

Good Grief

by Rachel Matyi

Undoubtedly universally experienced, no life has been lived free from the reign of grief. As trite as it is, death is a part of life. When it arrives, do you hate the world? Avoid the world? Change the world? Lightning strikes and knocks down the tree in your yard. Every day you are forced to pass the charred, uprooted tree. You can avert your eyes and learn to live around the misfortune. You can recover planks one by one, enough to build a fence around your life. Or you can plant flowers and let life rise from the ashes.

Or d. none of the above – attempting to explain death through metaphors is naïve and impossible.

Your therapist tells you that time heals all wounds. Your therapist is getting paid way too much to feed you false hope. Time magnifies guilt. Time does what time does, and each year becomes even smaller of a fraction of your life than the year before. You think it'd be impossible for you to forget such a life-shattering, earth-shaking, dramatic-adjective experience in your life, but slowly, you do. The stabbing pain in your heart that originated from the death of that person close to you is replaced with the stabbing pain of you realizing that you're forgetting. You're forgetting what their laugh sounded like. You're forgetting the color of their eyes. You forget their smell, the shape of their hands, the way they looked at you when you entered the room. As the time in between moments of missing them grows longer, the stabbing pain restores once you realize you forgot to miss them. You realize you hate yourself for spending too much time not missing them. You realize your brain is holding less of their memory to miss.

Time magnifies guilt.

People ask me why I hate the beach. Like a memorized a script to a play I recite, "It's too hot and I don't like invasive sand. Pale people like me don't do well on sun-soaked beaches." In actuality, the worst day of my life occurred on a beach. As the lengthy online obituary states,

John Richard Matyi

Posted: Monday, July 26, 2004 4:00 am | Updated: 10:47 am, Wed Oct 19, 2011.

0 comments

John Richard "Big John" Matyi, age 40, of Ligonier, Pa., died unexpectedly on Thursday, July 22, 2004, while enjoying his annual extended family vacation in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

“My eyes are blurry”
7 am - 7/22/2004

He is gone. Every quality that unquestionably gave him life is absent. Simply a carcass of the man that existed so passionately. The dark brown eyes I looked to for reassurance, the eyes that crinkled when overcome with joy, the eyes that watched me grow. Replaced with plastic eye caps, installed by morticians to imitate the appearance of life. The gap-toothed smile I could immediately recognize from a crowd, the smile that encouraged the decisions I made, the smile that greeted me every day for as long as I could remember. Now sutured shut, the lips sewn and the jaw wired to feign a peaceful sleep. The hands that guided me through my first steps, hands that taught me how to swing a bat, hands that carried me when I faked falling asleep in the car. Hands that are stagnant slabs of flesh, light purple, inducing hesitation for even the simplest of touch. For days before the funeral I yearned to see him again,

Touch him again,
Love him again.

I only feared him as his body, ripped by rigor mortis and violated by morticians, lay before me on his deathbed.

Standing on a step stool in front of his open-casket, I delicately placed my fingertips on a hand that I didn't recognize. The girl who not a week before would unquestionably leap into his arms was now hesitant to touch him. How could he go from tucking her into bed to lying lifeless before her? Funeral goers look on in sympathy as the young girl gazed expectantly at the pale purple body that lay in the casket. She returns the Steeler's teddy bear her father gifted to her back to him so he wouldn't be lonely wherever he was going. The sea of black parts, revealing the faces of family friends and co-workers pretend to understand and apologize for her loss. With every interaction, she's gazed upon as if she's damaged. She is damaged. 13 years pass and everyday her mind tries to imagine what the days would have been like with him. If only she were there in the hospital with him. So she could say goodbye. He witnessed my first breath but I wasn't there for his last.

For years after I'm confronted with moments that force me to remember the fallen tree in my front yard.

Visitors asking, "Are your parents home?"
 Telemarketers requesting, "Mr. John Matyi" to come to the phone
 Mail addressed to "John Richard Matyi" 13 years after he died
 The inevitable first date conversation, "what does your mother and father do for a living?"
 The moment when people don't know what to say
 Running to the restaurant bathroom to avoid his favorite song blaring from the speakers
 Father Daughter Dance
 Every official document that asks the age and occupation of my male guardian
 Friends' introducing their parents, "This is my dad."
 People mistaking my mom's asshole fiancé for my father, "Tell your dad I said hello" ... "My dad is dead"
 "Happy Father's Day"
 Watching a TV Show/Movie involving a father walking the bride down the aisle
 And this fucking horrible quote from The Parent Trap:

And if you ask me, a dad is an irreplaceable person in a girl's life. Think about it. There's a whole day devoted to celebrating fathers. Just imagine someone's life without a father. Never buying a Father's Day card. Never sitting on their father's lap. Or being able to say 'Hi, Dad,' or, 'What's up, Dad?' or, 'Catch you later, Dad.' I mean, a baby's first words are always 'Dada,' aren't they?

For years I'm confronted with moments that allow me to remember the tree that beautifully lived in my front yard.

Finding his cologne buried amongst his belongings - the scent so overwhelmingly and unquestionably him.
 Displaying the Charmander stuffed animal he won for me at an amusement park at the head of my bed
 Interacting with the hundreds of people that attend his Memorial Golf Outing every year, enthusiastic about keeping his memory alive
 Watching home videos - seeing him smile, hearing his laugh, seeing him alive
 Celebrating every time the Steeler's win
 Learning how genuinely good of a person he was through stories and memories
 Holding my cat as I look at a picture of her as a kitten curled up in his lap
 Hearing Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop Thinkin' About Tomorrow" come on the radio
 Finding my old softball glove I used when he was my coach
 Flipping through family photo albums where he's being a goof in every picture
 Looking at my mom

As a fatherless child, your decisions are dictated by statistics

Daddyless Daughters :How Growing Up Without a Father Affects a Women's Standards and Choices. Growing up in a Fatherless Household Could Have a Greater Impact on Daughters Than on Sons

71% of high school dropouts come from fatherless homes...
 90% of all homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes...
 63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes...
 75% of chemical abuse patients come from fatherless homes...
 85% of youths sitting in prison grew up in fatherless homes...
 Fatherless teens are 2x more likely to engage in early sexual activity...
 Fatherless teens are 7x more likely to get pregnant as an adolescent...

Tests performed on mice help me understand the way I make decisions

It's reassuring to know that my future will be severely negatively impacted since most of my life I grew up without a father. There's no hope for a future of success because I display an impoverished educational performance. Scientists tell me my pre-frontal cortex is shot.

As a female lacking a male figure growing up, the void must eventually be filled. I'm going to find myself pregnant earlier than average and will preserve my happiness facade through an abusive relationship. According to some doctors, it is believed that daughters without a father have no one to model their image of male standards from. We had to set our own standards. It's inevitable that I'm going to make the huge mistake of allowing others to define my standards. Without my definition of my true self, I give up control and allow others to dictate and influence my attitudes and behaviors.

I'm a statistic molded by the standards of others.

Growing Up Without a Father Can Permanently Alter the BRAIN. Fatherless Children are More Likely to Grow Up Angry and Turn to Drugs

My lifelong journey through physical and emotional turmoil was cut short because my mother provided me with everything I needed. We are an obvious outlier to your statistics.

The grieving process never truly ends. As life progresses, you realize his death affects you in new ways than it had the year before.

As an 8 year old I missed my best friend. So much joy was stripped from my life when I had to wake up to an alarm clock instead of his playful tickles. I had no one to do cartwheels in the front lawn with or to play catch with in the living room. The volumes of American Girl Doll books had to be left unread because only he could fulfill the bedtime tradition. There was no one there to explain what was happening in that week's episode of Star Trek: The Next Generation. He died over the summer so none of my classmates heard the news. No one understood why I would start crying in the middle of class. On the rare occasion that I was invited, I refused to go to my friends' birthday parties because I didn't want to see them and their father.

As a 12 year old I missed my coach. I quit my favorite sports because they were a bitter reminder he wasn't there. I couldn't play softball without remembering him teaching me how to swing a bat. I couldn't play basketball without remembering him teaching me how to shoot a free throw. I couldn't play soccer without remembering him teaching me how to perfect my goalie stance. Everything was a reminder. I had no motivation to get out of bed in the morning because he wasn't there to drive my passion to learn. My mom sent me to more and more therapy sessions because I showed "heightened signs of anxiety and depression."

As a 16 year old I missed John. I realized I had lived more of my life without him than I had with him. Even though he was my father, I never really knew him as a person. I learned through stories about his goofy personality and overwhelming charisma. He was one of those rare people that are genuinely good. Frequently, I would find myself facing moments of intense rage and sorrow. There are so many shitty people in the world, why couldn't one of them have died instead. My mom starts dating again and it reminds me of how much I wish I knew what our life would have been like if he were still alive. I wished he were there to ground me, to intimidate my boyfriend, to freak out over a speeding ticket. My sister and I uncover old home movies and I cry for 3 days straight because I'm able to hear his voice and see his smile again.

As an 18 year old I missed my dad. Every day I face the question, "would he be proud of me?" Over the years, I realized that there was no use for apathy or indifference. There is no level of sadness or amount of tears that could be able bring him back. Instead of being sad about his death, I let his death motivate me. At the age of 18 I graduated three times. I graduated college with an associate's degree, I graduated high school, and then I graduated army basic training. I wish he were there to see me walk across the stage. I wish he were there to open my college acceptance letters with me. I wish he were there to see me become a soldier.

As a 20 year old I miss my father. I am unable to count the number of times I wished I were able to ask him for advice. As a college student, it is obligatory to question all of your life decisions. I realize I have never maintained a healthy relationship with a man. My father died, my mom's fiancé is emotionally abusive, and the longest I've ever dated someone is 10 months. A degree of sexual promiscuity is expected in college. But when I have a one-night-stand with someone, the term "daddy issues" almost always comes up. Do I seek male attention because there is a void left from years without a father figure? How many voids are leaving me vulnerable? I attend therapy again just to make sure I'm in charge of my emotions.

As a 30 year old I miss my companion. My wedding will be bittersweet because I don't have a father to walk me down the aisle. But screw your traditions; I'll have my mom walk me down the aisle. I'll always wonder what he would have been like as a grandfather.

As a 40 year old I miss my parents. He and my mother would have been growing old together. I would have frequently visited grandma and grandpa with my family. His jet dark black hair slowly turning gray. His life having been filled to the brim with happiness.

As a 50 year old I miss my family. I would celebrate my mom and dad's 50th wedding anniversary. I wouldn't want to imagine my life without him.

You can't anticipate the next time your heart constricts with a desperate longing for him. Not a day goes by where something seemingly simple reminds you of him.

It hurts. It physically pains your being. Clenches your chest, tightens your throat, stings your eyes. But you're strong. If you can overcome this you can overcome anything.

Every day I am thankful for the moments I was able to spend with him. Every day I am thankful for my mother; without her, I would have contributed to another statistic.

We have been damaged by the death of a husband and a father and we have been strengthened by the death of a husband and a father.

The tree may have collapsed in our front yard by we have built a garden from its ashes.