

Singing with Grandpa

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I could barely climb my way up to the piano bench. My tiny feet dangled off the seat while my little fingers banged on the keys. There I was at grandpa's left, tapping him on the shoulder asking, "Please play this song Grandpa," or "Grandpa, do you know how to play this one?" He didn't always know my little songs, but anything he played made me happy.

He was a frail man, with thick, black hair. He always wore short-sleeved button-up shirts with cardigans or the occasional Members Only jacket. Grandpa was the epitome of refinement. He always had a toothpick in his pocket as well as a pack of the really cool gum with the liquid center. And he always had a piece for me. He was constantly singing a song under his breath.

He learned how to play piano by ear when he was a teenager in a rock-n-roll band. Now as an elderly man, his face lit up when his fingers touched the ivories. It didn't matter whether he was playing a nursery rhyme, a sonata, or his favorite, "The Bumblebee Boogie." Every note was a pleasure rolling off his fingers.

I tried to take piano lessons to be able to play with grandpa, but I did not have the natural ear or the patience to become the master he was. So instead, I began singing at his side. We would share the long, black piano bench, and he would play while I wailed.

Every family gathering, holiday, or get together was an occasion to play and sing. I would drag him away from the Thanksgiving football game (usually the Dallas cowboys) to the upright in the corner. We loved singing oldies like Frank Sinatra or show tunes. But after years of searching we found our favorite: Somewhere Over the Rainbow. He would begin with the delicate chords and improvise beautiful beginnings to the song that even Judy Garland never imagined. When he was finished with his flourishes, he would glance at me from behind his thick glasses, as if to signal me that it was okay to start singing.

He always closed his eyes when I sang. It almost felt like he was letting every word and note penetrate his soul. He would sway back and forth and shake his head at our favorite line: "Someday I'll wish upon a star and wake up where the clouds are far behind me..."

But as I grew older, our piano sessions just seemed to keep me from something else. There was a friend to call or a video game to play. So, our mini-concerts became fewer. Unfortunately, so did grandpa's ability to play.

He had diabetes, and though he managed to control it with diet and exercise for most of his life, when I was in high school he started taking a turn for the worst. His kidneys were failing him, and he had to start dialysis treatments. The treatments took most of Papa's strength. When he did come over to visit, it took everything he had to shuffle to the piano and play a song.

But playing still brought him joy, and he did it every time he could. Oftentimes, he would start the song, play his grand intro, give me his signaling glance, then just stop playing and listen to me sing. But even those times were coming to an end.

When I was a freshman in college, he got very sick. Between his crazy sugar count, his kidney problems, and the struggle with his treatments, he also suffered from Parkinson's disease and a lung disease called COPD. He tried to fight all of it with medications and treatments, but before long the illnesses took over. He was hospitalized with several problems and continued getting worse.

We knew his time with us was only getting shorter, so we tried to make him as happy as we could. I actually went to a friend's music studio in their basement and recorded a version of our song for Papa that he could play in his little CD player in his hospital room. My grandma said he liked to put it on repeat during his dialysis treatments. But the treatments were not helping.

The doctors moved grandpa to the ICU right after Thanksgiving. By the time I got home for Christmas break, he was in and out of consciousness. The doctors did not know how much time he had left. I was lucky enough to go visit him during what my family believes was one of his last times to actually be present with us.

After my mother prepped me to see his many machines, his loud wheezing breaths, his swollen face, and his droopy eyes, I was ready to go see him. I went down the long hallway to his room and looked at him through what looked like a glass cage. It felt like a scene from a movie. I went in the room, grabbed his hand, and was at a loss for words. I didn't know what to say, what to do, or what would help. Then I remembered.

"Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high..." I just started singing. I was scared but felt a peace come over me. Papa gave all his might to squeeze my hand and let me know he still knew that was our song. I sang the whole thing to him before he drifted to sleep.

Just a few days later, in the night, my family gathered to watch him take his last breath. I was not there at the time, but I knew that though Grandpa had died, he was no longer hurting. Now he was in the place where troubles melt like lemon drops, way above the chimney tops. I know that wherever he is, he is singing that song and playing the piano for whoever will sit down on the bench and join in.