

a stupid argument

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Y'know, if there was a reason for him doing what he's doing, then I could understand. If he, in his understated and roundabout way could find it in his slowly shrinking heart, this man who smoked something like forty cigarettes a day, for nigh on forty-five years like a movie character cliché and now coughs a lung just answering the phone, if he could find the words for an apology, if he knew what the word apology meant, which I doubt, then I might find a morsel of remorse for the old, bald codger.

You probably think I'm talking about my father. Well, it'd be extremely lucky, and by extremely I mean the kind of luck required to win the lottery twice in a row using the same numbers type of lucky, for him to apologise for farting while having dinner with the Queen, let alone apologise for anything he's ever done to me. Of course, an apology acknowledges you've done something wrong first. No. I'm not talking about my father. I'm talking about my grandfather. This sort of thing is passed on down the generations, I guess. I can be mule stubborn too, but at least I'm not stupid.

The apology isn't even owed to me. It's owed to my grandmother, and she's not alive anymore, so I guess I've got those two chances, Buckley's and none, of getting ol' Pop to spill his guts. And I used to love the old guy. I may find in the future that I can love him again.

I remember, and nobody, not even family members, believes me when I tell them, I remember him teaching me colours, boo, gree, ret, ringe, using balloons at a barbecue. My ex-girlfriend reckoned I would've been too young, only two years old or something, to remember something like that. The pot-smoking freak couldn't even remember what happened yesterday so I don't respect her as any authority on memories.

Mum told me it was grand final day and Pop didn't even watch a second. Every time we went to my grandparents' ramshackle rural property, populated with weed overgrown rusting cars, old cricket bats in the garage, upright piano in the back room, he was the same. When we arrived he whisked me away, showing me everything, beer or fag in one hand, me in the other, and didn't release me until the car was virtually pulling out of the driveway. My parents were happy for the rest, me being a complete brat of an only child, apparently. At Pop's, pretty soon I knew the difference between beer and coke, fetching for him more times than not the ones marked with the golden VB letters.

My grandparents were married for forty-one years, well outlasting my parents who only made it to a meagre and argument-ridden thirteen, when Grandma's heart, as the doctor matter-of-factly said, just stopped, and she fell

face forward into the rose bushes at the corner of the immaculate front yard. That was her domain, tended to rigorously and efficiently, a green thumb extending from her iron fist. 'Roses are like people' she told me, a number of times. 'Tend to them carefully and they bloom like crazy, but you can't let them do whatever they want.' At this she'd always set one eye on Pop. 'You've got to know when to prune them back.' Pop wasn't allowed to set foot in her front yard garden. An exception was always made when I was in tow, as long as he didn't touch anything. 'He's got all the rest of the property to do what he wants, which as you might have noticed, isn't much.' Pop would always come back with the same answer. 'I'm planning.'

When Grandma died, Pop started growing wild. For the first time to me, he looks old. Not just plain, old. Tired old. You'd expect that after your wife died, I guess. But there's a time when you move on, get on with life. Pop refuses, using the stubborn goat lineage, that my father and I inherited. Sustained heavy drinking can do terrible things on an already old and abused body. His face sags. His shoulders slump. His whole body hunches. He doesn't want to get on with life. What I tell him is he shouldn't be such a damn old fool, and should stop drinking and smoking himself into an old man stupor. He just pushes his lips together, forming a thin bloodless line. I know he wants to swear at me every time I say it, I just know it, but Grandma would never let him swear in the house.

I know what's going on though. He's angry at Grandma for dying. Maybe for dying before him, and leaving him alone. I don't know. Maybe just for dying, full stop. He needs to apologise to her for being angry at her. Whether he knows this himself is another matter entirely.

Two weeks ago I went and dug up all the roses that were running wild in the front yard and took them back to my place for replanting. Except for one. I told Pop that he'd better look after that rose if he knew what was good for him. Grandma didn't spend all that time looking after the front yard to let him ruin it. If he looked after that rose, I told him, I'd bring the others back. He said he didn't know anything about roses. 'Well you better start learning quick, 'cause if it dies, there'll be hell to pay.' 'Where am I gonna learn about bloody roses? On the bloody internet? Like hell...' 'There's this thing called a library, and it's just down the road. I'm sure they'll even let you in.'

The front yard was still a mess when I stopped in yesterday, and I was about to give him a serve when I saw the book. On the sideboard sat a copy of *How to grow roses for dummies*. I didn't say anything.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ross Murray.