

If A Tree Falls

By Gregg Casazza

SHE smelled like birthday candles and beef stew. Galaxies of glaucoma consumed the entirety of her left eye, and her body sagged from her wheelchair like a used teabag on a mug. She was ancient, the frail kind that perplexed doctors; an enigma of longevity, and yet she had drudged herself up out from her chair to tap *my* shoulder. How this woman's feeble arm had extended to reach me will leave me forever confounded, and at the time the shock was visible upon my face. She spoke in a voice that sounded like wool sweaters and Canadian mints.

“Bruce—” she inquired, “my old friend Bruce?”

I knew that she was senile, like my grandfather. After all, they were both in the geriatrics ward. But for some reason

she was the only person I could talk to about his quickly declining health. I sat with her, pretending to be her Bruce, and listened as she gave me a chance to forget about my grandfather, and to forget about myself.

My parents and siblings stood behind my grandfather, stoic even in his slumber, as they tried to feed him his broth. It was this or feeding tubes, and my family chose the slow deliberate spoonfuls of the clear liquid which dribbled down his cracked face. They were a huddled mass of grief, but as I stared at them from across the room, the distance seemed only to grow.

“I’m so lonely Bruce,” the woman told me. She seemed less mad that I didn’t visit her more often, and more hurt. I felt so responsible for the ailing woman left alone for years, whose mind and body argued as two separate entities. I didn’t know what to say. I wasn’t Bruce, I didn’t know her name, or about

our jokes, or our secret handshake. I knew nothing, and I hated myself for it. All I knew was that whoever she thought I was, she loved. She loved “me” more than anything I had ever seen. Her fragile bandaged fingers were like the stems of orchids in the wind as she told me about our shared past. I nodded my head and agreed with her for over half an hour. When it was time to go, I said goodbye and told her I would be back soon.

But I don’t know if Bruce ever went back to see her, or any of her family for that matter. Would she spend the rest of her life forgotten in that lilac scented prison? Sometimes I stay up at night and imagine that Bruce came back for her—that a sixteen-year-old boy pretending to be her husband wasn’t the last time she ever spoke to someone who listened. I imagine her, in her crushed velvet pants straining once more from her chair to tap the real Bruce on his shoulder and do their secret handshake. I imagine that someone finally looked back at her with the same love-filled eyes.

But I don’t know if that ever happened. I don’t know if she spent the rest of her life passively drinking broth through a straw or being mocked by the orderlies, and that’s what kills me most.

When my grandfather died, my grandma slumped over his bed in pooling tears; staining the flannel pajamas he wore. Her breaths staggered as the room ached in collective grief. My whole family crowded into the icy room as our pain hung inescapably in the air. But my grandfather was the lucky one; he had family with him. Even on his last day, his children sat by his bedside, clutching onto his hand, digging their nails into his cellophane skin as they cried out how much they loved him.

I don’t think that old woman never had that. She never had someone holding her hand when she died, but that doesn’t make her life any less significant. Because if a tree falls in a

forest and no one is around to hear it, it *does* make a sound. A deafening, echoing roar, that it is important, even in death.

I'm just glad I got to hear it.