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Cherish Them

Darla Bouzane

Memories work in funny ways: the way you can forget about them for a while or the way they often blur into one another. Mostly they're funny in the way they come rushing back at the moment something reminds you of them.

I'm twenty and sitting in the living room of my childhood house. The carpet is the same dark brownish-red that it has always been. The same green trim lines the ceiling. I'm sure there's a smell lingering in the air that my nose isn't privy to. I'm home for winter break, as usual. Next to me is my boyfriend of almost three years. We have a movie playing on Netflix when my mom comes in and asks him to shovel the driveway.

Something is wrong.

You see, she usually won't ask him to shovel for us. One of her neighbours usually does it for her with his quad. My boyfriend agrees, probably sensing that she needs to talk to me. He pulls on a toque and his jacket, heading out the front door while she sits down next to me. She tells me that the doctors see a spot. She tells me they think it might be cancer. A flood of memories and tears wash over me, so many tears.

I was ten years old and sitting on the top bunk of my best friend's bed. There's no door and I could smell the Kraft Dinner wafting in from the kitchen. Her room was small and the ceiling light gave everything a slightly yellow hue. We sat facing each other, our legs crossed so that we both fit comfortably. I remember telling her that I thought my dad had cancer. He didn't. Not yet, anyway. She confided in me that her dad was also sick. This isn't her story, though. This is mine. This is my dad's.

I was sixteen. We had just moved back to Kitimat, a small town in northern British Columbia, and back into our little old house. The purple fence around our backyard had faded to brown. Snow still covered the ground; it was only December. You see, my dad was sick and needed treatment. His workplace wouldn't cover his trips to Vancouver from Kamloops, which meant

we *had* to move home. Our move happened mid-school, year meaning I was halfway through eleventh grade. I wanted the move for silly, childish reasons. I didn't realize how sick my dad actually was.

A few months later my parents were out of town. My dad was having tests done. I remember the call so vividly. I was staying at my Nan's house in Kitimat. She muted the TV as she picked up the phone. She was silent as she passed the phone to me. I don't remember who was on the other end of the call, but it was probably my mom. The voice on the other end shook as it told me the news. Tears filled my eyes and ran down my cheeks as I listened. I remember hoping it was a cruel April fool's joke. It wasn't. His disease had developed into cancer. It was stage four. They should have caught it sooner. They didn't.

I managed to finish the school year. It was summer and we stayed in a hotel in Vancouver. The hotel was in the busy downtown area. I was sitting with my parents, my aunt, and uncle outside of a coffee shop. The air was warm but the building shaded us from overheating. People buzzed by, understandably occupied with their own lives. They didn't notice how my life was falling apart in the middle of it all. Why should they? I stared down at my drink, my mind somewhere else, or anywhere else. I caught the smell of freshly ground coffee beans as it flowed out of the shop when the door was propped open. The scent pulled me back into the conversations. The adults were talking about my dad's health. Someone said that he would be around for a long time yet. I asked if that meant graduation long. Graduation was ten months away. My mom shook her head no and reached towards my shoulder. For what was probably the second hundredth time in five months, tears flowed down my cheeks as I broke a little bit more in the middle of a busy city.

The last summer with him was not all heartache. Don't get me wrong, it was mostly heartache. Especially as we slowly realized it was, in fact, our last summer. Before our trip to Vancouver, we stopped in Kamloops to visit my grandparents, my dad's parents. He was in pain, as he had been for a long time. We stopped at the hospital and they gave us the news about his spine. That's when he had to start wearing a neck brace. He could have been paralyzed at any moment without that brace. I was in the kitchen when they told me that. The horrifying news made my knees weak and I slunk down against the wall. My dad, however, was grateful. Not because of the possibility of being paralyzed, but because it meant he didn't have to join us on the

Hellevator at the PNE. While he might have been trying to cheer us up with some laughter, he was genuinely afraid of that ride and had been dreading the idea of it as we planned our trip to the PNE.

We were back in Kitimat for the start of the school year. It was the end of September. September 29th to be exact, my dad's birthday. I know they talk about the last good day and not knowing that it's the last good day when it's happening. Or maybe that's just a quote from a movie I watched. Either way, his birthday was his last good day. We had dinner for him at my Nan's house. Turkey dinner and birthday cake. He was so excited for his birthday. I swear he had been talking about it for weeks. "Turkey dinner and birthday cake," he would smile and lick his lips, his eyes closed. I can't tell you who was there, or what kind of cake we ate. At this point, people were coming and going all the time. They all knew it was almost time. They all knew we needed whatever support they could offer. I can tell you, however, that he wasn't able to walk up the steps anymore. Two of my uncles had to carry him up and into the house.

Everything can change so quickly. The day after his birthday was a Friday and I had been sitting in the library in my usual spot during my spare block. I had my headphones in, listening to the same song I'd been listening to all week, "One Step at a Time" by Four Year Strong. I glanced at my phone, surprised to see a text from my mom. She was outside waiting to pick me up. I always took the bus so this was pretty weird. My dad was getting worse and it was time for me to stay home from school. On Sunday, I put on a show for him. I laid down next to him on his hospital bed and watched the show we had enjoyed so many times before. The next few days were a blur. Our family was coming and going; they were always bringing food. They wanted to make sure we ate something, I guess. I remember going to bed on Tuesday exhausted and scared. I had always been such a daddy's girl. What was I going to do without him?

The next morning I woke up and wiped the sleep from my eyes. I walked into the living room, where the bed was, and kissed my dad's forehead. I told him good morning; I told him I loved him. *I love him. That doesn't change just because he isn't here anymore.* Some time passes, I can't tell you how long, then he is gone. We had our chance to say goodbye. Everyone was convinced he had waited for me to wake up, he waited to let me say goodbye.

I had always been very close to my parents. Unfortunately for my mom, she got the backlash of my teen years. My terrible teen years started to end when my dad was sick and I grew closer to my mom.. She became my rock, my shoulder to cry on, and my listening ear. I had learned to cherish my relationship with her. If she was sick, I would have left school. But I had to go back, it was my third year, after all. I resigned myself to focus on anything besides my mom's health. It didn't work. It was a waiting game for a few weeks. Waiting for the results. Waiting to hear if everything was changing. Again. Back home, my cousin was staying with my mom. We tried to assure each other that it was going to be okay. Something was nagging at me, buzzing in the back of my mind. Questions whirled around. *What if she dies? Can an adult be orphaned? Or would they just be a parentless adult? I can't lose her, too.*

And then the results came in.

It turned out that the spot was just a spot. She was going to be okay. Relief washed over me.

As I sit here, thinking about my two amazing parents, I am so grateful. I am incredibly fortunate to have had two wonderful parents raise me. I think about other relationships I see between other parents and their children. I know not all parents are like mine, but those are not the ones I am thinking about. Whenever someone pushes their loving parents away, I just want to shake them and tell them to love them instead, to take every opportunity to get to know them, to cherish them.