

Hands of Time

"Rest in Power, Michael."

The obituary trembled in my right hand. A cigarette burned between the fingers of my left.

I took a long drag, letting the smoke settle deep inside my lungs.

Screw my life.

I stood outside Third Baptist Church in a black suit I bought from Goodwill, wearing my father's favorite white shirt and tie beneath it. Church bells echoed overhead as mourners drifted past me with quiet condolences and rehearsed expressions of grief.

My heart pounded against my ribs.

Dad used to love NASCAR—especially Jeff Gordon. He admired competitors, people willing to dedicate everything to something they believed in.

He'd always tell me,

"Chase your goals with conviction, son. Don't run from fear. Embrace it. Fear isn't there to stop you—it reminds you to stay aware."

The church bell rang again. I hate funerals. I hate how death suddenly made everyone remember you.

My father died a brilliant scientist with more ideas than recognition. His greatest disappointment wasn't dying—it was never finishing the work he believed would change the world.

When I was four years old, he came within reach of the Nobel Prize. He never talked about losing it with bitterness.

Only possibility. I was seven then. Wild hair. Dirty clothes.

A juice box always in my hand because I spent every afternoon digging through the backyard looking for bugs no one else cared about.

Mom hated it. Dad loved me for it.

His laboratory sat on the right side of our house, but to me it was a second home. The room always smelled like buttered popcorn and rotten peaches.

I never understood why.

Photographs of Einstein, Isaac Newton, and Steve Jobs covered one wall above the telescope we'd built together during the summer of '89.

Across from them stretched a giant whiteboard filled with equations, sketches, and impossible ideas.

Dad would sit for hours writing inside his worn leather journal while quietly smoking his old tobacco pipe.

I'd sit beside him reading whatever science book I'd checked out from the library. Every so often he'd glance over with a smile.

The key to innovation, son, is never losing your curiosity."

Back then I thought he was just talking about science. Now I know he was talking about life. Everything changed later that year.

Mom left.

She packed her things, walked out the front door, and never looked back.

She left me with Dad but I didn't mind. Someone had to look after him. Someone had to remind him to eat when he disappeared into his work for days.

I was seven years old. I thought I was the man for the job.

July 17, 2000.

That's the night I heard my father cry for the first time. He tore through his laboratory like a man fighting invisible ghosts.

Glass shattered. Books hit the floor. It sounded less like anger and more like a wounded animal howling at the moon. A lone wolf and his pup.

The church doors groaned open.

People drifted inside in slow, quiet waves. An older man stopped beside me and rested a hand on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry about your father, Nathen." I looked down at the cigarette burning between my fingers.

"Thank you for coming."

He nodded once before disappearing into the sanctuary.

I took one last drag, crushed the cigarette beneath my shoe, and followed everyone inside.

"We are gathered here today to celebrate the life of Michael Jean Smith."

The pastor's voice echoed through the sanctuary.

"A devoted father. A brilliant scientist. A man whose curiosity inspired everyone fortunate enough to know him."

I tried to listen. I really did. But the room slowly slipped away. My heart pounded harder. The stained-glass windows blurred. My breathing shortened.

The pastor kept speaking, but his words dissolved into noise.

Then...

I smelled it. Buttered popcorn. Rotten peaches. Dad's laboratory. My chest tightened. Just like that I was seven years old again.

Terrified.

Thirty-four years old, surrounded by people, and all I wanted was for my father to wrap his arms around me one more time.

He always knew what to say whenever my anxiety took over.

"Just breathe, son."

That was all it took. One sentence. One hand on my shoulder.

One steady voice. Instead now There was only memories that faded into silence and when that realization hit me, it was a force I wasn't prepared for.

My father was gone.

Not traveling. Not working late. Not hidden away inside his lab chasing another impossible idea.

Gone. Forever. I had no wife. No children. No brothers. No sisters. Just me.

Just...Me.

"Nathen."

A soft voice reached through the panic.

"Nathen... breathe."

Gentle hands wrapped around me. I couldn't see who it was through the tears.

And yet they were able to hold me together. A familiar feeling that had been lost to me, but reactivated instantly.

"It's okay, sweetheart." "I'm here."

Slowly my breathing matched theirs. Slow. Steady. Safe. When my vision finally cleared, it was my mother.

She held me against her shoulder exactly the way she had when I was a little boy. I used to love the sweet smell of her perfume as a boy. She would read to me about things that would spark my imagination before bed, so wise and soothing.

The choir began singing softly behind us.

"Wade in the water..."

"Wade in the water, children..."

She closed her eyes and held me tighter. For a brief moment...

Twenty-seven years disappeared. She wasn't the woman who left. She was simply...Mom.

The choir's final note faded into silence.

One by one, people filed past my father's casket. I stood there alone. My hand rested gently against the polished wood. Inside lay the man who taught me how to dream.

The man who taught me curiosity.

The man who convinced a little boy that impossible was only another problem waiting to be solved.

I smiled through the tears.

"Thank you, Pop." My voice barely rose above a whisper.

"Thank you for giving me a world bigger than the one we lived in. You never stopped believing there was something left to discover. I won't either."

Behind me, I could feel eyes watching. My mother stood several feet away beside her husband, Chuck. Two children—my half brother and sister—stood quietly at her side.

Twenty-seven years. No phone calls. No birthdays. No holidays. No apologies. For a moment our eyes met.

Neither of us spoke. Some things were too heavy for words.

"Nathen?"

Larry's voice gently pulled me back. I turned.

He stood near the chapel doors, phone in one hand, garment bag in the other.

"We should get going." I nodded once. I looked back at my father one last time. I felt bad for leaving him again. The first time was for MIT, then for NASA, But I always made my way back. This time there's no way back.

I rested my palm against the casket, "I'll finish what you started daddy, and I love you"

Then I turned away.

Outside, the afternoon sky stretched endlessly above us.

Larry opened the passenger door. "You ready?" I looked back at the church. At the place where I just said goodbye forever to the greatest man I've ever known.

A small smile found its way onto my face.

"Yeah."

I climbed into the car. Larry started the engine.

"Your flight leaves in an hour," he said.

I looked out the window at the church. "Then let's not keep history waiting."

Larry smiled.

"Stockholm?" I nodded. "Stockholm."

The city slowly faded into the distance.

So did the boy who spent afternoons chasing bugs and reading beside his father's workbench.

The world knew Michael Jean Smith as a brilliant scientist whose greatest discovery never came.

I knew him simply as Dad. Funny how history works. The Nobel Peace Prize Committee invited me to accept the award in Robotics.

People would say I earned it. They'd call me a visionary. A pioneer. A genius even.

What they don't know is They'd be wrong. Every equation. Every invention. Every impossible idea, began in a small laboratory that smelled like buttered popcorn and rotten peaches.

I wasn't walking into history alone, no I was carrying my father with me. The whole way. Thank you dad and I love you.