

Carter Brainerd

ENGW 1111

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November 21, 2019

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When I was about twelve, I was sitting on the floor at the Target in Columbia Heights, DC while my sister and my dad were picking out clothes. The floor was carpeted like a school floor, so I couldn't sit in one position for very long or my hands or my butt would start to hurt, so I was getting really restless. I was so restless and bored beyond reason that I started to count individual articles of clothing on each rack.

By the time I was around 300 articles deep, my dad got a call from my mom. Since I was watching all of my dad's and sister's stuff while I waited for them, I answered it. The phone felt unusually cold on my ear but I continued answering, I heard my mom's voice on the other line and it sounded... different. It sounded like she had just woken up (even though it was 3 pm and she had woken up very early that morning) and very stuffy, but also nervous.

"Mommy you sound tired," I said like the emotionally inexperienced little kid I was.

"Oh, it's nothing sweetie. Is your father there?" she said with intermittent sniffing.

"No, he's with Emily right now," I said quickly in response.

"Ok well tell him to call me as soon as you see him, okay? I've got to go now, bye love," she told me as she hung up quickly.

At the time I just thought the call was strange. I didn't really think any more about it, even though it turned out to be a life-changing event. I relayed the message to call her to my dad

when he finally got back from helping my sister after what felt like an eternity. He called my mom as I (or rather she) requested, and a few seconds into their conversation, I hear my dad say, “what?!” in a surprised tone. Not the exciting kind of surprised, but rather the ‘oh crap’ kind of surprised. It was at this moment while sitting on the floor of a Target clothes section when I realized something was wrong. I didn’t know what it was yet, but my dad hinted at it with his tone of voice on the phone.

After the conversation ended, my dad said we needed to leave. We checked out as normal, but then he was walking really fast towards the elevators to the parking garage. My sister and I matched his pace, but we didn’t really know why at the time, but everything seemed so chaotic. Later that day I would find out why my dad was going fast, why my mom sounded tired, and why I was so confused: my grandfather had died. As soon as I found out, our dining room which we were sitting in got a rush of cool air. I remember just how eerily quiet the room was right after we were all told the news. I was crushed.

My grandfather had been very influential in my life. He taught me how to live and how to live well. He lived like he had all the money in the world, even though he really didn’t. Whether or not that’s a financially good idea is a topic for another, much less personal memoir, but nonetheless, his way of living made his family very happy. My grandfather had developed Alzheimer’s after being in a car accident a decade or so earlier, so him dying at this age wasn’t a complete surprise, we all saw it coming eventually, but it still hurt a shit ton nonetheless. It hurt to see my mom being sad about her dad dying so suddenly, and it hurt even more to see my grandmother mourning. My grandmother and grandfather had been married for about ~50 years, and they were soulmates. She was crushed by his death, and it was hard to watch.

The days following his death were the hardest on my grandmother and me, as is the norm for families who lose a loved one. Our lives felt... empty. Like there was a hole that needed to be filled. She and I talked about his life a lot whenever we had time together. She would tell me stories about how he would steal cookies out of the cookie tin and she would get mad (even though she made them for him). She would also tell me stories about their early life together and why they moved from South America to the USA, and how his family didn't like my grandmother, but he stayed with her anyway and left his family behind just to be with her. It was right then and there when I truly understood how much my grandfather meant to her. They were one and the same. One team. One force of nature, together.

After our couple days of mourning, we were at an important crossroads. Do we continue to be sad about his death? Or do we celebrate the long, exciting, and meaningful life he had lived? My grandmother and I talked about our choice for a couple of hours our choice. We talked about how we've felt since his death. We decided that celebrating his life would be better for our own health and for all of our memories of him. In less selfish light, we thought that us celebrating his life would be what he wanted. For the next week, I was told stories about my grandfather that I had never known before. Like how he got on the last boat to leave Germany before WWII started, or how he would read my grandmother Pablo Neruda love poems out of the blue. Hearing these stories made me appreciate his life even more, but also made me regret not asking him more about his life. After hearing all about his life from my family, I knew we had made the right choice.