Grandpa was to be Grand Marshall in the Beaver Days Parade. Upon being informed of this slightly silly, but altogether endearing ordeal, I knew that we had to go. It had been nearly four years since I had been to Grandma and Grandpa’s house. Grandma had passed at that time and after the funeral, I mustered the strength to visit only once more and that was merely out of worry for Grandpa. Grandma had been the queen bee. She was a cook, a housekeeper, and Grandpa’s counterpart. Mom and I had returned a couple weeks following the funeral to tend to housekeeping and assure ourselves that Grandpa would have a home cooked meal. We needed to know that he would survive the loss and that he could fend for himself, not because he was incapable, but because he and Grandma had been a team, a partnership, a routine twosome and the sudden loss of anyone’s everything could knock the wind out of their sails. Upon departure, my heart heavy and my throat tight, I had subconsciously decided that the loss was nothing I could seem to bare.

I hadn’t seen Grandpa since I was pregnant with Maddie and now she was four months old and Ant was nearly three. Excitement consumed me while anxiety overwhelmed my senses. I feared not the condition of the house, but the condition of my Grandpa. I packed the kids and me a change of clothes, diapers, baby wipes, and toiletries and we headed to Mom and Dad’s. After transferring the car seats from my car into Mom and Dad’s brand new car, I climb in behind Dad in the driver’s seat.

We headed west then north and west again into the vast openness of rural Nebraska. Since it was the first trip that Anthony would remember and the first trip with Maddie, I accessed the camera option on my cell phone and commenced at posing Maddie in her carseat and instigating perfect facial expressions for the perfect pictures and snapping pictures of Anthony’s excitement at seeing, for the first time, things little boys dream of. At the first sight of a farmhouse, Anthony’s face lit up and his voice grew to extreme excitement.

“It’s a parm!” he exclaimed, his tiny white monster teeth visible between his lips and his tiny precious finger pointing out the window to a lone simple house set back off the highway.

Mom, Dad, and I laughed at his adorableness and encouraged more sweet and silly outbursts by asking leading questions and laughing heartily at his responses. For two hours Anthony remained amazed by farmhouses, announcing every one that entered his line of vision.

Even in my childhood, Highway 22 seemed to veer in and out of nowhere and nothing, and I had often feared that if, by chance, we missed the northern turn that placed us on an even more desolate Highway 39, we may never find our way. Somehow, Mom had only gotten off track once and that was upon she and my slightly older sister, Krissy, attempting to go to Walmart in Columbus, but somehow ending up so far north that they claim to have ended up very near South Dakota. I’ve often wondered at what point they realized they were traveling in the absolute wrong direction, headed north when the destination was southwest.

Luckily, Dad was driving. He made the northern turn onto Highway 39 and the car, in all its newness, slid along the ground coolly, unjerking and unwavering toward St. Edward. Finally, St. Edward was in view. As we approached the western curve that would take us into the quiet, happy, nostalgic home of our holidays and our family, my attention was pulled instead east. I peered out the back passenger window and up into the trees that I knew shaded the cemetery. “Hi, Grandma” I thought, my heart heavy with grief. It was not until it was impossible to see the hill upon which we had laid her to rest that I was able to stop myself from looking for her.

Grandpa greeted us with smiles and cheer, his age seeming to have doubled since the spring before. My heart ached for our loss. I had half expected to be greeted with her smell, her smile showing the silver cap on her tooth, and her laugh, which while loud, was the most comforting laugh we had ever heard. The morning of her funeral, I was awoken at dawn to what I swore were Grandma’s laughter and the clanking of dishes echoing from the kitchen. I had begun to rise and go see her when an unbearable weight was placed upon my chest, the realization that it couldn’t be her. There would be no breakfast made to order, no outbursts of friendly laughter echoing from the kitchen.

We ate and began to settle in; talking to Grandpa about what he had been doing and his aches, pains and doctor’s visits. He told us who had been to visit and what he had been working on in reference to the gardens and the upkeep of the house. It was a relief to realize that he was much more capable than my pity had given him credit for. Grandpa took Maddie, holding her in his pale, wrinkled hands that shook slightly from old age. The smile on his face melted my heart. His hands were just secure enough for me to just bite my tongue and let him enjoy the moment rather than showing him my nervousness of his shake. She smiled a baby smile and nuzzled her chubby face into his shirt.

The night ended early. Grand Marshall Grandpa had a long day ahead of him. Upon rising in the morning, I woke Dad to assist me with making breakfast for Grandpa. We spent the day lounging and looking at what seemed like hundreds of pictures hanging on the walls, wishing, missing. I walked Anthony to the neighbor’s stable to see the horses and let him sit on the rusty old tractor and inside the landlocked boat. He was in heaven. The parade took place in the early afternoon and was as lively as a small town parade can be. Anthony hooted and giggled as men, women, and children threw candy from vehicles of all shapes and sizes. Finally we saw Grand Marshall Grandpa. He sat upon the backseat of a convertible with a huge smile, waving proudly at his audience.

“There’s Papa Papa!” bounced Anthony chasing candy across the ground and stuffing it into his green plastic flower pot.

Grandpa skipped the meal being sold at the park and retired back home to rest. After eating, we packed up the kids and returned to the house. Grandpa looked exhausted and unraveled. After gathering our belongings, hugging, kissing, and expressing our love for him, we headed out. The trip home was quieter than the trip there. Almost.

“Look! It’s Thomas the Tain!” Anthony said, obviously wanting to leap from his seat.

The train traveled beside us for a while, inciting questions of what was in each and every car. Mom, Dad, and I entertained the game until we eventually advanced past the train, losing it on a curve of the track. Omaha was not far away and we too were exhausted. Anthony is now stuck on the concept of passing vehicles disbursing candy from their windows and frequently requests to see Papa Papa and his parm.