

“Sorry Alex”

It'd been a week, but I was no closer to any answers. Not that I'd seriously been trying. It was like leaning on the point of a knife to even think about it. On the numbness of my third beer that evening I finally surrendered and replayed for the first time what happened that night.

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It'd started with a call on my cell. Caller I.D. said it was dad. I answered as if I didn't already know who it was. The one time I'd seen his I.D. and answered, 'Hi Dad,' it'd freaked him out.

“Hello?”

“Tyler?”

“Hey, Dad. Kinda late for you? What's up?”

“Tyler?”

“Yeah, Dad—you okay?”

“I think—”

Then a deep, hollow groan.

“Dad?”

Silence.

“Dad!”

Then, “I'm not fee—”

—then a double thump.

I winced at the memory, hearing it like it was the first time. Thump one was more of a crack. Like one rigid object hitting another. Like dad's phone. Striking the hardwood. Thump

two was a muted puff. Like a bag of feed dropped from the bed of a truck. Like dad. Collapsing to the floor.

My apartment was twenty minutes from his place. I punched 9-1-1 as I sprinted the hall to the parking garage elevator. I told them where he hid his key. I remember it seemed like they already knew, like it wasn't their first time there. Traffic was shit. He was already strapped to a gurney when I arrived. Mask over his nose and mouth. IV in his arm. His face as colorless as coconut meat. "Dad?" I knew he probably couldn't hear me. I said it, anyway. I remember telling an older attendant, "I think maybe he hit his head," and he showed me both palms and slowly shook his head as if to say, "Not his biggest worry." I asked to ride in the ambulance. They said to take my own car. Let them do their job.

I'd called Joy on the way to County.

At the ER, I lost dad to a rugby scrum of doctors and nurses. One pulled me aside for questions. Dad and I were close. I knew everything. Full name and address? Check. Allergies? Yep. Personal physician? Yep. Exact date of birth? Ditto. I always called him on his birthday, always at noon, always with our same stupid joke: I'd say, "Happy birthday to my favorite father," and he'd say, "Thanks. Who the hell's this?" Would my mother be coming? No, she passed seven years ago. Did he have a medical directive? That one stopped me. I'd obviously heard the term before, but I realized right then that I wasn't exactly sure what it was. I hunched my shoulders. A signed document, she'd explained, giving someone else authority to make medical decisions if your father isn't able to make them himself. *Isn't able*. I remember staring back for a beat as I processed the implications. Then pushed my way into the scrum. "Dad!"

Eventually, they got him plugged in, tucked in, and settled into a room. I sat beside him, staring. Not knowing what else to do. Hoping there wasn't anything I was supposed to do.

Joy showed a couple hours later. Why hurry? He was only our father. She shoulder-hugged me, assured me everything was gonna be okay, like I was a little leaguer who'd just struck out. Then she marched out to the nursing station, announced that she was the daughter, his oldest, and to please let her know if there was anything, *anything*, they needed. She'd returned, told me "I'm here, Ty," then dredged her cell out of her bag, started punching numbers and retreated to the corridor. I could hear the irritated tone of her voice echo off the sterile walls as she strode away down the hall.

I scooted a vinyl chair closer to dad's bed. The beeping of the vital-signs monitors said he was still alive, but you couldn't have guessed it from his face. A blank look of sleep or unconsciousness or I didn't want to know what.

At some point his neighbor—Doug, I think—stopped in. We'd exchanged a few across-the-street waves over the years but didn't really know each other. He acted like we did. I held out my hand, "I'm —" "—Tyler. Yeah. Of course," he'd said. "You're the shift lead, just promoted." I was surprised. He leaned in, "Braggs on you all the time." He smothered my hand in both of his and held my eyes, "He's a strong sonofabitch, Tyler."

Doug said he'd seen the ambulance, been here lots, and knew all the best nurses. Then he fell into my chair and waved me off. "Trust me, you'll feel better after a cup of coffee. Cafeteria's on L3. Open all night." I didn't argue.

Doug was right. Two cups of coffee and a few minutes alone did wonders. When I returned, I said, "Anything?" He just stood, patted my shoulder, "Sa-good man," and left.

At one point dad's eyes fluttered open. I smiled. I swear he tried to smile back. Then Joy reappeared and his eyes snapped shut. She glanced at him, scrutinized the monitors, then said something like, "I just can't believe this," and, "Ty, we should talk, I'm not going to be able to

do this all myself.” I nodded. “I’ll call if there’s anything.” “I’m always right here,” she’d replied, then skipped the shoulder hug and was gone.

So, it was just the two of us, again, for I don’t know how long.

I stared at dad’s expressionless face. Listened to the monitors. Stared some more.

Then sometime, either really, really late or really, really early, his eyes flew open again and this time I’m sure he was looking right at me—actually seeing me—at least that’s how I remember it. Then his lips moved. Open, close. Open, close. I shot upright, jerked my head around, searching for medical staff or Joy or anyone. I looked back down at him. Open, close. I leaned in, touched the back of his hand. “Dad?” Open, close. I bent down farther, turning my face toward his feet so my ear would be closer to his mouth. Nothing. I turned back and looked at his face.

It’d changed.

That blank mask of sleep or whatever had disappeared and been replaced by the faintest hint of a sad smile. Pursed lips, pulled slightly up on one side. Eyes like chubby slits. His lips moved again. I bent close, turning my head again to the side, bringing my ear inches from his mouth.

It came as a hoarse whisper.

Barely audible.

But I heard each word. Exactly as he said it.

“Sorry, Alex.”

Then breathed out for the last time.

* * *

If beer three is about numbness-driven courage, beer four for me has always been about focus. It's when I feel the most clear-headed, the most untethered by false anxieties or inhibitions, indifferent to anything but my own, absolute mastery of everything. Beer four always makes me feel, rightly or wrong, and I know mostly wrongly, that there's nothing in the world I can't understand. No nuance, no subtlety, no veiled implication I can't pierce and perfectly grasp. It doesn't last forever, of course, because beer five inevitably drags me into paranoia, self-pity, idiocy, or the greatest hits of all three. But at beer four, I'm a god. I glanced at the three empties on the coffee table, took a long pull from the bottle in my hand and settled in.

The starting point was obvious enough.

There were two questions. Question number one: Who the hell was Alex? Question number two: Why was dad apologizing? Which inevitably, of course, triggered question number three, which, not to get technical, was really a beer five question. Which totally pissed me off, because why couldn't question number three simply wait its turn when I still had all this really important beer four work on questions one and two, even though, obviously, it was goddamn question number three that was the whole reason I hadn't even wanted to think about any of this all week. But there it was, subtle as cleavage on a Vegas waitress, preening and insisting and demanding my immediate attention. What about me? What about me?

I polished off beer four, popped another cap, and gulped at beer five until I started choking and coughing and had to stop just to breathe. I stared into space for a long moment. Hoping it might clear my head. Knowing it wouldn't. I took one last pull then surrendered to the inevitable, allowed my eyes to fall shut, and impaled myself on question number three: Why were dad's final thoughts about Alex and not about me?

* * *

Morning for me began at two p.m. the next day, as beers six, seven, eight and I stayed up most of the night wrestling demons. But, having given question number three its due and put it at least temporarily to rest, I felt sufficiently cleansed to have a renewed go at questions one and two. I made coffee, ignored the tower of crusty dishes in the sink, and dumped myself into a chair on my apartment balcony. I slumped back, made a finger-basket behind my head and took stock of what I knew and what I didn't know, the latter so far pitching a shutout.

Question one: Who was Alex? Question two: Why was dad apologizing?

Alex first.

The name didn't immediately mean anything to me. Not family. Or a nickname I recognized. Certainly not one for me. I knew most of dad's friends and there wasn't an Alex among them. He'd been a CPA before he retired, so maybe a former client? But it wasn't a name I could remember him ever mentioning, in any context. So, who was he, or—hang on, it suddenly dawned on me—who was *she*? Was it Alex, Alexander? Or Alex, Alexandra? Or Alexis? That took me down a new rabbit hole, but ultimately stalled me at the same dead end.

I tried question two: Why the apology?

I thought about why people apologize.

You do when you carelessly hurt someone or their things. "Sorry, I scratched your guitar." "Sorry, I said you're fat." Or when you intentionally do something wrong. "Sorry, I stole that twenty from your coat." "Sorry, I said the joints were yours, not mine." Sometimes you apologize just because you disappointed someone. That one left a mark. "Sorry, I'm not the son you hoped I'd be." "Sorry, I dropped out of college." "Sorry I got divorced." "Sorry I haven't given you any grandkids." "Sorry I'm not perfect like Joy."

I wondered how many beers were left in the fridge.

The other thing was, I knew my dad. He wasn't the kind of man who gave away apologies for no reason. And more than that, he wasn't the kind who ever did much he needed to apologize for. At least I didn't think so. Except what if he was? I thought I knew him. But I didn't even know who Alex was. Some guy so important to my dad's world that he merited a deathbed apology.

And really, that's what this was—a deathbed apology.

He used his last breath to make amends to someone I didn't even know existed, for something I never even knew occurred.

Yet, even that didn't quite square every corner.

It wasn't just his last words. They were his last words *to me*. Because I was convinced it wasn't happenstance that I was the one, and the only one, present when he said them. No. He definitely intended those words for me and for me alone, I was sure of it. When he'd opened his eyes that first time, I swear he was about to say something. But then Joy appeared, and he clammed up, and he only spoke when it was just the two of us alone.

So that was it. My dad intended his last words for me, and his last words were an apology to someone else. I could feel my face beginning to radiate heat and my eyes starting to tear up. Like he couldn't have said: "Ty, you're the son I always hoped to have." Or, "Ty, I've always been proud of you." Or just, "Ty, I love you." Hell, it wasn't even me he was thinking of. I was there, like I'd always tried to be for him, and all he wanted me for was to be his friendly-faced dumpster for someone else's apology.

The knife again. Buried to the hilt.

I shook my head, dabbed at my eyes. I really didn't want to lose myself in question number three again.

I tried a different question: Why would dad want me to hear his apology to someone else?
And suddenly, it was obvious.

It wasn't for my general edification. "Here's an interesting factoid, son." He was telling me because he wanted my help, because he *needed* my help. He was asking me—no, he was entrusting me—to do something for him that he couldn't do himself. "Sorry, Alex" was his deathbed request to me, his trusted son, to find Alex, whoever that is, and to offer him or her my father's apology, for I-don't-know-what.

* * *

On the drive to dad's house, it occurred to me: What are the rules on deathbed requests? I should have Googled it. Are you required to comply? And if you don't, does it matter? Or does it mean you're cosmically damned with eternal bad karma? Because, clearly, there was no good third option. You can't really say, "Gee, I don't know, is there maybe something else I could do for you?" Or, "You know what, I bet Joy would just love to do that for you." There's no one to say that to, because—duh—he's dead.

Which meant I at least had to try. I owed dad that much. I'd make a genuine effort, and if within a reasonable time I couldn't find him or her or whoever or couldn't otherwise figure any of this Alex crap out, that'd be it. Regardless, I was now simply a messenger. Not the greatest outcome, but at least the hurt was gone, replaced by a sense of duty with a small side order of resentment. But trying to find Alex meant I needed clues, which was why I was on my way to dad's. I still had my key.

It's funny how you think you know someone, then pow—you realize you don't know shit. I always figured dad was happy enough, even if he lived what I always assumed was a small, somewhat lonely life, where our calls and get-togethers were his biggest treat. Now I

wondered how wrong I was. And what if he really saw our calls and to-dos, while nice enough, as simply an obligatory distraction from his own, much larger life and goings-on?

Maybe my life was the small one.

I didn't like where this was heading.

I shook my head, refocused on the job at hand.

“Sorry, Alex.”

Dad wanted me to hear—

A new thought suddenly slammed into my brain.

I whipped the wheel the right, squealing to a stop at the curb.

What if I'd read this completely wrong? What if it wasn't Alex who dad was apologizing to? What if he was actually apologizing to me? What if he'd really been saying, “Sorry,” period, as in “Sorry, Ty,” and then when he said, “Alex,” that was simply the first word of what was going to be a full-blown explanation about why and what he was apologizing to me about, except that he died before he could get anything else out.

My mind flooded with possibilities.

Some good. *“Sorry. Alex, who's my attorney, has my will, and although I did have to leave a few Shekels to your worthless sister, I left everything else to you, because I always liked you best, son.”*

Some less good. *“Sorry. Alex—really, Alexandra—is a woman I never told you about. But I'm in love with her so I left everything to her.”*

Some straight out of the dark corners of a funhouse. *“Sorry. Alex—or, Alexei, which is his real name—is a killer who I cheated and stole from and who said he intends to exact his murderous revenge on you for what I did to him. Sorry, son. I guess, keep your eyes peeled.”*

This wasn't helpful.

I eased back onto the road and replayed dad's last words in my head. Not just what he said, but how he'd said it. Were they *all* he'd intended? Or was he cut off? The jury was still out when I turned into his driveway.

I unlocked dad's house, closed the door behind me and leaned back against it. It was so silent. And the air—stale, utterly motionless. As if it were the house itself that had taken its last breath a week ago that night.

There were cardboard cartons near the bookcases, more under the windows, and as I began quietly roaming room to room, I found even more in the kitchen and guest room. Some empty. Some half-full. Joy's work, no doubt. Poaching valuables, big sis?

But I wasn't there to divvy up dad's things. I was there for clues. Alex clues.

I scoured the place, examining every picture, card and knick-knack. Anything that might have an unfamiliar face or some tell-tale writing on the back: "Saw this. Thought of you. Alex."

Nothing.

The only room left was dad's bedroom. His private sanctuary. As I pushed open the door it occurred to me this was first time I'd ever been in there. I felt a flicker of thrill, like a bad boy sneaking around where he wasn't supposed to. There was a carton on the floor and another, half-full on his bed. Joy apparently didn't feel the same.

A third carton sat next to a desk against one wall. A desk with a computer. A computer that might hold secrets. Like who Alex was?

I dropped into dad's desk chair. He'd been a CPA, no doubt handled tons of confidential information, so I figured his computer would be passworded. On the other hand, he was also sixty-five. I lifted his mousepad. Bingo. A list of passwords was scotch-taped to the back. I

stared at them and thought about everything that might be on that computer. Emails. Word docs. Pdfs. I couldn't do it. He may be dead, but he was still my father, and he was still entitled to his privacy. I peeled off and pocketed the password list just in case others (who shall remain nameless) weren't as respectful of their elders.

Even if I put the contents of dad's computer off limits, that didn't mean the rest of his desk was. I slid open the top drawer. Pens. Pencils. A magnifying glass. Free address labels. I opened a side drawer. Empty. I tried the next one down. A stationary box. The kind a ream of top end, very expensive paper came in. Its lid was thumb worn from being opened and closed a hundred times.

I made it a hundred and one.

Inside, bound with rubber bands was a thick stack of printed pages. The top sheet read: "Columns and Rows. A novel. By Joseph R. Dix."

A novel? My dad wrote a novel?

Just like that, whatever remaining thoughts I had that maybe I did actually know my father after all disappeared like a cough in the wind. Like someone flipped a switch and instantly erased a lifetime of assumptions and beliefs about who he was.

I sat the bundle on my lap and gently removed the rubber bands and the top sheet.

"Chapter One."

I'm not sure how long I read or how many pages I got through. At some point I skipped to the back and read the last few pages. It was obvious the novel was unfinished. There was no, "The End." Or epilogue. And nothing in those last few pages read as if they were wrapping everything up.

I stared into space.

Dad's story was a thriller or mystery about a clever young accountant hired at a large CPA firm where everything wasn't as it seemed, where bad things were going to happen that the young accountant would somehow be dragged into and then no doubt have to cleverly resolve. The writing was a bit clunky and mechanical. Like you'd expect from a CPA.

But it didn't matter. None of it did.

Because I'd found what I was looking for.

I'd found Alex.

Alex, it turned out, was my father's main character. The young accountant. The hero of his story. I couldn't help smiling as I wondered if dad thought of him as his own alter ego.

I sat in that chair in that empty house and just thought about things for I don't know how long. I thought about my father and what I knew and didn't know. And I thought about his novel and about Alex. And about his final words to me. And about myself.

* * *

It's been seven years.

I've come to accept that I will never be certain exactly what my father truly meant by his final words. There was no accompanying glossary or decoder ring. But because I am certain he intended those words for me, that means I, and I alone, get to choose their meaning. And what I've chosen to believe are two things.

Number one, his words were, in fact, an apology to Alex, not to me.

Because dad never finished his novel, Alex's life was never fully realized, either. He never got the chance to heroically save the day, save the world, or thwart whatever villainy my father intended to throw his way. So, for my father, for my wannabe novelist father, who I now know that I never truly understood, but who I also now feel I somehow know more intimately

than I ever did before, “Sorry, Alex” was his way of saying: Sorry, Alex, for never bringing you fully to life. Sorry for never letting you achieve your hero’s destiny. Sorry for never having a chance to share you with the rest of the world. Sorry for never sharing with the rest of the world that secret part of me that gave birth to you.

Number two, my father’s apology to Alex was also a fatherly message to me.

His way of saying not to end up like me. Not to have to make a deathbed apology for paths not taken, things unshared, dreams never dared, races not fully run. My father being my father.

Did I take his unfinished novel home and finish it myself? No. That was their world. His and Alex’s. Not mine to take. I returned it to the stationary box and stuffed the box in the bottom of one of Joy’s cartons beneath a pile of old shirts. And, no, I never told Joy any of this. I decided I just forgot.

Did I at least take my father’s words to heart? Embrace the spirit? Change my life? Not entirely. Not—okay, not really at all. At least not yet. But I do think about all those things. More than I did before. And I think about my father. And Alex. And—true confessions—I also sometimes cringe if someone steals glances my way and they look like a Disney version of a Russian villain and my inside voice whispers, “Or maybe you got it wrong, after all. Maybe that’s Alexei coming to get you, as in ‘Sorry. Alex-Alexei is going to hunt you down and gut you like a fish’.”

Mostly, I don’t feel hurt anymore.

In the end, my father just wanted me to know him. And that’s more than enough.