Spring 1999

The Dad Cycle

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Carroll College
Helena, Montana

The Dad Cycle

A Senior Honors Thesis Submitted to
The Department of Languages and Literature
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
To Graduate with Honors

by Elissa Fairbrother

12 April 1999
This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of Languages and Literature.

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Acknowledgements

This project has been a wonderful opportunity for meaning-making and catharsis. I am honored to have shared it with Dr. Kay Satre. Her writing class sparked the beginnings of this piece during my senior year of high school; it is through her support and gentle nudging that I have revisited the material and taken it to an honest and vulnerable level. I greatly appreciate the many hours she has put into my work. Her ability to see shape and her suggestions for revision have been invaluable to my development as a writer. Most of all, I thank her for her friendship and trust. She is an incredible mentor.

I thank my readers, Lorna Milne and Murphy Fox, who assisted me in focusing my language, creating more power in my writing. Both helped me identify areas to cut--and convinced me that it was for the best. I am grateful for their patience and insight. Their comments led me to a richer, more effective piece.

I also thank my friend Steve Dee for encouraging me to reach farther--even though I was down to my final days of writing. He correctly sensed that I had more to say. I am grateful to Dr. Laurie Fahlberg for understanding loss, being brave enough to share, and giving me the encouragement I needed going into the final weekend of revision.

I would not have been able to write this thesis without the support of my family. I thank them for understanding when I needed quiet, tolerating my creeping around the house in the middle of the night, and putting up with me in general. Most of all, I thank them for believing in me--especially when I was questioning myself. I thank my mother, Karrie Fairbrother, for her endless patience and love. She has been my partner through much of this. I think Dad would be proud.
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Introduction

We write to communicate, to create relationships. Telling our stories helps us connect with others. We write to give meaning to life’s processes. As the writer searches, struggles to express her thoughts, she may help the reader through his own personal meaning-making. Writers often say they write to find out what they believe; reading can yield similar results. Comparing and contrasting the writer’s experience to our own lives helps us gain a better understanding of ourselves.

I hope to provide readers with such an opportunity; I hope “The Dad Cycle” speaks to experiences we all share. In this piece, I have combined memoir, confessional poetry, and personal essay to tell the story of life with my father, coping with his death, and learning to live again. I use memoir to relate my past experiences, confessional poetry to convey the weight of emotion, and personal essay to introduce expository materials, connecting my story with the writings and philosophies of others.

Literary critics define memoir as “reality-based literature” and “the literature of memory.” Many of them find memoir self-indulgent. A New York Times Magazine writer once stated, “The license to tell all has produced a virtual library of dysfunctional revelation” (qtd. in Terry B5). Critic James Bowman agrees, saying that memoirs are too often “like a literary Jerry Springer. When someone has a fit of pique or nastiness, we tune in, we buy the books” (qtd. in Terry B5). In an article for The Nation, Patrick Smith describes memoir as representing “the democratization of the written word, because everyone has a story and, as with the harmonica, anyone can make noise” (30).

But is this all that memoirs accomplish? Are writers of memoirs just venting and dumping—just “making noise?” If this were so, would memoirs such as Frank McCourt’s Angela’s Ashes and Tobias Wolff’s This Boy’s Life have obtained such wide acclaim? I think not. There is a place for memoir in all our hearts—but also in our minds. More real than fiction, more personal than autobiography, memoir fulfills a basic need of the human
heart: the need to make sense out of one's life. A need that, as Sara Terry of Christian Science Monitor writes, "turns small moments of self-reflection into a more universal mirror of the soul" (B5).

In an attempt to explain the recent explosion of memoir, Terry describes writers as "grappling with individual meaning in a consumer culture swamped with data" (B5). We are surrounded by information and technology, drowning in computer-based interaction. We use e-mail instead of handwritten letters, on-line conversations instead of meeting face to face. In an age of limited human interaction, it is no shock that people gravitate toward self-revelation in their writing and reading. Where else can they go? Few take time to sit on the front porch and reminisce, to share their past experiences. It seems that memoir fills a traditional part of our culture that has been slowly disappearing under the manufactured identity that society projects onto us.

Contrary to our fast-paced, technologically-oriented lives, memoirs take past experiences seriously. Novelist and essayist Charles Baxter believes that "memoirs are part of the search for both meaning and the preservation of experience" (qtd. in Terry B5). But for memoir to be successful, readers need to see more than a writer's personal experiences; they need to see a relationship between the text and their own lives—something that triggers feelings and issues beyond both reader and writer. Smith proposes that memory should "illuminate work made to stand on its own" (30). He cites Angela's Ashes as an example: "The power of McCourt's book lies in its account of an emerging consciousness—a universal experience that is rarely articulated well. It is also about poverty and childhood, survival and laughter, and to an extent, the long tragedy of the Irish" (30). McCourt achieves this through memoir, through relating stories which show us his emerging consciousness. Angela's Ashes may articulate a universal experience, encompassing poverty and childhood and "the long tragedy of the Irish," but we encounter this universal by reading McCourt's personal experiences—his book is about his life; he doesn't spend time analyzing the Irish or any other issues. How does McCourt craft his story into a Pulitzer Prize winning memoir that stirs the emotions of people across the world, speaking to issues much bigger than his personal life? What makes one memoir successful while
another lies dusty on the shelves?

Paul Diehl, head of the nonfiction writing program at the University of Iowa, states that “a writer’s craft is what saves a memoir from being a mere narcissistic endeavor. ... Homer said, ‘The gods have given us tears so that we can make songs out of them.’ Good memoirs...turn an individual story into a song that we can all share ourselves” (qtd. in Terry B5). Andre Malraux, writer of Anti-Memoirs, says he is not interested in “the pursuit of secrets,” but rather in “the human condition.” When evaluating memoir, he looks for “certain characteristics which express not so much an individual personality as a particular relationship with the world.” Malraux nails the problem of memoir when he asks, “...what do I care about what matters only to me?” (qtd. in Smith 30).

The problem of focusing on the purely personal is all too common. If a writer is writing only for himself, why get it published? That is what diaries are for. Jacki Lyden, author of the memoir Daughter of the Queen of Sheba, wrote in her press kit, “I was afraid that my mother...would drift away from me if I did not write this down” (qtd. in Smith 31). Smith argues that there is no larger point to this memoir. He states that the first words of Lyden’s text sum up the problem with her piece: “This book was written first and foremost for my mother and my family” (qtd. in Smith 31). Does work this personal have anything to share with readers outside the family? Like Smith, writer Tobias Wolff believes memoir should have a larger focus. He describes this focus in a July 1997 interview with Writer’s Digest:

You’re not just going to write down, “Well, this happened to me, and then this happened to me, and then this happened to me.” You’re trying to discern a pattern from these experiences. What is significant about what happened? How would some of these experiences tell us something—not only about one’s self, but about human beings in general. What happens to us? How do we respond? Is there something in what you’re putting down that could be learned and useful to other people?” (25).

Finding shared experience seems to be the key to an effective memoir. We read and we see ourselves--we see our own struggles; we laugh and cry because the memories being shared lead to associations with events and feelings we’ve experienced in our own lives. Tristine Rainer, director of the Center for Autobiographic Studies in Pasadena, California,
says, “Part of the appeal of a memoir is the fact that readers can sometimes find their own lives reflected in someone else’s—and perhaps draw insights or strength from the lessons the writer has learned” (qtd. in Terry B5). Memoirs enable us to experience something and learn from it without having to live through the event in our real lives. Just as we can learn from world history in order to avoid repeating the same mistakes as a nation, we can learn from personal history—learn about how we do or do not want to live our lives. Memoir may even help us gain emotional intelligence in everyday situations. “We’re trying to figure out how to live out our own lives in a tremendously complicated world with too many choices and no clear guidelines,” Rainer says. “The only thing we can go on is other people’s actual, lived experiences. We don’t want to be preached to, we don’t want abstract ideas about what we should or shouldn’t do. We want real-life experience” (qtd. in Terry B5). Reading memoir can show us that we are not alone. It may even give us stamina to deal with difficult situations in our own lives.

By choosing to weave confessional poetry into my memoir, I am compounding the risk of being too personal. At the end of his article, Smith concludes that “the purely personal is not the stuff of memoir, but its enemy” (33). While David M. Brown of Penn State University states that the function of poetry is “the need to escape the one unforgivable sin of dullness—the need to move the reader to some emotional response,” he also admits that confessional poetry has an inherent “preoccupation with the personal, reflected not only in the language of poems, but also in the poet’s self-definition.” He cautions against self-indulgence, stating that poetry must explore and seek “the exactitude of the personal, [but] must never make the deathly pretense of being more than human. In other words, the trick in this process is to analyze without bloating the self” (292-293). Confessional poetry must portray true emotions without becoming self-absorbed—a state that alienates the reader, rather than inviting him to share the experience.

Critic and poet, Bruce Weigl points out another danger of the self as subject:

For a poet, relying too heavily upon autobiographical detail, structure, content, or strategy can be a dangerous thing. Such dependence can lull the writer into focusing too much attention on being true to actuality and not enough attention on the poem
Although this is an easy trap to fall into, it should not prevent a poet from using the personal as the subject of his writing. As Robert Lowell, one of the first confessional poets, emphasizes, personal experiences must be worked into art. He told an interviewer that "...the thing was the joy of composition, to get some music and imagination and form into [my personal 'outpourings'] and to know just when to stop and what sort of language to put in..." (qtd. in Maio 229).

This language should express emotion through description and imagery that stimulate the reader, touching his own pool of feelings and experience. In his book, The Confessional Poets, Robert Phillips states that in successful confessional poetry, "the personal is expressed so intimately we can all identify and empathize" (17). The goal, as Ken Norris writes in Essays on Canadian Writing, is to "be emotionally honest while almost entirely avoiding the wretched excesses of a poetry rooted solely in personal emotion" (45). Poet Michael Ondaatje describes this danger of confessional poetry in the final lines of "Tin Roof," the second section in his poetry collection entitled Secular Love:

I wanted poetry to be walnuts
in their green cases
but now it is the sea
and we let it drown us,
and we fly to it released
by giant catapults
of pain loneliness deceit vanity (qtd. in Norris 6)

But confessional poetry doesn't have to succumb to these excesses. In analyzing the confessional poetry of John Crowe Ransom, critic Cleanth Brooks points out that "the emotion is there, very real, completely genuine, credible, but the poet is never overmastered by it: the poet, one feels, is always in control of himself" (212). Brooks also points out that, while the confessional poet makes it "a point of honor to tell all" and while the subject matter of the poems are mostly revelations of the poet's personal life, the ideas and emotions still apply to many of us (211). As in memoir, the poet's disclosure of personal experiences can help the reader understand his own life.
It is the bravery of self-disclosure that critic M.L. Rosenthal most admires. Confessional poets open up to the experience of life, allowing themselves to be affected and changed and then express those changes. Rosenthal, credited with coining the “confessional” label, defines confessional poetry as a “literally self-exposing vulnerability,” stating that he has “always...been more interested in the poetry that storms and dreams past known boundaries than in the poetry that seeks to perfect itself within them” (qtd. in Gregson 6). He does not see a problem with the freer, more dramatic verse. To write with perfect form requires good intellect. Confessional poetry requires the intellect and the heart to work together.

Incorporating the heart means sharing personal feelings, all the while guarding against being too indulgent. While indulgence is a common criticism of confessional poetry, Phillip Lopate speaks in favor of the individual and the personal in a 1996 New York Times article:

American poetry today suffers not from being too personal and confessional, but from being not personal or confessional enough. Often the poet pulls back from providing just those biographical specificities and idiosyncratic reactions that would bring him alive as an authentic individual. Instead, there is a judicious ladling of images and metaphors and sense details to make the poem resemble that craft object, that Procrustean bed, the contemporary American poem; and the poet, abandoning onerous individuality, merges prematurely with the collective ethos (39).

Lopate stresses the need for “uniquely voiced individuals in poetry today,” asserting that the cautious language of today’s poets stems from the expectation that “poetry should dispense wisdom” and that poets are afraid to be “open-ended and honest about their doubts” (39). His call to write poetry that is more personal and confessional is encouraging.

Although I weave three different genres in this piece, they are similar in their objectives as well as their problems. The challenge lies in forming smooth transitions so that “The Dad Cycle” doesn’t seem like a conglomerate of disjointed chunks of writing.

Each genre serves a unique task in shaping the piece. While memoir allows me to
relate scenes from the past, confessional poetry enables me to express intense emotions and images. Memoir is grounded in a reality-based retelling of experience; confessional poetry, in the words of Yale’s Cleanth Brooks, “cannot be reduced to a logical statement or statements without the loss of its very substance” (228). John Crowe Ransom echoes this in his book, Selected Poems: “Poetry is still the supremely inclusive speech which escapes, as if unaware of them, the strictures and reductions of the systematic logical understanding” (qtd. in Brooks 228). Ultimately, my purpose for using memoir and confessional poetry is the same. I want to connect to my readers. As Denise Dumars states in her article for The Writer, “confessional poetry draws poet and reader closer together and helps both deal with the traumas of life and to gain more understanding of the human condition” (26). Confessional poet Anne Sexton said that when a writer can expose her soul, the reader will learn something: “They [great writers] expose their souls and then suddenly I am moved and I understand my life better.” She believed that her poems should “hold back nothing,” that they “should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us” (qtd. in Phillips 75-76). I hope my writing can break up the frozen sea within myself and my readers.

Finally, my use of the reflective essay introduces ideas from Hospice training, psychological theory, novels, and other writings on related issues. I use this genre to draw associations and reveal the shared nature of this piece; I see personal essay as one of the tools to make “The Dad Cycle” a shared experience as well as a vehicle to reinforce my credibility and depth as a writer. The outside references enrich the piece and further reveal common elements of human experience.

This is important because this project is not just for me. It’s not a desperate attempt to hold onto my father or record my memories before I forget them. I have my journal for that. I hope my memories and reflections will encourage people to look at their own lives. Perhaps readers will stop and think about their relationships, all the love and beauty that is in them, all the areas where they could work harder. Life is short; we often take our loved ones for granted, never imagining we could suddenly lose someone upon whom we think our very life, our very soul, depends. I want to emphasize the importance of this type of
relationship, but also show that it is possible to move through a loss that feels like it’s going to turn you inside out—that there is life on the other side of that experience. There can be so much love in life and death; because that love is really the most important thing we have, we can’t let the fear of loss prevent us from living.

All these issues are part of being human—everyone, everywhere deals with them in some way. In my piece, I want to address them without preaching. I hope to move people to their own realizations of life, death, and love by sharing my memories and reflections, finding a way to make them come alive for my readers. My genre choices work well in this respect; there is something about knowing a story is true that makes it more alive. We read, and in the back of our head there is a little voice that says, “My God, this really happened to her.” Not only is the language more alive to the reader, I think the language is more alive to the writer as well. Nowhere to hide, extremely vulnerable, writing memoir is more exciting than writing a story about something I have never experienced. W.D. Snodgrass, a confessional poet of the fifties, addressed this issue in his poetic manifesto of 1959. In it, he explains why the use of personae, third person narratives, and adopted poses were a dead end for him. He decides that the measure of a poem’s worth is “the depth of its sincerity.” His statements about the poets of his generation apply today:

...it seems to me that the poets of our generation—those of us who have gone so far in criticism and analysis that we cannot ever turn back and be innocent again, who have such extensive resources for disguising ourselves from ourselves—that our only hope as artists is to continually ask ourselves, “Am I writing what I really think? Not what I think is acceptable; nor what my favorite intellectual would think in this situation; nor what I wish I felt. Only what I cannot help thinking.” For I believe that the only reality which a man can ever surely know is that self he cannot help being, though he will only know that self through its interactions with the world around it. If he pretties it up, if he changes it’s meaning, if he gives it the voice of any borrowed authority, if in short he rejects this reality, his mind will be less than alive. So will his words (qtd. by Phillips 46).

Because of the power of its words, memoir has responsibility to truth, to a certain purity. Writing memoir, we say that these things happened—at least this is the way we remember them. I heard that Jack Kerouac once received advice from a fellow artist: “No matter what you do, keep it pure.” When Kerouac asked why, the painter replied,
“Because people look at your art and they see themselves.” The same is true for memoir.

Victor Hugo agreed: “When I speak to you about myself, I am speaking to you about yourself. How is it that you don’t see that?” (qtd. in Phillips 15). I hope I’ve crafted “The Dad Cycle” so that readers can see themselves in it. It is my story, but I’d like to share it with others now. They can receive it in whatever way works for them. May it help them understand what their friends, their loved ones, and perhaps their own selves are going through. May it bring thoughtfulness and insight, hope and revelation. May it bring peace. This is for everyone out there who has lost someone or will lose someone someday—I guess that’s everyone. And Dad, this is for you.
The Dad Cycle
I remember walks
down long dirt roads that wound under canopies
of Virginia autumn color
and I remember standing at dusk in the pink snow of cherry blossoms
watching mallards, feet stretched, strain to skim
before landing in sunset waters by the Jefferson Memorial

How we spent each dinner
eating classical music
and "Practice your violin, Elissa. Why am I
spending so much money if you're not going
to practice?" White-water rafting; those ice
showers we took at the youth hostel,
and fishing--Dad running after me as I swam
the catch bucket into the lake
"Go! Swim! You're Free!"

Life was his donut-breath-before-going-to-work
and the smell of his dental office
when he came whistling in the screen door each night,
changed into his baggy sweats
with holes in places that made Mom laugh.

We struggled at midnight with chemical equations,
me yawning and him, "For God's sake,
Elissa, drink some Coke or something. Just
stop yawning in my face."

I remember I watched his face as cold elevator doors
sliced the space between us, leaving him in
stiff hospital white.
The cancer
and him coming home from NIH or The Mayo Clinic
sitting in his big chair,
too sick to go to the bathroom alone.
His anger, the wheel chairs,
his body wasting away
until he was all gone.
Saturday, August 5, 1989. As we drive up to the cottage on Keuka Lake, I lean out the window, breathe the clean air through me. I'm so happy that we've come back to up-state New York this summer; we've definitely made the right decision. Dad's getting worse—he's in a wheelchair—but he really wanted to get to the lake, to go back to his home, just like we've done every year.

My grandparents have driven Mom and Dad in the Cadillac, arriving a couple of minutes before my uncle and I roll up in the station wagon. I see Mom and smile. Dad must be sleeping in the car, I think, as I watch her relax in a patio chair just five feet from the open door to my father. They're waiting for the wheelchair. I jump out and hurry to the hatchback to get it. Mom's cry freezes me mid-stride. "Oh my God. He's dead!"

I turn to twisted faces grouped at the car door. Mom, crying, bends over my father, searching for some sign of life. Everyone is shouting. I can't understand what's happening except that my grandparents, mom, and uncle are jumping into the car and driving off. Where are they taking him? I run to catch them, slipping on gravel, yelling for them to stop. Yanking open the door, I climb in next to Dad, slip my hand into his, searching for the usual love-squeeze. He just sits, perfectly still; not a breath passes his lips. I look around at everyone in the car. Stone faces focused forward—no signs of life there either.

The weeks after my father's death blur in my memory. I was all business and no tears, operating in shock, fourteen years old and trying to take care of my brother and sister, worrying about where my father would be buried, planning the funeral and memorial service, finding music, deciding what would be printed in the paper and the service programs. Cards, flowers, and food came raining down as soon as we returned from up-state New York. Nothing felt real—especially the way my friends tiptoed around me, not
knowing how to act or what to say. That was okay. Anyway, I had too much to do. I had to get everything typed and laid out for the printers by Monday. I had to figure out the order of the tape that would play background music after the service. I had to decide what poems would be printed and what ones would be read—and who would read them. And then there was the problem of the man at Arlington National Cemetery who said that Dad didn’t have enough rank as a Captain and medalled officer to be buried there. But that was what he wanted and I couldn’t let Grandma Alice keep him in up-state New York—even if she was his mother and he could be next to his father and not have to be cremated, which was the only way he could be in Arlington National Cemetery. He’d have to be in the columbarium and be cremated and I knew that wasn’t what he wanted. And even though Mom said that it would be okay and that he’d understand that it was the best solution to this “unforeseen problem,” I don’t like it because I know how stubborn Dad is and how he always gets what he wants and if it looks like he isn’t going to, he fights and fights so that it comes out his way in the end. And I tell her this and she gets tears on her face and says that he didn’t always get what he wanted or he’d be here. So then I feel bad and think that I’m causing trouble again and I don’t want to do that so I shut my mouth and keep quiet. But I write in my diary and I talk to whoever is out there—although I don’t think there is anyone out there anymore. But I do one of my God-tests: I say, ok God, if you are out there then make it so my dad can be buried like he wanted in Arlington National Cemetery so that we can visit him whenever we want and even when we’re old and maybe living someplace other than Virginia—although I never want to move away because he is here—we can still come because, as Mom says, “Washington D.C. is a place that people travel to from all over the world and you will too no matter what you do in life.” And that way he can be buried with all his friends from Vietnam—the ones who have died and the ones who will die later—and he will be just across the river from The Wall. I know he never went to that place and he wouldn’t let us go there either, but maybe after a while he’ll be glad that he’s close to all those names that he knew so well. So, God, if you’re there—which I don’t think you are because you didn’t pass the test of keeping my dad alive—if you’re there, make it okay for him to be buried in Arlington.... Please?
You didn’t come through. You failed another test. Dad has to be cremated. You know what that means? God? Do you? Maybe if you knew, then you wouldn’t have let it happen. It means they take his body and they put it on this sliding thing and they slide him into a big oven, filled with smoke and fire and his body burns up—everything, his bones, his skin, his eyes, his hair. He gets set on fire, God. My dad. Don’t you care? Would you want anyone you loved set on fire, everything burning until there’s nothing left? What if people can feel after they’re dead, God? What type of pain would that be—burning in an oven? And then, when everything is burned up they take the ashes and they scrape them into a box. Mom says that we have a nice box, but I don’t care. I don’t want my daddy burning. God? How long does it take for a body to bum? What about the stuff that doesn’t bum? Do teeth bum? Do fillings? Even though he was a dentist and none of us kids have any cavities because he always made us brush and let him check, I think he had some.

Dad stopped checking my teeth about the time he got cancer. I remember thinking that he stopped because I had just turned twelve—all grown up and too old for the nightly teeth checks. I was flattered that he trusted me to do “an adequate job.”

When I think of the years of the teeth checks, I fill with memories of a happy, playful father—a happy, playful life. I’ve labeled those years B.C. in my mind. Before Cancer. Once Cancer came to our family, a lot of the playfulness disappeared. Life went from carefree to surface smiles masking an underlying sadness.

My parents waited to tell me until the end of my sixth grade year. They’d known since February, but they didn’t want to worry me; they didn’t want to distract me from school. Funny how kids know something is up, though. It wasn’t just the termination of the teeth checks or the way Dad seemed to snap at us more easily; something definitely felt
wrong in my secure, Northern Virginian life. I just didn’t know what. I was wrapped up in friends and sixth grade graduation, registering for junior high, stressing over end-of-the-year projects. They were probably right to wait until June. I don’t know how I would have concentrated on school had they told me what the doctors told my dad: that he should get his will in order, that they didn’t know how to treat his melanoma—it was already spreading through his lymph system, that he might die within a few months.

The air was full of daffodils the day Mom met me on the walk home from school. She hadn’t done that since the first or second grade, so I knew something was wrong. She told me, then put her arm around my shoulders, assuring me that everything would be all right as I numbly took in the news. I didn’t know what to say. The only experience I’d had with cancer was my good friend Jenny. She got sick when we were eight and died when we were ten. Was Daddy going to die? Mom said no. The doctors were going to try lots of different medications and surgeries.

We walked home and tried to pretend that everything was normal. Dad came home from work and we didn’t say anything about him being sick. It was obviously a subject that was not to be discussed—right up there with Vietnam. A heaviness descended into our silence, weighing our hearts down. Everything changed during that short walk home.

* * *

My last weight-free memories are of the December 1986 trip we took to visit my grandparents in Brazil. It was Christmas on the beach. We were all together. Life couldn’t have been better:

“Ready?” Dad asks, settling down in the big arm chair next to the Christmas tree.

“Yes,” I say, stretching my arms up high and letting them fall to my sides with a slap on my bare thighs—a bathing suit was my usual attire in the sticky Brazilian heat.
“I’m ready,” Hilary giggles, jumping up and down beside me. I put a big sister hand on the top of her head to quiet her. She squirms out from under it with a whine of, “Don’t!”

“Ready,” Grant says, dressed in his pajamas. He goes and sits on Dad’s lap.

“OK,” Dad clears his throat. He opens our most cherished book:

‘Twas the night before Christmas,
When all through the house,

Hilary and I chime in:

Not a creature was stirring,
Not even a mouse.

“Go, Hilary. Go!” I whisper. Hilary obediently does her little mouse walk, yawns, and curls up in a tight ball. Dad smiles, raising his signature eyebrow.

The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,

I hang imaginary stockings over an imaginary fireplace. Hilary gets up and tries to help.

“No, Hilary!” I hiss. “Stay there. You’re the mouse!”

“But I want to help. Daddeeee—”

“Let her help, Elissa.” One sentence from my father always settled any argument between us.

In hope that St. Nicholas soon would be there.
The children were nestled all snug in their beds,

Hilary and I lie down on the blissfully cool marble floor and beckon Grant to join us.

While visions of sugar plums danced in their heads;

We dance our hands up into the air, colliding and giggling at the He-Man figures Grant has in his hands. We settle back down for:

And Mamma in her kerchief, and I in my cap,
Had just settled our brains for a long winter’s nap....

Dad starts to snore loud, funny-sounding snores.

“Daddy!” we all shout. Grant jumps back into his lap.
“Oh! Oh! Excuse me! Oh!” He blinks in mock surprise.

When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,  
I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter.

Hilary and I jump up to act this part out.

Away to the window I flew like a flash,  
Tore open the shutter, and threw up the sash.  
The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow  
Gave a lustre of midday to objects below—

“But Dad, we don’t have any snow here....” Grant’s voice quivers, concerned.

“Of course not, silly. We’re in Brazil,” Hilary reminds him.

“But how is Santa going to come if there isn’t any snow?”

“Shhh!” I want to keep going. I stand frozen in the scene, looking out the window

at the new-fallen snow.

“It’s okay,” Dad draws Grant into a hug. “Santa doesn’t need snow to come.  
He’s magic.” Grant smiles and snuggles close.

When what to my wondering eye should appear  
But a miniature sleigh and eight tiny reindeer,

“Santa!” Grant squeals with delight.

With a little old driver, so lively and quick,  
I knew in a moment it must be....

Dad pauses, waiting for our unison:

ST. NICK!!!!

*     *     *

About a year-and-a-half after his death, I went to a performance by a new-age pianist and a storyteller. The storyteller did a piece about her dad, remembering the way things were when she was little. She talked about sitting on the front steps with him—him on an upper
step, sitting with his knees bent, his feet on the step beneath him. She climbed onto that lower step, climbed into the space between his big legs; and as he leaned forward to put his arms around his little daughter, she felt him become a fortress around her. She called it her dad castle.

How many times had I sat on our front steps, watching the evening fade into night, enveloped in a dad castle? How many times had I relaxed into his arms, leaned on him for support, gone to sleep after his goodnight kiss—and the teeth check, of course. I would do anything to still feel his arms, his strong hugs, and all the security that emanated from his presence.

* * *

I hold your frail body in my 14 year old arms
awkward
I don’t know how to touch you

you slump over me from your perch
on the side of the bed
me standing in front of you
having been called by Mom--
“Don’t let him fall.”

I stand there
trying to make my scared limbs
loving
struggle against your collapsing weight
your breath rasping on my neck your body losing strength

I don’t know you anymore

I don’t know this blank confused look
this mouth that struggles to form words
these eyes that look desperately
this frail body
this smell

I don’t know this man who falls out of his big chair
can’t get up until I lift him in
scared by his explanation:
“I was trying to get the phone.”

You’re not the father I remember.

I think you’ve left
a stranger took your place
or maybe there’s nothing left
maybe you’re just a shell
--like the ones I collect when we go sailing
once home to a living thing
now empty.

I stand holding you
all these twisting thoughts...

I want Mom to come back
I want out of this room
away from this cancer.

I’m willing this when your hand creeps to my shoulder
pushes down to help raise your head up
slowly
painfully
your head comes level with mine
your eyes--clear for a moment
    lock into mine
    and you try to smile with your stranger's mouth

"Good girl," you say. "You're a good girl."

    you look at me quietly

your head lowers and I stand there with "I love you" in my head
    "I love you, Daddy" in my heart
    "I love you so much" on my tongue

but Mom comes into the room
    steps me aside and tells me to leave:

    "It's time for your shower, Gary."

    I leave without a word

*  *  *  *

My father didn’t want to talk about dying. I think he thought he could stay alive as long as he didn’t acknowledge death. When he was diagnosed with cancer, they told him he had a few months to live. He told them he’d try anything. And so he was the National Institute of Health's guinea pig for two-and-a-half years, trying every new drug, submitting himself to high doses of radiation and chemotherapy, agreeing to operations. He kept his dental practice going all that time, bought two sailboats and taught himself--and me--to sail, called from his hospital bed to get tickets for The Phantom of the Opera in New York, spent hours with me on homework, taught me how to use our first computer, kept
on me about practicing my violin--basically tried to keep life as normal as possible. We played along, even though we knew there was a dark presence lurking in the corner, a creature that made him snap at us for no reason, an illness that kept him in bed for days after he'd come back from the hospital, a monster that watched over everything we did and never left us alone--even for a minute. He tried so hard to deny that monster’s presence. He could keep us from talking about it, but he couldn’t keep it from destroying him.

From my work with Hospice I’ve learned all about anticipatory grief: the value of getting prepared for a loved one to die, the necessity of talking about what is going to happen, saying goodbye, beginning to develop a sense of peace and acceptance. Dad fought it to the end--and we never did any anticipatory grieving. We never even said goodbye.

* * *

I slump lower in the chair of my 7th grade counselor’s office. This is just too much. Sure, I can understand them telling the teachers Dad’s sick--better that they know so they understand if my work isn’t as good as usual, or I don’t get an A on a test. But this? I didn’t need to talk to a counselor, and I certainly didn’t need to talk to this January White girl--8th grader, popular chic, cheerleader, voted best smile, best attitude, best legs, biggest flirt, whatever, 14-going-on-29. The girl makes light of the fact that her mom died, for God’s sake! “I’m the only girl in the house because I live with my dad and brother and they never put the seat down so one night I actually fell into the toilet!” she tells people with a giggle. Ha-ha-ha. If my mother had died of pancreatic cancer, I certainly wouldn’t be laughing about it.

People call her the all-American girl, say her smile lights up the room when she walks in. She’s just so happy! I wonder if she is for real. I mean, I know how I feel, and my dad is going to be fine. “Sure,” she tells me, “Sure, I miss my mom, but, hey...I
mean, life goes on, right? Things aren’t that bad.” I look at her blankly. What does she have to do with me? Why do I have to sit with her for 45 minutes, just the two of us in the counselor’s office?

I stare at her white Keds with “I love Matt” written in black ballpoint all over the canvas. The declaration of 8th grade devotion also forms a repeating border along the rubber edges of the soles. I tune out as she talks and giggles, flips her long blonde hair around and makes more jokes about being the only girl in the house. Then something catches me:

“What?”

“Did you ever think that your dad might not come back?” she repeats, patiently.

“What?” That’s all I can manage to say.

“He’s at The Mayo Clinic, right? Major surgery on the chest. Tumor removal. What if he doesn’t make it?”

“He’ll make it.”

“Are you sure--”

“Of course--what do you mean he--”

“I’m just saying--asking--have you ever thought--what if he didn’t come back?”

“He will. He will.” My voice starts to close off my throat.

“Ok,” she says, looking a little scared.

“He will,” I repeat, more for me than for her. I search desperately for some sense of confidence in that statement. The note! “Here,” I say, unzipping the pocket of my backpack. “I just got a note from him:

...It will take some time to finish up here; there is no way to rush it. I love you and miss you very much. I can’t wait to get home. You don’t have long left in school, so study hard. See you soon.

Love you,

DADDY

There. That proves it. He’s coming back. He just has to finish up there and then he’ll be
home and everything will be fine. Okay. I’m okay. It’s all going to be okay. I look at
January; I never want to talk to her again.

It’s six a.m. when Dad cracks open my door. “Psst,” he whispers. “Hey.
Sleepyhead.” I roll over. It’s finally summer; I actually made it through seventh grade. I
don’t have to be awake right now. I hear him chuckle as he walks over to shake my
shoulder. “Today’s the day.” He pulls back the covers and tousles my hair. “The Elise is
docked in Old Town. Come on.”

I sigh, crawl out of bed, still weary from the hours we spent last night practicing
my freestyle flip-turn and start. My muscles ache from climbing in and out of the pool to
Dad’s “Better, but again. This time get closer to the wall and remember your streamline.”
I don’t know if I’m ready for the eight miles into Old Town, Alexandria.

But Dad already has the bikes out and is checking the tires. I fill the water bottles,
and we’re off. The sun just up, the summer day is still bearable. We ride through the
community and down to the bike path along the Potomac River. Frogs splash for cover as
we clatter over the wooden bridges. Great blue herons rise out of the lingering mist. The
beeping of the city seems far away as we ride through leafy forests; only the occasional
glimpse of a car reminds us that we’re nearing Old Town.

We turn into the parking lot in front of King Street Deli. I stay with the bikes as
Dad starts up the stairs.

“The usual?” he asks, pausing at the door.

“Yeah!” I can already taste the fresh blueberry muffins and the cool bottle of
Orangina. I’m anxious to get down to the water to see the antique sailboat which bears my
name.

We take our breakfast to the park overlooking the dock. The little sailboat waves
on gentle swells. Her wooden hull gleams in the sun; the brass railing gilds her beautiful shape. I can imagine pure white sails unfurling as she slips out to sea. We eat and gaze in silence.

“Good name,” Dad says, smiling.

“Uh-huh...” I murmur through my muffin.

“Someday I’d like to have a boat like that. Of course we’d have to start with the little fiberglass deals—the ones we can afford. But someday...” he nods in the direction of the beautiful Elise.

* * *

“Uhh!” I grunt and set the sailboat down on the rocky beach. Dad adjusts his “Captain” baseball hat, wipes sweat from his brow. The August heat means that school will soon be starting. Eighth grade. I don’t know whether to be excited or scared. We slip on our life preservers and launch the tiny boat into Mason Neck Bay. Motorboats, hydridilla, floating debris, and ornery winds—this is not our pristine Keuka Lake. Still, we’re sailing.

I lounge backwards in the boat, bask in the warmth of the orangy-pink sunset. “This was an absolutely gorgeous day,” I sigh, dangling my fingertips in the water. Dad relaxes, his hand barely moving the rudder. He smiles, whistles one of the many symphonies we’ve heard at The Kennedy Center. His smile widens as the boat lurches up a sudden swell and comes down in the trough, splashing my sun-toasted body with icy water. I scream, and he throws back his head, laughing his deep rich laugh.

* * *

* * *
“You cold, red-nose?” Dad teases, pokes at my nose.

“Don’t,” I squirm away, embarrassed. We’re sitting on the hill overlooking the stage at The Wolf Trap Outdoor Pavilion and there are people watching. I hate how my nose always gets red when it’s cold. It’s embarrassing enough for a 13-year-old to have a red nose, not to mention having her dad poke at it in public.

“Here, have some hot chocolate.” He hands me the cup he’s just poured for himself. I sip carefully as he pours one for my sister and another for himself. His hot chocolate always tastes better than Mom’s because he puts in extra chocolate and marshmallows. I smile up at him as he draws us close, press my cheek against his corduroy jacket as he rubs our backs to warm us up.

“My two girls,” he says softly as the concert begins. A huge chorale and full symphony orchestra plays all the best Christmas music—even the Nutcracker Suite. We sit, huddled against the December cold, warmed by the excitement of Christmas and my father’s strong arms. He is so big—so powerful. I know he can fix anything, make everything okay. There’s no way this cancer-thing even has a chance. I drift off in the melodies and security until my father is telling us to stand up. It’s time for the “Hallelujah Chorus” and he stands tall, singing the part he sang in choruses throughout high school and college. His deep voice booms over my feeble “Hallelujah, Hallelujah.” I don’t know any other words and I finally decide to stop and listen to him. I feel so proud, standing there, holding the hand of the man who has the strongest, most beautiful voice in the whole world. “Hallelujah” ends and we start “Silent Night.” The audience begins to pass a flame from candle to candle; I watch the rows in front of us glow, carefully lighting my candle when the flame gets to us. By the last verse of the song, everyone is singing, swaying, their faces lit by candlelight. The concert ends and we gather our blankets and thermos, start walking across the fields to the parking lot. People keep singing until they get to their cars; I listen, watching the parade of lights that stretches in front of us and behind us. It seems to go on forever, this parade of hope. All these people, singing together, walking together. All in harmony—silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright...all is right in the world.
I curl my legs under me and look out the car window nervously. April 20, 1989—my first regional science fair. Dad and I had worked so hard on this year's project. I had done well at my school's fair, but how could I compete at Regionals?

Dad looks over at me from the driver's seat, "Don't bite your nails." I snatch my hand from my mouth. Guilty. He catches my eyes and smiles, "I would have thought those braces I put on your teeth would have curbed that habit." I look at him blankly. "Guess not, huh?" He laughs—not his usual hearty laugh, but a light, more nervous laugh.

Science projects. They had always been a big thing at our house—him being a doctor and science being very important to our education. I remember doing projects on how motors worked, water fountain hydraulics, aerodynamics, and the infamous seventh grade "Soil Samples of Fairfax County" in which I compared the acidity, porosity, density, and composition of soil samples taken from one end of the county to the other. Dad and I had spent our weekends driving his little Chevette all over the backroads of Northern Virginia, searching for just the right place to take a sample. We had to find native soil.

I stare at the passing forests, remember those wonderful weekends. Just a year ago. Dad looked younger then. I remember watching the sunlight dance on his face, thinking how lucky I was to have a father who would drive me all over the county looking for virgin soil, a father who devoted his weekends to me and my science projects instead of beer and football games. I close my eyes and can almost hear his whistle—it was so clear and beautiful as we walked along forest paths, through grassy fields, away from signs of man interfering with nature. I wish he would whistle now.

This year was different. No more driving all over hell and gone—that was an expression he often used. Most of his weekends were devoted to NIH or some other treatment program. There was stress in his eyes, tension on his face. I knew he didn’t want me to notice, so I didn’t say a thing. We stuck close to home and picked corrosion protection for this year's project, turned his entire work room into a laboratory to see which
method of corrosion protection—oil, an electric current, or various commercial products—
was the most effective. I was more on my own with this one. Lacking confidence, but
wanting to please him, I tried to do everything just as he’d taught me. His lessons paid off;
I won first place at my school fair in front of his proud, smiling eyes. Now we were off to
the second day of Regionals. I had withstood the first day of interviews, defending my
data and conclusions to representatives of various corporations and research organizations.
I didn’t know how much more I wanted to do. Talking to those stern adults with
clipboards and reading glasses made me so nervous that my voice shook and I could barely
use my hands to point to my graphs.

‘Those Naval Research Laboratory guys sure seemed interested.’ Dad’s voice
interrupts my anxious thoughts.

‘Huh? Oh, yeah—I don’t know. They sure asked a lot of questions.’

‘Well, maybe they see some value in protecting their ships from rusting.’

‘That would be good,’ I laugh. My nervous laugh sounds a lot like his.

We settle into silence again. I think he has almost as much invested in this fair as I
do. These days I feel like he’s searching for anything positive. I don’t really understand;
he seems so sad and angry to me. Thinking makes my stomach churn. I glare at the
raindrops spattering the window. The trees outside blur and I press my lips together hard.

Dad sighs, pushes the radio on. A song finishes and we hear the first chords of
Debbie Gibson’s ‘Eternal Flame:’

Close your eyes
Give me your hand, darlin’
Do you feel my heart beatin’?
Do you understand?
Do’it feel the same?
Am I only dreamin’,
Or is this burnin’ an eternal flame?

I believe
We’re meant to be, darlin’
Watch you when you are sleeping’
You belong to me.
Do’it feel the same?
Am I only dreamin’—
“Ahhh--aww-ooohhhhh!” Dad interrupts Debbie’s whiny pop voice with a hound dog yowl.

“Daddy!” I giggle.

“Ahhh--awww--ooooooooohhhhhhh!” he howls again, louder.

“Oh, Daddy! Come on. It’s a good song!”

“A good song?!”

I nod, giggling.

“You like this song?”

I nod again, laughing harder. We stop at a red light and he turns to me,

“You mean, my daughter, the musician and Regional Science Fair prodigy, actually likes this howling?!”

I smile sheepishly.

“I’ll give you a good song!” His hand lunges to grab my knee.

I squeal, squirming helplessly in his tickling clutch.

“Stop!” I shriek with delight. “Stop!”

His laughter matches mine. One last squeeze...he releases my knee and I catch my breath. He smiles at me, gives my knee a pat. I see a flash of his old self in his slate blue eyes; he doesn’t look so tired and sad for a second. Catching me looking at him out of the corner of his eye, he reaches out to pat the top of my head--an old familiar gesture of his love and pride. I close my eyes and smile, open them again as his hand touches my cheek.

* * *

Three months later, yellow forsythia graces the garden; the bright mulberries in the tree outside the dining room tempt the squirrels, already drunk from the previous day’s feast. Sunlight bursts through the open window. Everything is beautiful today.

Dr. Hogan is coming to lunch. We’ve already sat down--Dad at the head of the
table, Mom and Grant on one side, Hilary and I on the other—when she walks in the room. I look at her with questions. She’s a friend...but why is she here? I twist impatiently through the chitchat, waiting for an answer.

Conversation slows to a weighted pause; she looks around and speaks in the calm, detached tone that doctors must develop at medical school—the tone that means the news is bad.

“We’ve done everything we know how to do. The cancer treatments just aren’t working on Gary. You need to know this means your dad isn’t going to live as long as he should.”

My dad castle crumbles at the head of the table. His hand comes to his eyes and muffled sobs escape his tightly-pressed lips. I watch him as the aroma of the food sickens and turns my stomach. Glaring at my plate, I push it away, rise slowly to stand beside his trembling body. What do I do? What do I say? I put my arms around him, lean my head on his. He looks at me from teary eyes and tries to force a smile. I stand in an awkward hug as Mom, Grant, and Hilary come close, silently gather around his big chair. Raising a hand to wipe his eyes, Dad sniffs and slowly pats our intertwined arms.

That was the only time I saw my father cry. That was the only time we talked about him dying. And I don’t know if it counts: he was there, but he didn’t say anything.

The next day he came home from work and something had happened. The Dad I knew was gone. The doctors said he probably had some kind of stroke or maybe the tumors on his brain were getting bigger. I think he finally acknowledged death, and that meant he couldn’t keep himself alive anymore.

* * *

Dad hated hospitals. Funny how a lot of doctors do when they have to be the
patient. At least it didn’t come to that—him being confined to a hospital for his last days. He had a “Do Not Resuscitate” order. I guess that was to prevent what he hated.

Of all the hospitalizations over the two-and-a-half years, my sister and brother and I only went once to see him after a surgery and once to drop him off for treatment. He hated us seeing him like that. I think it violated the image he wanted us to have—that was when he could still control what he showed us. He resented the time that surgery and treatment took away from his practice, his wife, his kids, his life, but he could still hide the amount of damage the disease was doing to his body. And he didn’t just want to hide from us; he hid from everyone—his friends, his patients, his colleagues. He had patients who loved him and had been going to him for years who first learned he was sick when they read his obituary in The Washington Post. I guess he robbed them of anticipatory grief, too.

I often wonder if it would have been a lot different had we talked about Dad dying—all of us talking together with him. Would the pain be any less? Would we be more at peace?

I saw an HBO Family Video Series program, a compilation of home videos and narration that a girl named Nicole Betancourt made about her father when she found out he was dying. I was in tears as I watched it—it was so similar to images I had of my dying father. Her thoughts were so like mine that it was eerie. She was in her mid-twenties and I in my early teens, but that didn’t seem to matter—death reduces us all to children. Watching it, I was envious of the time she had with him. The last summer my dad was alive, we were farmed out to friends and neighbors, summer camps and swim team practices. Nicole had time with her father, time to ask him questions about his life, time to talk about dying, time to take care of him. Time.

Still, at the end, she filmed a clip of herself, standing with her video camera in front of her. “It’s been two and a half months since my dad died...and all I feel is pain. I miss him. ... I just want my dad back; he was too young.”

Anticipatory grief or no, maybe the feelings are the same.
Some time after Dad died—I don’t know exactly when—I starting getting visits from the loneliness birds. When it started, I didn’t know what they were or why they were bothering me—I didn’t even know that they were a “they.” It all became clear a few years later when I read a novel about a little boy who lost both his parents: The loneliness birds are big black birds who fly into your heart and leave their heavy stones behind.

The first Christmas of my father’s death
we tree hunt with friends
try to find the perfect tree.

We search for hours
missing Dad’s decisive “This is the one”
try to avoid the feeling that we’re really searching for him.

We finally find one
cut it down, haul it to the car.
Mom and I lead
share the weighty bottom branches
Hilary, ten, trots with the middle
Grant—only seven, still small—
straggles behind
protecting the angel’s perch.

I watch the tree man tie it to our roof rack
Dad always did that.
Bet he thinks my parents divorced.
I want to tell him he’s wrong
my dad died
or he would be here.
At home
we lean the tree against the house
postponing the inevitable.
My grandparents drag it in
Replacements.

Then the lights--Dad’s plan
We untangled, tested
held them off the floor as he taught us:

   Lights go on a certain way
   There has to be balance and line
   the perfect mix of red and white and green and blue
   steady, flashing, bubbling
   You can’t just put them up any which way
   It won’t look good.

That’s exactly what they’re doing.
I protest
Do it like Daddy did!
The right way.
They come in and take over
grandmother commands from her chair
grandfather, half-tree-half-man,
follows each order.
Go do your own tree

I hate you

I don’t say this
But I still get sent to my room
I watch from the crack in my door
narrow my eyes at the horrible imbalance.

That night
I sneak down the hall
plug in the lights and look with disgust
yank down every strand.
Snow falls outside in soft caresses
does nothing to soothe my anger tears
I hang the lights back on the tree
beg for balance
symmetry
desperately mix the red and white and green and blue
steady, flashing, bubbling
   You can’t just put them up any which way
   It won’t look good.

I arrange
rearrange
cry in frustration
pull them down
put them up again.
Mom comes out to see about the noise
I snap mean enough
that she turns back to bed
Over and over I try
These are the same lights as last year
Why can't I get them right?

Exhaustion shuffles me back to my room
I peel off my clothes
crawl into bed
huddle under heavy covers
search for dad castle comfort
close my eyes and will Sleep
But my arms start prickling
itching makes it worse
What in the world?

Hot. Hot.
throw back the covers
race to the bathroom
shove my arms under the icy blast
Ouch!
Millions of red dots crawling up my arms
I take them from the sink
dry them timidly
Hurt
Itch

Mom?
I stand at my parents' bedroom door
peer into darkness.
Mom...
   Go to sleep, Elissa. I don't want to talk to you.
But I have a rash or something. It hurts.
   Put some cream on it and go to sleep.
Her voice steps me back into the hall.

I don't want any cream
I'll lay a while with pain I can feel.
It took a while for pain to set in. The loneliness birds dropped their stones long before I began to feel them. I was operating in a fog of shock and denial. I had intellectual regrets: I hadn’t said good-bye; they wouldn’t let me see his body after the ER nurses took him away; I hadn’t spent enough time near him that last summer. But, for the most part, I was calm and utterly detached—it just couldn’t be happening. These months without him...he’d be back. He had to come back. One day the phone would ring like it had on New Year’s Eve when I was sure it was him calling to ask when Mom and I would be finished at my grandparents’. It wasn’t him that night, but one of these nights.... It was only rational. He wasn’t really gone—just on vacation. Tearless, fearless—I was dry.

All that ended when I found out we were moving to Montana. We couldn’t. We weren’t supposed to. How would he find us?

* * *

Mom looks at me with guarded eyes. Her hand twists the closet door—see her wedding band gleam as she sighs, “I don’t want to hear this. Not now. It does you no good.” “But I miss him so much,” I cry, trying to distract her from the vacuum she begins to back down the hall, “You do too, I know you must.” Pursing her lips, she attacks the thick dust on the radiator, asks me to get a clean rag. Slowly, I hand her mine, wet with tears. “Dad’s gone. I don’t want to go on. I’m tired and lonely. I need someone to hold me.” She turns from the dust and hugs me quickly. “We can’t stop living”—she lugs the vacuum up the steps and plugs it in. “We have to work. It helps a lot.” I cringe. I can’t work, can’t sleep, don’t even care what I wear to school. I avoid my friends—eat lunch alone in the library. Mom sees but can’t let me be unhappy.
And I can't hide pain like she does. I shake
my head and look at her as my voice breaks,
"Don't you understand how hopeless I feel?"
She blankly nods, doesn't want to deal

with me. Work helps you forget the one who's gone.
She hands me the vacuum, presses it on.

* * *

Some people seem to move on with their lives quickly, continuing jobs, school,
activities, achieving madly to cover up the emptiness--anything to fill the void in their
hearts. Others take some time to drop out of the world. They grieve, they wallow (a word
my mother loves to spit out), but then they move on. I wish I had wallowed. Instead, I
became the obsessive achiever, trying to ignore the heavy ache in my heart. My father's
absence had left a huge space for the rough stones of the loneliness birds to collect.

During four years of high school, I obsessed over every project, every assignment,
each test, essay, paragraph, sentence, word. Dozens of applications to prestigious schools
and tough scholarship competitions just to prove to myself that I could win--that I was
okay--even though I felt anything but okay inside. Then college. More obsessing, fewer
hours of sleep, stretching myself too thin, trying to do everything and be everything to
everyone, searching vainly for comfort and security in relationships. I needed something
to stop the aching. I needed something fast because I was drowning in its heaviness. It
had become a pit of quicksand, and I could feel the sand rushing down on me, starting to
fill my mouth, my ears, my eyes. Drowning, gasping, clutching for a hand hold--or a
hand to hold--but pushing everyone away, I fell deeper into myself, deeper into the grief of
a lost father, a lost best friend, a lost mentor, tutor, science partner, swim coach, violin
motivator and practice monitor and playmate. My father was all these things in one.
Without him, I was lost. Life was going on around me, but I was turning to stone.
Two nights ago the moon was full, voluptuous—a skinny dipper in the spring sky—every curve and hollow etched against watery black. I walk for hours tonight, waiting for it to rise. I need to see it. Strange; it’s so important to me. I think when my father died, he went to live on the moon.

I stand at the foot of my driveway, breathe the crisp Montana air and watch the magpies flit around; their shrill voices pierce the stillness of the fall morning. Shifting my weight, I set my backpack and lunch on the wall beside me, wait for my ride to Capital High. A cold wind blows my bangs across my eyes. I push them aside, then shove my hands into my pockets in an attempt to keep them warm. Nothing seems to warm me up these days, I think, as a door bangs shut and I hear the young voices of the twins who live across the street.

“Hurry!” one urges. “We’ll be late for school!”

“I’m coming!” yells the other from somewhere inside the house.

Blonde pigtails bobbing, the small girls trapse across their yard to the street corner. They look both ways and, nodding to each other in agreement, step off the curb. Hurrying across, they start up the next block. I watch their retreating backs bearing identical backpacks. Smiling at their quick little steps, I wonder how old they are.
They’ve traveled halfway up the block when I hear the door swing open and a voice call, “Girls?!?” They stop, turn as a man shouts, “You didn’t say goodbye!” Both faces read “Oooops!” as they run giggling back. Their father waits at the corner with outstretched arms, knees bent and smiling. Still giggling, they fly into his strong embrace. “Good bye, Daddy!” He hugs them and gives them each a kiss.

* * *

death is weird. sometimes you feel like the person never existed. life goes on without him and as you get farther from his death, learning to live without him—even if it’s not happily—he starts to fade. he lives in wonderful memories and not-so-wonderful memories, but he doesn’t feel tangible anymore. that’s disturbing. i don’t like the feeling that maybe he didn’t even exist—that my life with him seems like a wonderful dream that i can’t touch anymore.

Death is weird in the roles you take on when the person is gone. Dad died and I stepped right into his place—as much as I could. I couldn’t bring home an income, but I could help Grant with his algebra each night. I could sit there and teach him just as Dad had taught me—and proofread Hilary’s papers during breaks. At Halloween, I could show them how to carve pumpkins just like him, and when Christmas came I could choose the tree and put up the lights—never as good as he did. But I could plan family hikes and bike rides and fix the computer. I was in charge of the stereo and VCR, of keeping up the sailboats and steering the canoe. I learned how to parent alongside my mother, ward off my grandparents, and rant and rave when things weren’t going my way.... I became a partner to my mother and a parent to my sister and brother, and all the time that I should have been going through adolescence, I was acting the part of the adult, trying to be perfect in every way.
My first job with Hospice is taking care of a little boy whose mom is dying of cancer. While the father works and the mother rests, I watch the little boy—four years old—soon to be without a mother. We play, mostly; we go to the park and read and go swimming. We eat ice cream and talk about little boy things. And every once in a while we go see his mom and I have to make sure that he doesn’t jump on her because she is so weak and sick. But she doesn’t want him to see or to know what is going on. Maybe there is an age when anticipatory grief would be too much to handle.

We visit her today and she’s looking better than usual. She’s washed and dressed and sitting outside to feel the warmth of the sun from under her wide-brimmed hat. She smiles as we walk up, opens her arms for her son and hugs him as he settles down beside her. I sit quietly as she fingers his curls. He watches a bug walk a blade of grass and is oblivious to the tears in her eyes. We are silent in their moment together.

“Why do you volunteer for Hospice?” Her question breaks the silence. I look up, startled at her sharp tone.

“Oh. Well...I want to help. I mean, I think I can help--I--do help....” I shift uncomfortably and search for words, getting nervous as her eyes search my face. My mind races around my emotions and I try to figure out what answer to give her. “I guess I just feel drawn to it. I mean, I feel like I can handle it and not that many people can and I understand.” I look at her face. She is still searching mine. I try to explain: “My father died and I know how hard it was. We didn’t have any help and if I can help anyone and make things just a little better then--”

“Your father died?” Why did she have that tone today?

“Yes.”

“When?”

“1989.”

“How old were you?”
“Fourteen.”

“Was it bad?”

I pause. How can I describe losing him? What am I supposed to say? I can’t remember what the Hospice training said about this. I want to tell her that my dad and I had a wonderfully special relationship—much more than father-daughter, even father-first daughter. I want to tell her how I was definitely Daddy’s girl, but I was also Daddy’s boy and Daddy’s helper and Daddy’s assistant and sailing companion and pupil and fellow PBS watcher, museum goer, musician, carpenter, and dreamer. I want to tell her stories that show how my dad was everything to me—absolutely everything. He was my hero and teacher and best friend all at once. He was my protector and my toughest critic; he shaped my attitudes, my work ethic, my values and morals and passions. He was my life.

But if I tell her all that, I might end up showing how much I hate life without him. I don’t think Hospice would want me to say that.

“Elissa? Was it bad?” I look into her eyes and then away.

“Of course...it was hard. I mean, he was my dad and my best friend. I really miss him.”

“But you’re okay, now. Right?” Her eyes pleading for affirmation, her arm tightens around her son’s small shoulders. How can I tell her the truth? How can I tell her that I’m slowly spiraling downward, that my desperate achievement whirlwind does nothing to fill the void in my heart. Grades, scholarships, applause, boyfriends—nothing is ever enough.

“Yes,” I say, nodding and forcing a smile. “Yes, I’m fine.”

* * *

But two years later, I can’t do it anymore. I tell Mom I have to drop out of school—pretty
big deal since that's what's been keeping me in denial all these years. She protests, but I drop out and the black hole begins to leech my heart. It turns me inside out or outside in. I don't know which. No one is here when I need them most—not family, not friends, not my boyfriend who said "I'll love you forever with all of my heart." He took those words back and I'm alone, devastated, desperate, angry...at myself. Because I told everyone to go away.

I don't want their help. I make that clear. I don't want their love. I make that clear too. I don't want anyone because I don't want myself. I just want to be dead.

* * *

There's a chair in our living room that always feels good to sit in--something about its size and shape, something about the way its arms seem to envelop me in an almost dad castle. I go there when things are at their worst, when I feel like my insides have turned to stone and I can't deal with anything. I think of it as my father's chair--funny, since it's always been in my grandparents' house.

Since the year after Dad died, though, my house has been my grandparents' house. Before that, the chair was in the living room of their house in Virginia. I remember Dad used to go up and sit in that chair to get away from everyone during our all-too-frequent family dinners. His body was being bombarded with chemicals and radiation; I don't think he could take being bombarded with my grandparents, my aunt and uncle and screaming cousins. No one ever said anything. I guess everyone understood: He was sick. He needed space. He needed to get away from the video camera my uncle prowled around with, aimed with telling frequency at my dad. So he sat up there and read and thought and tried to escape what was happening to him. I would bring my homework and share the heavy silence with him, only to be called downstairs to help with dinner or the cousins. I
wish now that I had been called less and shared more silences. I wish my uncle had been more persistent with the video camera.

But before all of that, I remember the chair sitting in my grandparents’ apartment in Brazil. Brazil always symbolized happy days of carefree vacation. Sure, we had to bring the six weeks of schoolwork with us, but we went to the beach, swam in pools, ate out a lot, and spent time with each other—that was the best part. My favorite memories are the walks on the beach—just my father and me. I remember the last walk we took: Almost twelve years old, feeling very sexy in my aquamarine bikini, I held Dad’s big hand as we strolled down the beach, stopping to take pictures along the way. I felt like a supermodel as I posed in front of his camera. I have that camera now. Strange, I’ve never found those pictures. I’ve gone through all the boxes I can find and I’ve never found a single image of our last beach walk.

If I had those pictures, I’d sit in the dad chair and look at them, remember those blissful moments when I felt like the most beautiful girl in the world. I played “The Girl from Ipanema” in my head as I walked alongside my invincible father. I remember thinking that our life together would go on forever. I really couldn’t imagine anything different. A week later, Dad left Brazil to return to his practice. We stayed on for another two weeks. I would have gone home with him, but he extended my stay as a present for my twelfth birthday. I was ecstatic. I didn’t know that he had done it because he had found a lump under his arm and was planning to go to the doctor while the rest of us were still in Brazil. Not even Mom knew that.

When I sit in the chair—my father’s chair—I think it’s ironic that it’s always been in a living room. Dad sat in it when he was dying; I sit here now and contemplate death. I bring my knees up so I can fit sideways in the strong arms, try to stretch my mind back to a time when the chair really did belong to the living. All I can think of is the time I missed by not coming home from Brazil with him. If I kill myself, will I see him again?

* * * *
I am in my lowest, stoniest state
when my ex-boyfriend
ex-best friend
calls from a payphone in California
says he heard from Mom that
I won’t get out of bed.

he gives me an hour of reasons to live
and I shoot them all down
with well-crafted arguments

You have a rat running around in your head
gnawing at your brain,
he tells me, exasperated
angry
You have to chase that rat out of there.

I want to tell him the rat is gnawing at my heart
not my brain
and it’s harder to chase rats out of our hearts
could he come help me?
please?
but the phone disconnects
I wait

He never calls back.

* * *

Kenneth J. Doka, editor of Hospice Foundation of America’s newsletter, says grief
is like a roller coaster, full of ups and downs. “Some of the downs may be expected;
others take us by surprise.” Eventually, the downs “seem less intense, come less often and
do not last as long.” But he reminds us that we never fully get off that roller coaster.
“Even years later, at special events, holidays, or just in our regular, everyday lives, we
may experience a bump, or a feeling of particular longing for the presence of that person
who died.”

But my roller coaster keeps twisting and turning, weaving in and out and up and
down, getting bigger, adding more upside down spirals each day, never passing near the place where I first got on. My outside is being pulled inside and no one is noticing. I can’t last much longer if I don’t find relief.

* * *

Relief comes in a dream the fall of 1996:

I’m sitting in the garage on one of our wooden ice cream chairs, facing the back wall—just sitting, calmly, staring, staring...until my father is behind me and puts his hands on my shoulders—big hands that blanket my shoulders with strength and love and security. I sit there, still, still calm, and he wraps his arms around me, enveloping me in the dad castle I’ve been yearning for these seven years. Basking in his fortress feeling, I close my eyes and relax into his strong arms, then turn, rise from the chair for a real hug. We stay there—both standing, embracing, holding each other tight...until I notice that he’s shaking, crying—my dad castle tries to stand strong against the earthquake but crumbles as the quake gets stronger, and all I can do is hold tighter, stand there and try to hold it all together. He’s sobbing now—crying hard. I’ve never heard him cry like this. Deep, dark, sobs of grief, anguish welling up from someplace deep inside. I don’t know what to do. Then I start crying too, grieving for all the lost bike rides and science projects, Christmas Eves and Silent Nights, apple picking in the fall, the search for the perfect pumpkin, hunting for Christmas trees, hikes through the falling leaves, concerts at The Kennedy Center, helping him at work, at play, building our swing set and playhouse, trips to the museums.... All the memories that we’ll never have: how he’ll never walk me down the aisle on my wedding day, how he’ll never see me graduate from high school or college or know what my life is like. Grieving, sobbing for the dad castles I’ll never feel again. Angry, despairing at the injustice of it all. And then, little by little, the sobs subside. We stop
shaking and begin to breathe again; we’ve released the grief geysers that had been building up pressure for the last seven years. Our breathing returns to normal; our whitened grips relax. Exhausted, we lean on each other for support--foreheads together, brows wet with sweat and tears. And then he’s gone. I’m left standing, calmly, in the garage, now facing the window--the way to the outside.

I woke up then. From that moment on I’ve felt a sense of relief. I’d give anything to have my dad back, but something happened the night of that dream--I can finally breathe again.

* * *

Sharon Olds wrote a collection of poems about watching her father die and learning to live without him. In the last poem, her father speaks to her from the dead:

I have been in a body without breath,
I have been in the morgue, in fire, in the slugged chimney, in the air over the earth,
and buried in the earth, and pulled down into the ocean--where I have been
I understand this life, I am matter,
your father, I made you, when I say now that I love you
I mean look down at your hand, move it,
that action is matter’s love, for human love go elsewhere.

I look at my hands and I carry the relief of my dream.

* * *

Huntley Meadows. One of Dad’s favorite places. It’s hard to find pockets of nature in the suburbs of D.C., but Huntley Meadows always promised wildlife within its
highwayed boundaries. After the dream, I go back for the first time since he died. I have a new life—an after dream A.D.—to start living after despair. I go alone now, but I carry a peace that allows me to begin turning some of the stone back into flesh.

Part of that peace is a piece of my father, something that stirs as I listen to the familiar sound of my feet on the boardwalk. It’s fall—his favorite time. Even the rain can’t dull the brilliant reds and oranges of the trees. I climb the observation tower and gaze over the water, remembering how we watched a beaver swimming in the dusk of eight years before. It was the first time I’d seen a beaver in the wild. We were both ecstatic. I smile and think he would love Montana’s wildlife. Wish I could show it to him.

I climb down from the tower and cross to one of our favorite paths, lose myself in nature as Dad stops me at places most people would walk quickly by, whispering a soft “Lookatthat” in my ear, somewhere behind my consciousness. His eyes see through mine, help me look at things he taught me to identify: duckweed, minnows, lily pads, mallards, a great blue heron huddled against the brush. I can see him beside me pointing; I want to touch him as his rich voice echoes in my ear.

* * *

At first it seems the dream will fix everything. But as the stones begin to shift in my heart, I begin to feel and remember. My return to Virginia has become a search for completion. I look for clues in family friends, the Smithsonian, The Kennedy Center—all the places we used to go. I walk under the barren cherry trees around the Jefferson Memorial, try to remember the warm spring nights when it snowed pink. My memory feels far away, so I search the murky waters we sailed, circle the streets of the neighborhood—linger in front of our house, jarred into longing by foreign landscaping. I don’t know where Dad is in all of this. I don’t know where I am. How do I end this grief?
Maybe there’s no end. Maybe I’ll always feel this emptiness. How can I mend when such a huge part of me is gone? I remember the words of Hospice’s Kenneth Doka:

To “recover” is to get something back. If my lost car keys are recovered, they are found. In that sense, we never recover from the death of someone we love. “Resolve” is not much more helpful: it means to tie things up neatly. And that does not happen: grief is never finished neatly.

I don’t want it to be neat. I don’t want to stop missing Dad. I just want to know how to live.

One evening, I go to The Wall. Dad never let us go there. Too many friends and memories. I must stick out, alone in the twilight. A park ranger approaches and asks if I have a name I want to find.

“No,” I say. “My dad was in Vietnam--a lot of his friends were killed right in front of him, but I don’t know any names.”

“Here,” he says, gives me the name of a young soldier who died today--26 years ago.

I find the name, stand in front of him, wonder if he is one of the friends Dad held in his arms. I spend time with him as the Washington Monument begins to glow in the distance.

The next day, I visit The Wall exhibit in the Museum of American History. I read every note, inspect every medal, stuffed animal, and photograph. I’m eavesdropping on people’s lives and feelings, searching for my own. I find two letters echoing Dad’s death—each man died of cancer caused by the chemicals in Agent Orange. I read them again and again, obsessive in my search. He is not here.
"Excuse me," I say too quietly. No one notices. "Um. Excuse me," I repeat a little louder. A kind looking grandmother-type peers at me from behind the information counter.

"Oh, sorry. I’m getting a little bit deaf in my old age. Well.... Welcome to Arlington National Cemetery. Visiting hours are 9-6 on weekdays." She pauses to look at her watch, "Oh no, dear; I’m afraid you’ve missed the last tour. It’s awfully rainy out there. They’re not doing any extra runs this evening. Hmmm, let’s see. Well, you could come back tomorrow and--"

"Sorry. No. I’m not here for a tour. I just need directions to the columbarium."

"Oh...oh. Are you visiting someone then?"

"No--I mean...yes." I don’t understand what she means at first. Can you really visit a dead person, especially one who’s been burnt up and put in a box?

"I see." She is a little flustered at her mistake. "Well, then, you’ll need a pass for your car--"

"That’s okay. I’m walking. I just need to know how to--"

"Are you with anyone?"

"No. I’ll be fine. I just need directions. I haven’t been back for quite a few years and I’ve never walked it.... If you just point me in the direction, I’ll find it."

She is looking at me sadly. "Oh," she catches herself and her thoughts. "All right. Ah...just go out those doors and turn left. You’ll want to head straight down the road for a ways. The columbarium will be off in the distance to your left."

"Thank you. I appreciate it." I turn to go before she saddles me with an escort.

"Dear?" she calls after a few steps. Shit. I turn back to her. "Do you want me to look the person up? Tell you what vault he’s in?"

"No. That’s all right. I remember. Thank you, though."

I burst out the doors into the October drizzle. Avoiding the eyes of the guards and the people on the tour trains, I keep my head down, focus on black pavement, shiny with rain, step over yellow and red smudges of fall. As I get farther away from the visitors’ center, I lift my gaze and look at the regiments of tomb stones. How many men here had
spent their entire lives in formation—in lines and rows in life and death? My eyes linger on
the beauty of the turning leaves, the distant hills rolling down to the Potomac River. I’m
getting soaked, but the rain is a blessing; I have the place to myself.

I pass an open meadow, land not yet broken for bodies. Why couldn’t my father
be buried here? Because there wasn’t enough room? It looks like there’s plenty of room to
me. Canada geese step amongst the moist leaves. I smile as a flock flies overhead. I like
it here. A few more minutes and the columbarium appears in the distance. I find a road
leading in that direction and turn.

My shoes echo on the damp marble. Memory is strange. My images of the funeral
are foggy, but I know exactly where to go. Down the passage in the center, turn left,
around the fountain, turn right, then right again to the vault in front of the stone bench.
There it is: Dr. Gary Eugene Fairbrother. Captain. May 19, 1944 - August 5, 1989. I
stand awkwardly and stare.

So...now what? I’ve never been here alone. I turn and see the officer handing my
mother the triangularly folded flag. I can’t look in her eyes. When I close my eyes I see us
standing where I’m standing, my little brother being lifted onto the bench, too small to see
around the adults. My mother, hands shaking, places the box with my burned up dad into
the hole in the wall. I remember wanting to scream, grab the box, and run. I wanted to get
him away from all these people saying that he was dead in heaven. There was no heaven;
God hadn’t passed my tests. And if there was a God and he took my dad away who we
needed so much, then he must not be a good God. He probably lies. Anyway, I know he
doesn’t exist. I’ve proved it.

BANG! My eyes fly open. BANG! My body jerks at the second shot of the
soldiers’ rifles. BANG! I finally breathe out the air I’ve been holding onto since I stopped
in front of Dad’s vault. BANG! Okay. I’m okay. BANG! Okay. Just breathe. BANG!
More shots and then the slow Taps. I reach to touch the Gary etched in marble.

Day is done
Gone the sun
From the lakes
From the hills
From the sky
All is calm
Safely rest
God is nigh

Day is done
Now tears come
From the eyes
From the mouth
From the heart
All is dark
I can’t rest
We’re apart

The tears come as I stand alone amongst the dead. My fingertips pressed into the grooves of the etched Gary, I shake, trying to control my sorrow. Grey sky descending on me, tears and rain and sobs all mix; I feel my body shudder through shots fired all the way back in 1989. They hadn’t moved me then--I stood straight and tall and everyone admired how strong I was. Seven years later, they tear through my heart.

It’s getting dark when I finally pull myself together. It’s past visiting hours, and I worry that the guards are going to make me leave. I stand, indecisive, not wanting to go, not wanting to be discovered. I wish I could just sit down forever, stay in the silence of the dead. I pull at the bush beside me. A sprig comes off in my hand; soft needles bend in my twisting fingers. Evergreen. I pull another off and set them on top of Dad’s marble plaque. Two more to frame the bottom. There. Fall leaves fold under my feet--red maple, yellow birch. I find two of a kind, make sure things are symmetrical as I twist their stems around the ends of the bolts that hold the marble onto the vault.

I sit and stare a while, let my eyes slip out of focus to kaleidoscope the colors of leaves and marble, of living and dead. “Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again” fills my head. It was one of our favorites from The Phantom of the Opera. In the musical, a lonely daughter sings it to her dead father. We never thought it would come true. My voice quivers at I start:

You were once my one companion
You were all that mattered
You were once a friend and father
Then my world was shattered.
Wishing you were somehow here again
Wishing you were somehow near
Sometimes it seems if I just dream,
Somehow you would be here.

Wishing I could hear your voice again
Knowing that I never would
Dreaming of you won't help me to do
All that you dreamed I could.

I stand to touch the marble. Take a deep breath and continue, louder:

Too many years fighting back tears
Why can't the past just die?

Wishing you were somehow here again
Knowing we must say goodbye
Try to forgive
Teach me to live
Give me the strength to try.

No more memories
No more silent tears
No more gazing across the wasted years
Help me say good bye.

I finish the song in a whisper, trace the etched Gary one more time, then force detachment.

My feet carry me away, around the fountain, out into the open. The rain has stopped; moisture hangs in the air as I cross the road, walk onto the field where we held Dad's funeral.

I need to breathe. I tilt my head back, notice the clouds are lifting and the sun has come out on the horizon—a few moments to shine before it sets. My shoes squish into the boggy field. I shift my weight, feel something hard under my right foot. It's long, slender, covered with mud. I pick it up, wipe away the grime. Brass. A casing from one of the bullets the soldiers fire. Empty. I start to throw it down, but stop, fold my hand over it, hold it tight as I walk across the field and down the road.

Ignoring the guards' glances, I let myself out the iron gate, start down the steps to the subway. Again, I stop. I turn and walk back up the stairs, past the monuments and across the Memorial Bridge.
December. I return home for Christmas, happy to be back with my family, still feeling Dad's heavy absence. I don't know what I want, but I start working again, lose myself in helping others. I makes plans to return to college in the fall. It's hard to tell, but sometimes I think I'm starting to feel a little less frozen. Perhaps the loneliness birds have begun to lift their heavy stones.

* * *

Mom wants to sell our 1984 Oldsmobile. It's one of those big station wagons with the two extra seats that fold up in the back. My brother and I call it "The Elephant," partly because of its size and partly because of its purpley-grey color. It handles horribly on snow, has a big dent where someone backed into my sister, another where my brother ran into a car while driving home from school. The paint that Dad spent weekends keeping perfect is now marred by sap from our pine trees and long key scratches from obnoxious kids passing by. The protective cover that he always insisted be put on at night disappeared after the move to Montana.

Looking at its physical state and considering the fact that insurance is expensive, anyone--including Mom--would say, "Sell it!" Why not? We can't use it in the winter. Its fifteen-year-old battery dies on a regular basis. No one really wants to drive it for fear of getting stuck.

But I open the door and climb in and I feel safe. The burgundy interior fills me with family trips and science fairs and most of all my dad. I remember how excited I was when we bought it in the fall of fourth grade. We spent several days at the dealership test-driving and bargaining. It was the first new car we'd ever had. The thrill of the new
smell, the perfection of the carpet and imitation leather—I thought we must really be moving up in the world when they gave us a complimentary cassette to play in the tape deck. A tape deck in our car. Wow! I felt very privileged.

There was tons more room for the three of us sitting in the back seat—always Hilary on the left side, me on the right, and Grant in the middle—more room for all our stuff when we drove to up-state New York each summer. Things couldn’t get much better than when all five of us were in the car and we were on our way to someplace exciting.

The Elephant symbolizes family and life without cancer. It reminds me of a time when we were all happy together. I don’t want to see it go. My uncle drove it home from up-state New York a week after Dad died. I sat in the passenger seat. Dad—now ashes—sat in the middle. It was the last time I ever sat next to him—the last of our car trips. Sometimes, I feel like it’s all I have left. I crawl in there in my search for the dad castle, searching for security. I can’t let it go just yet.

And yet, each scratch, each dent, each time I see it dirty with the leaves my grandfather hauls to the dump, I feel like another chunk of my life with Dad is disappearing. Each new sap stain makes my stomach squirm with queasy regret and resentment. Sometimes I want to sell it now so I won’t have to watch it deteriorate. One night I almost went to my mother to beg her to get rid of it quickly—before I changed my mind.

In a way, it reminds me of Dad’s body. First appearing indestructible, perfect in every way. Now, as more dents appear, more key marks glint in the sun, as more sap eats away at the purple-grey shine, I start to despair. I can’t let go; yet I can’t stand to watch. I’m not sure how to reconcile. Maybe this is how he felt.

*   *   *

*   *   *

Death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship which struggles in the survivor's mind toward something which it never finds.

--Robert Anderson

As years go by and I move through life, I can't shake the intense desire to talk to Dad, to ask him my unanswered questions. Nine years makes for a lot of silence, a lot of thinking. It would be weird--talking to him now. I'm not a little girl anymore. I might even make him mad. I'd risk it, though, to ask him if he's okay, if he can see us--if he watches us or if he's somewhere else. Will we ever see him again?

I want to tell him that I love him--that I loved him so much even though I never said it enough, that I love him even more now that I understand about life and living and all that he did in raising me. Then I'd ask him why he wouldn't talk about death. Didn't he want to tie up loose ends or reach closure before he died? He didn't leave us letters or video tapes or anything. I don't think he ever accepted death. Was that because he had no belief in an afterlife? Was he scared of his belief that death was death--that's it--the end?

I wish I could ask him what he thinks I should do after graduation. Is it okay to finally leave Mom and Hilary and Grant--the wife and kids I took on? Can I do that?

* * *

It's hard to remember who I was before Dad got sick. I don't know how to get back there. The grief cycle doesn't bring you back to where you started. Novelist Julie Reece Deaver describes this feeling:

Grief travels in a certain route--if you could plot it out on a map you'd have a line that twists and weaves and eventually ends up near the point of departure. I say "near" because although you may survive the grief, you won't ever be exactly the same.

After Dad died, Mom found a Hemingway quotation written in Dad's slanted caps:
“One generation comes and passes into another. But the earth always abides, and the sun also rises.” It was dated January 31, 1968. I fought that quote for a long time. I didn’t want the sun to rise. I didn’t want the world to keep going when a generation had passed. Eventually, I had a choice: move forward or stay frozen. As I start to thaw, acceptance remains illusive. I don’t feel like I’ll ever finish grieving. Even if I do, I won’t ever be the same.

Perhaps a person never heals completely. Author Jane Smiley claims that “the loss of a parent is the one thing for which there is no compensation.” Still, I must move on with life, struggle free of the constant sadness, try to banish the heavy stones the loneliness birds left in my heart.

When a child finishes her time at The Dougy Center for bereaved children, she is given a small pouch containing various stones. Some of the stones are smooth and polished; these represent the work she has done on her grief. But the bag also contains many unpolished stones. Their rough surfaces represent the work she still needs to do.

Rough stones get polished by tumbling around with others. Movement. If I can get the stones out of my heart and into the bag and keep them moving, maybe I can find the joy I’m missing. Maybe I can find the peace of the Navajo poem we read at Dad’s memorial service. Over the years, I’ve woven its words into my own poem, an epitaph I hear Dad whisper:

Do not stand at my grave and cry--
only the tombstone lies rigid and white.
I am not there; I did not die.

I know your sorrow, your question: why
I vanished from your sight;
but do not stand at my grave and cry.

And do not remember me struggling, my
body convulsing tight.
I am not there; I did not die.
I haven’t left you, my daughter—I
am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry.

I am the sunlight in your eyes,
the wind that wraps around you as you hike.
I am here; I did not die.

As you grow without me, feel my
presence holding you in sight.
Do not stand at my grave and cry.
I am not there; I did not die.
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