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THESE DAYS, POST-UNTIMELY-DEATH of my father, I tend to research the lives and unexpected deaths of pop culture icons. Not because I'm some sort of diehard fan of Prince, Karen Carpenter, or even James Dean, but because I don't want their short yet influential lives to be forgotten by the world. Like my father's death, their deaths

me that, once someone has died, we grieve their loss for a moment then quickly release their stories to the wind like goodbye balloons floating off to the clouds. Time doesn't heal all wounds, but it does lessen the clarity of memories. And I worship those memories and stories, especially when it comes to the members of my family whose storied lives are

slowly drifting away into the wide open sky with the passing of time.

When someone dies, you tend to dredge up long lost memory snapshots of a time in your life when that per-

Crunchy Jeans

Bethany Bruno

were far too soon and left the world reveling in the stage of "what could have been" if only they had lived longer. I love to read about the people who knew these icons as they recount harrowing lessons and stories. Through their interviews, I've learned that the people you leave behind ultimately become your historians, and it's important to understand that everything we say or do can leave a lasting impact on our legacies. It seems too cruel to

son played some role—small or large. It's a wholehearted effort on your part to keep a series of short films in your fading memory library. There's always some random encounter in which you unexpectedly connect to that deceased person, an encounter that ultimately changed you. It's honestly amazing how one simple act of kindness could be your epilogue for generations—present and future. Unknowingly, it becomes your legacy.

For myself, I like to remember my Uncle Bob by one tender act of pure selflessness. One short movie that plays in my mind on constant loop involves a pair of crunchy jeans, an angry wasp, and a brand new dryer.

I WAS THIRTEEN YEARS OLD, LIVING IN THE comfort of my parent’s home in sunny south Florida, and waking up to start another monotonous day of middle school. I was all alone on that early Tuesday morning as my parents had left for work hours before. For the first time in my young life, I was entrusted to get myself up, dressed, and even physically get myself to school. On the wobbly desk chair beside my bed was one pair of slightly faded blue jeans. These jeans, as I rose out of bed and reached for the article of clothing, crunched in my hands as I tried to loosen up the fibers by stretching and pulling at the hem. This unpleasant sensation was caused by the hours of sunlight that radiated upon my jeans while they slowly dried over our busted chain link fence. The day before, our dryer kicked the bucket and left my family with the challenge of spreading out all of our damp laundry along the bent chain-link fence—a poor man’s dryer. For hours, my jeans, along with endless polo shirts, my dad’s tighty-whities, and my mom’s bras, sunbathed in the Florida sun. “We’ll just make do until the end of the month. Everything will work out, I’m sure,” my mom said. So, as we always did during tough financial times, we made do because we had to. We were a poor working-class family living on a paycheck-to-paycheck budget.

As I removed my pajamas and threw them into my white plastic hamper, I prepared my body for the balancing act as I stepped into my jeans. Left leg, then right, slid over my thighs as the sides came to rest comfortably upon my

hips. I zipped up and tried to stretch out my limbs with some slight low kicks in the air for some much needed stretch. I squeezed myself into a tight collared shirt and then reached for my mangled hairbrush when it hit me—a horribly painful and burning sensation in my left thigh like someone with a rusty tack was repeatedly inserting it into my skin. Maybe it’s because of the dryness? I assured myself as I tried to rub away the pain. But this only made the pain worse as I attempted to go about my morning routine. Somehow, the pain moved up my leg and started climbing up my thigh until it hit below my waist.

I unbuttoned my jeans and quickly pulled them down to my ankles, and I saw my assaulter: a huge black and yellow wasp was stabbing me repeatedly in the skin with its stinger. I instinctively slapped the wasp, killing it, but at the expense of my poor thigh that now had a stinger implanted further within my skin. The wasp fell to my carpeted floor as it fought to stay alive. I screamed and began to cry as I tried to wobble myself to the bathroom, my jeans around my ankles acting like unbreakable chains. I fell to the ground and desperately kicked off the jeans, scooped them up off the floor, then began to shake the fabric wildly in the air. Another wasp flew out of the right leg as I grabbed my right Sketcher Sneaker and smacked the hell out of it until I was sure it was dead. The wound on my thigh was beginning to swell, and I could feel the pain of it throbbing throughout the entirety of my defenseless leg. It sent pulsations through my leg like waves of small embers through a drought forest, lighting small fires and creating what would surely be a much larger path of destruction.

I’m not entirely sure what happened next, other than somehow getting in contact with my mom and downing some liquid bubble gum-

flavored Benadryl. My mom consoled me over the phone and promised that as soon as she could get out of work, she would come home to take care of me. I grabbed an ice pack from the freezer as I hobbled back to my room and gently laid down upon my bed, wearing only a shirt and underwear, too weak and afraid to crawl back into my pajamas or any article of clothing.

Call it ignorance but the idea that my Uncle Bob bought my family a dryer seemed ridiculous. I couldn’t comprehend the level of empathy that my Uncle had shown in his generous act.

In what seemed like only minutes later, there came a knock at the front door. Exhausted from the wasp massacre, I managed to pull myself out of my bed and hobbled to the front door. As I reached for the handle and pulled it open, I saw my Uncle Bob standing there with a small, blue, metal hand-truck. Uncle Bob in all of his glory was easily two hundred and fifty pounds and over six foot three, making him feel like a giant within my midst. Unsure of why he was at my front door, he assured me that “everything’s OK Beth” as he propped my front door open with a large rock taken from our stony sidewalk. Uncle Bob had a calm demeanor in his voice, the kind of voice for when he told you something, you not only believed him but also felt soothed by the genuine words of empathy he expressed. He was also the only person in my family to ever call my dark Italian features “beautiful” when I felt like an oddity within my predominantly Irish family. It wasn’t just words—it was words of good intention, and those stick in your mind forever.

I stood there at the doorway as I watched him slide a large and heavy cardboard box

slowly off the flatbed of his huge pickup truck. As he lowered it down, the weight of its contents made a “clunk” sound as it hit the concrete below. He pulled the hand-truck behind me, dragging the box inside and setting it down ever so softly within our tiny laundry room. Whirlpool Dryer was displayed on the sides of the box as my uncle whipped

out a small box cutter and began the process of setting up our new dryer.

I went back to bed, unsure of what to think of the scene I just witnessed. How in the hell did he know our dryer broke? Did my mom call him right after she spoke to me? She must have gone out on her lunch break and bought a dryer, but asked Uncle Bob to drop it off, I thought. I was taken aback by the notion that my mom could have just gone out the day before and bought a dryer, in turn preventing my battle wounds with the wasps. It took me getting injured for her to pony up the cash?

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, I WOKE UP ONCE again, this time from my bed shifting as my mom sat on its corner. I told her how Uncle Bob delivered the dryer she bought, fully ready to hear her apology for not doing it sooner. To my utter surprise, she laughed. “Oh no, he went out and bought it for us. He called me at work, and I told him how wasps had made a home in your jeans from drying them outside. He must have gone out and immediately bought a dryer,”

my mom said. Call it ignorance, but the idea that my Uncle Bob bought my family a dryer seemed ridiculous. I couldn't comprehend the level of empathy that my Uncle had shown in his generous act. I assumed, as a naive teenager, that those kinds of acts were to be expected. Family, in theory, always goes above and beyond for others. But here I am, now thirty years old, realizing just how admirable a man my uncle was.

AS WE ALL LEARN SOMEDAY, THOUGH WE might expect certain things from family, they will now and then let you down. Sometimes in life, we become like battered ships trapped upon a darkened and rough sea, desperately searching for a glimmer of light indicating help is on the way or just that there's hope in troubled times.

Uncle Bob's legacy, for me, is the generous acts of love he provided within his family. He didn't want his niece to ever have to worry about another wasp making a home in her jeans because of the lack of access to a working dyer. He saved me from enduring another painful sting, something I didn't appreciate fully at thirteen years old. I have many memories of Uncle Bob, some involve his generosity, while others are positive words of affirmation that are now tattooed somewhere on my self-confidence.

Uncle Bob died from cancer in 2006 after a short but nonetheless harrowing fight. His death was sudden and cruel for a man of his character. That loss shattered my family to the point where the Scott legacy is at jeopardy of being passed down. In their collective grief, there exists a fear to speak of him. Saying his name aloud will invoke an emotional response, and they can't allow themselves to open those wounds once more. So, as with every death in my family, including the recent passing of my

father, that legacy memory book gets shelved and left to collect dust. Grief is such a whirlpool of beliefs, and once you're caught in its wrath, it's hard to break out from its grasp.

Since Uncle Bob's death, I find myself randomly thinking of this moment in my life. The crunchy jeans, the angry wasp, and Uncle Bob pulling that blue hand-truck are ingrained within my mind forever. It's a story that I tell often, mainly to express my amazement that such a person once existed in my life. Recently, I began a serious relationship with a man who is in many ways similar to my uncle. One night, during dinner, the inevitable "tell me about your mom's side of the family" came up. Instead of hesitating or making up some excuse as to why I no longer have contact with that side, I decided to tell a story from my memory library. It was about that traumatic hot Florida day when a teenage Bethany was stung several times on her thighs, only to be rescued by her kindhearted Uncle Bob, an uncle who is physically gone, yet his love lingers onward in my mind and in my stories. "He was the best of us," I would tell my date. "He always showed up for us all when we needed it."

Uncle Bob didn't need to tell anyone how "nice" he was or how generous; he simply showed it by being himself. And to this day, I don't believe people who claim to be "nice" or otherwise until they show me through some act of pure kindness. Like so many goodhearted and sincere individuals, they simply do tremendous acts of generosity because it's who they are. When they eventually pass away, their stories will be memories for those they left behind, and those memories become bedtime stories and lessons learned for children and generations to come within the family. This passing of the legacy torch is now something I will do for

all those who've been a part of my life, like Uncle Bob and my father. I've learned that they didn't need to be a celebrity or cultural icon to deserve their influential legacy. Uncle Bob was not a musician who changed the musical genre of pop as we know it. My dad wasn't an actor who left behind a film collection that generations of upcoming actors will study. No, my family members left me with the importance of knowing how to spread kindness and love to everyone in need of it, to do for others as we would do for ourselves. How wonderful it is to have known such a person in my life, a person who shaped me into an empathetic adult.

For the sake of everyone who has passed away too soon from your life, I hope you take to heart your memories of them and pass them along to anyone you feel is worthy. Don't let their legacy be forgotten.

WHEN PRINCE DIED ON APRIL 21, 2016, HE left his fans in such a state of grief. People from all over the world flocked to Paisley Park, home of Prince, and left all kinds of posters, purple flowers, and even released white doves to honor his musical legacy. There were musicians who played cover songs of Prince's hits, making YouTube look like a Prince concert tribute. Random fans and friends spoke of his genius, his kindness, and of his mark on the world of pop music. As the world was reeling with the loss of Prince, I was engulfed in my own grief over my father. But, unlike all the tribute videos and flowers, I was unsure of how to honor my father.

Since my studying up on the life of Prince, I've learned such a valuable lesson from one of his songs: "Sometimes It Snows in April." It is a song that encompasses a truth about love and death, and it goes something like this:

**good things
don't last;
love isn't love
till it's past**

This song was recorded exactly thirty-one years before the day of his death, and I have to wonder if he realized the message he was leaving behind in this one lyric. It would be his final lesson, but the utmost significant one to share with new generations to come. It would also be the starting point toward accepting the loss of my father and how to deal with that loss for years to come. ❖

**listen to
and watch
Prince
perform
"Sometimes
It Snows in
April"**