Dad Died on Groundhog Day

Punxsutawney Phil didn’t even cross my mind on February 2nd . Overshadowing Groundhog Day was the first anniversary of the death of The Old Man, my Dad, John Orville Reich.

Dad loved quotes. “Life is like fucking an 800-pound gorilla. You don’t stop until the gorilla stops.” I always shrugged that one off as bad advice. It was his way of saying keep your head up; keep moving. Life is going to throw things at you; you’ve got to deal.

His time was coming. Septuagenarians, congestive heart failure, and walking pneumonia mix like oil, water, and sand. He was losing his mobility. Most of his friends were dead.

Tom Baker went to check on The Old Man on the morning of February 2nd, 2018. Dad was found alive and conscious but unable to get up after another fall. Baker loaded him in the truck. They headed to the hospital.

Dad was down. But with no foreboding sense of urgency or immediate sign of doom, the two old friends took the backcountry gravel county roads where they’ve both spent years hunting birds; where the serenity of vast farmlands and the slow pace of travel isn’t afforded on state highways.

At Dad’s funeral, Baker told me of that last trip down those backroads of Guthrie County, Iowa. Dad stared out the window - through the openness of agriculture, dormant between the harvest and the planting seasons. Passing through the tilled fields of corn, the pheasants and the deer in hiding, he offered up one last quote. “The buzzards are circling, Bake. The buzzards are circling.” He always had a quote up his sleeve; that one, you can only play once.

Earlier that day, my Aunt Lynn called and said Dad was going to the hospital. I asked if I should prepare for the worst and fly home. My gut told me it was time, but my aunt insisted I wait for more news.

You remember where you were when “the call” comes in. Pedaling down 8th Street to distract myself at a local dive, I put a foot down on the ice and answered the vibrating device.

My half-brother broke the news. The Old Man was taking his last breaths. I called Aunt Lynn. His heart stopped. He was gone. I wouldn’t have made it, anyway.

I’ve never listened to the last message Dad left on my device. I don’t know if I ever will.

One last joke. One last, “Did you see the Iowa ballgame?” One last, “I saw your old friend \_\_\_ today….” One last quote. One last, “Proud of you, Kid.” If I don’t listen, there is still one last something. I’m keeping it a mystery, but I carry it with me everyday, everywhere I go.

February 2nd won’t ever be Groundhog Day to me. It’s the day I lost The Old Man, my biggest supporter, and my best friend. “Kill them with kindness.” His quotes now follow me like my own shadow does. “You can never have too many friends.” “Never lose your sense of humor.”

And, of course, there’s that fucking gorilla.