

Family Photos

By Alexander Saxton

A door opens.

EDWARD: Hey, come on in. Let me just move some of this stuff off the chair. My daughter, Kiera. First year psych at the University. Parties more than her mother and I would like, but she's doing okay. What can you do. Want some coffee? No? Well, just grab a seat then.

E: So I guess you want to hear that story, then huh?

E: No, I said I'd tell it, and I'll tell it. I'm just not going to enjoy it. Uhhn. Okay. Well, I guess I'll start by saying, I never really knew much about my dad's side of the family, until he died. My mom's, lots. Too much, if I'm honest. They're catholic, so there's about a hundred of em, and they all live in BC, about an hour's drive away from each other. Spent most of my summers out there as a kid, and got enough of drama and politics to last me a lifetime. But my dad's side . . . Well, I've got one aunt and a cousin, but my dad and my aunt never really talked. See, my grandfather was a drunk, and he died young, and everyone in the family blamed everyone else in the family, probably - I'm speculating here- because they all actually blamed themselves. Well, you probably know the kind of guy that my dad was like. Not exactly the type to talk about his past or his feelings, or anything like that, and so beyond the stuff I just said, which I mostly gathered from things my mom told me, I didn't really know much about him until he died. I don't think I really got to know him until I went through his stuff, after the fact.

Yeah, people tell me that's often the way of things. Anyway. After he dies, Mom gets in touch with me and says she's going to go stay at his house for a couple days and sort through some stuff. And since we haven't seen much of each other since Jessica and I moved out the city, she asks if we all want to come stay as well, maybe make it sort of a family thing. So I say sure.

(snorts) Haha, no, they hadn't lived together for *years*. She was still in his will and everything, and in their own way, I think they still loved each other a lot, but she'd have had to be a lunatic to stay with him, and he'd've had to be a lunatic to let anyone else stay with him.

You can ask the question- I said I'd tell you the story, and I'll tell you the story.

No. No, he never hit us. I think he was always afraid, though, that that was a person he could become.

If you talked to anybody he knew, you'd hear that he had a temper. But it went further than that. My Dad, he had *real* anger issues. Scary ones. Don't think I ever met anybody that angry in my whole entire life, and that includes a couple of my ex-girlfriends. Growing up, we'd always have these, polka dots on the walls, where he'd put his fist through them, and then patched them up later. He never laid a hand on either of us, though. At least, he never laid a hand on me, and I

think he never laid a hand on my mother. I never saw or heard anything about it, and she's always said he never did, anyway. But I guess you can never really tell, in a situation like that.

But there was always the . . . possibility. It was like, he never hit us, and he never threatened to hit us, but it was like all three of us were living every day with the fear that he might completely lose control and send one of us to the hospital. It must have been, terrifying, for him. Christ knows that it was for us.

Oh, I didn't become *consciously* aware of any of this a couple of years ago. Jess made me start seeing a shrink, and it made a huge difference in my life. Lot of guys wouldn't talk about that, but fuck it, that's how it is. *Unconsciously*, though? I think I always knew. . . . When I was really young, like in kindergarten, it was still cool to spank your kids, you know? I mean, some parents still do it now, but it's controversial or whatever. But when I was growing up, it was just what you did, right? Some people were starting to say, hey, you can really fuck up your kid that way, but as you can probably guess, my dad wasn't one of them. Hundred percent, that was a guy who believed in corporal punishment. One time he told me criminals should be caned, like in Singapore or whatever. But in spite of that, he *never* spanked me, not even once. It was like he knew that if he just crossed that line once, just one time, then that was it, and there would be no going back, and we'd all become one of those horror stories you see about on the news.

(laughs)

So after I got a job and moved out at seventeen, it wasn't much time before Mom called it quits too, and got her own place. I think he was relieved by that.

So I guess it wasn't really a happy homecoming to go back there, even with the old bastard dead.

It was the family home, though. My grandparents' place, originally. And its own way, it was sort of like a vacation for Jess and Kiera and I. Coming to the big city for a couple of days is nice when you live out in the burbs.

So we take an afternoon to get settled in. Jess and I take the master bedroom. Kiera's about 7 at this time, and she goes on the pullout couch in the office, which had been my bedroom growing up, and my dad's when he grew up. We order in chinese, and we try and watch a movie on TV, but the TV's about a hundred fuckin years old, and there's no cable or anything, so it's basically just CBC or the news in spanish.

Mom's not staying with us, by the way. She only lives about twenty minutes away by transit, so she's still just staying at her place.

Anyway, Jess says she's going to take Kiera to the museum the next day, so Mom and I can start looking through the old man's stuff on our own. She thinks she's being clever, but I get it. It's small doses of Mom for Jessica, sometimes.

We don't sleep that well that night, though. Kiera has a nightmare around 1 and it takes an hour before we can get her back to bed. As a result, I'm pretty crabby when Mom starts leaning on the doorbell at 8AM the next day.

But that's life with kids. I make bacon and put on some coffee while Mom gets started in with the boxes, Jess sneaks Kiera out the backdoor before Mom can ask the two of them to help 'for just a couple minutes', and then it's just Mom and I getting to work, and it's actually a lot of fun, in its own way. You know, we're just down in the basement, putting things in new boxes, unpacking old boxes and sorting things into piles of 'keep' and 'throw away' and whatever, taking stuff out to the curb, and I sort of realize that, hey, it's been a couple of years since I've had some one-on-one time with just my mom. So it's nice. And at some point during the day, we start talking about dad, and about his life, and about who he was to her, and what he was like when he was young, and stuff like that, and I start to realize how little I knew the guy.

Like for me, he was just this, tyrant, when I was growing up, and this crusty old bastard when I was an adult. But, talking to my Mom, I start to see this whole other side of him, and how, when she was young, and had just moved to the city from tumbleweed-fuck British Columbia, he was this, dashing, mysterious figure to her. She showed me some old pictures of him, from when they first started going out, and they were, shit, 21 or something like that. Stupid kids. Anyway, she shows me this picture of him at that age, and he looks like young Brando. Like, Jeeesus, why wasn't I ever that handsome? And then somewhere along the way, we also start talking about his anger, and about why he was such a mean son of a bitch all the time. And that's when she starts to tell me a bit more about his dad's drinking.

He wasn't a mean drunk. Nothing like my dad, for sure. If he had been like my dad, and he drank, I don't think my dad would have made it past the age of eight. He'd have killed him.

Granddad, apparently, was more of a sad, pathetic kind of drunk. He'd just disappear for days at a time. Never had a job, drank away all of his and my grandmother's money. Probably cheated, though I never thought to ask my grandmother. She's not the sort who would give you a straight answer, anyway. She's all about keeping up appearances: If you ask her, granddad just liked a little nip now and again.

Well, a little nip now and again doesn't drop you dead of cirrhosis of the liver at 55.

But because of all this, Dad had to be the man of the house from the time he was ten, and had to have a job from the age of fifteen. Never finished highschool, that's something I never knew about him. Probably a big relief for the teachers. But that amount of responsibility, that young, is a lot of strain, and that strain's got to find an outlet. But Dad had to be better than his dad, you see? That was part of being the man his mom expected him to be. And so, instead of drinking or screwing around, he just took all that strain, and he bunched it up inside him, and he carried it like a lit stick of dynamite in his chest for the whole rest of his life.

Can you guess what killed him?

(laughs) Bingo. Huge coronary. Doctors say they never saw anything like it. Anyway, so I start thinking about all this stuff, about how so much of my shit comes from my dad, and so much of his shit came from his dad, and it makes me wonder, okay, so where did *his* shit come from?

And I put this question to my mom, almost exactly like that.

And that's when the conversation stopped cold.

Well, I don't know if this is really how it happened, or if it's just me making things up after the fact, revising memories in light of everything that happened later. But the way I remember it now, this, shadow passed over her face, like the sun going behind a cloud, and her shoulders drooped a little bit, and she just said, 'I don't know, honey', and then she said that she was tired, and we should break for lunch.

I didn't think too much about it. You know, fair enough, it's been a long morning, and she's getting older. Why wouldn't she be tired?

Maybe it struck me as a little odd, but again, I'm not sure if that's just me making things up after the fact. Anyway, so as we're going up the stairs to get lunch, I notice that she's picked up this big, heavy cardboard box. And I ask what she's doing with it.

MOM: Oh, it's just a box of stuff we've already looked through that I'm taking out to the curb.

E: Are you sure? I don't think I recognize the box.

M: Yes, I'm sure, it's just a bunch of your dad's old technical manuals.

Only, I remember the box with the manuals, and this wasn't it. And then, as I take a closer look at the box, I see that it's old, really old. Coming apart at the corners, held together by masking tape that's dried to the point of crumbling, and covered in this crusty layer of grey dust on top.

Now I start to think that maybe something's up. Because if we had looked through this box, the dust on top would have been disturbed, and also, my mom is 100% not the sort of person who would lose track of which boxes we had and had not looked through. She is *methodical* when it comes to this stuff. Which is maybe one of the reasons Jess can only deal with her in small doses. So I say to her,

E: You know what, you shouldn't be carrying something this heavy up the stairs.

M: Honestly, Eric, it's fine.

E: No, really, let me.

Well, she sort of halfheartedly thanks me as I take the box. I leave it in the hallway at the top of the stairs, right by the office, and I think this is the end of it.

After that, we have lunch, and we do a few more hours of work in the afternoon. I try and bring the conversation back to my grandfather and my great grandfather a couple of times, but every time I do, she just doubles down on talking about the politics at the church. So eventually, I drop it. Jess and Kiera get home at about 3, and I go and half pay attention to some world war two documentary on TV, while Mom hangs out with them, and after dinner mom heads home.

Now, at this point, Jess is just in the early stages of being pregnant with Harris, so later in the evening she gets this craving for pickles, and I walk around to the corner store to get them. But when I walk back up the street, I notice something in the driveway.

The box! It's tucked in with all the other ones that got put out. And I know Jess didn't put it out- 'cause she gets ooky around old dust, so I know it was Mom. And at this point, I don't even care what's inside the box, I'm just irritated about being treated like I'm stupid. So I pick up the box, and I bring it right back inside, and I put it right back down outside the office, where it was before.

I know it sounds petty, but you've got to hold firm on the little things sometimes.

Well, it's another rough night. Dad's mattress is well past its shelf life, and Kiera has nightmares again, and this time they're so bad that she insists on sleeping with us the rest of the night. So once again, I'm not in the best place when Mom starts rapping on the windows at 8AM. Jessica's pissed, too, because this is supposed to be a vacation for us, so we should be able to sleep in a bit, but Kiera's already up and bouncing anyway, so if we hadn't been woken up by the one generation, it would have been the other. I make breakfast and coffee again, Mom asks if Jess and Kiera are going to stay and help today, but Jess says they *have* to go to the aquarium, and manages to smuggle Kiera out the door before the poor kid can protest that she doesn't like fish.

At this point, with the rough sleep and the hectic morning, I've completely forgotten about the box.

Just before we go downstairs, mom heads to the washroom. When she gets out, I'm waiting by the top of the stairs, and I see her just stop dead, like she's been slapped in the face.

E: What's wrong?'

M: Why on *earth* did you put this picture up.

I've disappointed Mom plenty of times in my life, but I've never had her look at me with the kind of *disgust* she's looking at me with at this moment.

E: What are you talking about?

I come over to see what she's looking at. On the wall outside the bathroom door, there are some old family pictures. Aunts and great aunts and uncles and shit. Some of them fairly new, most of them pretty old, don't know three quarters of the people in them, that sort of thing. And she's pointing at one of them, and I can see that she's worked up: eyes wide, nostrils flared, and everything. I don't think I'd seen her that angry since I was a kid. And she's just pointing at this old beige picture of this guy, what do you call that, when the picture's all-

Yeah, sepia, this old sepia photograph of a guy in a dark jacket. Sort of a military-looking coat.

E: sorry, what's the issue here?'

M: *Why did you put this picture back up?*

E: What are you talking about? I didn't put any picture up, that's been there for years.

M: That picture was *not* there yesterday

E: Well, nobody put any picture up, so unless some burglar broke into the house and started spangling the place with family heirlooms, then the picture was already there.

And when I touch the picture and swing it slightly out of place on the hook, sure enough, there's a patch of darker paint on the wall, like the picture's been protecting it from the sun for a couple decades.

I start to think maybe Dad's death is hitting Mom harder than she's willing to admit.

E: Who's that a picture of, anyway?

M: Sorry, you were right, let's just get back to work.

The whole thing seems to have her pretty rattled, so I drop it. But for the next little while, everything's fine. The first fifteen or twenty minutes are kind of awkward, and we're working in silence, but then we get into the groove of things again, and we start to chat and shoot the shit, and she starts telling me about how she ran into one of my ex-girlfriends who was a real, well, and how this person doesn't seem like she's doing so great, and everything's comfortable between Mom and me again.

Over the next couple hours, the pace of work starts to slow. You know how it is, you open a box to see if it's junk, and then something catches your eye, and next thing you know, you've been reading report cards from the 1950s for forty five minutes.

Well, late morning, I'm stuck in one of these loops, and I'm reading my granddad's old immigration papers. Born in England, came over as a kid during the War.

But something in the papers sort of strikes me as odd, and it takes me a minute to figure out what it is. Once it hits me, though, it stands out as really odd.

E: Hey, didn't granddad come over during the War?

M: Yes, during the blitz.

I look at the document again and sort of blink, making sure I haven't misread it.

E: But these immigration papers say he came over in 1945.

M: So?

E: Well, the blitz had been over for a pretty long time by 1945.

M: How do *you* know so much?

And of course, I knew, because of the world war two documentary that had been on my dad's shitty basic tv package. It had been about the blitz. And when I tell her this, she says it does seem a little strange, and she shuts right up.

After how weird she's been acting, I don't want to push it. Clearly something's going on with her, and she's done talking about family history. So for the rest of the morning, we just talk about, I don't know, some celebrity scandal or something, then we go upstairs and have some leftovers for lunch. I offer to do the dishes, and when I'm done, I wander into the living room and find her staring at a picture hanging in the corner

It's an old black and white family portrait. Mother, father, older daughter, younger son. And because I'm an idiot, I open my mouth.

E: Was *that* one there yesterday?

And then she looks at me, and for a moment, I just see this, deep, dark terror in her eyes, and I get really afraid, because I start to think that maybe she's really losing it. But then she rolls her eyes and slaps me on the arm.

M: Real funny. I'm going to the bathroom.

And she brushes past me and goes upstairs to use the toilet.

All the way upstairs, even with her bad joints, even though the one with the other picture hanging in front of it is just down the hall.

Well, I take this new off the wall, and of course, there's a patch of darker paint behind it, like it's been there for years. And I look more closely at the picture, and I notice that the father is the same man in the picture outside the bathroom, but a couple of years older, and with a bit of a beard.

He has the same cheekbones, and the same square jaw. Handsome man, and even though the picture's black and white, you can see how clear and pale his eyes are.

I flip the photograph over in my hands, and there are names written on the back. William, Elizabeth, Mary, Clifford.

Real WASPy names. But the important thing is, I recognize 'Clifford'. It was my grandfather's name.

It's a portrait of his family. Him, my great aunt, my great grandmother, and William, the man with the pale eyes. My great grandfather.

I hear the toilet flush upstairs, and I hang the picture back on the wall. Mom and I head back to the basement and get back to work.

We're still talking about the celebrity scandal. It's a juicy one. And at some point the leftovers are getting to me- not to go into too much detail, but we'd been eating Indian food.

And after I finish up in the bathroom, I'm about to head back downstairs when I notice that box again, sitting in the hall outside of the office. So instead of heading back downstairs, I sit myself down beside it, and I open it up.

It's mostly just old papers. Disordered pages of letters written in a cursive that I can't really make out. So I shift them aside, and pull out this sort of leather bound scrapbook. And the first page is this folded up piece of paper that says GEORGE V in big letters at the top.

As in George the fifth. It's a commission, granting the rank of Midshipman in His Majesty's Navy to one William Onslow, Gentleman.

He would have been crazily young at the time. Back then you could be a midshipman on an active warship at 12 or 13. They didn't raise the minimum age to 16 until like 1950.

I'd never known he was in the navy. Never knew anything about him. Now I was starting to think maybe this was something that had been kept from me as some sort of pacifist thing, you know? My mom's a bit of a hippy, she's part of that generation, and I'm getting pretty mad at her thinking about it. But then I start flipping through this book, and I forget about it, because I get sucked into the pages. There are just all of these pictures in there, sepia photos from 19-0-something. Pictures of life on board ship, pictures of various ports of call, cool pictures.

There's this one picture though, that stood out. It was, I don't know, it must have been in southeast asia or something. There's palm trees in the background, and they're standing on a beach. There's this kid in the picture, and I think it must be my great grandfather, because he has these pale eyes, and because, in this weird way, he looks sort of like how I looked at that age. And there's a man with him, standing really close behind him, with both hands on his shoulders. And around them, it takes a minute to figure out what they are, because it's a black and white picture, so they just look sort of, I don't know, not how you imagine, but around them,

four or five of them either side, are these five-foot wooden stakes, and each one of them, has a human head spitted onto it.

Yeah. To this day, I have no idea.

There's some writing on the back, too smudged to make out. This is the picture that I'm holding in my hand when my mother comes up the stairs.

And when she sees me holding the picture, there's just this moment, where it looks like she's going to break into little pieces. But I guess she's a strong woman- you'd have to be, to live with my dad for as long as she did. And so she just steps up to me, and calm as anything she takes the picture out of my hands, and she puts it back in the book, and she puts the book back in the box, and she closes the box.

M: Edward, I want you to take this box out to the curb.

And I do . . .

But when I get to the curb, I put down the box, and I stare at it for a moment, and then open it up again. I take the picture, tuck it into my pocket, and then close the box and walk away.

Why? I don't know, lot's of reasons. Morbid curiosity, a desire to preserve some family history. He was my great grandfather. He was part of me. I don't know.

Well after that, I go back to the house, and Mom's sitting at the kitchen table. She's put on a pot of tea. She asks me to sit down.

E: Mom, it's time that you told me the truth.

M: You're right. Have a cup of tea, and we'll talk.

When it's ready, she gives me the cup- lots of milk and sugar- and then hands me an old, yellowed envelope.

E: What is this?

M: It's for you to read,

I open it. It contains a stained and crumbling letter, written in neat cursive, and dated November, 1944. It starts with 'Dear Colleen.'

E: Who's Colleen?

M: She's a distant relative of ours. She was. She and her family put up your grandfather when he came over.

E: What does this have to do with it?

She looks at me, and it's the look I remember her giving me when I scraped my knees as a child, or when I got my heartbroken as a teenager.

M: Just read the letter, Edward. If you want to.
I look down at the page.

"Dear Colleen,
I hope this letter finds you well. Have just received word that William has been discharged and will be returning to us after all. And so, I have to ask something of you that is beyond all reasonable expectations. Will you take Clifford in? He is now the same age as his sister was. I cannot go through it again, Colleen. Please, I cannot go through it again.
In desperation,
Elizabeth."

Long silence.

'In desperation'.

Well, after that, I stood up, and without saying anything, I went into the living room, and I took down the picture that was hanging there, leaving that dark rectangle in the paint. Then I went to the bathroom, and I got that picture as well. I brought them both out to the curb, and I smashed them and threw them in with the rest of the garbage.

Pause

I didn't throw the photograph out with them, though.

I went back to the house, and I found one of the boxes piled up outside the office, and I slid the picture into one of the photo albums inside of it.

And then, my mother and I went back into the basement and worked some more. Both just trying to forget everything by burying it in hard work. When Jess and Kiera came back in the evening, we ate leftovers, and Mom went home. Jess, and this is one of the reasons why I love her, immediately knew that something was up, so after we put Kiera to bed I told her everything, and then we poured ourselves a drink.

And that night...

A few seconds of Edward breathing hard.

No. I said I'd tell you the story.

No, I don't need to take a break.

A few more breaths.

Alright.

Alright. That night, I had strange dreams. I still remember parts of them. I dreamed I was in the living room, and I was looking at the family portrait, but I knew something was wrong, because part of me knew that I had smashed the picture and thrown it out, but now I was looking at it. It had become slightly different, though, because in this picture, Elizabeth was now sitting off to the side with her hands over her mouth, and William was standing behind Clifford and Mary, and he had both of his hands pressing down on Mary's shoulders, and somehow, he also had both of his hands pressing down on Clifford's shoulders, and he was, smiling. And then I noticed that the background of the picture wasn't some drawing room in England, it was that beach in southeast asia, and there were a pair of hands pushing down on William's shoulders as well. The sailor who had stood behind him in the photo, and there were a pair of hands pushing down on the sailor's shoulders as well, and all around them, hundreds and hundreds of stakes, all of them decorated with a spitted, gushing head.

Deep breath.

And that was when I woke to hear my daughter screaming.

I got to my feet. It was like still being in a dream: you want to run and go, but everything seems hazy and insubstantial, and you're dizzy, and your whole body feels weak. I tripped over something in the hall: the box with the photo album, and as it tipped over, the photo of the beach slipped out and slid across the floor, gleaming in the darkness. Kiera was screaming at an even higher pitch, and when I burst into the room, I could see something crouched over her in the darkness, and I shouted at it, but it came out weak and half-strangled with fear, and the something in the darkness looked up at me and all I could see was a pair of pale blue eyes, and then Jessica turned on the light and there was nothing in the room but the two of us and our crying daughter.

Jess doesn't . . . One time, some old university friends of hers came over and each of them drank a bottle of wine to themselves. She told me she'd seen something after *that*, but she denies it now.

Well, I picked up my daughter, and I grabbed my wife by the hand, and I took them down to the car. We had some cough medicine in the glove compartment, and I gave Kiera more than I probably should have as a responsible parent, and then I drove us an hour and ten minutes back to our house.

That night, neither Jess nor I said anything. That night, she believed it.

Silence.

Kiera? I don't think so. . . I don't think so. I hope she doesn't.

No. I never talked to her about it.

Because I want it to end. I want it to end with her. I want to be the last one to know his fucking name.

Silence

The next morning, I called my Mom and drove back to the city to meet at her place. I'd told her not to go to the house until I got there. All she said to me when I got there was,

M: You saw him, didn't you?

E: Yeah. Yes I did.

Deep breath.

Yes we did go back.

And. . . when we got there. . . the front door was open. I had slammed it behind me the night before. When we went inside . . .

Deep breaths

The . . . pictures were hanging just where they'd been, in the living room, and outside the bathroom. The glass on both of their frames was intact.

Pause.

The pullout couch in the office was immaculate. We had left it in a tangle of sheets. Somebody had made the bed with . . . with military precision.

deep breaths.

The box of his things was sitting in the middle of the bed, and the picture, with the heads, was sitting on top of it.

Long silence.

We took the box, and the photograph, and the pictures, back out into the driveway, and then we doused them with lighter fluid, and lit them on fire. Then we sold the house for half its worth to a development company, who tore it down and built a giant, ugly fucking mcmansion.

Is that it? I hope so. But sometimes, I, I look at Kiera, and I think about the kind of father I've been, and I, I don't know. I hope that's it. I hope that's it.