

“An Emotional Journey”  
First Person Essay  
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“Your grandfather has cancer.” The path of words left my mother’s lips, traveled across the air that filled the space between us, lingered for just a moment within the crisp day, and finally overwhelmed me with their bitter truth. It stung. Little did I know that the initial sting would be nothing compared to the agony to follow.

My mother kept my siblings and I home from school and disclosed the news to us at the neighborhood park. I replayed this day over and over again in my mind and each time, my mother’s words increasingly *stung*, the details increasingly *stuck*, and it increasingly *sucked* the life out of me.

It was a beautiful day: the sun filtered through light opaque clouds; the weather provided a slight chill that complimented the sunshine; the bushes bloomed with vibrant flowers – the peak of spring.

My little sisters – barely four and five years old at the time – cheerfully chased each other on the jungle gym. While they were delightfully distracted, my mother explained the details of my grandfather’s condition of cancer. Although my mother spoke hope-strung words, they seemed forced – her body language told another story.

“The doctors caught it early,” she insisted. “With just a few surgeries and months of rehabilitation, he’ll be back to normal.” I believed her.

After learning his diagnosis, everything was a blur. Time progressed and we visited my grandfather often. On some occasions, he was bedridden in the hospital, and then before I knew it, he’d seem practically perfect again, basking in the comfort of his home. This became a pattern.

One day in particular, he was bright-eyed—nearly normal even. I was sitting next to him on the couch watching a game of golf – his favorite sport— on the television set.

“Whenever you find a boy, make sure he treats you like I do. Find a boy just like your grandpa,” he said as a tear welled up in his eye. I studied him – slightly aged from the chemo – but certainly young at heart. These would be the last words my grandpa ever said to me, but I didn’t know it at the time.

“Make him buy you a car,” he chuckled at himself, lightening the mood. Then we sat, silently enjoying each other’s presence, until my visit was over.

Our visits hinged heavily on the tension between both wanting to be there for my grandfather and sheltering my little sisters from this painful process.

“I don’t like seeing grandpa so sick,” Anjelina, my five-year-old sister, stammered after one visit.

Perhaps I was too naïve for seventeen, or perhaps I was in denial – I still haven’t detected which one it was – but as the days accumulated, I continued on as if nothing had changed.

“We’re just going to bring grandpa medicine,” my mother told a cover story to my little sisters in the backseat of the car when we left the house in a rush late one Saturday night.

After catching every red light, stopping for a bathroom break, and refilling our gas tank, it was the longest car-ride ever—full of fear and faith. Praying, or at least attempting to, between my silent broken sobs. I wanted to be strong: for both myself and my family.

The hospital was cold and barren. As I entered the waiting room, I instantly burst to tears. It was becoming a reality: my grandfather was dying.

Through my clouded vision, I saw a *Clean Hands Saves Lives* sign above the hand-sanitizer mounted to the wall, and I know this is silly, but with every ounce of hope left in me, I made my way to the dispenser, hoping that maybe, just maybe, my clean hands would indeed

save my grandpa's life. As I brought my hands together in a rubbing motion, it was a good prep for prayer.

Now, I still have mixed emotions about the choice I made when given the opportunity to see my grandpa that night. They told me that he was unable to talk, but that he was fully aware, and peaceful—so peaceful, but despite what they said, I just kept picturing him lying in that hospital bed: skin yellowed from the jaundice, eyes swollen with tears, and a mouth too weak to form words. Muted, every thought was trapped within his mind.

My mom didn't want me to remember him in a hospital bed: helpless -- but the truth is, I was more concerned about how he'd remember me. So, I decided that I would not see him, because I knew that I was not nearly strong enough to hold back the inevitable stream of tears, and I most certainly did not want his last moments to be overwhelmed with my grief.

I didn't want to ruin his peace. Knowing that the doctors pulled the plugs on his life support, I teetered on the edge of regret, questioning whether or not I made the right decision but choosing not to see him eventually allowed me to have peace myself. Living amidst a real life nightmare, I had to face the reality of the pain head-on.

I repeated the same prayer over and over again in the car-ride home and all through the night, hoping that God's healing power would work in my favor; wishing that even though the plugs were pulled, his life would be revived; believing for a miracle.

When Sunday morning struck, we inevitably received a phone call notifying us that he passed away. Despite his death, I am confident God heard my cries. In that season, I felt abandoned, betrayed, lonely, lost, and confused. I was a mess; oblivious to the message God was developing in me.

Within two short months, I could no longer function from all the loss in my life. My god-mother passed away of liver failure just shy of 40 years old; my ex-best friend found a new best friend; my sappy high-school love interest fell for another girl; when I didn't think I could handle any more grief, my hero-of-a-grandfather lost his life in a brutal battle with cancer; and soon after, my older sister, who often sheltered and mothered me, moved out of my house leaving me trapped in her trail. I crashed, and as a seventeen-year-old girl, I came face-to-face with depression.

It took months of long lonely days and tear-filled sleepless nights to recover. I wrestled with God for an answer as I longed for companionship, and it was within that desert that I learned the most valuable lesson yet: God wanted me all to Himself for that season. He taught me to rely on Him for strength, joy, and comfort. Community is vital and companionship is part of His plan for my life, but my identity is found solely in Him, not in the validation of others.

Amidst all these deep life-lessons learned in the pit of solitude, there was a very applicable last set of words my grandpa left me with: "Whenever you find a boy, make sure he treats you like I do. Find a boy just like your grandpa," —and those words, I hold near and dear to my heart – just the way he once held my hand.