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October 8th

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Nonfiction

OCTOBER 8th

MEGHAN LARGENT

The snap of the baseball against my father's leather glove echoes like a gunshot, sharp and sweet. The glove is older than time itself, from the looks of it—laces deteriorating, webbing worn, and palm cracking until it has nearly begun to crumble, flaking like dandruff in the wind. The fissures that streak in serpentine chasms across its tanned surface form a second skin, creasing smoothly around my father's fingers. They remind me that his skin, too, will crack and deteriorate one day.

He once told me about when his father, my grandfather, first gave the glove to him, when the leather was new and supple, and he would place a baseball inside and sit on it for hours in order to break it in. I had just gotten a new softball glove, and was frustrated that I couldn't open or close it the whole way. His solution sounded much more uncomfortable, though.

"It takes time," he told me with a knowing grin, his face creasing and spreading like the leather of his glove. "If you work at it, someday you'll break yours in, too."

Watching him now, as he tosses the grass-stained baseball my way, my grandfather's time-worn face flashes in my mind's eye like a sunspot burnt into my vision, crinkled in the same expression of mixed contentment and concentration that my father wears. I remember the crows feet that nearly obscured my grandfather's eyes as he squinted; the liver spots like freckles that crinkled merrily as he let loose a fierce grin; the clever wrinkles across his forehead that expressed exactly how he felt, a surface broken in by many years of hardships and joys. Crumbling leather turns to sand before my eyes—the sand that my grandfather marched through in Normandy, stumbling to keep up with his comrades, desperate to escape the bullets that fell around his head like rain. I can only imagine the living hell that must have been, long before I was born—before even my father was born. And yet, we are all that remain long after the fact, even though my grandfather was the one who narrowly escaped death, and who continued to fight the memories of those days until the very end.

He escaped once, but not forever. The last time I saw him was in a hospice room, eyes glazed, barely breathing. And yet, I still could see a hint of that same careworn smile I'd always known.

My father laughs as he misses the ball, forehead puckered in consternation as he stoops stiffly to retrieve it. If I squint closely enough, I can spot the first traces of crows feet at the corners of his eyes, the smallest of wrinkles rippling across his forehead like newly broken leather, not yet fully hardened and cracked with wear and sunlight. Year by year, the lean muscles in his arms have faded, the quickness of his fingers have dulled—and someday, I imagine, more than his wrinkles will come to resemble his own father's faded form.

It takes time. Someday, he will wear down, too. He turns forty-seven in two days, and the big half-a-century will follow too soon after. I can't even begin to think of what will come next. I don't want to, not now. Not when the reality of my grandfather's aged face looms so near, larger than life, more than just a speck beyond the horizon now.

Before I can say anything, the ball slaps into my palm once more. I meet my father's gaze as he teasingly asks where I've been.

"Thinking," I tell him, and toss the baseball back to his waiting glove. To say any more would be to make everything too real, too present. I don't want to accept what I know to be true.

My father doesn't pry, just lobs the ball overhand back to me. As we continue with our game, back and forth, overhand and underhand, I try to ignore the pressure against the backs of my eyelids, and instead move through the rote motions of catch, pivot, release that he taught me when I was seven. But it won't last. I know that it can't, not when all I can see now is the faint afterimage of my grandfather's smiling eyes in my father's own, forehead worn and cracking, lingering until the day he falls apart and is no more.