

Fallen Eyelashes and Infinite Wishes

PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

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I came across a chance to make a wish many times last spring. It came in the form of an eyelash. So I made a wish for my dad, praying for good health. He died anyway.

But before he died, everything seemed like it was going to be okay. At least that's how my mind made it seem to be.

But you try anyway, don't you? You pretend that you can do the impossible, that you can control life itself. You make wishes on lucky numbers and eyelashes and shooting stars, praying for one more chance, one more moment to make things last.

Wishes aren't granted, but wishes are taken for granted. You see the warning signs and consciously ignore them. You believe that things will become right again. That it all will work out in the end and that the scene unfolding in front of you simply isn't real.

Like having your father tell you that he has mere months left, if not that. When you ask if he'll be here for your junior high school graduation, he simply hesitates, and that's all you need to hear. You lose all the hope you previously had, and can't see anything bright in front of you.

And yet, you still take time for granted. You imagine that the next clinical trial will work, it will stop the world from crumbling around you. You imagine that you can hold up the walls of your disintegrating life just a bit longer.

And it works, at least for a short while. Because your father makes it to graduation. And you once

again can see the bright things around you. Because he's here, on the beautifully sunny day in June, so cliché it could be from a movie scene. He's watching you give a speech that he helped you create. He's watching you walk across the stage and he's watching you accept your diploma. He's there afterwards, when you race over to him dazed and smiling and joyful. He's there.

And in that moment you believe that maybe wishes do come true. That all of the eyelashes paid off, that all of the numbers are adding up, that all the shooting stars didn't fade away without at least a moment of sympathy for you and your plea.

So you become proud, thinking it won't get worse once again. You take it all for granted. You waste your moments. You don't take advantage of the valuable time that was generously given to you when you wished for it. Because you believe you'll have infinite amounts of it—that you'll always have tomorrow.

But you don't always have tomorrow. Because just weeks later you wake up and an ambulance is outside. You wake up and your mother says you'll be spending Father's Day with your dad in intensive care.

But you also wake up and still choose to have hope. You hope that your father will come home and recover. That the walls may be crumbling, but you can hold them up just a little bit longer, until they can once again stand up on their own.

And so you learn of oxygen tanks and breathing machines. Of pulse oximeters and CO2 levels. And

you believe this is how it'll be for weeks or months, or however long until something either works finally, or it all stops.

You've started to realize that this may be the end, that the walls are breaking down too quickly, and maybe there isn't anything you can do.

But he can hold on for a couple more months, right? A few months is more time.

But you don't have a few months, because only three days later, you hear quick footsteps. Rushed running to your bedroom door. A frantic knock.

Your mother telling you there's no time left.

You spend the last three days by his side, letting him know you love him, and wishing you hadn't trusted the eyelashes, the shooting stars and the ill-fated numbers. Because the numbers were adding up. Just—not in your favor.

Three days later, the walls collapse, and you're there to see them fall.

You wish life wasn't what it seemed, and that the scene in front of you wasn't real.

You wish that you could have lived in the perfect reality your mind created. Where you're still at your graduation, dazed and joyful.

You wish that he could have stayed for just a few moments longer, anything longer than the time you were given.

Most importantly, you wish you could have realized how dire things had gotten, and taken one more moment, one more second, to make memories that lasted.

You wish.

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I came across a chance to make a wish today. It came in the form of an eyelash. It's happened a few

times since you died. And I haven't known what to wish for.

I spent years wishing for your good health, for things to get better, for things to seem right, and yet now that you're gone, is there anything left to wish for? Or did I toss away all of my chances left for a wish, and it's simply meaningless now?

I just wished that you were okay. Wherever you are. Because what else was there to wish for? I just wanted you to be okay one last time. I guess some things never change. I guess I'll be wishing for you till the day I die.

I've started high school. It was a gift that you were able to make it to my graduation. But over the summer, so many more things happened. And it is hard to come to terms with the fact that you didn't see it.

Writing is one of my biggest passions - and one I like to think I got from you. And I've realized that you won't be here anymore to read through any new pieces. To tell me that it's one of your favorites—every single time. That you won't be here to help me edit, even when I get frustrated with my words and what I need to cut. You won't be here when I feel unfinished because there was something I could have, should have added.

Something I would have added if you were here.

You won't be here when I write the next piece, or the next, or if I decide that writing isn't my passion. You won't be there to help me work through it.

You won't be here to say goodnight to me when I go to bed, with our nightly exchange, "See you in the morning."

I don't think I've come to terms with anything. I know you're gone, but it doesn't feel like it. I think I'm still in shock. Maybe I always will be. I feel guilty for feeling numb, but there's nothing I can do about it. In fact, I've realized that maybe there's not much I can do about anything.

I could die today. There could be an accident in the theater while I rehearse, or I could get in a car crash, or any other sort of things that plague me at night. Life is such a fragile concept, and I think that's why humans don't think about it often. We just live. We scroll on phones, we laugh, we cry, and we feel anger so passionately that we burn inside. But we don't want to think about death, or dying. Anything but that. We don't realize how short of a time we have. We say, "I'll take this chance, life is short!" but we don't understand the gravity of that statement, what it truly means. Life is much shorter than any of us realize because we never really know when it'll end.

I remember a conversation with you a few months before your death. You asked me how often I thought about you dying. I admitted not that often. How could I? It didn't seem possible at that time, when my mind was consumed by the eyelashes and numbers and shooting stars. You said you thought about it all the time.

I think you realized then what I realize now. That life truly is short and we never know when it'll end. You took those last months of your life to make every moment count, because you had the gift of knowing the truth, because you had no choice but to confront death. I had a choice and I made wishes. You made the choice and made memories. You knew what to do, and I'm just figuring it out after it's too late. Because if I had realized what you had, I could have taken more time and made memories like you did.

Maybe I can't control anything. But I've realized I really do need to live in my moments while I have them. That's what you did.

I had no idea what grief meant before this past summer. My previous understanding of grief screwed me over. Because the only place I had seen it up until this point was in movies and in books or tv shows. In movies, you see an image that's completely different than what I've seen now. You see someone sobbing, and then a time skip to when the character has moved on.

Real grief is crying for no reason. You don't feel any sort of emotion to lead up to it, you just see something that triggers you and you start crying suddenly.

Real grief is being in shock, and numb to the world around you. Not wanting to accept the reality that you're currently in, so you simply don't.

It's just hard to accept my own experience when everyone else around me feels something else. While I am numb to the world, the world goes on.

Ever since you died, I've learned that we people don't ever talk about grief or death. We have all become so accustomed to shutting down whenever we hear the slightest possibility of someone dying. We automatically think that there is no need to worry, there is no way the person could get worse—they're fine now. We don't want to accept that people die. I'm guilty of this as well - I spent years of my life dedicating my time to useless wishes that didn't even do anything.

And even though now that I know that wishes don't ever work, that they're just hope placed onto inanimate objects that have no power, I still find myself wishing.

Because finding our humanity is finding hope in the darkest places. It's living through the most profound tragedy and yet still being optimistic—trying to find light in a dark room. It's being able to look at problems and still work for a brighter future; it's believing that some wishes may still come true.

Dad, you became wildly courageous because you were dying. You found your deepest humanity.

Humanity was you playing "Thunder Road" on repeat in the car, after shaving your head during chemo, because you believed it was a masterpiece of a song.

Humanity was you taking baby steps around our yard, having trouble breathing, but filling the bird feeders multiple times in a day, because you wanted the birds to be happy.

Humanity was you deciding to deliver a speech at a fundraising event in town only a few weeks before you died, your breath unstable and uncomfortable, because you truly loved the people you worked with and the cause you were fighting for.

Humanity was you insisting that your last moments be on our couch, where you spent most of your days, reading a book or talking with our family.

And humanity is the fact that I'll keep wishing on eyelashes for you, even though you aren't here anymore.

Because the thing about grief is that I now know that wishing didn't work in my favor. Miracles won't happen due to a fluttering eyelash, the paper in a fortune cookie, or a giant rock hurtling through space.

I can't make up for the time I lost. That will never come back to me, and I'll never be able to see you again.

So I like to think of the time I did have with you, dad. The memories I made.

I still feel numb from your death. And I still wish that my perfect reality ended up being true. Because in that reality, you got to live, and I got to see you again.

And maybe one day, I'll learn to fully embrace my current reality, instead of the one that's far gone.

I'll come across the chance to make a wish sometime in the future. It'll come in the form of an eyelash.

And I'll wish.

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I'm not sure what I'll wish for yet. But I'll wish. And that's enough. Because wishing is a form of hope. I learned from you, dad, that you should always keep hope, even in the darkest times.

I learned to keep pushing forward, even if your breath is short and your hair is shaved and you can't see a reality other than the one you desperately wish wasn't your own.

So the next time I see an eyelash on my hand, I'm going to wish. Maybe it'll be about you. And maybe it'll be about something completely different. But what matters is that I'll keep wishing, and I won't let go of that.

And I won't let go of you, in the best way possible.

I love you, dad. See you in the morning, whenever that may be. ■