**An Imagined Conversation with My Grandfather**

Megan Nicholson

“Do you know any of their stories?” I asked, putting down my pen to pop my fingers, a bad habit I had acquired from a friend and didn’t know how to quit.

He rocked back on his chair legs, eyes roving the inside of his skull as if searching for the answer there. “Why?” he said after a moment’s pause, lowering his mottled eyes to settle on mine. His cataracts gave his look some complexity, like he was simultaneously seeing into your soul and unable to focus on the form of your face.

I wormed my pinkie finger under the clasp of the clip board and tried to hold his gaze for a moment before breaking away to shuffle the notes I had scrawled in shorthand- his story of the war, taken over three sessions. “It would be nice to know their side of it, for a fuller picture…” I trailed off as he tipped his chair forward with a thud. Even though he walked with the considerable effort of arthritis and aged joints, his body still exuded a wiriness, and at times he could still seem like a teenage boy, ready to jump out of his skin.

“What’s the damn point in that?” he said, resting his forearms on his thighs, hands languishing between his knees. The left sleeve of his flannel shirt was rolled up just above his elbow and the flesh crackled there in hard spirals like a heel of stale bread. The right one hung loose and unbuttoned around his bony wrist. He had been baking earlier, plunging his left hand in the bowl of flour, and rolling balls of the sweet dough that would be used to make kolaches with his right.

I blinked rapidly, surprised by his sudden change in tone. “The point,” I paused, trying to formulate my thoughts, “is to see the story from as many sides as possible.”

He took his toothpick out of his mouth and twirled it between his thumb and forefinger while he talked. “A story needs a good guy and a bad guy.” He stuck it back in his mouth and made a sucking noise on the thin strip of wood. I could smell the wet birch wood soaked through with saliva. “That’s the formula. Don’t go mucking it up.”

“But most people live in the grey area in between those two extremes, and other stories might help readers see different viewpoints and other people’s struggles in a new light.”

Every now and then an oak leaf from the nearby tree rode lazily down on a raft of air and landed on the chipped boards of the porch. We watched one make its unhurried entrance before he countered, “What good does that do?”

“Well,” I kept my voice casual, not wanting to escalate a disagreement that had no chance of being won and anger my only living grandfather in the process, “maybe if we stop looking at the differences, we can start to see the similarities.” I shrugged as I said this, still trying to keep the temperature of the conversation cool as the heat of the early fall day in Texas stagnated around us, filling our nostrils with heat.

He sat up with his spine against the chairback and his hands still languishing between his knees. He tilted his head as if he was really seeing me for the first time. “No one wants to read a story with no bad guy.”

I nodded, and smiled, “Yeah, well, there are always the bad guys, I guess, but, what about all the rest?”

“What about them?” His toothpick balanced limply of his thin lower lip while he waited.

I scratched the back of my neck and looked around, wishing to end this conversation as soon as possible. “It’s just that,” I said, watching a car kick-up a trail of grey dust and rocks as it crackled steadily down the dirt road in the distance, “lots of people in the middle are just trying to live their lives the best way they know how and somehow they just screw up along the way.”

He slapped his thigh with his right hand and laughed. “What the hell kind of story would that make?”

I tried to laugh along with him but couldn’t help feeling a little hurt. “Well, kind of a real one,” I mumbled, half hoping he wouldn’t hear me. The cicadas had started their nightly roar, vibrating the air in rhythmic undulations.

He snorted. “Real!” He flicked his toothpick into the bulky branches of the yew bush that was pushing its way through the rusting porch rail. “People got real in spades. Give ‘em a good guy and a bad guy and they’re happy. That’s all they want in life. Someone to blame and someone to cheer. Tie it up nicely. The end.”

“The problem is,” I started more vehemently than I intended, and forced myself to breathe. “The problem is that it’s not real life. Real life is complicated.” I looked away from him, turning my face to the sun which was just about to start its descent behind the pine trees that flanked the West side of the property.

“Exactly!” He leaned over and slapped my knee twice for emphasis. He was grinning in triumph as I watched him rise from his chair. “So, why make stories that way?”