**The Visits**

It was November 25, pick a year after 2001. I opened the car door to the brisk fall air of northwest Ohio. The frozen gravel of the road crunched under my feet. My steps left footprints in the dead grass and drove a few acorns, from the large oak tree next to the road, into the ground. A shuffle left, a shuffle right to avoid the people buried beneath the gravestones.

Every year my dad and I visit my grandpa’s gravesite on his birthday. I was six months old when he died, so it never meant too much to me. I could tell how much it meant to my dad though, and the way he talked about my grandpa made me wish I had known him.

My dad wiped the dust that had settled on the gravestone since the last time someone had visited. We would then empty the flower containers of water or marvel at the beautiful flowers other family members had left. I would then craw on top of the gravestone and lay there while my dad drank a beer with his dad. He always made sure to pour some beer on the dirt for my grandpa. The gravestone appears to shrink every time I visit, but memories of my grandpa don’t shrink for my family. After he finished his beer, we would each kiss the gravestone and say our goodbyes.

On the way back to the car, I would pick up a few acorns and throw them into the nearby field hoping to grow another tree to rival the growth of the existing one. Then I would take one last look back at my grandpa before reentering the warmth of the car.

The thought of my grandpa would shrink from my mind until the next visit on a Father’s Day or a birthday or a holiday. Then all the thoughts of what life would be like if he was still alive and what he meant to my family come flooding back. On warm visits, these feelings are not as somber, they are more a feeling of fleeting happiness. On cold visits, these feelings are more a feeling of sorrow and lost possibilities.

These thoughts and feeling would then cease again. As I grew older, I heard more stories of how much he meant to everyone. To my grandma, he was everything. They had been together since their teens. They had built a life and watched their two children build lives of their own.

To my dad and his sister, he was a great dad who was always willing to help. To my cousin, he was a loving grandpa who had a cool barn to play in. To me, he was just other’s memories and pictures.

As I grew even older, I learned how death affected people and how people could love one another. I knew how hard it must have been for them to lose my grandpa, but by the time I realized it they had mostly moved on. Still when a group of my family members get talking about him, I can tell the deeper feelings and tears building like water behind a dam ready to burst through.

This reinforces my wish to have known him because I see what he would have meant to me and how much he would have loved me. I know that would have made losing him worse than not knowing him, but I believe the pain would have been worth the great moments we would have had.

So now, when I go to visit his grave, I don’t just see a gravestone to play on or buried bodies to avoid. I see a place full of people who were deeply cared about. I see lives ended too short, like my grandpas. I see lives lived to fruition that still left people grieving behind. Most of all, I see people like my dad left behind holding on to the memories of their loved ones and people like me wishing they had memories of people they would have loved.

I’ve realized from these visits that the ones left behind bear the burden to move on and love others. And just like the tree and the size of me compared to the gravestone, we grow, but we never forget where or with whom we started.