

Water In My Hands

PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

Zoe Benavidez, Grade 11, Tucson High Magnet School, Tucson, AZ. Deborah Dimmett, *Educator*; Region-at-Large, *Affiliate*. Silver Key, **Arizona State New York Life Award**

I wish that I could be that 14-year-old girl whose dad just died.

Three years later and its still hard for me to talk about.

I discovered what grief was at 7:30 on a Tuesday morning in 2019.

My alarm went off, and I got up. I was scrolling on my phone looking at my friends' messages on Instagram. My mom came into my room. She wasn't dressed for work. She was dressed in her weekend clothes.

She looked as though she was carrying something heavy. Not on her body, but on the inside. Then she looked at me. *The police came to the house this morning. You were still asleep.*

It was hard for her. It looked like she didn't know how to say what she wanted to say. She laid it out to me like bullet points. They felt like real bullets.

Your dad was in an accident last night. He was hit by a car. He's at Banner. His arm is in a cast, and he needs surgery for his leg. It's shattered. He's about to go into surgery. They need the list of medications he's on. You're the only person who would know. No one else does. They've checked. We need to go be with him.

My heart was heavy. My entire world had simply stopped with no warning.

I couldn't react. I went to the worst possible outcome: that he would die. It really wasn't so much that he would die, but that half of the world that I knew would be gone forever.

Okay. Um...okay. Let me get dressed, and we can go. We can go once I get dressed. Okay.

I was lost for words. I just kept saying "okay." If I kept saying "okay," it would be okay.

As my mom and I walked into the hospital lobby, we stopped at the information desk to ask what room my dad was in. I glanced around the room. People were holding each other or leaning into each other like they were lifelines. I wondered if they had just received the best or worst news of their lives because joy and pain often look like the same thing.

I remember flipping through a book in my school library a few weeks ago. It was a collection of photos that were taken while people were laughing. I thought about how if you didn't know they were laughing, you would have thought they were in agony.

I looked down at my hand clasping my mom's. I felt like a small child clinging to her and letting her lead the way. It was the first time I had felt like a child again in years.

My parents had shared custody of me since I was seven. When I would be with my dad for his week, I more often than not had to be the grown up. Emotionally, my dad didn't see or treat me as his child. It was more like I was his confidant or best friend forever.

I couldn't do normal kid things like hanging out with my friends. I felt bad for being a child and wanting to do normal kid things. He needed me to take care of him when I was supposed to need him to take care of me.

14...13...12...11...

I count down from a number whenever I started to feel my anxiety seep into my bloodstream and spread throughout my body. The numbers floated

around in my head as I tried to keep myself grounded at the hospital desk.

10...9...8...

The translucent lights hurt my eyes as we walked down the hall. I had to close my eyes because the lights were so loud. It felt as though they were screaming at me:

Turn around! Go back! Stay away!

7...6...5...4...

The sterile smell of the hospital ICU whirled around me like a tornado. I can still smell it to this day.

3...2...1...

My mom never told me that he was in a coma. So I kept telling myself that my dad would be lying in the hospital bed laughing with the staff surrounding him. Why? Well, five years earlier, my dad's gallbladder erupted in the middle of the night. I called 911 and he was rushed to the hospital. I recall him telling me after his surgery that that was the worst pain he had ever felt. Yet, he still managed to crack a smile.

I imagined that this time when he saw me he would give me that crooked smile. The one everyone says I inherited from him.

Instead, a clear slender tube pulled at the corner of his mouth. It was a breathing tube because he couldn't breathe on his own. The crooked smile wasn't there. And it couldn't be there.

His foot was up in a sling attached to a pole next to his bed. His toes, painted with a coral pink polish, poked through the white cast. His knuckles were bruised from the accident. His nails had dirt packed under them. His face was scraped and bruised. I looked at him as if I was seeing him for the first time. This couldn't be my dad.

I was in shock. I had no time to cry before the anesthesiologist started asking me questions.

This is your dad? She tossed her head in his direction.

Yes.

What medications is he currently taking?

I processed her question.

We need to know so we can take them into account when administering the anesthesia.

I didn't have to rack my brain for the answer. I knew every medication my dad was taking. I needed to feel like everything was taken care of, even when I was the thing that needed to be taken care of.

Levothyroxine. He had thyroid cancer about 10 years ago. He's also taking antidepressants. I don't know the miligram strength or the brand. Um, I...I think that's it.

She nodded and scribbled down the shorthand of what I had said on her pad of paper.

You can wait for him in the surgical waiting room. Ask a nurse and they'll show you where to go.

I watched as my dad was wheeled out of the room and rounded the corner. Out of my sight, but not out of my mind.

Please be careful, I called out to her. *He's the only one I have.*

She never looked back.

Eight days later my dad died.

He never woke up.

Bob Seger was one of my dad's favorite musicians. "Roll Me Away" was playing in his room after he was taken off life support.

Roll, roll me away

Won't you roll me away tonight

I too am lost, I feel double-crossed

As I heard these lyrics, I was lying next to my dad listening as he took his last breath.

Holding him was like holding water. As time went by, he slipped through my fingers until he was no longer there. I always thought death was quick like watching lightning in the sky. I realized then that it can be long and inconvenient. Up until then, I

thought of an hour as a moment in time. One that passes us by so quickly we hardly notice it. Now I wished that 65 minutes would stretch on forever.

In those 65 minutes, he kept breathing. I felt like he wasn't going to go until I was ready. I could never be ready. My dad couldn't go because he still had to see me do the things he promised he would always be there for.

I wrote the first draft of this essay, but it was fiction. It was a made-up story that I wished was true because it was easier than remembering what was real, what I felt, and what had happened.

It was easier to write a scripted version of my story rather than to wipe away tears and keep from hyperventilating.

It was cleaner.

Grief, however, is dirty. It is the dirt that life adds to crystal clear water. It muddies the perception of the truth until you can no longer tell what is real.

It's not so much the inevitability of letting go of water, so much as it is the inevitability of it letting go of us. We can't control when it leaves, we just know that it will. But when it's gone, your hands are still wet. And you remember what it was like when it was there. ■