UNBOXING A LIFE:
Growth Through Grief

By Lane Williamson
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“Honey, it means I’m sick.”

This phrase, these words, were the words I had been dreading to hear for months, but knew, in the back of my mind, would eventually leave my father’s lips. The words that I knew, without a single doubt, would crumble the fragile sense of clarity and stability I had been aimlessly trying to maintain for months. The words that, even now, a few months later, induce a sort of heaviness to my body, feeling as though I am desperately trying to escape myself, but am simply tied down, uncontrollably grounded to this life.

I can still remember pieces of the entire day. My mother and sister coming to greet me outside of my college dorm room before we loaded ourselves into our minivan, wondering why my father had not climbed out of the front seat to give me a hug like he had done so many times before. The way that my mother seemed to speak in a bit more of a low, gentle tone to each of us. The way that my sister Grace’s eyes looked swollen and raw when I first saw her outside of my building, and how I naively assumed it was nothing more than fatigue.

I remember the way my father held onto my mother’s arm the entire drive, grip onto her and occasionally rubbing his thumb across the back of her tricep, something I hadn’t seen either one of them do to each other in quite some time. I took a photo of this gesture about an hour into the trip, wanting to capture the heartwarming moment of affection between my parents. Grace eyed me from the seat next to me, looking like she knew something that I didn’t. She did.

It was December, and we were driving down to South Carolina for my older sister’s college graduation. I remember trying to convince myself the whole journey from Maryland to Columbia that the coughing, the loss of weight in his face and body, and the constant fatigue were symptoms of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. My dad smoked cigarettes since he was a teenager and COPD was something we had watched other smokers in the family endure. Funnily enough, this disease was what we were hoping for. We wanted him to be diagnosed with COPD because to us, this was somewhat of a best-case scenario. If he could smoke for roughly fifty years and not be in worse shape, we felt like this would be a victory.

We had been begging him to see a doctor and have some tests done, partly because
it would bring us peace of mind and partly because our neighbor, Tom, had died in November of a heart attack, leaving a wife and two sons around my age behind. Grace and I visited the family about a day after the man had passed. We sat with his sons that night, in the house that Tom had bought, renovated, and lived his life in. One of the boys was our age, so we tried to talk about our first semesters of college and how we were adjusting. His younger brother, a junior in high school, had taken his father to the hospital the previous night when he suspected something was wrong. After taking his dad to the hospital, he went home while some tests were being completed. His father called home later on, assuring his son he would be fine and that they were just going to run a few more tests. It was the last conversation this man would have with a loved one. Although Tom had been having heart problems for years and it was unlikely that our father would suffer the same fate, my sisters and I recognized that we did not want to lose our dad so suddenly. We came home from our neighbors’ house crying that night, urging our father to see a doctor, for us if not for himself.

The day after Thanksgiving, my dad had gone in for his first set of tests, but we couldn’t gather very much from them. At this point, my sisters and I all returned to our schools. We each called home at least once a week, trying to see what was going on. I think my parents wanted us to focus on school and not be as worried, so they chose not to tell us when his appointments or tests were. When I called and asked how things were, they would usually say that all was well and that they hadn’t learned anything new. I later learned that it took much more time to schedule a biopsy and other appointments than I thought, so for most of the time that they were saying “we don’t know anything,” they were being truthful. They only came to know the truth around three days before I was picked up from college for Olivia's graduation.

There was another prominent warning sign that I subconsciously chose to ignore. One night in early December, I was studying for my Biology final that was coming up when I got a text message from Grace. She said she had tried calling my parents but that they were not picking up. A little-known fact about my family is that we often use an app, “Find my Friends,” to make sure each one of us gets home safely at night. Grace mentioned that she looked at the location of my father’s phone, and that he was at a hospital. I told her that I was sure he was probably just getting bloodwork done, because I looked at his location on my phone myself, and he had been to that specific location for blood work before. She calmed down, said thank
you, and hung up. After getting off the phone with her I looked at the app again. This time I zoomed a bit further in on the map so I could see exactly where my father was in the hospital. It said he was at a cancer clinic, which was directly next to the place where he normally got his blood work done. My heart immediately dropped, and I felt like my head was starting to spin.

My life was starting to fall apart in a study room in the lobby of my dorm building, and there was a group of students laughing and talking about their party plans for the weekend just a few feet outside the room. I think that in that moment I knew what was going on, but I couldn’t let myself admit it, not yet. I tried to hold onto the fact that it might not have been what I thought. I convinced myself that the app was wrong, that he was just getting the bloodwork done, that my father did not have cancer. I chose denial.

About an hour later, my dad called. I answered and we started talking about school, the babies he had delivered at work lately, how Ms. Tina and Stephanie from his OB/GYN office were. Then, as usual, I asked how he was feeling and if he had heard anything. I don’t quite recall most of the conversation, but I do remember that my dad asked for my cooperation and my word that I would try to keep whatever came next within our family. He did not say exactly what he knew, learned, or suspected, but I could tell it was unfortunate news. He told me that not even his brother Bill knew what was going on just yet, but that he would tell him soon, when he knew more. He said he had no doubt that my Uncle Bill would get his entire church to pray for him so that things would be okay. I started to cry when he said this, and my voice cracked as I tried to keep talking to him. My dad started to say goodnight, explaining that he didn’t want to keep me from studying. He ended our call by saying, “I love you, Lane,” and it was something in the way he said my name that broke my heart, because I realized that this conversation was probably going to mean a lot to me one day. That he wouldn’t always be able to say those words to me.

I can’t completely describe how I felt about him not sharing more with me in that moment. It felt like hundreds of different emotions were coursing through me, like they were battling against each other, fiercely escalating as my mind attempted to process them. I felt horrified thinking about his future and ours, sensing that it could be cut short. I felt powerless, because I couldn’t come up with the perfect sentence to ease my father’s mind, although I knew this was an impossible task. I felt confused, because this obviously wasn’t something I could have expected for
him. I felt frustrated that I still had to focus on my schoolwork, especially because we were learning about cancer in my biology class. I felt like I wanted to know how my dad was feeling. I understood why he didn't want to overshare at the time; I think he was trying to protect me and keep things as normal as possible until he eventually couldn’t anymore. I’m sure he was fearful, but he wasn’t one to openly share his emotions even in less serious contexts. Now that I look back on this call, I think that him telling me as much as he did was slightly out of character for him, and that I appreciate how much he did say. My dad knew how to handle tragic news when it involved a grandparent or a friend. He was good at ripping the bandaid off when it needed to be and he would share misfortune in a strong manner, but he never really updated us on his own health. This was new territory for him, having to tell his children that things were going to get complicated and asking us to comply with what he wanted to do. He could talk to anyone, friend or stranger, but he was the type of person to talk about how much he liked Jimmy Buffett, how the Orioles were doing this year, his stories from college, his daughters. Always his daughters.

He wasn’t known to talk to others about the hardships he was enduring. To this day I still don’t know if he had gotten results back before our phone call, had just talked to a doctor, or just had a hunch at that point. I didn’t want to ask, I didn’t want to know or push my father to tell me something he wasn’t ready to say yet. I just wanted to live in ignorance, but that was difficult. I stopped studying after the phone call and sat for a while, not saying or doing anything. I walked back up to my third-floor room where the light was already off. I was thankful for this, because I didn’t want my roommate to see my red face, full of tears. That night I silently cried myself to sleep, because I was sure of nothing, but somehow knew everything.

I didn’t let myself cry again until that day in December when we were driving to South Carolina. We were only about an hour away from the hotel when we stopped at a rest station. Grace and I went in to use the bathroom and when we walked out, my mom and dad were still making their way to the restrooms from the parking lot. They looked like they had just had a conversation, but I didn’t think much of it; my parents had conversations all the time.

We sat in the car and waited until they both returned from the restrooms, but instead of going to their seats, they opened the trunk of the car. My mother started fumbling with bags and medicine bottles, and then I heard her say, “Here is your inhaler, George.” I turned around in my seat, and I watched my father puff air from
the piece of plastic after shaking it up a few times. I turned away, feeling like I had seen something I wasn’t supposed to. A few minutes later, both of my parents climbed into their respective seats. After buckling her seatbelt, my mother turned to the passenger seat and said to my dad, “You should probably tell Lane.” My eyes got wide at this remark, because all at once, I realized a few things. Grace already knew whatever they were going to tell me, my parents had gotten some kind of results back, and Grace had to have been crying from whatever news they were going to give me. My father simply said, “When we get to the hotel, we will all talk.”

My family sat in silence for the rest of the ride, and when we got to the hotel, Grace and my mother went inside to get the room keys. My father and I stayed in the car, and just when I was about to ask him what was going on, he started to cough. It lasted a couple seconds, and it was one of those coughs that surprised you, that worried you, and made you ask if the person was alright. But I already knew this answer. Instead, I whispered, “That doesn’t sound too good,” to which my father responded with, “Laney...I’m not really doing too good right now.”

Tears had already started streaming down my cheeks when I reached out to touch my father’s shoulder in the seat in front of me. After a few seconds, I finally asked him what I had been waiting to say for weeks, the question that would give me the answer that I could never be ready to hear: “What exactly does that mean?”

He said, “Honey, it means I’m sick.”
Introduction

Over the course of the last four months, I have spent my time writing about experiences from the last year of my life and the time before it. I’ve tried to capture some of the moving parts that have collectively defined this time, from heartache, to uncertainty, to glorious joy, by creating a series of personal reflections. As part of the University of Maryland’s Honors Humanities program, I was instructed to design a keystone project that would serve as a way to conclude my time in the two-year program. Although I struggled to commit to an idea for a considerable amount of time, it became clear to me in late December of 2019 that I simply couldn’t focus on any subject matter besides my father for my keystone. When he passed away in December, everything seemed to break down and I needed a way to move forward, work through my grief, and communicate my thoughts and emotions. My keystone project gave me the opportunity to do each of these things in a supportive, creative environment that thrives on studying the arts and humanities.

When deciding what my “passion project” would be, I knew that I wanted to pursue something that was equally meaningful and challenging. For me, this meant that I did not want to perfect a skill that I already had or begin a project that did not force me out of my comfort zone. I wanted to do something different, because I recognized that risk taking hasn’t always been my strong suit. I also knew that I wanted my keystone to revolve around my dad, his life, and our relationship. A handful of ideas occupied my mind for weeks, until a family gathering inspired what would come to be the foundation of my work.

One day, I was sitting with my family members as we went through some of my father’s childhood belongings. My aunt and uncle were visiting my dad and decided to bring some items from my grandparents’ house for us to look through. They brought us close to twenty boxes and they all had "George" written on them. It was amazing to see how my grandmother managed to keep so many of his belongings and meticulously organize them. She created a box for each year my dad was in school until college, and then had additional boxes pertaining to those later years. Each box and every item held a story of its own.
As I was sitting around boxes and boxes of my dad’s things, with these objects ranging from every Christmas list my dad had ever written, old report cards, his graduation photos, to boy scout handbooks, I realized I wanted to do something with all of these boxes. When my dad died, I knew I had to do something with these items and the grief I was experiencing. After months of going back and forth between potential plans, I decided to write.

As someone who is a perfectionist even when it comes to school writing assignments, I knew that writing about my father, our memories, his struggle with cancer, and my loss was going to be difficult. I knew it would be emotionally taxing and I didn’t want to create something that didn’t honor my dad the way he deserved. I also don’t have any background in writing, so it was challenging to come to terms with the fact that there was going to be a lot of room for improvement. It was even more daunting to think about sharing my words with other people. However, I went into this project wanting to accept challenges, and I’m happy with what I’ve chosen because I learned that I enjoy writing much more than I expected. It has helped me process my feelings, document my thoughts, and understand the situation more than I imagined. I enjoyed the entire process, and I’m thankful I found a new way to express myself.

The steps of the process were generally the same for each of my seven written pieces: gather my father’s boxes of objects, choose one object or picture that I felt specifically drawn to, and use it as a springboard for my writing. I created rough drafts of each written piece that were completely raw, unedited, and honest. Next, I edited each of them multiple times, sometimes taking pieces out that I felt I was not ready to share at the time or combining two reflection pieces together. Over the past couple of months, I also found myself writing random thoughts down, either on paper or on my cell phone. Usually, they were only a sentence long, but I still documented them simply as a form of release. I decided to incorporate these brief pieces of writing in between each of my seven reflections, because it felt like they belonged somewhere, too. Altogether, I’m sharing part of a story, and it is my hope that anyone who engages with my words is able to connect with them in some way.
Effortless Connections
EFFORTLESS CONNECTIONS

My immediate reaction when I picked up this blue scope that houses a picture of my dad as a boy, was that it looks just like he did at age sixty. I don’t think I have ever seen a picture of him at eight years old and been so able to compare it to the current image that I have of my father, alive and well in his 60s. This small picture of him, where he is smiling in a striped, blue collared shirt for what I am guessing was school picture day looks just like a photo I recently saw of him in his bright white doctor’s coat, it was a headshot that the hospital took. A few years ago. It was an odd feeling, seeing a picture of him at a stage of life that I was not present for, yet being able to connect a photo taken in the 1960s to him just a couple of years ago. I have seen plenty of pictures of him in the last couple of months, but this one feels different. His eyes then are the same as they are now, the same as they were. His smile is just as bright as I will always remember it being. The creases in his face from smiling are the same as they always were, though they became more pronounced with age and were joined by scars and other lines, with every stressor, loss, every surgery he happily performed throughout his medical career.

I think that I can draw a connection between these pictures of him so effortlessly because in both representations he was healthy. In each picture he looks genuinely happy, without a care in the world. There was no cancer, no worry for the future, he was not in pain. The more recent pictures we have of him obviously still warm my heart to see, but in the back of my mind I can’t help but recognize that as any photo in the past year or so was being taken, he was slipping away from us, whether we knew it or not. He was slowly fading, and although he experienced periods of time in which his health seemed to be restored, intertwined with the longer time periods of not feeling himself, his
body was growing fatigued as it fought against itself.

Despite this decline in health, his spirit and belief that he was going to get better remained constant throughout his battle, though perhaps he just never showed his true emotions to his friends and family members. He had to be nervous, he had to have a million questions and be incessantly worried, he had to feel like everything was changing, and yet, I can’t think of a time when he said any of this aloud. He still grew his relationships with people, visiting the neighbors, going to dinner with colleagues, making nightly ice cream dates with his family a new tradition, always smiling, laughing, singing. I wish there was a way for me to remember each individual moment I spent with him, not only in this past year but throughout my whole life. At least once a day since he passed, I notice myself panicking about something that is not even yet lost that could potentially vanish against my will. I’m terrified of a day when I can’t remember his voice or remember things he has said to me as I grew up, or the way he always laughed borderline inappropriately loud. He could never chuckle in a quiet manner; I miss this.

I’m scared of a time when I am no longer having to tell myself that he is really gone. I do not want to adjust to his absence, as backwards as that may seem. At the same time, I want to stop having to remind myself that I’ll never see him again with such intensity. Immediately after he died and in the following weeks, I would constantly forget that he was gone and be forced to painfully remember. It was unbearable, being able to breathe for a few minutes and then getting the feeling that there was something that I was forgetting, having the loss pile on top of me again and again. It was a constant transition between being absolutely numb and drowning in confusion and anguish; my mind was trying to process that my father was gone but I wouldn’t let it. I wasn’t ready. This process was particularly never ending at night, and I couldn’t sleep in my own bedroom until over a month after he died. I couldn’t’ bring myself to sleep there; I would step inside the door frame and stand for a few seconds before an unbearable wave of anxiety crashed over me, leaving me feeling small and powerless as it pushed me out of the space. A couple of hours before he died, I was laying in the bed and even though I knew everything was falling apart, he was still alive. But one minute I was asleep, and the next I was being jolted awake by my sister’s voice,
telling me to hurry downstairs because Dad wasn’t doing well. I think that subconsciously I wanted to keep some element of my life exactly the same, because I knew that virtually every other aspect was changing. So, I avoided this room as much as I could and slept in another, and my brain continued to try to make sense of what was happening. Forget, remember again, forget, and remember.
Someone just walked up the steps at the same pace that you used to. I memorized how it sounded when you made your way up the stairs in our house, and for a split second, I thought it was you. Sometimes this happens when the door shuts in the evening, around the time that you used to come home from work. For a split second, I think it is you.
SOUTH DAVIS STREET
1988 is written on the back of this photo. Although I wasn’t born yet, I take comfort in recognizing my grandparents’ house in Texas, my dad’s childhood home on South Davis Street. By this time, he had already moved to Maryland so he must have been down there for a visit. He’s wearing one of his signature outfits of blue wrangler jeans and a crisp, white button down. His hair is dark and fairly short, a bit more shaven on the sides of his head than the top. This reminds me of how he would always go to the barber shop every few weekends to get a haircut. He always wanted his hair to look nice; he wanted to look clean and put together. I remember he always liked having his head rubbed by me or one of my sisters, just for a couple of minutes at a time. It was a bit of an odd activity to add to our routines, but it comforted him and gave us a chance to chat about random topics, like what I was learning in school, if there were any University of Maryland sports games coming up, what was going on with my childhood friends, how my roommate Anna was doing. It made me laugh how much my dad seemed to ask how my new friend Anna was doing, whenever we were on the phone he would ask what she was up to that day. I think it was like he had made a new friend too, simply because I did. He wanted to know what was going on in my life because he had absolutely loved college and getting to work in a research lab with other students, going to crowded sports games, having newfound freedom. He wanted me to love it too; he and my mother both always urged me to take my classes seriously, but to still have fun with my life, to spend time with my new and my childhood best friends, to join a club, to take as many opportunities as I possibly could, while I still could. He only wanted the best for his children and he had high expectations for us because he always believed we were capable of anything.
One day, probably a little over a year ago now, I was rubbing his head when soft
clumps of hair came out and into my hands. My heart and my mouth dropped,
and I immediately began to quietly cry. I turned my body to my mom to show
her what had happened without my dad seeing; I wasn’t sure if I should tell him
or how to tell him, but any words that were supposed to come out of my mouth
couldn’t anyway. I was speechless and scared, part of me wanted to hide the
hair and act like nothing had happened. But my mother gave me a sad smile and
told me that my dad had been losing his hair for a few days. The exact words
that my dad said are something I wish I remembered, but I know he tried to
comfort me and make a little joke out of what had just happened.

It’s funny how he was the one comforting me, instead of the other way around,
but I was shocked. His previous cancer treatment had not made his hair fall out
and I naively thought that maybe his new treatment wouldn’t either, that you
wouldn’t be able to the sickness invading his body. But you could tell. You could
tell he was tired, exhausted all the time, that his face had changed, that his voice
sounded different. Even if he didn’t tell you that he had cancer, which he didn’t
share with anyone outside of family for months because he never wanted others
to think of him as ill, you could tell that the usual light that radiated through my
dad had slightly dimmed. I still don’t know if I fully understand that my dad’s
light is gone forever now, that it can’t be reignited and that all I have left are
memories and his belongings. Part of me is overwhelmingly grateful for the
time that I did get to spend with him and that he got an extra year against all
odds. I recognize that we were given a miracle, that he was diagnosed with stage
four cancer and had a whole year to hug his daughters, to spend time with his
brother, to joke with his wife, to visit old friends, to simply live his life. I know
that not everyone gets this extra time, that for unknown and inexplicable
reasons, life can be cruelly snatched away with little warning. I don’t think that
anyone will ever be fully completely satisfied with the amount of time they are
given though, because another part of me is outraged. Selfishly, I wanted more
of our time. I feel like I deserved it and that he did, too. I wonder what one more
year could have brought us, or two, or ten. What he would have gotten a chance
to do and see, what things we could have experienced together, what lessons he
could have taught me or stories he could have shared. Sometimes I’ll be in the
middle of my day and I’ll wonder what Dad would be doing around that time if
he were here; what song he’d be listening to, if he would be outside or in the house somewhere, what sort of outfit he would be wearing. This might be a risky game to play, and it probably won’t help me feel better about this monumental loss and gaping hole in the structure of my world. But I can’t help but pass some of the time this way, because it’s both comforting and agonizing, a cross between acceptance and denial that is working for me, at least for now.
It hits me. I forget. Then, it hits me and I forget, and then it hits me.
TOO LATE
TOO LATE

A picture of my dad in 1984 outside of South Baltimore General Hospital. Most of my memories of him while I was growing up feature him wearing blue hospital scrubs or the bright white lab coat he is pictured in here. He’s kneeling and I can see a pen peeking out of his pocket; he seemed to always have a pen in his possession no matter where he was. He taught me to do the same, to always be prepared, if not overprepared. Photos like this one remind me that he was not just my father, but a medical student, a physician, a student that had to work hard to get through high school and college to secure the “Dr.” in front of his name. I think that when I was younger, and up until about a year and a half ago, I sometimes forgot that my dad was a person, not just a bunch of labels or things that he did. It’s an odd thing to realize that someone you look up to and turn to for guidance once did the same things you were doing; my dad was a student trying to figure his life out once too. He had to balance his schoolwork and his social life like I try to do, he wanted to have fun, go to sports games, travel, he listened to music. He met people and he lost people.

I lived with him for twenty years, but why did it take me so long to build a better understanding of him? I think that if I would have been able to grasp that he was a human, trying to do his best, we could have had a bit of a different relationship. I guess I have to cut myself some slack, because I think it’s difficult when you’re young to think of your parent as anything but your parent. It’s a shift that doesn’t magically happen, at least it didn’t for me. I progressively moved towards understanding that he was my parent, but he also worked five days a week and had a social life and hobbies and struggles. My dad was a doctor and father, but he was a friend, a brother, a son. He had good days and bad, I just don’t know if I ever stopped and thought to ask about those difficult days often enough.
I imagine that my dad and I would have had a stronger relationship as I continued to grow up. I can’t explain why, or the feeling that makes me sure of this, I just think that we could have changed our father-daughter relationship into something more similar to the types of relationships he had with his coworkers and neighbors. Would we have had fun going to Orioles and Ravens games the same way he did with his friends? Would he think of me as an adult and friend, and not just his child? Would I have even wanted that? I’m not entirely sure of the shape our relationship might have taken, but I think that I’ve been going through countless changes that would have helped somehow, made me more mature. Part of me wishes I had not come to such a conclusion; obviously there is no way for me to know. I can’t test this theory and come up with an answer, so instead, I feel regret and a sense of being unfulfilled. If I had talked to him more, set aside more days for us to spend time together, reached out more, then what could have happened? We spent a lot of time together as a family, and I love that about how my parents raised us. But somehow, I feel like I barely knew him, and I’m not sure if he really knew me.

I was definitely the kind of kid who shared a lot with her parents; my sisters and I are still known as the girls who told their parents mostly everything. I say mostly because I think the way I have always operated is only being comfortable sharing small bits of things going on in my life with the people I trusted. Unfortunately, I think that I shared less and less with my dad as I grew up. I feel like I told him the highlights, the things that I had accomplished, and when I needed some guidance, I would turn to him and my mom. But he didn’t know all of the T.V. shows I liked to watch, he wasn’t aware of all the drama happening at school, he didn’t know all of the music that I liked to listen to. We were close but we were not as close as I wish we had been, and that’s painfully tragic to me. I can’t go backwards and reshape any of it, not anymore. I’m too late.
Happy Birthday, Dad. 67. Everyday hurts without you, but I'm happy you aren't hurting anymore. Until we meet again—
NO LONGER
NO LONGER

These photos were taken in 1986, and I am not entirely sure where my dad is standing. It looks like it could be in his childhood home. I've visited this place a handful of times in the past couple of months, always browsing through the boxes of old clothing, running my fingers along the shelves in the living room with books that have been in their same positions for years, pressing the buttons on the telephone that is no longer plugged in. No longer making calls.

So much has changed since these pictures were taken of him a few decades ago, but it's nice to see his familiar face and style. He’s wearing Nike sneakers, Ray Ban aviators, and Wrangler blue jeans. Each one of these pieces, along with his black leather wallet he always carried around in a pocket, a wristwatch, and sometimes a baseball cap were staples in his wardrobe for as long as I can remember. He knew what he liked and enjoyed sticking with the classics when he could.

In one of these photos, he’s standing next to the driver’s side of a car, making me think of how obsessed he was with the black Dodge Stealth he used to drive when I was only a few years old. The seats were bright, red leather and he loved cruising around, blasting music with the windows down. He’d play his favorites, like Jimmy Buffet, the Eagles, Elton John, and Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young for all to hear, both inside and outside of the vehicle. He absolutely loved that car, but at some point, he decided to start driving something that could fit the whole family. This was one of the many little changes and sacrifices my dad made over the years for us that I hadn’t thought much of until now. Even though his next ride was no longer the zippy sportscar, there was room for all five of us, and he still played his favorite
music. He would always enthusiastically sing all the lyrics to his music, whistling the tunes while sometimes sharing about how he’d seen some of his favorite artists in concert. We drove this car to get to all the holiday parties at my mom’s sisters’ houses, more often than not arriving fashionably late, a Williamson specialty. We drove this car to Olivia’s high school graduation. He drove this car to come visit me at work when I was a lifeguard at our community pool, always bringing me a can of Coke to drink as I sat near the water. He’d sometimes sit with me before I closed the pool for the night after he got back from work; it was a small, kind gesture that I don’t think I fully appreciated until now. Now that I can no longer do this.

I think it used to be easy to simply brush these moments off as if they were unimportant, but in hindsight it’s these simple, everyday acts that I have tucked away in the back of my mind that I appreciate the most. There’s a collection of these in my memory that paint a vibrant, dynamic picture of who he was to me. Only I have complete access to this version of him, and I like this, because my dad had relationships with hundreds of people, from friends, to patients, to colleagues. At one of the viewing services we held after he passed away, I was overwhelmed by how many strangers approached me and confessed my father had saved their lives in one way or another; the fact that a single person had this to say about him was amazing enough to hear, but a handful of visitors was remarkable to me. I remember feeling proud and dazed, like I had just been let in on a beautiful secret that was hiding in plain sight for years. It was surreal to hear people summarize him this way, partially because I had never heard their stories or known of the connection they shared with him, but mostly because my own summary is different. My dad didn’t change my life on any specific day or drastically alter the future because of a single instance, though maybe he could have one day. But when I patch together all of the pieces of our relationship, I think of those nights at work when he’d sit with me, the way he taught me that squeezing my hand twice in a row meant “I love you,” and how he used to read Magic Treehouse books with my sisters and I when we were younger.

Although I know that each relationship he had with other people was special, I think our relationship was unique from others simply because he was my father. I was once a blank slate, a fresh canvas of a person that I like to think my
parents and I colored together as I developed and grew. My friends and family members have also had their fair share of influence on me, but I feel that my relationship with my parents has always had the most significant impact; besides my own personal role in my life, their guidance carries the most weight. For that reason, I think of my relationship with my father as an assortment of impactful moments that have always been dispersed throughout my life; he was a factor that influenced my life on the everyday level by molding who I was continuously, even if I didn’t consciously realize it. We got to interact with each other almost everyday in a way that was unique to us. I feel grateful for this time, whether it lasted for hours like when my family watched our favorite Christmas movies together, or if it was just a few minutes while he drove my sister and I to school as he played the news on the radio.

We also drove the family car to North Carolina each summer for family vacations, where we spent a week in sleepy beach towns, passing time by swimming in the ocean, reading on the beach, barbecuing, and getting ice cream almost every night. We drove this car to get our Christmas tree the day after Thanksgiving each year; my dad used to be the one to take the tree off the roof of our car, carry it inside, and put it on the stand.

This past year, things were different. Instead of getting the typical full-sized blue spruce, we chose a small tree that was only about two feet tall. By this time, my dad spent his days and nights in the family room because it was on the ground level; he was too weak to go up and down the stairs in our house. His new “bedroom” had a television, plenty of space for visitors, and the fireplace was across the room in his line of vision. We put our little tree in the nook in front of the fireplace and decorated this space with most of the lights and décor that would usually go throughout the entire house. It was my mom’s idea to shift things around a bit given the circumstances; we wanted things to still feel festive for him, even though at times it felt silly to be celebrating anything at all, as if things were normal.

But our traditions and routines were not left intact. Dad didn’t carry the tree inside our house, he couldn’t help us choose the perfect one, he didn’t drive us from church to a restaurant for dinner on Christmas Eve like so many years before. Today, this car that brought us to family parties, trips, celebrations, sits
in our driveway, only to be turned on every so often to ensure the battery doesn’t die. Music isn’t blared through the stereo system like it used to and five-person family car rides no longer happen. The car itself is broken now, and I’m not sure what we’re going to do with it; so much has changed. Too much has changed.
I want spring to come, but I know how much you loved summer. The warm weather won’t feel the same without you. So, I guess I’ll hold onto winter as long as possible because it is the last season you were here with us.
T-SHIRTS
In this photo, my dad is holding me, I couldn’t be more than a year or two old, and his smile is beaming. I wonder if he was laughing while this picture was taken; even though I can hear his chuckle in my mind if I consciously think about it, the sound in my head doesn’t bring the same mix of safety and excitement that the real one did. The pink t-shirt shirt he is wearing has become a part of my wardrobe now, and I wear it at least once a month to remind me of him. Considering how much I think about my dad each day I suppose I don’t necessarily need another reminder, but I want it.

Wearing one of his shirts to bed was a tradition we had when I was little, and I would stroll into his room every few nights to request one of his t-shirts. The men’s large shirts functioned as dresses for me, and a bit of extra comfort as I was tucked away in my bed. Sometimes he would request a hug in exchange for me wearing his clothing, and oftentimes he’d take this time to tickle my neck until I was giggling uncontrollably, desperately trying to get away. It’s odd now, thinking about some of the time I spent in the past trying to get away, sometimes to be with friends instead of my family or to be by myself. I’d wander off to my bedroom when I wanted to be alone, sometimes I’d waste time
reading, watching T.V. shows, or driving around my town instead of spending it with my family, as much as I hate to admit it. A lot of my time in high school was spent in my room because I am the kind of person who needs complete silence to do homework and study. If my father and I had some kind of small disagreement, I'd usually run off for a few hours instead of talking things through, trying to distance myself.

The last year of his life required a different type of distancing, a new form of avoidance that made the prior instances seem irrelevant. Instead of running away from trivial disagreements, I ran from recognizing that time was running out. I ran from acceptance as I tried to picture my father as the exceptional case; the one who would beat the disease and live to tell his story. When we lost him that day in December, it felt like I couldn’t run anymore, at least not in the way I had been. I had to face the indescribable pain of feeling him take his last breath as I laid my head on his chest with my shaking hand in his frail grasp, and lifting my head up, whispering, “He’s gone,” to my sisters, mother, and our close family friend Rita. Just like everything began to crumble when I discovered he was sick, the ground underneath me shifted as the last hours of my dad’s life ticked by, until there was nothing left, until I couldn’t keep my balance, until a piece of me fell through the cracks with him too.

Control was absent, a full-fledged desire to change what was happening in front of our eyes engulfed me. I have never felt as powerless as I did during those hours, and yet, immense guilt settled into my chest as my voice echoed promises to him that everything would be okay; as if I knew this, as if anyone wholeheartedly does. Even though there was no perfect string of words we could say to ease my father’s worries or his pain, there was an unshakeable sense of remorse beginning to drown me from the inside out. I felt like a mere bystander as I knelt next to him. I wanted him to feel peaceful as he left, I wanted some of his discomfort to be transferred to me; I wished he could stay but if he had to go, I didn’t think he deserved it to happen this way.

About half an hour after he passed, I walked upstairs to change my clothes so I could take a walk, and I remember the silence. I remember our home was silent for a few seconds. Walking to my dresser and wrapping my fingers around the
cool, wooden knobs to open the drawer and pull out a shirt, it felt like I was on an airplane. It was like I was landing, the pressure was changing, and my ears were trying to adjust, like the strange shift your senses feel after a deafeningly loud noise eventually dulls to a gentle murmur, and then to no sound at all. But the lull did not last as I pulled one of my father’s navy blue, long sleeved shirts over my head, my body trembling as my mind continuously replayed his cries from the last hour: “I don’t want to go.” He did not want to go. He did not want to go.

Looking back on those years when I was a young girl, sleeping in my father’s shirts, I think I wanted this to be me and my dad’s “thing,” our established routine. A tradition. I wonder if I felt like this would make us closer, if I took those shirts, hugged him goodnight, and went back for a new one a few evenings later because we were close, or because I wanted us to be. I feel it was a mixture of both, and it was a strange sensation when I opened his bottom drawer one night, slipped a t-shirt over my head, and realized it was no longer a dress on my frame. I had grown a few inches, and the large shirt didn’t go to my knees anymore. I had grown up, and so had he.

I continue growing. I continue persisting and surviving. I live even though he didn’t; a million thoughts come to mind when I realize this and think of what it means. So far, it has meant feeling like I’m living a life that belongs to me less than it once did; it’s still my own but it’s as if I have less of a say, less power. Besides this overarching feeling, each day is slightly different from the last and I can categorize them as good or bad, which is something I find myself doing before I go to sleep each night. Some days I find myself wondering how I’ll ever push past each painful second that passes without my dad, if I’ll ever feel as content as before he passed, how I have come to partially dread my future simply because it’s not how I once pictured it. Other days I feel like the weight of the loss is not as heavy, like I’m surprised by how easily I can smile and appreciate the beautiful things around me. On those days, when I’m laughing with friends or enjoying my own company, I sometimes experience guilt as well. No matter how many times someone tells me, “Dad would have wanted you to be happy.” I still find myself feeling like it’s wrong of me after something so tragic, wondering how long happiness will be attached to remorse, how time will change feelings.
My friend who recently lost her sister once mentioned that she doesn’t ever want to reach thirty six years old and one day. She said that this will be the first day she will have lived more years without her sister than she ever got to live with her. I remember my heart breaking for her as she shared that she wishes she could stop time. Then, naturally, I started doing my own calculations and realizing her statement encompasses how I feel about what lies ahead. As much as I would like to be able to relive the past few years all over again or pause everything so I can breathe without worrying about what comes next, or stop thinking about how many months have passed since that morning on December 7th, I can’t. I can only move forward as I try to navigate through my world with one less guiding hand. Some days I feel like I’m well on my way to figuring my life out; most days I don’t have a clue. But I’ve realized that I don’t think anyone truly knows how to handle death, how to talk about it, how to get past it. To me, this is equally terrifying and comforting, because there are no right or wrong answers for me or for anyone else.

At some point I’ll reach forty years old and one day, and this will be the first day I have ever lived longer without him than I ever got to live with him. I know nothing of what this day will bring, what will happen between now and then, or what will come after that. I can only live.
I miss the way you used to talk about the sunshine on the back porch. Never “let’s go sit in the sun,” always, “let’s go sit in the sunshine.”

I liked that. I like that.
EMPTY SPACES
It's both surreal and amusing to see my dad in this photo, wearing his football uniform and standing tall in front of a football field, looking a bit younger than my current twenty years of age. I feel a strange comfort seeing him this way because his involvement with sports that I grew up observing was always limited to the many games he watched on T.V., the couple of baseball or football games he would attend each year, and his role as a cheerleader at my sisters' and my sports games growing up. He used to take my sisters and me to Orioles games when we were younger with his good friend Bob, and I remember singing all the songs that played on the jumbotron with him. I have also heard a handful of stories about my dad being involved with the high school basketball team, and I remember how he once tried to tell my sisters and me that he was on the team, only to be followed by my mom's snickering as she said, "George you were the manager, don't lie to your kids." My dad looked at us as his eyes went wide, he started chuckling, and said, "Yes and that is a very important part of the team!" knowing he had been caught, and started chuckling as we all began to grin and howl with laughter.

Although I don't know very much about his involvement as a young adult, I know how much he loved sporting events while I was growing up. I'm glad I can look back and remember him watching me play lacrosse and cheering on the side of the pool all those years of summer swim team. I can still picture myself diving in and beginning to glide, humming as I blew bubbles from my nose, kicking my legs and pulling my arms in and out of the water. The 100 I.M. race was one of my favorite things to compete in during swim meets; it was the first event of the day and there was always a large crowd of parents and
teammates standing to watch the swimmers as the competition began. I would struggle down the pool in an ungraceful manner on the first lap, barely breathing because my butterfly always needed some work even when I was fifteen and had been swimming for years. I remember I always loved the transition from butterfly to backstroke because I would slap my hands on the wall, look up, and see a whole little fan club standing at my lane, cheering me on, clapping, and telling me to keep going. Uncontrollably, I always started to laugh and smile when I got to this point, and I would keep looking at the group of friends and my family for a couple of seconds as I moved my arms and floated on my back towards the opposite side of the pool. Sooner or later I would realize that I couldn’t look at them anymore, my mom, dad, one or two of my sisters, maybe a few teammates; if I wanted to keep moving as quickly as possible I had to rip my gaze away from them and focus instead of grinning and giggling. I never wanted to look away though; I was a ten year old girl staring at a whole fan club. I didn’t want to be away from them, and I didn’t want to stop hearing their constant words of encouragement.

I was telling my mom on the phone a few weeks ago about how receiving good news or getting a good grade on an assignment I slaved over or learning about a new opportunity no longer makes me feel the way it once did. I am not as thrilled about anything as much as I once was, and this is because whenever I received that good news, got an A on a test, learned about something I was excited to get involved with, my mom and dad were the first people I told. Both of them. It feels like half of the emotion I could have when something positive happens to me is no longer there because I can’t call my father anymore to hear from him, answer his questions, and hear the excitement in his voice as he listened to whatever I had to say and offered any support he could. It was hard for me to realize how much I depended on both of them, and even harder to realize I couldn’t anymore. I hate that I can’t share pieces of my life with him anymore, I wish he was still stopping by my room before going to sleep to say goodnight. I miss waking up in the morning and seeing him in his robe, and every so often finding him cleaning up a mess at the coffee machine because he’d forgotten to place a mug under the dispenser. My family still jokes about how often this happened.

For the past couple of months, there has been this constant anger and
disappointment occupying my mind because no matter what I accomplish or experience, there will be a piece of me wishing my dad was there to see it. Millions of things are changing in my life and I feel like I am growing every day, but it’s not the same without him. I want him to be a part of all of it, to see the person I am becoming, to give me advice when I feel like I’m utterly failing at everything I do, to ask me about my classes and my goals, to make me laugh and tell me old stories. I’m terrified of all of the milestones that I will experience without him by my side. Graduating from college, getting into graduate school (fingers crossed), starting my first real job, getting married, having children. That was all I could think about the day that he died: how he wasn’t going to walk me down the aisle, how he couldn’t help deliver my children, how he wouldn’t watch me get a college diploma.

I wish I knew more about what he had hoped and planned to do with his time. I wish I knew if he had regrets. I wish he knew exactly how much I cared about him, even though I wasn’t always as vocal about it as I could have been. I wish I knew that he was okay. In his last hour with us when we knew we were losing him, I asked him, to be there on my wedding day, to help deliver my kids, to stand in the audience as I graduated. In those moments I was placing all of my hope in this idea of a heaven that I had grown up learning about, latching onto the belief that he would be able to experience these days with me even if I could not see him. I think that before it was my father who was leaving us, it was easier to assume that there was probably something else out there, that I would see my grandparents and friends again in time. It was easier to blindly assume the best.

When my dad died, I started to rethink all of my belief systems. I felt more doubt and more worry that this time that we had was truly all we were getting. If I’m being honest, I’m completely unsure what I believe, but I do think I’ve seen some signs from him. I still wonder about those things I asked him to do once he was gone, how I brought up painful reminders that he wouldn’t be physically present for those moments. Sometimes I wish I hadn’t said those things, thinking these were selfish requests, that it may have upset him more, that I contributed to his fear. Other times, I try to remind myself that I was panicking, trying to provide him with comfort while trying to find some sort of balance. I didn’t want to say something I would regret but I also didn’t want to
regret not saying something I wanted him to know. It ended up being a total jumble of words that came out of my mouth, a mixture of stories I hadn’t shared with him, things about myself he didn’t know, opening up the gift I had gotten him for Christmas. I think I’ll always wonder how my words made him feel. I tried to tell him things I had been holding onto before, I tried to thank him, I tried to hold onto him as long as I could, knowing that this was the only time I was guaranteed.

There will always be empty spaces where he should be. An empty chair at the dinner table, an extra seat in the car, a vacancy on the couch he used to lay on, one less name on a card from my family. Nothing will ever be able to fill these gaps, and it’s not like I would want anything filling these voids except my dad. I just wish there weren’t so many, so soon, always growing in number and in size.
It feels like life has just become a never-ending “Wish you were here!” postcard.
DECEMBER SEVENTH
December Seventh

“Lane loves to sleep on George’s chest. It is a really bad habit we are starting, but George likes it...he just can’t sleep away from the house.”

Reading this piece from a letter my mom sent to my father’s parents struck me, because it reminded me of a photo that I found a couple of months ago. In the photo I’m only around five or six years old, taking a nap on my dad’s arm as we both relaxed on a hammock outside in the sun. It makes me think of sitting on my dad’s lap in a chair we have in our house, and how Grace or Olivia and I would squeeze next to his left and right sides while we all watched T.V. when we were little. Or how my dad would hold me above the water at the beach when I was too small and shaky to be on my own, eventually teaching me how to swim under the waves or jump over them before they crashed. Or the time last summer when my car battery died, which is sadly a common occurrence for me because I can never remember to turn my lights off. Even though one of my sisters could have come alone to help me out, my whole family including my dad came along to jumpstart my stranded car. He wanted to do most of the work, and we all clapped and laughed when we heard the engine start up. Once we were finished, my dad gave me a hug, kissed my head, and said he’d see me at the house. Apparently on the way home, he said to my mom and sisters that he was so happy that he got to help out, and it made him feel like a real Dad again. It broke my heart to hear that, because I knew how much he hadn’t been
able to do since the diagnosis.

It’s upsetting to think about how much the roles reversed once he got sick, because it was never supposed to be that way. He wasn’t allowed to drive his car anymore because of his treatments, so we would take him where he needed to go. This mainly became Olivia’s role because Grace and I were at school and my mom still worked until last October. We all were extremely grateful for Olivia; she graduated college and basically put things on hold so she could be there for Dad. He called her his “wingman” because of how much she did for him.

During school breaks, we all had more time to spend at home, and one of us would go with him and Mom to his chemo appointments on Thursdays. He’d always greet his nurse Valery with a smile and a wave as we sat in our room and waited to get started. Once he was hooked up to the machines, it was just a few hours with transitions between different medications throughout the visit. Dad would normally sleep through most of it while Mom and I read or played games on our phones to pass the time. I remember it felt strange as we walked out and past the other patients. I didn’t know any of them, but sometimes it felt like I did; everyone was there for the same reason even if no one spoke to each other about it. I’d grip onto my dad’s arm as we traveled back to the car; he was sometimes a little drowsy from the treatment, so I would take the lead for the first couple of steps. It was like when he held my hand to cross the street when I was young or carried me on top of his shoulders, only it was me guiding him along.

Towards the end of the summer this year, my cousin was visiting us for a couple of days, and we were out to dinner with some neighbors. My neighbor had taken us to the restaurant on his boat and my mom had met us there in her car. We all had a wonderful time, sharing stories and laughs around the table. But when it came time to leave, my dad didn’t feel well, and the pain started spreading. I remember walking out of the restaurant and my head feeling fuzzy as I stepped down the stairs and onto the gravel of the small parking lot. I held onto my dad’s hand as he carefully walked down the steps, and I kept holding
on. For those few hours at dinner, I had completely forgotten he was sick, but this moment of helping him down the stairs tossed me back into reality. It was like the lights had been turned back on after a few hours of being in the dark. I wish we could have stayed there.

I vividly recall lightly gripping onto my dad’s hand and continuing to hold it as we walked to my mom’s car so he could get home quickly. It was one of those moments where you know you’re going to remember it for a long time even while it’s still happening. I knew I’d remember the warm air, the crunch of the pebbles under our feet, the fluorescent lights against the dark summer sky. I remember the way my hand fit into my dad’s, or rather, how his fit into mine as I stayed quiet, not knowing what to say while we made our way to the car. I wasn’t sure if he needed me to walk, but it felt like he wanted the hand to hold onto. So, I clutched onto him until I opened the door for him to climb in and take a seat. I shut the door for him.

It felt like a form of defeat, like the disease had altered yet another piece of his life, including a night out with his friends. Normalcy was thrown out the window when we learned he had cancer all those months before; it wasn’t normalcy that I expected anymore. But I still couldn’t fully adjust to our new “normal,” the one where every so often there would be some kind of glaring reminder that no matter what, things were different. Things were hard and they only got harder.

I think it’s funny how everyone told me that my dad’s funeral would be the hardest day, because it wasn’t for me. I think the hardest day will always be the day he died. I still can’t fully express how it felt to have him at 12:08 pm, but at 12:09 pm be left with nothing. Everything that happened between me waking up and us losing him and what came afterwards feels like an enormous jumble. If I think about it hard enough, I bet I could remember all the little details, the ones I think I’d forgotten. But I try not to think about it.

When I woke up the next day without him, it felt like something had shifted inside me. I don’t think my body could take anything more, so my brain settled into a state of denial. It was a numb feeling, and I think I’ve been stuck in a less severe form of this state ever since, transitioning in and out of it every so often.
I remember not crying on that second day and being able to talk more than the previous one. I think this was the day we went to the funeral home, and for some reason I desperately wanted to go with my mom and her friend to make funeral arrangements. For anyone that knows me, they know that any kind of new situation normally induces nerves for me, but this didn’t. I was able to speak to the directors without any trouble and take over when my mom started to get upset. I don’t know what got into me, besides shock from the day before. I wasn’t my typical shy self, and the next week, I was able to share something I had prepared during the funeral. Although I don’t fully remember how I felt, I remember not being nervous while I spoke. Maybe I was too sad and distracted to let my mind fill with doubt that day, because it was like I was a completely different person. I felt drawn to doing things out of the ordinary for me. I still don’t fully understand what was going through my mind, but it didn’t last too long.

I thought that I would never be timid again because I was able to challenge myself in these ways that meant so much for me, and although this certainly hasn’t been the case, I do think I’ve changed because of it. More than before, I want to try new things, overthink small matters a little less, and I try not to stress about aspects of my life I can’t change. It hasn’t been a perfect transition and I still have a long way to go, but I like to think I got some of my new mindset from Dad. I like to think parts of him were left with my sisters, mother, and I when he died. The alternative is thinking we’re disconnected from each other, and I don’t think that’s true. I think December 7th set off a chain reaction of influence that will continue to show its colors for as long as I live.
May 7, 2020

I wanted more.
Concluding Thoughts

It has now been over five months since my dad died. The months have collectively passed quickly, but each day went by slowly. I think that time might always feel this way from now on, a bit warped. I still feel like it’s all been some sort of misunderstanding, a dream I’ll wake up from, or someone else’s story. The day that it no longer feels this way will be interesting to say the least, and I often wonder if it will ever truly sink in.

I still think about my dad multiple times a day, and I feel like I’ve been struggling without him much more than I had initially realized. The grief I have experienced is not what I originally expected. That being said, I’m thankful that writing has given me a new way to feel connected to him, even on the more painful days. I’ve always struggled with verbally voicing my thoughts, for whatever reason, and I think that’s why I was determined to do some kind of writing for my project. Even though I knew I wouldn’t be writing utterly groundbreaking sentences, I still wanted to see how I could communicate my thoughts on paper. For a while I was afraid of letting my words speak for themselves; I kept trying to add other elements to my project, perhaps thinking it would distract people from what I was actually saying. Only recently did I work through this and come to the conclusion that all I can do is produce work that I am pleased with while I share a story. I also realized that I can always continue to write; it’s not like I shared every single emotion, memory, or thought that I have regarding my dad, our time together, or this loss. I think that’s an unattainable goal and not one I ever attempted to reach; I simply wanted to communicate what I was feeling while I was writing in a way that resonated with people besides myself. I hope I’ve achieved this.

Another realization I’ve had over the past months is that I now know that I think about the 7th of each month a lot more now. For most people, the new year starts January 1st and it is celebrated as a new beginning and opportunity to leave the past in the past. For me, it makes more sense to think of my New Year’s Day as December 7th. Of course, this day wasn’t marked by joyous
celebrations or cheering. There were no fireworks. But it was the day that changed everything else that came after. Losing my dad gave new meaning to this day of the year, and the seventh of every month, which previously held no significance. I find myself thinking of him more on those days, wondering how time can just pass without him. I think it’s funny how before this happened, seven used to be my lucky number. I don’t have such warm feelings towards the number anymore.

I also realized that no one knows how to handle grief, especially someone else’s. No one fully knows what to say, if they should reach out, how to show someone they care. I still never know how to approach the topic with my family, and we lost the same person. Then again, he was a slightly different person for all of us, I suppose. I hope that maybe sharing these writings with my family members will make it a little bit easier to talk about how we are each dealing, and if nothing else, give us a chance to share some good stories.

I still laugh about how many people approached me at one of my dad’s services and shared, “It doesn’t get any easier.” Frankly, I feel like this has to be one of the worst things to say to someone who just lost a family member, but at the same time, I know they meant well and I now appreciate their honesty. Because they were right; it doesn’t get easier, at least it hasn’t yet for me. As all the books and websites say, grief impacts everyone differently and people deal with things their own way. I think that the only similarity is that we all learn how to push forward in the ways that work best for us personally. It’s been a process of trial and error for me, but I’m only a few months in. I have years to figure things out.

I feel that the most noteworthy thing that I have realized during this time is that this specific process and collection of work has always needed to be my keystone. Even when I didn’t realize it, even when I felt like I had absolutely no plan, this method of looking through my family’s items and gathering my thoughts on them has been a tradition I never realized I had. While I was putting this project together, I was sent old pictures from my aunt. Some of them were of me and my family members going through boxes of my grandparents’ things once they had passed, there were other pictures of my dad and I going through some of his items before he passed, and it hit me all at once that I had done this
so many times before. This process of getting a glance into time periods in which I was very young or simply wasn’t present for had always been a family tradition; I just had never recorded my thoughts, questions, or feelings. I was comforted in a way, because it was reassuring to know this was something I had grown accustomed to. The only difference was that I was writing my own words as I went along, and even though I sometimes felt alone, I knew I never was.
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