

## A Man I Never Knew

In the Summer of my freshman year, I wrote a piece on my relationship with my father. It was bitter and detached, broadcasting all my grievances with him from over the years. I criticized his every action and attitude, blaming every bad thing in my life for every imperfect thing he'd ever done. I said I wouldn't miss him, that I would be angry forever and skip his funeral and slander his name. I thought, as a child, it was never my fault. It was all him.

In the Winter of my sophomore year, I was diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder and Generalized Anxiety. I'd experienced both for a few years, I think. I'd had the symptoms for a while. I thought it was all because of my dad, that his awful-ness was making me awful. But by the time I was diagnosed, he had moved out. I couldn't blame him for all my problems anymore. I just had to look at me.

This Fall, I am entering into my senior year. I've been on meds for –roughly– two years, and they have greatly improved my mental state. I no longer go to bed with a parental war-zone downstairs, or a mind that feels like it's actively my own enemy. I no longer have to pretend to be someone else and stay miserable. I am happier, healthier in many ways, and just overall, better. It's like finally breathing after drowning for as long as I can remember,- but learning to breathe again is hard.

I spent so long being prickly, I forgot how to be soft. My anger had pushed away so much in my life; I had lost my sight, still saying I saw fine. I was scared of becoming my dad, I turned into his clone. I was just as sword-tongued and bull-headed as he was. There was this coil of fire in my chest, it bubbled and boiled, I hated myself, and the more I did, the worse it made me. I looked in the mirror and saw my father, the same father I saw my freshman year. I saw the ugly creature, covered in boils, with teeth bared, claws sharp and on display. I saw malicious eyes and heard foreign, hateful thoughts. I felt ugly, and I saw a monster.

My father is not a good man. But, my father is not the monster I painted him to be when I was a child. He is human. He is a person, complex, and flawed, with his deeply wrong beliefs and his ideas that are beautifully kind. He contradicts himself in ways that confuse me. He is hateful, then loving; He is harsh, before gentle. I understand now that he is not evil, but I also cannot say that I love him despite it.

This past Spring, my uncle passed unexpectedly, and soon after, my dad was re-diagnosed with cancer. It made me think again about how fragile life is. I remembered the six year old girl, the day before Halloween, being told that her dad had cancer for the first time. I remember the pain, and the way the salty tears made her eyes sting. I remember the fear, the uncertainty of whether or not daddy would still be alive next year. I remember the weakness of truly understanding having no control for the first time. I think back to two years before that, to the death of her grandfather, the first real loss she had. Then forward to age twelve, when she became I, and I lost a dear pet, my best friend, the other half of my soul, and I couldn't be there to comfort her.

Things change so fast, and humans even faster. When I said I would not attend my father's funeral, I was just a hurting kid.

I don't know where I'll be next Summer, I don't know if my Father will still be alive. But when his time comes, I will go to his funeral. I will grieve, not for who he was, but for who he could have been. For all of the games we could have played, lessons he could have taught me, memories we could have made. I will not mourn the father I had in this life, but I will cry for a man I never knew