

Sweet Sorrow

No matter how carefully Mike walked, his shoes squeaked on the sterile, white tile floor as he approached the hospice reception desk.

“Hi, I’m looking for Pete Norwich.”

Several floors up, in a carpeted wing pretending not to be a hospital, he was led to Pete’s room.

“I’m so sorry you weren’t able to get here yesterday,” the nurse said with hushed compassion.

“He told us all about you, and that you were flying in, but he hasn’t been responsive since this morning. We don’t expect it will be long.”

Mike sat next to the bed. Pete’s hand was clenched tight, so he wrapped his hands around it, and made his apologies for being too late. The man Mike spoke to was now in his 90s - pale, thin, and frail.

He had first met Pete, 21 years ago. Mike was 6 and his dad had just walked out on his mom a few weeks earlier. He was drooped like a wilted plant on their backyard swing set, watching the new neighbor work in the yard. Mike had hoped there would be kids in the house, but it was a retired couple.

The man stopped planting flowers and looked over the chain link fence.

“Hello, young man,” he said. “I’m your new neighbor Pete. You seem awful sad.”

“I am, I guess.” Mike peered up at him, as he dug a groove into the ground with the toe of his tennis shoe.

“How come?”

“My dad left.”

“Ah. That is a very good reason to be sad.”

Pete swung one leg over the fence, then the other. He sat on the swing next to Mike and held out his closed hand. Mike trustingly held out his open hand. A butterscotch candy landed in his

palm. Mike unwrapped it and popped the smooth, buttery candy into his mouth as they chatted about baseball, first grade teachers, and their favorite pizza.

Mike and his mom came to depend on Pete and his wife Mary, who had no children of their own. Mike's mom didn't even have to ask him, Pete just stepped up to become the man in Mike's life. Mike began to call Pete, Grandpa, and Pete introduced Mike as his grandson.

Pete cheered from the stands of Mike's games. When they lost, a butterscotch candy always appeared miraculously in the boy's hand. Pete was there to give advice about girls when Mike started dating. When Mike's first love broke up with him, he and Pete commiserated for hours on the front porch swing, downing a whole bag of butterscotch candies.

When Mike went off to college, they didn't see each other as often, and once he was working, it was even less often. After Mary died, Pete's health began to fail. Mike tried to get home once a year, but it had been two years since he'd last made the trip. Sitting next to his dying grandfather, Mike felt the regret deep in his bones. He should have spent more time with Pete after Mary died. He had failed the man who had always been there for him.

Rather than let the regret fester, his emotions spilled out as he talked. He hoped maybe the dying man could still hear him. He told him of the girl he hoped to marry. He told him about his career plans. He told him he knew he'd be a better father for having Pete in his life. Through it all, Pete's wrinkled face remained quiet. His fist did not relax. His eyes did not even flutter. Whe

n the labored breathing began, Mike felt hot tears spilling down his cheeks. The nurses had informed him of the signs of death. Even so, he could not accept this stranger he had come to love would soon be gone from his life forever.

He held on to Pete's hand and wept.

“Thank you, Grandpa. Thank you for saving me. For being there when my own dad wasn't. I love you so much. Now go find Mary.”

Moments later, Pete quietly took his last breath. Despair tore through Mike as he felt him leave.

When the tears receded, he got up to tell the nurses. He laid Pete's hand gently on the bed, noticing the clenched fist had finally relaxed. He pulled his hand away to find a butterscotch candy resting in his palm.