

“Grandfather’s Jiffy Pop”

A Short Story

“He wanted to be buried with Jiffy Pop!” I remarked to my father, insistently.

I was 13 years old, a tall, lanky string bean. My messy crow’s nest of a hairdo sat atop my young, slender skull, sticking up and out this way and that, fluttering in the funeral home’s stale smelling air as I flapped my clumsy arms about while announcing my point, animatedly and argumentatively.

“Where is the Jiffy Pop?”

My grandfather, whom I loved probably the most of any adult in my young life, was an avid outdoorsman. He always took myself and my younger brother to various campsites in our area where we would spend weekends and breaks from school under a bright canopy of stars, making s’mores on the campfire, listening to ghost stories (one in particular, wherein long ago my grandfather and his friends had a hair-raising encounter with a towering thin and gangly figure, always gave me shivers) and of course, we enjoyed the piece de resistance, my grandfather’s personal favorite, Jiffy Pop.

I kid you not when I tell you the man ate Jiffy Pop every single day. He loved it, loved the process of making it, and just about everything about that snack. One was involved in the process of making the final product, and it was far more exciting than that “pansy” microwave popcorn, as he called it. In his opinion, the microwave version sucked all the fun and spirt out of making popcorn.

“It ought to be *banned!*” my grandfather would grumble.

He had t-shirts, posters, and other memorabilia in his office, a special room in his house. He was indeed a humongous fan of this fun, entertaining snack product.

“Don’t be silly,” my father told me as we stood together in the funeral home hallway just prior to the viewing, awaiting relatives’ and friends’ arrivals. “He wasn’t serious about that.”

Don’t be silly?

He wasn’t *serious* about that?

Was my grandfather’s love of his favorite, tasty, fun popcorn silly? I did not think so. It was a vital part of his personality, a reflection, or perhaps better put, a manifestation of a piece of his soul, the signature thing my brother and I knew he loved, and would remember him for. Were all the camping trips and all the skills he taught my brother and I, whether it be canoeing, fishing, hiking, fire making, knot tying, silly, too? And how could my father, my granddad’s own son, not see all the evidence in front of him, not have noticed his own father’s *serious* affinity for the popcorn? Had their last years on earth being father and son indeed been so strained? Had they been so estranged from one another?

Flabbergasted, overcome by frustration that was accentuated by teenaged hormones, I turned around at once and briskly stomped away from my father, unable to put my feelings into words, and took up my parentally assigned post near the sign-in book to greet people.

A day later, we stood in my grandfather's house, which my father had inherited, and we were moving into as a family, both because my grandmother needed us to help care for her, and it was much more spacious than our one-floor ranch style house down the street, which my dad sardonically referred to as the "brick doublewide."

"Come in here." I told my father, dragging him into the office room at the end of the main floor hallway. "Look."

I stood in the middle of the room, my hands outstretched, indicating all the Jiffy Pop memorabilia covering the walls, the Jiffy Pop themed rug on the floor, and the knick-knacks on his bookshelf.

The look on my father's face could have been a tiny thumbnail image under the dictionary entry for surprise. Realization slowly trickled across his features, stretching his face into a knowing look. He opened his mouth to say something, but no words came out. My father was at a loss.

I normally would have said I told him so, but I was already sufficiently satisfied by his reaction, one that was indeed a pleasant surprise to me.

Presently, my mother, brother, and grandmother, who was hunched over and clutching her walker, walked up and peered over my father's shoulders into the room.

"He *loved* Jiffy Pop." I said. My mother gasped as she took in the decorations and finally fully comprehended their meaning, having had pillow talk the night before regarding the matter that had occurred between my father and I at the funeral home. "I wasn't making this up."

My family stood, transfixed, gazing at the crimson glow of the logos as the setting sun peeked in between the slats of the drawn blinds on the office's one window, illuminating the Jiffy Pop materials in the room.

Finally, my mom walked away distraught, my brother did so nonchalantly, unfazed, and only my grandmother, father, and myself remained lingering there. My father's lips quivered and he still stood awkwardly just outside the office, searching for words.

Grandmother screwed up her face and peered at him.

"A fine pickle you've put us in, boy...this won't end well!" she said, ominously, to her only son. My dad's eyes widened.

"B-but, I didn't mean- he never-" father finally sputtered, "I mean, it wasn't in his will!"

"Ha! His will!" said my grandmother, "I can assure you, mister, it was indeed in his very will!"

Then she slowly turned and hobbled away back to her room and hospital-style bed, the sounds of the metal walker clinking and grinding as it slid across the floorboards following her all the way.

My father stood there, a worried look on his face. He glanced at me briefly, became conscious that I was aware of his anxious expression, and then whirled around and departed from there quickly, tromping away into some undisclosed location in the house, to further he and my mother's toils of sorting through old things and moving in their own.

At 11 o'clock in the evening, we had all settled into the living room after a family dinner and were watching a TV show. A short Frenchman of some renown who had a waxed mustache was investigating a murder on a train. I was fixated on the screen, enamored with the story and the thrill, paying attention to each plot detail, whilst perched on the edge of my seat.

By contrast, my younger brother was begging for snacks.

"Popcorn, mom, I want popcorn!" he begged at every inopportune moment, usually at the point of the detective delivering a famous one-liner of great depth and insight into the world and nature of being itself, or the revelation of a poignant piece of plot.

"Huh. Fine!" my mother exhaled exasperatedly, following my brother's umpteenth such ill-mannered and high pitched squeaking request.

She arose and made her way to the kitchen, getting a bag of microwave popcorn from the cabinet and began the process of cooking it inside the proper rectangular appliance. Round and round the popcorn bag turned on the glass turntable and up and up by so many degrees its contents went.

Turning around with her backside against the counter and arms outstretched and both palms resting on its surface, my mother craned her neck and stood on her toes, struggling to see the progression of the movie through the glassless window that sat in the wall between kitchen and living room.

After failing to fully hear the line the protagonist spoke from that vantage point, Mom came back down flat on her feet and gave up.

Pop!

Pop!

The kernels reached the proper temperature and began their transformation.

Pop! Pop!

Mom was just about to turn back to glance at the clock on the stove, when she noticed something strange. The stovetop was on and a burner was glowing bright red. She had not turned it on. She had not used the stovetop when preparing dinner.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Rolling her eyes and assuming her youngest child had yet again experimented with kitchen appliances, she stepped over and rotated the stove dial to the OFF position.

Pop-pop-pop-poppitty-pippity-pop-pop!

DING!

With the popcorn finished, mom hit the spring-loaded button that both opened the microwave door and ended its cooking cycle, picked up the bag and, shaking it, turned to make her way back into the living room.

Across the kitchen floor and starting around the corner of the entry way to the living room, when Mom noticed a bright, orange light in the corner of her eye. Looking, she realized it was the stove burner indicator light, telling her that the stovetop was again on.

Gasping, she reached over and switched the burner off, again.

"Okay, guys, not funny!" she said. Her husband sometimes played tricks on her and must have snuck in while she was turned around and turned it on again (though, admittedly, pulling such off so stealthily was an impressive feat). "That's a dangerous prank turning on the oven like that!"

None of us knew what she was talking about. She insisted, much to my chagrin, on talking over the TV program about it, just as the perpetrator was about to be revealed. She demanded to know who did it, and only eventually settled down and stopped, giving her interrogation a rest. As I gave her a sidelong glance when she was seated again on the couch, I could see her squinting and studying each family member's face, scrutinizing their expressions, looking for any innate signs of latent guilt. Her face vaguely resembled the detective from the show we were watching. Finding none, she stopped, allowing herself to relax and sink deeply and comfortably into the cushion.

"Mommy! Water please!"

Mom closed her eyes and gritted her teeth, then took a deep breath.

With the TV movie over, and it now being well after midnight (it was a Friday night, during the summer!) we all got up, washed up, brushed our teeth, and prepared for bed.

Mom told us all she really didn't think the joke was funny and seriously whoever was turning on the stove burner repeatedly really needed to stop because they'd burn us all to death and that was if they didn't kill her with a migraine from worrying first. She had found the burner on upon walking into the kitchen after the movie ended.

Walking into the kitchen just after finishing brushing my teeth, I found my mother, pale and wide eyed, standing with her hand covering her mouth, and my dad looking skeptical standing by her side, frowning. They were both staring at the stove.

The burner was on, the knob turned up to HIGH. Mom had seen the knob turn of its own accord, and bring the stove back to warm life again.

My father turned the stove off.

A few minutes passed, and nothing happened. We all exited the room.

CLICK!

Turning, we all saw the burner was on again.

My dad stepped grumpily up to confront the appliance, turning the knob off again, then for extra measure, stepped behind it and unplugged it from the wall.

“Let’s not think too much about this,” Dad said, “and just all go to bed.”

So we did.

In the morning, the knob was turned in the on position again, and all the Jiffy Pop that had belonged to my grandfather, a stack of 4 units, that the previous night had been stored away in the cupboard above the stove right next to the microwave variety, was strewn all over the floor as if someone had angrily tossed it all about.

None of us had gotten up in the night. No one could explain how the Jiffy Pop got all over the floor. My mom and dad cleaned up the mess and replaced the Jiffy Pops back into their allotted space in the cabinet.

For the next several days, we left the cooker unplugged, except when my mother or father used it for dinner, after which they once again unplugged it. Every single morning the same stovetop knob was turned to the on position.

I knew the significance of this.

Everyone in the house did, but no one wanted to say it, to talk about it.

With each passing day, the odd events taking place in my grandparents’ house became more frequent and increasingly eerie.

One night, in the wee hours of the morning, my father woke up in he and my mother’s room when he felt a shiver as if the air in the room had become suddenly frigid. Squinting and without his glasses, he saw a shimmering blue figure: it was a glowing silhouette of a man standing in the room nearby the bed.

Reaching for his glasses, my dad sought to see this figure more sharply, and to determine if perhaps the figure was a trick his eyes were playing on him. As soon as he turned back over, glasses in hand, the figure had vanished.

At first, he told nobody this.

The figure kept appearing. The next night it was ever so slightly clearer and more distinct than the night before. My father commanded the ghost to go away, and immediately, it did so. The figure continued appearing frequently, and always at the same hour each night.

On the fourth night, my mother, too, awoke when the cold spell occurred. The figure was more clear this time, and closer to the bed.

Sitting up, my mother squealed. She recognized the man. Turning and pulling his glasses onto his face, my father, too saw and comprehended who the man was.

Standing before them in glistening, flickering, blue ghostly light, was my grandfather.

I, of course, already knew this good and well. I knew exactly which burner my grandfather used each and every time he cooked his favorite popcorn treat. I knew which cabinet he stored said snacks, and I knew him well enough to know how he probably felt about his offspring not honoring his funerary wishes regarding his favorite earthly good.

So, I was not frightened in the least by the story when my parents finally mustered the gumption to tell me, nor was my brother, nor my grandmother. We knew that this ghost was the spirit of a man we all loved and knew very well. And we knew what he needed. By contrast, however, my parents were very distraught and freaked out by the haunting. It was incredibly evident in their faces as they called the family meeting in the living room one afternoon and told us in elaborate detail about it.

"I knew something like this would happen! You fools!" my grandmother said with a grimace and an aged, gnarled finger quivering and gesticulating at my parents.

"He wants his Jiffy Pop! I *told* you!" said I.

"Yeah! Jiffy Pop!" squealed my younger brother.

"Oh come on, that's not *serious*! Not adult! When hauntings of this nature occur, it's for a more important and deep reason than that!" my father shouted, insistently. "It's *not* because he wants Jiffy Pop!"

"Dad, why are you so opposed to the idea? It's *obvious*! It's dancing around right *in front* of your eyes!" I pled, "He *loved* Jiffy Pop! His ghost couldn't understand the stovetop was unplugged, and threw a fit, tossing all the Jiffy Pop everywhere!"

"I don't want to hear anything more about Jiffy Pop!" Dad declared. "I'm tired of it! I have already had to hear about Jiffy Pop, Jiffy Pop, Jiffy Pop growing up and all throughout my adult life! I was drug all over the woods in various locations all over Kingdom Come as a child on dreadful, mosquito-infested, cold camping trips where we slept on the cold hard ground and didn't have TV! I'm *tired* of it! We are *not* giving the ghost Jiffy Pop. It's absurd! What we *are* going to do is tonight as a family when he appears is ask him what the devil he wants and why he's here from beyond the grave. I'm putting my foot down and that's final!"

No one else said a word.

We all filed out of the living room one by one. As I gave an angry, pouting glare at my father from over my shoulder, I saw that the last one to pass by him was my grandmother. He looked at his mother and she at he. She hissed something inaudible at him through gritted teeth, then, raising her voice, said "you have no idea what you're doing, boy!"

The blood left my father's face and he appeared to me altogether deflated.

That night we were all together, gathered in my parents' room, awake, awaiting the arrival of my grandfather's ghost. Mom and Dad sat up together atop the bed, above the covers. Grandmother was across the room from the bed in an armchair in the corner, and my brother

and I were on the floor in sleeping bags. We all gazed solemnly at the small television in my parents' bedroom.

When the hour approached that grandfather regularly appeared, my mother turned off the TV with the remote. We all sat up and watched diligently.

A few minutes past the hour, and a chilly, soft breeze seemed to cool the room with no natural cause from out of nowhere. The lights flickered several times, a slight static crackle came out of the speakers of the dead TV, and a blue orb of light suddenly appeared floating in the air in our midst.

The orb turned and rose and fell, growing larger and brighter all the while until there was an eerie fluttering flash, and before us stood a glimmering, ever so slightly translucent specter of my grandfather.

Grandmother arose at once and moved toward him with extraordinary speed given her age and condition. As she approached he turned, and, seeing her, smiled. His face flickered and he appeared to age backward some odd years as he comprehended her presence.

"George, oh George!" she said.

Grandmother went to throw her arms around him, but her appendages passed right through his body, moving his presence aside like smoke as they went through him. When her hands hung by her sides following this, the misty essence of my grandfather fully reconstituted itself to its prior shape and form.

My father stepped forward.

"Dad." He said. "You keep coming here each night, and each night you are slightly more solid-looking. We can only assume whatever it is you need you really, really want badly, so much so that with each passing night you come back more furiously, vigorously, and real looking that before."

Grandfather nodded.

"But what is it you want, dad?"

Grandfather stood looking at my father. He said nothing. His gaze flickered with the varying intensity of his spectral light and swirling mist.

"Dad, please tell us, what do you want?"

Nothing from grandfather.

"Can you tell us, Dad?"

My grandfather moved his head from left to right and back again, shaking it.

"No. So you can't talk, then George?" asked my grandmother.

Grandfather turned his ghostly head to look at her. He nodded this time.

"Well can you *show* us what it is you want?"

Grandfather's ghost smiled. He nodded again.

Down the stairs and into the living room we all went, following closely behind my slowly moving grandfather's ghost, who at seemingly random intervals was so vivid I thought he may be back to being fully solid, then was nothing but a vapor, then a ball of light, then a silhouette, and then back to nearly solid form again as he led us through the house. He opened the kitchen cupboard and lifted a pack of Jiffy Pop. He carried it with him, sometimes in a clasped, ghostly hand, other times on the very wind of his essence downward, into the basement, where we followed him.

It was entirely dark in the basement, and the only illumination we had was that emanating from grandfather's spirit.

My grandfather progressed across the basement floor, straight through his old couch with its red cover, and to the woodstove built into the chimney on the opposite wall. He crouched down and began removing wood from his still present wood pile, which was neatly stacked exactly the way he had left it. He stood stacking piece of wood after piece of wood into the stove. He doused the pile with lighter fluid, then lit a small torch from a matchbook he picked up that had been tucked behind the clock on the mantle top.

The ghost was just about to drop the match into the stove when there was a yell, a sound of splashing water that caused grandfather's mist to swirl, followed immediately by total blackness.

A moment later and my mother had turned on an electric lamp.

"What in the world did you go and do *that* for?" my grandmother demanded of my father, accusatively.

"I'm sorry, I panicked! That wood pile was so big and there was so much lighter fluid...I didn't want the house to burn down!"

"Didn't want the house to burn down?" my mother said, disbelievingly. "You still don't trust the man, his, knowledge, or his skills do you? Your grandfather was an Eagle scout! He was a master of flame, knot, and outdoors-ing! He would have had total control over any fire he started, in this stove or anywhere in life, and in death!"

"You never came to terms with him..." grandmother said, her eyes raising in realization. "You never understood him and you still don't..." then her brow furled and she pointed her gnarled finger at her son once again. "I'll tell you one damned thing, boy, you had better make your peace with your father and give him what he wants! You've been given another chance most don't get, and I don't even want to *think* what might become of you, us, and this house if you refuse the opportunity to make good on it!"

We stood there a few awkward moments later, none of us saying anything.

Then, "Dad," I spoke up, "I loved him. He loved you, too. It's Jiffy Pop. It really is. I'm serious. I know you didn't like camping and everything like he did. But he loved you. I love you too. Please forgive him. Let him go. Jiffy Pop, Dad. Jiffy Pop."

I didn't know what more to say, or how to communicate in words all that I felt that went unsaid. But, I think I struck the nerve I needed to, for my father bowed his head and tears

trickled down his now reddening cheeks. My mother stepped forward and put her arms around him. After several minutes and several long whimpering sighs, my father's tears stopped.

We all receded upstairs and went to bed, with the exception of my dad, who stood there, holding the Jiffy Pop he had stooped to recover, staring at it intently, his eyes sparkling in the glimmer of the basement lamp.

The next night I was awoken suddenly by my mother shaking me excitedly.

"Wake up, son, wake up! He's here! Grandpa's here! It's time!"

I woke up and ran out of the room in my PJ's and slippers, joining my brother by my grandmother's side, and watched as my dad handed grandfather's ghost, who was now hovering in the living room, the Jiffy Pop he had picked up the night before. My grandfather took it in his ghostly hand, and a bright, wide smile broke out across his phantom face.

We followed him again, this time out the back door, down the steps of the back porch, and across his back yard to the fire pit he so loved, its multiple camping chairs still arranged in a circle around that pit in its central position in the yard, exactly how he had left it. We helped him ignite several logs with kindling and fuel, and built the fire up into a flaring and strong furnace.

When the fire was roaring steadily, grandfather peeled the paper from the aluminum foil container, and held its handle, sticking the disposable pan over the flame. When the kernels began to sizzle, the ghostly man swished and swirled the snack, and pops began inside it.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

Pop-pop-pippity-pop!!!

A few minutes and the aluminum bag had expanded and burst, and fresh, buttered popcorn sat steaming in the disposable pan, and my grandfather was beaming, both on his face and literally from his phantasmal form. He reached into the treat bag and brought forth a handful of popped kernels, which he somehow crunched between his ghostly teeth. His form began to solidify more than it ever had before, and he looked alive and real to us again.

"Thank you." he said.

Myself, my little brother, my grandmother, and both parents watched in awe then as my grandfather's form began to fade, gently growing less bright and more transparent. As he faded the Jiffy Pop began to fall gently to the earth, but a second, ghost version remained in the figure's hands.

A river flowed from my dad's eyes once more.

"All those years. I resented him. I got too cool for camping and didn't go. But he kept going. He loved it. I thought he loved it more than me. But he didn't. All those years." He closed his eyes and pushed out pooling droplets. "I'm sorry, dad. I love you. My mother clasped one of my dad's biceps with a hand, and rested the other one on his back.

My father opened his eyes to see the last glimmer of misty ghost smoke, and with it my grandfather's smiling face that mouthed back the words "I love you too" dissipate and rise with

the smoke of the fire into the clear, starry night sky, beyond, onward and upward to rest and final freedom.

“George, oh George” my grandmother whispered.

We all sat there together and watched the fire and talked and enjoyed each other’s company for a long time the rest of the night, until the fire burned down to hot ashes. My father finally retrieved the same bucket from the basement with which he had doused the stove fire the prior night. The same bucket filled with water, but a slightly different and better man repeated the action tonight, and put out the flames of that particular fire for good.

Things were different after that. The house became more ours, and we finally rearranged and changed things from exactly the way grandfather had them, subtracting from his furnishings and adding our own. We left the office room full of his Jiffy Pop memorabilia, and the fire pit unaltered, however. As for my grandfather’s camping equipment, after that night my father removed them from the “to Goodwill pile” and replaced them in their spots in the house closets.

Dad took me and my brother, and eventually my third brother and our dog, camping nearly every weekend after that. We would fish, learn how to tie knots, and tell ghost stories (one day long thereafter I told my very own that involved my grandfather, while my father, sitting across from my own children, his hair and beard now a bright white, listened and smiled) and always made sure to bring Jiffy Pop along. With every pop and burst of buttery goodness as the treat reached its heat apex and transformed into my grandfather’s favorite camping treat, I could hear him laugh, nearly see him smile the same way he did when he had camped with my brother and I all those delightful nights. I could feel him there with us every time, and knew as we sat there by the campfire, that somehow he was there, and also above us in the vast splendor and mystery of the cosmos, looking down upon us, smiling.

The End