

The Crash

By Jake Minor

There was more than one tooth missing, he said, maybe three or four from what he could tell. He held one in his scraped-up hand as I searched for the others, not sure what I would do with them if I found them. My little sister's bike lay on top of him, a paperweight on his frail frame. Blood pooled in his mouth and dripped onto his shirt when it ran out of room. This concrete was unforgiving, I knew that from my childhood. I had been the victim of its broken cracks and unevenness countless times, my dad always there to dust me off. Now as he lay here on the concrete that I had grown up on, I felt anger above all else. Anger at the bike, anger at the cancer growing in his brain for the past six months, anger at the doctors for not fixing him, and anger at my dad for thinking he could ride a bike on his own when he could barely walk fifty feet. I snatched the tooth out of his hand and gently placed it in my shirt pocket, thinking that his teeth were something that could be fixed, a problem that could be solved. I threw the bike off him and took his hands in mine, scratching myself on the tiny bits of concrete that had embedded themselves in his palms, tunneling under his callouses. "Shit, Dad, what're you doing?" I said, exhaustion and frustration coating my words. "I'm sorry, I thought I could do it," he struggled to say, staring back at me with a look of fear that sons rarely see from fathers. I felt his open mouth rest on my chest as I wrapped my arms around him, hiding my eyes from his. I couldn't cry, not now when he needed me to be strong, to be a leader of the family, something I wasn't sure I could be. As we sat there collapsed on the street holding onto each other, the terminal nature of his disease started to poison my thoughts. Everything from here on out had the potential to be the last of its kind. Every meal, every hug, every word, every bike ride.

Four months earlier I received the news that I was accepted to medical school. My dad had been undergoing chemotherapy for two months at that point, and I was working at a rehabilitation hospital as a nursing assistant a few hours from home. I quit my job, deferred enrollment, and moved home despite my dad's opposition. "You might never get this chance again," he would say. Still, I moved home, knowing the guilt of not doing so would have paralyzed me, not the best mental state for starting medical school. Besides, I thought, he would beat this tumor soon and things would revert back to normal in no time. I was wrong.

At the hospital, I had worked with patients to help them with tasks that they and everyone else often take for granted. Helping someone wipe their ass for the first time is a humbling experience for both people involved. But like anything else done repeatedly, I got used to it. The first time I had to help my dad in the bathroom, I quickly realized that it was not a task of which I would grow accustomed. This was not a job anymore, this was a tragedy. This was what other people were supposed to go through while I offered my condolences. *Let*

me know if there's anything I can do. What a hollow sentiment, I would think, after hearing it for the eighth time in a week.

The beginning is easy because you think you cannot possibly lose. My dad was fine, it seemed, and would continue to be fine because he was too resilient and unbreakable to be anything other than fine. He would go to work, go to my sister's swim meets, tinker on his Camaro in the garage and nothing would change. When an illness first arises, its defeat seems like the only possible outcome. You can't get through the early times without thinking this way. We had to believe that the glioblastoma multiforme taking over parts of his brain that helped him with his balance was a solvable puzzle. We had to pretend that his brain could mount an attack on this foreign invader, allowing him to read a book again and remember my mom's name. For my dad, he would only believe that he was going to "beat this thing." My mom believed him. I wanted to. It's not about winning or losing, I would think, it's just bad luck.

I thought we could fix it.

I thought I could fix it.

I thought the doctors could fix it.

Not everything can be fixed.

The first things to change were his eyes. They knew something that we were not yet willing to accept. They were defeated, beaten down by the poison being pumped through his veins. What were once piercing green eyes that could see right through any lie I ever told had become gray and hollow. He would beat this thing, he would say, but his eyes betrayed him. For the first time, I began to question whether the man who had carried me down to the river to sing me to sleep as a child could actually die.

Next were his legs, they became unresponsive to his thoughts, the synapses used for the last time. After that his bowels, his bladder. Dying is not over quickly. He became completely dependent on us, especially my mom. She never complained, never was anything other than grateful to spend another minute with the man she loved. She never cried in front of him. Whatever I had previously thought another human being was capable of withstanding, my mom surpassed it. She was exhausted. Each day brought with it more bad news, more tests, more drugs, more side effects, more uncertainty. What had she done to deserve this? What had my younger brother and sisters done to deserve this? Yet, at the end of each day, she would lie down beside him and be perfectly at peace. To witness her switch between caregiver and wife so effortlessly made me realize that to her, it was all the same.

His mind started to go. Steroid-induced psychosis, the doctor called it when my dad started to burst into tears randomly. *He's fucking scared*, I wanted to scream. *Can't you see that?* I was scared too. I'll never forget sitting in the doctor's office listening to my dad try and fail to do simple math. His brain was dying along with his personality. The last few months were not

my dad, they were the cancer. I was cynical and mad at the world, my thoughts became unrecognizable and shameful. I began thinking that I wanted it to be over. Nobody tells you that. No one tells you that you'll have thoughts about how much easier life would be if your dad would die and let you and your family move on. No one tells you that you'll furtively feel relief for your mom, for your entire family, when the funeral home shows up to your front door to take his body and you watch as the men in suits wheel out a husband, father, brother, and friend. No one tells you death smells. No one tells you these things because it hurts just to think them. It hurts to think that death can be cathartic, that it can be compassionate.

I wanted to wallow in self-pity. I wanted to believe that good could not possibly exist in a world that was going to leave my thirteen-year-old sister fatherless. But Dad wouldn't let me think that way. He wouldn't let me bask in my misery. He would point to my mom. *How could I deny her strength?* He would point to the doctor who made house calls to make sure that he was comfortable. *How could I deny that there was compassion in tragedy?* He would be grateful that family was constantly around without being asked. *How could I deny that love is what would keep us together after he was gone?* I let myself be taught one last lesson by the man who had taught me how to ride a bike all those years ago. I learned something in those eight months that no medical school curriculum teaches. I learned what kind of doctor I want to be, that I need to be, because I know what it means to lose, I know what it means to feel hope, to have it crushed, to look for comfort in family. I know how important a doctor's visit can be, if only to hear that life goes on. And I know how essential it can be for someone to retain some semblance of independence and freedom, even if that means riding a bike down the street.

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