

My Father Has Always Been Dying

Despite his claims to the contrary, my father's office reminded me of a hoarder's mess. Something I knew he was intimately familiar with, given how he cleaned up my uncle's home twice a year. He spoke with disgust about the decades worth of garbage. Newspapers, plastic bags, and several hundred cockroaches buried my uncle. My father always promised he wasn't like that. And for the most part our house was tidy. It was only when we ascended to his haven, his den of bills and online card games, that we found the paystubs from the '70s and the endless business cards and every scrap of spare paper he had ever picked up. Boxes and boxes of cables, more than we knew what to do with, attached to nothing but coiled neatly, over—under, the way he had taught me. Containment of a problem does not mean the problem doesn't exist.

It's fascinating how some people think they are ordinary while others think those people are extraordinary. Such was the case with my father and I—he believed himself to be a very boring man with a boring life, and I thought he had led an extremely interesting life and as a result was a very interesting man. The son of Jewish German immigrants, thirteen years younger than his brother, orphaned by age fifteen, he had been seemingly everywhere, seen everything.

He told me stories of growing up in Chicago, his travels throughout the country working for various productions, living all over. There was a list of things he still wanted to do, of course—go back to school, take my mother to Hawaii, hold his grandkids. He promised me a trip to Germany, just the two of us.

I don't know if I'll ever stop grieving for all that he did not get to do.

When they met, my mother was thirty-two, my father forty-one, and he had no life savings. He lived in a hotel room sized apartment, did freelance work, and had been a bachelor for years. He had never lived in a house

until he and my mother bought one. But by all accounts I've heard—he was happy.

I didn't know what tumors were when I was younger. Of course not. When the adults spoke of it, my imagination conjured up a strange sea being, some porous, dried barnacle or coral. It sent a shiver of disgust down my spine, imagining such a thing sitting delicately on the back of my father's tongue. My young mind saw other things differently as well, bringing a child's innocence to the harshness of disease. When I learned chemo was a medicine, I thought it came in a little orange bottle with a childproof lid. After we went to bed, and it was time for my father's meal, I saw in my head my mother spooning a plate full of food—pasta, chicken, vegetables—down his feeding tube.

I didn't know he threw most of it up later. My mother only told me that recently.

My mother remembers how many people thought my dad was my grandfather, when I was little and we were out together. He was old, there's no getting around that. He felt insecure about it too, he told me later, when he showed up for parent-teacher night in elementary school, and there was a mob of young thirty-somethings looking at him, all gray and thinning hair before his time. But I never knew him any differently. On some level, I think I realized that it was strange my father was so old, but what could I do about it? Just enjoy every moment with him, I supposed.

But this is all about my father. This is supposed to be my story, my memoir. But here is the problem: I am defined by the absence of my father. It is certainly not my only definition; I am many, many other things. But when I try to write stories, they always seem to veer into death, into old men, into parental affection. To suffering. When I try to escape my definition, I might as well be a word attempting to escape a dictionary. I should be fair to myself—my mother has yet to escape her definition of widow.

I am haunted. To be clear: I believe in ghosts. No, I don't think my father is one. He's haunting me regardless. I see him in every sailboat I spot in the distance, every red Prius that passes me on the highway, in every bag of gourmet coffee beans. My mother sees him in the cardinals and

butterflies in our yard. I think of him every time I see a gray haired man, every time I hear a boisterous laugh turn into a hacking cough.

How about this: my father drove me home from dance, sometimes six days a week, for years. Looking back, it was the height of fatherly love, spending every evening waiting to collect a tired, complaining, and rank teenager. And yet when I got out of class, usually at 9:30pm, sweaty and irritated and feeling very bad about myself, he was always waiting for me. Radio on—NPR, or jazz, or an audiobook—we often drove without conversation, and, as per his rules, no looking at phones in his car. Other nights, when I had learned something fascinating at school, or when I had read a good book, or simply when I had some strange, philosophical thought, we would talk. He loved to hear me speak about things I was interested in, and he inevitably had some thoughts that would lead to a debate or an even deeper discussion. My mother will tell you I resisted getting my driver's license out of stubbornness or anxiety, but truthfully, when else would I have seen my father? We ate breakfast in the morning together, but I was too bleary and grumpy to have any sort of conversation then. Besides that, the thought of sinking into his passenger seat and closing my eyes was sometimes all that got me through dance class.

There's a small, peaceful graveyard surrounded by trees tucked away on a side street just off the main road I took to go to and from dance. That's where my father is buried. We drove past it for years and never knew it was there.

Our breakfasts were important too, I don't mean to imply otherwise. I will never forget the scent of coffee in the air, or how irritated I got when the first thing I heard in the morning was the loud screaming of my father's bean grinder. When I ate my sugary cereal with my hands—I had a strange aversion to silverware in my earlier years—my father tsk-tsked at me and asked if I was going to eat with my fingers when I dined with the Queen. He made eggs for himself, over salted and peppery, but always allowed me to steal several bites off his plate. We listen to classical music in the morning, and my cue to leave for the bus was when the smooth voiced announcer said, "And now, time for your morning Bach..."

As I darted out the door to grab the bus, he would throw me an easy question, calling out, “What’s two plus two?” only so I could retort, “Three!” The other phrase that followed me in the morning was when he said, “You’re beautiful and smart, and which is more important?” I would flick my hair or bat my eyes and answer cheerfully, “Beautiful!”

On my last day of high school, the placid announcer said, “And we have a special announcement for today. Rick Segall told us that his daughter has been listening to our classical program for years now, and is about to graduate! Congratulations...”

It wasn’t my choice to listen to that show, but I loved it anyway.

I could tell you it was the stroke that killed my father. A series of minor ones, ignored due to my father’s habit of downplaying his own health concerns, discovered when my mother forced him into the ER. Then “the big one”—the one that made the doctors sit down with our family and say all those nice words like, “It might be possible,” and “There’s a chance.” I could tell you it was the cancer, and that wouldn’t be a lie. For fifteen years after he went into remission, the lingering effects of radiation clogged the arteries in my father’s neck. I could tell you it was destiny, fate, his genes: neither of his parents made it past fifty-seven, so sixty-eight was a success story, for him.

I could tell you that it was a shock—and it was! I didn’t expect my life to change on a random summer Thursday morning. But I look back and in the end it seems like everything my father’s life led to that morning. Like it was inevitable.

Or I could tell you simply: my father is dead. And that must, necessarily, affect my story now.