

Europa

by Ian Whitlow

Dad died in Alcatraz. It's funny. You hear about these places all your life, but you hope to God you never end up there. When I was young, I always said I would live with Dad one day. I don't talk like that any more. I'm not like him; I won't ever end up in the places he's been. Granddad says that, in our family, the sins of the father really do get passed down to the son. Not for me. I won't let some Sunday school bullshit dictate my life.

Pride. Infidelity. Rage. They go all the way down the line, and they all stop with me.

I asked Granddad about his parents once. He heaved a sigh, and as he released the air from his lungs he leaned far back in his recliner, as if submitting himself to powers beyond his control. He downed the last of his beer, grown lukewarm sitting between his legs since lunch. The deer head on the wall behind him hung down almost over his head, casting a dark shadow over his high brow; he was kingly, a barbaric monarch preparing to tell me his dark history in this bright room. I had never been intimidated by him, but he looked great and terrible, and I felt small, miniscule against this man and the army of years that marched behind him.

"My mom lived in a small town on the coast of South Carolina. She was a southern belle, through and through. Gorgeous, too. All the men in town courted her, but she turned them down; I don't think she was being coy, I think they just bored her. She came from money, the kind that perpetuates youth and shrouds all important choices in frivolity. She preferred collecting shells on the beach to planning social engagements. Once, as she and her friends were coming back into town from one of these excursions, they caught a glimpse of a hulking behemoth hurtling down the main thoroughfare

– a white truck, roaring and rattling and startling the girls. After all, cars were rare and frightening in those days. But, the truck slowed down, and the man in the driver's seat gave the girls a wink. So they started to approach the truck slowly – all except my mom. She ran up to it, let her hand brush the side, and vaulted into the truck bed. Before her friends could say anything, the truck snorted, bucked, and galloped down the road, out of town and out of their lives.

“A few years later, she'd had me and my brother, that man had deserted her for God knows how many other women, and the magic of running away with a mysterious stranger had decidedly worn off. Mom never seemed angry with him for his infidelity; she was just sad. According to her, he was middle-aged and handsome, maybe married before he met her, but a charmer nevertheless. She was reverent whenever she spoke about him, but my brother and I always felt like he'd cheated her. Hell, I guess we felt cheated, too. We always heard about this godlike father of ours, but never got to experience him firsthand. He belonged to someone else, or no one at all.”

I lived with Granddad growing up. Dad was locked up for “involuntary” manslaughter before I turned three. Granddad says we were happy. Mom was pretty, Dad was successful. He worked in life insurance. He had a reputation (says Granddad) for being honest, being compassionate, actually caring about his policyholders. Once, he gave a guy enough money to pay all his bills that month. Electricity, water, the works. I'm sure we went a bit hungry that month. Despite his overflow of compassion, we were still on the lower end of affluent. I was set up to go to some rich private schools when I got older, but everything went to hell.

“One day, your dad goes into the office” (Granddad again). “But he doesn't sit down at his desk. Instead, he charges through the door like an animal, knocking down cubicles,

smashing coffee mugs against people's heads. Then he gets real violent. Now, your pops was a beast of a man. Gets that from your grandma. He was over six feet, easy, all bulk. He starts grabbin' people, ripping off limbs and breaking bones, moving through that maze of an office berserk and without method. The police called it a 'river of blood.' When they showed up, they just started firing. Your daddy took three bullets to the chest before he went down. He didn't die, either. So he ended up in Alcatraz. One inmate killed him in his sleep, strangled him with his bare hands. Someone asked the guy why he did it; he answered simply, 'He was an abomination in God's sight.' That's how people remember your father, boy – an abomination, a pariah. You come from a family of abominations.”

After my father's rampage, Mom slit her wrists. She only made the river of blood run deeper. I went to live with Granddad after that. A palatial cabin in central Arkansas, and the perfect place to shelter his grandson from the world that would show him no mercy for being the son of terror itself.

I didn't stay in school long. Kids knew what my father had done; no doubt parents had girded their children with the knowledge that I might bite if provoked. They were right. The first mention of my dad would bring rage, anger that no child ever ought to know. Then anger would give way to action. Granddad took me out of school before I did any serious damage.

He was educated, though, a real southern renaissance man. He taught me to read in his library, bigger than any backwoods library has a right to be. I read everything, too. He taught me to hunt, to live away from people, to depend on myself. He never shied away from telling me about my dad, either. He taught me to control my anger, that self-control was what made you a man. I was truly grateful to him.

It wasn't until I turned 21 that I moved out. It's not that Granddad kept me locked up or forced me to stay – not physically, at least. He just always managed to come up with some excuse. “How can you leave an old man to himself, when he's got no other family to care for him?”

I guess after a while the appeal to pity wore off. Granddad knew it, too, so he became sullen, and tried to use our monstrous past to bully me into staying. “Go if you must, boy; but don't forget, no one understands our family. We might as well be animals, for all the world thinks of us. You'd be safer here.”

I left. Moved to Tennessee.

Society didn't sit right with me. I took to working small, part-time jobs in order to fund long trips into the wilderness. I felt more at home among the trees than I did in town. When I was in town, I drank. At first when I drank I just got irritable, but soon it spilled over. And I fought. Under the cloud of alcohol, I couldn't feel the rage I'd learned to control when I was younger. But I knew it was there. Breaking bottles over guys' heads and shattering noses just felt like exercise. Any girls I might have had I ended up hurting. One girl I slept with got a broken pelvis. I surely don't know how to explain that. I took her to the emergency room, and I didn't see her again.

When I wasn't off by myself, life was a routine of drunken fights and frightened women. I spent more than my share of nights in the county jail, but I guess the memory of my father kept anyone (cops or inmates) from giving me shit. Mankind wouldn't even let me be a normal delinquent. It was as I was getting out of yet another three-night stint for yet another barroom outburst that my grandma came to see me. And it was when my grandma came to see me that I learned, as it turns out, that most of what my granddad told me was utter bullshit.

Grandma wasn't a beast of a woman.

I don't know how she found me, but she set my story straight.

"I loved your granddad dearly, darlin'," she told me through a cloud of cigarette smoke. "But one night, I met a man. Your granddad was a drinker back then, so he'd made a big noise and found himself asleep early in the evening. So I went to the bar in town, had a few drinks. This big ol' hulk of a man came in, sat right down next to me. Turned out he was a wrestler. He was a charmer, too. I slept with him. Your granddad never knew, 'til your daddy turned out to be 6' 3"; then he knew what happened, and he was too proud to stay with me. Left your daddy and me to fend for ourselves, washed his hands of the family till after your daddy died."

I guess I should have been angry at Granddad then, but I wasn't. He was still my granddad. He'd raised me after my parents died. I knew he'd lied to me so he could believe the story himself.

That wasn't the only lie he'd told, though.

I was tired of the life I'd found for myself, so I decided to retreat into the only thing that had guaranteed me any (albeit twisted) comfort in my life: my past. I wish I'd let it go. Instead, I asked my grandma where I'd lived growing up. I could tell she didn't want to tell me.

"It was a place down in South Carolina."

As I got off the Greyhound, I knew it was the town my granddad had told me about some years back. It wasn't the quaint Southern paradise he'd described to me, as years of expansion had dulled its character. I didn't want to sightsee, anyway. I made straight for the address Grandma had written down for me. I guess the house hadn't been lived in since my parents had left it, each in their own way. Words like "monster" and "murderer" were spray-painted on the doors and windows. I went inside.

It was just a house. The furniture was still there, covered by over 15 years of dust. I went into all the rooms, found everything like it must've been the day Dad last left for the office. My room was small, just like any child's room. There were toy cars and guns lying on the ground, a Lone Ranger poster on the wall. I went into the kitchen. There was still blood on the floor from Mom's last afternoon.

I didn't stay any longer. There was evil in that house.

I went to a neighbor's house. Rang the doorbell. A woman in her fifties answered. I asked her if she knew anything about the house next door. Her face turned to ash, and all the lines and creases on her brow turned into canyons.

"There was a family lived in that house, about 18 years ago now. The man was a bum, an alcoholic and an abusive man. I don't know how many times I heard his wife and his son crying because of his drunken violence. He wasn't a small man, either. He supposedly sold life insurance, but I doubt he was an asset to his company. One day he took that violence to work with him. Killed five people. Then his wife killed herself. No one's even looked inside that house since."

The lies my granddad passed down to me were being taken away one by one, ripped from that small, secure place in my mind with excruciating pain.

My dad was no saint. He was a fiend.

I guess because my dad had died in Alcatraz, the authorities felt they owed me a visit. I had asked for the chance to speak with the man who killed my father. He didn't know who I was; I suppose plenty of other people had come to ask this man about his slaying of a wild-eyed butcher.

He wasn't what I'd expected. He looked like he had been strong, once. Like he'd gotten drunk, laid, high before, just like everyone else. Like he wasn't meant to be in prison. I told him as much.

“What’d you think, kid? Were you expecting a religious maniac with hair down to his shoulders and a fork that gave him messages from God?”

(That would’ve made more sense to me, I guess.)

“That man was a goddamned monster, no doubt; that’s not why I killed him, though. For Christ’s sake, his own dad hired me to do it. Fed me some nutjob lines to use after I’d done it, about his being an abomination and cursed by God. I didn’t need them, though. The guards treat me like royalty for what I done; that bastard scared the shit out of them. I’m a hero in here.”

Granddad was right about something: I come from a family of abominations.

This time, I could feel that rage.

My dad was a legendary terror throughout the nation, the stuff of ghost stories and sermons. He was proof to everyone else that people are still cursed by God, that monsters still walk the streets. People could condemn him and feel better about themselves. Sin and evil became relative terms, measured against the wickedness of my father.

I don’t agree with that anymore. Maybe he was a monster, but so is everyone else. Others are just better at hiding it. People lie and abuse and steal every day, but they think they’re civilized because they don’t get caught. But they’re not. When you get down to it, they’re sick just like my dad; just like me.

Just like my granddad.

My granddad, the monster.

I show up at the cabin one night, a few weeks later. It’s around midnight. I feel my way through the Arkansas darkness for the front door, let myself in. I make straight for my granddad’s study on the first floor. In his desk, I find the old revolver that had sat there for years. Granddad had kept it clean and loaded.

Back in the sitting room, I admire the old deer head on the wall; it had been joined by one more on either side, creating a bestial crucifixion scene. Move to the kitchen, find a bottle of whiskey in the cabinet. I drink it in gulps.

Bottle empty, I climb the stairs slowly, taking care not to make a noise. I approach my Granddad's room with all the silence of a vulture on the descent. His room is right in front of me. No hesitation. I push the door open.

His snoring fills the room just like his stories: full and rhythmic, completely authoritative. Even on his final night, he is regal in slumber. I guess that makes this an assassination.

I am beside his bed now. Cock the gun.

Pull the trigger.

The shot to his chest jerks him out of sleep. He sees my figure in the dark, and he knows it's me. But now it's wrong. There's no satisfaction in what I've done. Because, as he begins to fade, he looks at me with a face that says clearly:

"You were to be my redemption."

And now he's gone.

And the gun turns to face me.