been more than 20 minutes ago.

I had never seen a dead person before, and Mr. Smith was fresh. His eyes were still open, frozen in time. His last glance was at his wife. As I slowly pushed forward into the room, I could hear Mrs. Smith crying. I didn't know what to say. I was an intruder. Her husband had just died. She was now alone...

I didn't speak. I didn't say anything. I just sat in the visitor's chair beside her. I sat until the coroner came in. I watched as he checked his vitals. He put the stethoscope up to Mr. Smith's chest.

There was no breathing.

Pronounced dead at 2:15 pm.

Mrs. Smith's whimpers grew louder.

The coroner shut Mr. Smith's eyes, and covered his head with his white sheet.

I took a deep breath and slowly stepped into the room, and I began to draw my hands closer to my face. My Mom-Mom was now seated in the same chair as Mrs. Smith, and Pop-Pop was on the same bed as Mr. Smith. He looked so lifeless, so helpless. Just looking at his face, my hands began to over-ow. I turned and walked into the hallway.

-Alonna, are you okay?

-I'll be ne; there are just too many people in that room right now. I felt like I couldn't

breathe. I slid down the wall, and seated myself on the oor of the hallway. My Dad sat down beside me.

We sat in silence. My eyes began roaming the hallway. Then I heard it...

We sat as Auld Lang Syne began to play through the speakers. It was louder than I remembered it. I wanted them to turn it off. How could they be so inconsiderate? Why would they play this song now? In a hospital... people die here. Why would they play it? Hospitals, they make me cringe...

-Alonna?

**AS WE WALKED INTO ROOM 211, I WAS HALTED
IN MY TRACKS. I COULDN'T TAKE ANOTHER STEP
FORWARD. THIS WAS THE ROOM.**

What does he want now? Doesn't he hear that song? Doesn't he know what that means?

-Yes...

-Why are they playing that song?

I was going to explode. You want to know? Do you really want to know?

-They're playing it because on the fourth floor a baby was born. (I looked up).

I glanced at the clock. At 9:16 a new life entered the world. How many just left it?

-Oh. (He said).

I looked up and I saw the Doctor from downstairs walking towards our room. I knew what this meant. He had the test results back. My father and I stood in unison. We followed the white coated man into the room.

-Mrs. Sturgis?

-Yes?

-We ran lots of test on your husband today. At first we couldn't find anything. Then we did a MRI on his entire body. We found 3 tumors on his brain.

-What does that mean?

-Well Mr. Sturgis is 91 years old. At this age, if we did

try to perform surgery it would do more damage than good. His body probably wouldn't be able to recover.

-At this point, we are probably just going to keep him well medicated. But I'm sorry... it's too late.

It was at our annual family B-B-Que. Every September there would be music, food fryin', and people dancin' and yellin'. Everyone in my family had their place. My Dad would be standing with a beer in hand and a spatula in the other behind the grill. My Mom usually going from table to table forcing a smile and a laugh, I would eagerly be following behind her, making sure everyone was happy. My brothers were in the back of the yard playing basketball. There is a group of middle-aged family members sliding across the grass in synchronized motion. Perched at the front of the yard, just looking around and watching everyone...

There was Pop-Pop with his sideways smirk; he didn't speak because he didn't have to. He was my Pop-Pop and I was his granddaughter.

As I looked over at him; he pulled out a cigarette.

I went and sat beside him.

We were silent.

He winked.

I smiled.

