

Big C (2995 words)

My first ever (read : first *legal*) alcoholic beverage soon makes way for a second. And a third. Mum's taken a cleaver to the apron-strings for once, though her sceptical frown greets my 'revelation' that beer's surprisingly bitter.

I didn't screw up my face at that first sip. Rookie error.

Mum's glances in my direction seem fewer as the crowd in our lounge-room steadily grows, though she does want to wheel out cake, coffee and broom shortly. She's finally abandoned her perverse game of musical coasters, where no cup may directly touch woodgrain. Her sole holdout is the ornate dining table that Dad created, the year they were married.

"First anniversary's paper," she told me. "Little details never bothered your dad. He flashed that smile of yours. Says *timber's unprocessed paper. Same thing, essentially.*"

My mates and I have become pirates – kissing our land-legs bon voyage, started slurring our speech, and someone's decided we explore rum and search for booty.

Jimmy Nagle raps skull-motif thumb-ring against wine glass, raising both it and his voice a little too high. He's concentrating too hard, like the losing poker player with a hand of bananas – green ones. Trying to bluff the game of sobriety, and no-one's convinced.

I didn't invite him. Mum vetoed. Nagle's boutique vineyard is barely a kilometre away... or, three doors down. Our town's real small.

How small?

Within an hour's drive, there are two schools : one primary, one secondary. On a good day, the combined student population *just* cracks a hundred. Teachers can call out one of six or seven surnames, and match half the students. My surname was unique across both schools.

It takes a community, et cetera. But, to me, one man's *concerned neighbour* is another's *nosy parker*.

"To my mate!" I've tuned Jimmy out... I'm remembering Dad.

It begins with a gnawing ache, deep in your guts. Your starving stomach knots in on itself, cannibalistic. To the point where any stray scrap of affection fills the minuscule hollow you've left yourself for survival. Overstuffing it to the point of physical illness.

Just like Christmas afternoon.

Dad never went in for any 'Santa Claus' rubbish. Like many households, he remained clueless as to the contents of my gifts with his name in the 'from' section of the card. (His beautifully store-wrapped presents to Mum, year after year, were a different story.)

Toys and sporting equipment would tide me over until the Melbourne Boxing Day Test started. Dad would demonstrate : Swinging a new cricket ball, bowling the perfect googly with an old one. Boomerang throwing and football kicking.

I'd burst back inside, sweaty. Full of stories of winning the match, single-handed, for Australia, but an invisible force-field surrounds Mum, and I pull up, frozen. Eerie weak colour splashes spill through from the other room, as Christmas Tree lights periodically flash.

Time stops.

Christmas Eve's newspaper lies open to the blank crossword, pen alongside. Mum's eyes are unfocused and her tea's cold. I have to hug her, I want to hug her, and so I do, unsure of who needs it most.

Television preys on desperation and fear. The all-consuming hope for a Christmas miracle somehow takes tenuous root in arid soil. Every broken home gets a roll of red and green sticky-tape to mend it, half-way through December.

Conclusion : never hope. Mum does; she's forever disappointed at the wrong male – me – constantly walking through her front door.

Capitalism dictates : you romanticise what you don't have; tire of what you do. It's embarrassing; unfair on the people you're closest to. Rather than contrition and changed behaviour, anger breaks the surface, easiest to latch onto when clutching at anything.

I'm an onion. Each layer of skin, more raw than the one before. Cutting increasingly closer to the bone, shrinking smaller, weaker, inside. When I'm alone, the tears sting sulphur, rolling down rough stubble.

"Watch me, son. Keep skin taut for a closer shave." He'd pull humorous faces as the razor mapped his jawline.

"We've discussed carpentry. Wood and hair grow a particular way. Work with nature, not against it. You'll get better results shaving with the grain." He'd dollop foam on his head and finish off, a shining pink boiled egg.

Jimmy holds the floor and my subconscious shaving grimaces haven't gone unnoticed. Alcohol slows my reaction times, though I manage a half-smile in his direction.

The toast goes up *to Andrew*.

Jimmy's jaw's kept itself busy for minutes, but I've missed every word. I scull my drink in one continuous gulp, accepting the cheer.

Uncle Ned bolts upright, like he's been kicked. Slapping a careless hand on Dad's table.

"You probably know him as Charlie, Big C, Chuckles, or Dad. Do you know his full name?" A question of pure rhetoric in this company.

Uncle Ned swigs Dutch courage and I hear my Dad's advice.

"Life is short. Find like-minded people and do what you need to do. Not what you have or want to do... but what you deeply yearn for. Do it often, do it well."

"Stupid question. S'pose everyone does, round here. Whenever we were in strife, Mum'd chase him around the house with a wooden spoon. Yelling 'Charles Winston Brooker' like a mantra. Well, the opposite of a mantra, I s'pose. Every time she'd bellow it, she'd get more and more ticked off. Ha ha."

Off to one side, gran's laughing her false teeth out. Pops them back in before anyone else notices.

Ned downs another long sip. Pauses, holding me fast with the old hairy eyeball. It's uncanny. You'd never pick them as brothers. Well, not until he does that.

The familiar knot in my gut tightens; I have to piss again. Obviously I'm stuck until we plough through the rest of the speeches. That'll teach me for breaking the seal early. Rookie error.

"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." Uncle Ned's uncharacteristically complimentary.

Thanks a heap, Uncle Ned. He's still yapping, but I need fresh air. My eyes, not my bladder, leak first. I make a break for it.

Dad's face appears in the mirror. I inherited that easy, smirky grin of his. But also the half-frown, half-squint where something's clearly not right inside.

Tomorrow's hangover is booking reservations for an extended stay; another drink will only postpone the check-out time. But it's an inevitable I just can't face right now.

My head swims and splashing fresh cold water on my face only triggers more memories. Mum and Dad grew up on the coast – he joked about 'buying the farm' early.

His life-changing epiphany arrived in his twenties. Mum kept the letter. They'd chucked corporate gigs and townhouse in inner-city suburbia for outback Australia. Somewhere quiet. Rural. We'd visit Sydney every so often, but it wasn't home to me.

"Kick, kick, here we go. One arm straight out, and keep on kicking."

We're both body-surfing at North Palm Beach, where they filmed *Home and Away*. The break under the lighthouse is perfect for body surfing if you can avoid the rocks. I'd bounce on Dad's arm, studying the same wave for a long time before I ever tried going solo. Even then, with people all around, Mum'd fret on the shore.

I'd stay in until my eyes stung red raw.

"Never turn your back on the ocean, Andy. Respect it – nature is bigger and stronger than you. There's more planes in the sea than submarines in the sky. Ha ha."

I bring my stinging red eyeballs back from the bathroom to see that my best friend and Jimmy's cousin, Lee, is waiting for me. She mentions the time we 'borrowed' Dad's rusty old paddock-basher. Though wind whistled through the missing driver's side window, lapping up and down the town's one main street, I heard only my Dad.

"Give it some herbs... Hands, ten and two. Don't cross them when you turn – feed the wheel through, like a rope. Down through the gears. Wash speed off for the corner, but you need to be in a low enough gear to get power down to the wheels, otherwise the engine will labour and might stall. It's a manual, after all. Not a bloody dodgem car."

Mum was ropeable. She never had any proof herself. But anyone out and about (in the community, all charged with raising each child) would've seen the old unregistered car with me behind the wheel and Lee egging me on. Neither of us would've lied about borrowing it. It was just one of those – do you ask permission, or beg for forgiveness? Spur of the moment, moments.

I copped it worse as I was the male, the driver and I took the car. I willingly lined up for Lee's punishment too.

The party crowd lap the story up, but I remember the dimple on my arse from where Mum paddled it. Dad never found out about it, of course, but he'd take her side over mine anyway. So why even show me how to drive then? Huh?

Lee Nagle wraps up, gives me a big bear hug, and goes to check on her drunk cousin, passed out somewhere.

A girl from school, Simone, comes over and kisses me on the cheek. Nothing other than friendship, but she keeps mainly to herself. Tonight, she's given Mum a hand in the kitchen.

"You're different," Simone told me, not long after we'd met.

She never elaborated, whether it was *good* different or *bad* different. I just remember what Dad used to tell me after dinner when I'd have questions about girls.

He'd clear his throat and come up with stupid analogies and catch-phrases. *Advice is like brushing your teeth. Everyone learns off their parents, discusses it at school. It's a desperate situation that'll make you reach for someone else's toothbrush itself though.*

Then he'd revert to type : *"ask your mother"*.

Finally, knowing I wasn't going anywhere, he'd bury his head in both hands. Massaging his eyeballs with his palms, before smoothing both hands up and over his bald head.

"The talk. Right. I'm the Dad; it's up to me. As it should be. Here we go. No more jokes, or delaying. I won't deviate, or waffle around. Waffles. There's an idea. You want some waffles? I could do with a couple myself. Golden syrup, ice cream, maybe a wafer, banana, some crushed peanuts... Fine, the talk. Here we go. But I'm not going through the mechanics of it, ok?" He'd point a finger at me, in that mock-stern way, intelligence flashing behind his eyes.

"Here we go. You're what? Thir-four-fifteen now? You've got mates. You talk, share magazines, lingerie catalogues, am I right? You don't need me giving you all the ins and outs of sex."

Evasive. Cheeky. Dad jokes. Always.

"Here's what I do know. First and foremost. Intimate photos you may have of a certain someone? Completely off limits to anyone else, all right? No arguments. You're not given a picture, you have to take it, right? Therefore it's not yours to distribute. If she wants to share it, well, that's up to her, and her alone. You can't coerce her. Don't try."

"I can't stress that enough. If you break up, well, it happens; it feels like the world's ending. But no matter how you leave things, you need to ensure she gets any photos back she wouldn't want you having copies of any more. OK? Next thing : the most attractive part of a woman is the bit between the ears. Sure, they wear make-up and have better dress sense than you do, but make-up, clothes and lights are all off at night. She's not some trophy you've earned; you'll need to have her choose you afresh every single day."

He's hit a patch of paydirt. *"Know when to say 'no', and when to say 'yes'. It's about integrity. Keep your word, follow through on your promises, but don't be so bloody-minded or structured that you can't be persuaded by a better-reasoned argument. Or a nice day, either. If the sun's out, dropping everything for a picnic lunch is always memorable. Give your lady stable, predictable unpredictability. And strength to admire, but not just muscles. Any idiot can grow those – plenty of clowns, that's all they do. You want someone to laugh at you and with you. To cry with you, and for you. But never because of you. Right?"*

I've considered introducing Simone to Dad's wisdom. Maybe when it's just me and not the rum talking, I might gauge her interest.

Mum's turn now. Five-ish years old, and I'd cycle between six or seven classic favourite stories. I'd choose one, and Mum would collect it. She and Dad took turns reading to me, like a ritual. I can still recite the first half of most of them from memory. Second halves are hazy; engrossed or not, I rarely lasted until the final page.

Mum shares fond memories of kissing me goodnight and tucking me in a little tighter as Dad finished the story off. He never tired of reading, making silly animal sounds or singing songs.

I'm running the tightrope between happy and melancholy, with just enough wits about me to know another shot could tip the balance. Mum's in the same boat, even though she's stone-cold sober. I'm thankful she doesn't offer up another toast.

I have the right of reply – the duty, really, though my mind's jumbled. Tongue's an alcohol-soaked sponge, swollen and heavy. Even rum doesn't mask the residual aftertaste of my wounds, from the constant licking. Rusty blood leaves a bitter tang.

I thank everyone for turning up, of course. For the help and advice they've offered me and Mum all these years. It's not gone unnoticed or unappreciated. I love every person in this room. But not every person I love is here tonight.

There's more to say, but I can't articulate it. I've drunk half my vocabulary away.

Sensing what's going on, Mum cranks the kettle, dims the lights and heads my way. Simone carries the biggest chocolate cake I've ever seen. Eighteen flames dance on it, but I feel warmth from the one my parents lit inside me.

Mum left the sex talk to Dad, but we talked over stuff, obviously. I know why Dad chose her – her insight co-mingles with his and is just as valuable.

“If you want to gamble on anything, go all-in on love. If you fail and you've only gone in half-hearted, it's two people's whole hearts that break, no matter what. It's pointless, unfair and frankly, not love, to hold back.”

Mum's lost the capital-L Love of her Life, but will never let the little-l go. Tonight, more than ever, I'm being reminded that it's these little things that matter the most.

* * *

Dad's looking like everyone's dad at their son's eighteenth birthday party : an idiot.

But one, utterly unembarrassable. Suit jacket, starched-stiff white shirt, black bowtie, like he's hosting an awards ceremony. Then there's board-shorts on lanky, Sunday-morning cyclist-shaved legs, and an ancient pair of rubber double-plug thongs. Mischievous eyes twinkle *thirty*, but hollowed cheeks suggest otherwise.

He addresses the crowd like a man born to it, joking about me as a baby, keeping us in stitches, and pausing just long enough for laughs and applause.

One time, I messed three nappies before I stopped toying with him. There's sad wistfulness there, for missed opportunities with Mum and I, but he leads the group in a rousing chorus of 'Happy Birthday'.

Abruptly, he holds up a hand, to catch his breath. His cavalier speech has turned serious, and it's not just pride that makes completing his thoughts difficult. Concerned, Mum asks him if he's OK and whether he needs a break.

Finally, I realise what I'm seeing, like never before.

Mum's beside me, but hasn't moved her lips. She's always been there. Dad cheekily flicking shaving cream at her in the bathroom. Squealing with unbridled excitement when he dropped the clutch and floored it in their paddock-basher, dirt spraying out everywhere.

Cricket nets, sporting fields, talking science, woodwork, nursery rhymes, everything. Dad's chemo's kept him awake, spewing his guts up all night. She's rubbing his back, whilst baby Andrew sleeps in his crib. Mum's always been there, holding the waterproof camera, bad days and good. Creating memories for the future she knew we could never all share.

Mum's always been here. Right beside me. She's never blamed me – she just misses him.

I hit a mobile black-spot and the blackness infects my mood. Big Charlie had more to lose, but took everything in his stride, making the most of life with greater dignity and maturity. Mum looked after two people, utterly dependent on her.

Ancient tribes have rituals. One day, a boy conquers his fears, overcoming some external challenge, becoming a man in his peoples' eyes. My adversary is internal; I've let it defeat me, over and over. Technically, I'm now an adult by law, but I've never felt so feeble.

Mum slips an arm around my waist, head pressed against my chest. Her eyes look like she's been body-surfing. Gaunt Dad, oxygen prongs up his nose and feeding tubes piercing his slight frame, still jokes.

"I know I've done a lot of the talking; I've just had plenty to tell you over the years. I hope some of it has been useful. Congratulations, son, and thanks for looking after your mum for me. It would've been our twentieth wedding anniversary this year." Big C takes another laboured breath.

I notice the date-stamp on this final recording to me; Mum shot it fifteen years ago. *"But today's about you – you're officially a man. Happy birthday."*

His eyes glisten; a scene repeated right 'round our crowded lounge room. Tomorrow, I'll have Mum break out some of Dad's video messages to her. There'll be dozens, and today I leave childhood – and childishness – behind. I'm the man of her house. Time to take up the mantle.