

Grieving in Advance

Ashley Vega

I've always had a sliding scale of anxiety about my father's mortality. Him being nearly 50 when I was born didn't help that and made me much more aware than my peers that, *Wow, my dad is old*. Having a parent in that age range was incredibly abnormal where I grew up, and my classmates in elementary school constantly confused my dad for my grandpa, and I'd have to correct them when they commented on how cool and nice my grandpa was. I'd turn around at lunch and say, "That's not my grandpa, it's my dad." Eventually, they caught on, but there were definitely kids who thought I was lying or joking around about that for a while. It made me overly aware that my dad was notably older than most parents, at least back in the early 2000s.

When I was around ten years old, I realized my dad's age meant I'd lose him far before I was ready. Not that I'll ever be ready, but that it could happen when I least expect it. That was the moment the anxiety crawled its way into me. It wasn't even particularly rational as far as anxieties go because it wasn't tied to his current health status; it was more of a total acknowledgment that he was getting older, and I was starting to understand and grapple with what that meant. Grieving the living became a very concrete concept to me because his aging meant he could die. Back then it was the thought process of a kid who has older parents and very little lived experience with death. I'd come to learn that even as death did happen to and around me, it didn't ease my fears about my dad, but instead exacerbated them and made me imagine what I'd say at his funeral, how I would put his eulogy together to sum up what he meant to me.

Speaking of eulogies, we started discussing the idea of me writing his around my early-to-mid teens. I'm still undecided on whether that helped quell my worries or just made my imagination run more wild. This is also when, as a family, we started having realer conversations on the possibility of him dying. He was in his early sixties at the time, and once again not particularly ailing, but we had to talk about it anyways. My refusal to talk about it started then, and to a large degree still follows me now. To this day, my dad tells me, "Don't cry when I die, I've lived a good life." As if that's going to make it easier for me to accept or live with. I'm happy he feels fulfilled, but how am I meant to live without him?

Thankfully, these conversations didn't start to feel real or carry weight until my early twenties. Up to this point, his health had been fine, but this was when alarming things started to happen. This was a period where I started thinking, *Oh shit, it could really happen. This isn't just a child's worst nightmare anymore*. The instance that brought this to the surface for me was when I was 23 and got

a call from my mom telling me my dad was in the hospital. He had a severe nosebleed, one that was nearly impossible to stop. He had to call an ambulance, and later I was told his apartment looked like a crime scene; there was so much blood. He'd gotten a couple before this one that weren't quite as catastrophic but seemingly served as omens for an occurrence of this magnitude. At the time, I was 400 miles away and felt helpless standing in the break room at work. Everything would end up fine, but it pecked at that part of me that, on train rides home, would think about the fact that I was so far, and he was in his seventies.

Now, he's in his mid-seventies. He and my mother, many years divorced at this point, are roommates. I've moved back to Indiana not only to go back to school, but to be closer to him. He's just been diagnosed with cancer. Fortunately, not the kind that kills, but here I am, feeling like that terrified ten-year-old girl again.

Nothing prepares you for how horrible the word "cancer" is when you hear it about someone you love so deeply. It's not like I'd never heard about someone having cancer before, but now I intimately know what it feels like because it's wriggled its way into my family, into the one person I can say I love more than anyone on this earth. I hear what the doctors say about outcomes, and I *do* believe them, truly. They're not deceiving my family and I when they say this is highly curable. That doesn't stop me from getting the news and staring up into the dark of my ceiling and sobbing, from catastrophizing. It doesn't stop me from telling my siblings, who I know are also processing this and hurting over it, that I'm not willing to face the possibility of this being the thing that kills him. I won't hear it, and I don't want to talk about it. I'm scared, obviously. It all makes me come off as a petulant child, a porcelain doll, but I don't care.

My dad is my best friend. He's the person who made me care about keeping up with the news, shaping my political philosophy very early on. He gave me a comedic edge when I was young because we watched late-night TV together all the time. He let me know all the time that no matter how old I was, watching cartoons would keep me in touch with the kid in me. He's taught me everything I know about life. I cannot imagine the world without him. I don't know who I am without him.

Parents talk a lot about their kids being their "mini-me's," but since I was old enough to imagine a life where I traveled and saw the world, my dad has looked at me and said, "You're just like me, not afraid to go out into the world." Even though he taught me to go into this world unafraid of it, what he doesn't know is that, even though I know what he means when he says that, it's not fully true. I'm scared of this world more than he can even fathom if he's not here to keep guiding me through its twists and turns. Without his knowledge, his smart remarks, or him telling me "Love you more" before we hang up calls, I don't know how

to navigate this life. How am I supposed to make sense of anything if one day I can't call him every day?