



Too Young to Die, Too Old to Live

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The repugnant aroma of failing organs and decaying bodies choked the corridors of the two-story nursing home where my father lay dying. I paused momentarily on the way in, allowing my nostrils the chance to grow accustomed to this ominous odor I had come to despise. The stark white walls, bleached yellow floors, and stainless steel components of the nursing home had long ago become acceptable.

This was my father's waiting room. Barely living, he had lost all cognitive abilities. He had not spoken in months and was confined to bed rest about two months prior. My father, 6'3" and 250 pounds, had been reduced to a shell of his former self. Comatose, the debilitating disease he forcibly fought would succeed in stopping the unstoppable. Though the other residents of Floor 2 had seen me hundreds of times, they knew me only as well as my father now did. And that was not at all.

I was 16 years old and about to bury my father, though I lost him long ago.

I made my way to room 417 slower than usual, idly playing checkers with the yellow and gray ceramic tiled floor along the way. Random, meaningless thoughts danced in my head vainly attempting to distract from the piercing reality that recently consumed my life. My family was already here. The doctors called my mother just an hour before.

"He won't make it through the night," she told me on the phone. "I'll pick up your brother and meet you at the hospital."

My high school was just two blocks away from the nursing home where my father lived. But still, I was the last one to arrive. As I approached my father's room, I heard the murmuring sound of voices – consoling, rationalizing wounded voices that held no real purpose. Try as we may, death can never be explained or wished away. I turned the corner to enter and 24 eyes darted my way. They waited for a reaction, some type of acknowledgement that I would not, could not give. My father was only 56 years old that September in 1997, too young to die, but, as it turned out, too old to live.

I made my way through the crowd of people to the only space in the 12'x12' room that was not occupied. It was not until I was seated on the cold tile floor that I finally looked at my father. My body shivered. My mind froze. And, my heart bled. His once dominating frame was now skeletal. His skin was jaundiced and scaly. His eye sockets and cheeks were sunken in. Every inch of his frail body was covered and recovered by a mass of second-hand, tattered blankets with 'PROPERTY OF' loudly printed on them. My father, my protector, wore a diaper. Tubes erupted from various orifices on his head – one for food, one for breath. Those little plastic tubes were the only life force my father had left. The machines they connected to, the only reason he was still alive.

"He won't make it through the night," she told me on the phone.



It amazed me how completely ignorant of life I had been. How much I had taken my father for granted. But none of this mattered now; by morning he would be dead. My father, with my mother's support, decided before his illness could steal his identity that he did not want life support.

The doctors were coming to remove the breathing tube shortly.

Only now did I take notice of the other people in his room. My family, my life, was of no comfort at this time. My older brother repeated the same question three times with not a second thought, "How do you think the Chiefs will do this season?" The room hummed with nervous energy and pointless conversation. I looked around, my gaze pausing at each person for a short while, before finally resting on my mother. The pillar of strength throughout my father's illness, her puffy eyes were bloodshot from tears that would not stop. And my younger brother, a man of only 13, held his mother while she wept. My mother had instructed the doctors to remove life from her husband. And this was too much.

I quickly averted my gaze to the hard, cool tile floor. Closing my eyes I wished I would absorb the elements of the room. I needed the solid, icy, rigid aspects of the floor. I wanted the mechanical response of the machines. I yearned for the blank nothingness the walls represented. I cried for the light's ability to shut off. Anything would have been better than the real, human emotions paralyzing me.

Father Carney arrived to the lifeless party shortly thereafter and headed straight for my mother. Aged 67 years, his tired face fought to appear strong for the grieving. His rough hands fidgeted slightly with the white collar adorning his wilted neck. Gently, he enveloped his arm around my mother's shoulders and guided her into the hallway of healing. Minutes later they returned none the worse and none the better. Father Carney approached my father's bedside and positioned an old, mahogany rosary in his hands, carefully lacing it between each finger. Seconds seemed like hours and the moments grazed by with no end in sight as my family witnessed this man perform my father's



My father's suffering had ended.

Last Rites. My body overcome with grief remained still even after Father was gone. In an insignificant 30 minutes, he absolved my father of his sins and

prepared him for the gates of Heaven. In some aspect, he granted my father the righteous permission to give up, to die.

I sat in the same spot for nearly two hours. Tears for my father had fallen consistently for the past four years. Love wanted his suffering to end and selfishness hoped he would never leave. Tormented with conflicting thoughts, I could do nothing. So I waited.

I waited for a calmness that would never come. I waited for reassurance that did not exist. And it waited, just like my father had done for the past two years.

What did find its way into room 417 that evening was death. The deep breaths carelessly forced into his body subsided to shallow attempts at life with the disconnection of the ventilator. Moments later, his heart, weakened by years of infection, could hold on no longer and stopped. At 2:47 a.m., my father quit fighting the illness that he could not defeat. Now I cried silent tears. I mourned for the death of my father years ago and I mourned the death of his body that night.

A doctor was called in to declare time of death. Dressed impeccably in black creased slacks, a cotton button up shirt, dress shoes and silk tie, he was grossly out of place. He offered a few words of condolence and turned to leave. His eyes caught mine and lingered briefly. What he saw I still don't know. Was it the grief-stricken girl who just lost her father? Or was it relief that he saw in my eyes, comforted by a finality that in my mind happened long ago.

My father's suffering had ended. Five years of affliction were over. He finally won in the only way he could, by complete surrender. He overcame the battle with Alzheimer's disease, and now I was able to bury that disease, the horrible stranger who stole from my father the dignity of life and robbed a girl of her innocence. My father

would never walk his only daughter down the aisle on her wedding day. He would never feel the joy of spoiling his grandchildren and returning them to their parents. He'll miss two high school graduations and his silver anniversary with his beloved wife. These thoughts, and others just as despondent in nature, played over and over in my head. Undeserved fate bestowed upon an unsuspecting man. As hopelessness permeated my feelings, I glanced back at my father's body. Slowly, I closed the heavy hospital room door on the way out.

I walked the hallways of the nursing home for the last time. And I walked away from the horror that symbolized Alzheimer's disease. The choking odor still hovered like early morning mist. The stark white walls still blinded. The pale yellow floor was still tacky from the previous night's bleaching. The informality of the hospital displayed in every steel accessory. Nothing was different and yet everything had changed.