

**2007-2008
CBC Writing Competition**

CBC Student Entry
Category: Fiction
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Toe Tag

I awoke to my head pounding and feeling extremely nauseated. Drinking so much last night was not very smart. The phone was blaring, and I looked over at the clock, "3:36AM."

"Who is calling me at this hour?" I shout at Otter, my faithful Labrador.

Otter gave an inquisitive glance and started drooling. Positioning my head upon the pillows, I attempt to fall back into slumber. The answering machine comes on, and this official sounding woman is saying something about my father. I do not have a father I thought. Rolling over, I try to fall back to sleep, feeling uneasy. The phone starts ringing again; the clock reads "5:25AM."

I pick up the phone and warn the caller, "Someone better be really dead."

The woman on the line was asking for a Michael Spanning.

"I'm Michael Spanning," I said with some disdain.

"Are you the next of kin for John Spanning?" she bellowed as if I was deaf.

"Yes if you insist," I quipped rather abruptly.

"Your father is in critical care, and you need to come to Westchester Medical Center immediately," she exclaimed.

I hung up the phone and pulled the covers over my head. I could feel my guts rolling up in my throat. They must be kidding if they assume I care about Mr. Spanning. He left years ago, looking for some other life. The vomit was rising in the throat, and I ran for the toilet. Launching last night's dinner consisting of frozen meatloaf was easy. Just thinking about that man who promised to be my father was repulsive. I lay on the cool floor, stretching my arms and

counting the ceiling tiles. I felt grounded and safe here, and no one could hurt me. My body was drained of any available energy. I closed my eyes and started praying for a miracle.

Otter was whipping his tail against my head rather hard. Looking up, he is begging to go out. The phone is ringing repeatedly; I realize two more hours have past. How long have I been here? Pulling myself up to the sink, I inspect my face. The dark circles under the eyes give the drastic effect of half moons. Maybe I had a seizure or the other thing. The missing time began months ago, and I have been misplacing things, blacking out. The blasted phone will not stop ringing.

I walk over to the phone and utter "hello" rather rudely.

She is repeating that hideous information again about Mr. Spanning.

I told her I was leaving the house now and to stop calling.

I pull on my Levi's and slip out the back door for a smoke. The wind was bitter cold and there was ice on the trees. There are glimmers of light through the ice-laden branches, as if the world was made of glass. Otter is going nuts in the new-fallen snow. I watch him wishing I could feel that good. I suddenly realize I have no shirt on, and the cold is chilling my arms. Otter follows as I head into the kitchen, he is begging for McCain's best. I give him the whole can and run to the bedroom for a warm shirt and some socks. I have not taken care of things around here for so long. There is laundry spread all over the bed, nothing folded. Shuffling out the door to start up the car, I try to imagine what my father looks like. That seems foreign calling him father. The motor struggles against the cold but eventually kicks over.

Being 32 years old, I have little memory of my fathers face. He walked out one summer morning and never came back. Memories start to eventually take me back to the front steps of our old house, waiting for him to come home. I sat on the steps that day until it was dark. My mother tried to tell me the truth that he went out for more than a pack of smokes. She was the

one who raised us, and no one gave her anything but ridicule. She worked many years at the local paper, setting the different type and cleaning presses. She made just enough to get by although I do not think we were that poor. She past away two years ago from cancer and the long-term affects of a hard life. My life seems in disarray, since they left. I do not have any family except for my brother Bill.

I do not know what to expect when I get there. I wonder if he is dying. Did they expect someone to identify the body? I shifted through the back streets trying to reduce my car's visibility. My tabs are expired again because I just overlook things lately. On the way, I wondered how the hospital found me. They must have called, "I-800-Absent Parent Hotline". Envisioning a hot list of missing sons by last and first names, they must have found me under "loser." Driving up to the medical center, I noticed how grand the building is. The roofline is defined in white brick and the eaves are carved from granite. I love the architectural designs and the fine lines of ivy cascading along the sides.

Walking through the front door, I felt frozen. What was I doing? Maybe he was already deceased!

The volunteer at the front desk was talking as I murmured, "My father is in the critical care unit."

I was led to the elevator, and as it pushed skyward, I could feel a sudden dread return. My palms were sweating, and I felt paralyzed. The doors opened to a crowd of interns anxiously waiting to board. Walking up to the desk, I see a small, petite woman. She asks if I am family, and I nod my head. She leads me through a maze of hallways, to his room. There is a frail man under the blankets. Tubes, wires, and monitors were layered across him like a tapestry. He appears much older than I remember, gaunt in the face. Sitting and listening to his labored breathing feels odd. A young man approach with a chart in his hand. He said his name was Dr.

Pearson, and that he was responsible of Mr. Spanning's care. He describes my father's condition as critical. He indicated Mr. Spanning had a massive heart attack and asked me to consider what was best for him. The doctor had some white papers in his hand stating, "Do not resuscitate." He said his complex condition was grave and next 48 hours would be defining.

I slumped back into the chair and blurted out "I need to contact my brother Bill."

Dialing the phone, Bill answers "Hello."

"You have to come to the hospital straight away," I pleaded.

Bill acted as if he knew already and said, "Hell no".

I lay the receiver down and wondered if they tried to call him earlier. Looking at father's face, I wondered if he ever really loved me. I turned to the window, opening the blinds. The sun cast a warm, comforting feeling on my face. All those years he had some other life, some other family.

Turning to leave, I noticed his eyes half-opened. He moved his hand towards the rail. He coiled his fingers around my hand; suddenly, I remembered those callused hands. His lips quivered as he tried to talk, obviously parched. I touched his lips as if to quiet him. I did not want to know if he did not want me again. I started sobbing as a man walked through the door with a bible.

"Are you here to give the last rights? I feel so alone," I said shaking.

He said, "You will never be alone in the eyes of the Lord."

He sat down and talked about John Spanning as if he was a friend. He said he had come to the rectory years ago seeking salvation and shelter.

He personally knew my father and said, "Your father has been sick for some time."

"I don't know him anymore," I stammered as tears were cascading down my face.

"They want me to sign a DNR order" I exclaimed.

I dropped the papers and clutched the man I did not know. The sobbing continued as we talked about the years when he lived in a small apartment on the church grounds. He was the maintenance man who cleaned the parsonage weekly. He disclosed my father left to avoid hurting the immediate family. He had a mental-type breakdown, whatever that meant. My brother Bill was standing in the doorframe. Glancing over, I never realized how massive he was. He filled the frame and there was minimal light peering through.

The minister got up and said, "I am Father Hernandez."

Bill looked dazed and hollow when he muttered, "I am only here because someone called."

The priest said he was very ill and had a history of heart issues. "A history" I thought, how bizarre sounding is that? We never had a history. I turned to my father who had tears streaming down his face. Reaching for his hand, I asked him to hold on. I confessed I loved him and wanted another chance to know him. Bill bolted out the door and was gone. He was older and understood pain better.

The doctor returned and was rather alarmed my father was awake. He picked up the phone and a swarm of medical staff rushed through the door. I released his hand and walked over to the waiting area. It seemed like an eternity before the doctor returned.

"Your father is stable for now and we will run tests later today. I will leave you two alone," he stated.

I sat for the rest of the day holding my father's hand. It was like a confessional as I blurted out my life in diminutive passages. I managed to drift off following all the agonizing confessions, and it was as if I had never slept before. I awoke to my father's voice asking me to listen.

“I never really left you and your brother. I was always in the background, watching” he carried on.

He talked of feeling inundated with the primary responsibility to provide for us kids. I stared at the floor as he said it was better the family be on welfare. I thought about those lean years of food stamps and government cheese. He had no idea what welfare meant, or the stigma attached. He said he had a small apartment close by and watched as we grew up. I thought he was lying, and that he was just making a deathbed confession. He talked about the summer I made the all-city basketball league. He said he always sat in the crowds, watching me play. I wondered if he rooted for me or saw me break my ankle that year.

I began to feel anger and contempt for him. He had to be lying to cover up his disgrace.

“Why didn’t you call or come by” I said in a trembling voice.

He said he tried many times but felt shamed. He denied having any other family.

“You boys are all I have,” He whispered while looking ashamed.

I felt my face getting hot, and I was uncomfortable. Then he asked the question I was dreading.

“Can we start new?” he asked rather remorsefully.

I managed to compose myself stating, “I do not know where that is.”

Feeling overwhelmed emotionally, I said, “I can start here, I know where that is.”

Looking away, I was strongly thinking about what he was saying. What would that mean?

He smiled softly and fell back on the pillow. We were not starting over, going back, we were just here. The tears flowed as if I was wounded. Crying was never an option in the past, and I felt shame climb up my tall frame. I look at my father thinking only for a while; I will accept him as is. I stare back towards the window feeling the afternoon sun. For the first time I have an emotion or feeling which is recognizable.

Driving home, I wondered if my father would call Bill. Pulling up in the yard, Otter was bouncing off the fence. He welcomed me and barked as if I had been gone for years. I hugged Otter wanting to feel closeness. The primary thing I wanted was a hot bath and some tea. I wondered down the narrow hallway towards the bathroom when the phone rang. Suddenly, the feeling of extreme panic arose as the phone kept ringing. The recorder picked up, and it was the medical center. I ran for the phone like a cross-country runner. The nurse was requesting my presence at the hospital, and she would not reveal anything other than it was urgent.

Driving back to the hospital, I felt numb. As the elevator door opened, there was the same girl sitting quietly at her desk. She smiles and called the doctor. The doctor appeared sometime later with a solemn look on his face. I could see the cavernous lines on his forehead tighten as he began to reveal the news.

“Your father passed away after you left earlier. He had a seizure and his heart stopped almost immediately. He signed his own DNR order this morning,” he declared.

“My father was not gone because he promised we would start over,” I exclaimed.

I jumped up and ran into the nearby bathroom. My body shook as I fell to the floor. I heard the door open and the faint sound of patent leather shoes. I noticed the doctor had big feet and expensive taste. He leaned down and touched my shoulder, trying to comfort me. I was sobbing as the tears rolled like water.

“He promised me,” I cried, trying to stand up.

“Your father was ill and it was his time to go” the doctor so carelessly stated.

I slammed my head on the wall not wanting anyone to ever hurt me again. It was that old feeling of pain and rejection shattering through my body. I composed myself and asked to see the body.

The doctor took me to the morgue and spoke with the attendant behind the desk. I was led in to a stainless steel room that had no color or life. The man pulled a drawer open, and there he was, bagged like a deer. Unzipping the bag, he said I could stay for a while. I looked at my lifeless father and again, the tears began to roll. He had a tag on his foot that was plastic-coated and bright yellow. It callously described his personal information and time of death. I reached over and yanked the tag off his toe. I said a quick prayer and ran out of the room. I held the tag tightly as I drove like a maniac towards home. When I got home, I carefully placed the tag on the kitchen table, and went to take a bath. I needed to wash off this filth and shame. The water was calming, and I sobbed quietly, feeling alone. The phone was ringing, and I was submerged under the water. I thought about the toe tag, the only trace left of my father.

A few months have past and the signs of spring are here. Otter is busy digging holes in the yard as I try to rake the leaves. I think about the impossible relationship with my father if he had survived. He might have wanted me to take care of him. I thought about all the negative outcomes that our relationship could have produced. I wondered if he truly loved me, or if it was just a deathbed confession.

Bill pulled up in the yard and wrestled with Otter. He walked up holding a piece of paper.

"I brought you Father's obituary," he mumbled.

I stared at him with amazement as he said the word "father." I was not sure but I think Bill was saying "goodbye." I opened my wallet and handed him the toe tag. Bill looked at it and glanced back as if I had slapped him or something.

"Do you want me to take this?" he asked with a confused look on his face.

"I want you to hold it for awhile, until you don't need it anymore," I stammered.

Bill handed the tag back with the obituary. He said he had to go, and that he would call me sometime. I knew he would not call or come by again. He always was running from the fear. It was something that does not wash off. Otter barks as he slowly drives away.

Feeling rejected again, I slumped down into the pile of leaves. Otter tackles me and grabs the yellow tag. He runs frantically around the yard and begins digging a hole. I watch helplessly as he dug through the snow and buried the tag by the Forsythia bush. I believe Otter picked an awe-inspiring place, as the Forsythia will only bloom in the spring. Signifying the expected death of winter, it will be a brilliant yellow against the harshness of the faded lawn. I congratulate him in the choice of holes and watch him dig. I looked at the obituary and walk over, dropping it in the same hole. I cannot have any reminder of what might have been, it is too much right now. I assume my father is at peace or maybe working towards some kind of forgiveness with God. I sit on the steps with Otter, waiting again. I look out to the hole where his toe tag is buried. I envisioned that twelve-year-old boy who once waited anxiously on the porch. It suddenly occurred to me that my father would return every spring, when the Forsythia blooms.