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**Making Up For Lost Time**

Struggles and tragedies are a part of life. Everyone endures hardships and difficult times. When I was in second grade I received the worst news of my life—or so I thought. My parents were getting a divorce. Divorce is a common thing now, but in second grade I had no idea what was going on. It felt like the world was ending. Looking back now, I realize that it was kind of silly of me to make a big deal of such a common thing that so many people go through, but my family changed forever. This was my trigger point. From then on out, my life was flipped upside down.

After the divorce was final, my father moved to Athens and I lived with my mom in Homer. Every other weekend my little brother and I would go and stay with my dad. This didn’t last long. Shortly after the divorce, my dad became an alcoholic. He had already suffered from mild alcoholism, but the divorce made it a thousand times worse. I remember looking in a black trash bag and seeing endless piles of empty vodka bottles. It seemed like they went on for miles—never ending. They were like a river in constant flow, drowning out every feeling he ever experienced.

He re-married when I was in fourth grade, and his new wife, Tammy, was a devil in disguise. She had three kids of her own. They were older than my brother and I and would pick on us and steal our belongings. Due to my father’s alcoholism and his psychotic wife, I made the difficult decision to stay with my mom full time, but my brother continued to go. We had moved to Battle Creek just before fourth grade started so she could be closer to her job in Kalamazoo. We were “starting over.”

My relationship with my dad was really rocky from here on out. I know that I hurt him by not visiting him or staying with him, but all of his bad decisions let me down and I knew that I couldn’t put myself through that. The only times we would see each other were at family gatherings, some holidays, and times when I was grounded and sent to his house for punishment.

He ended up divorcing Tammy about a year after they got married, and within a few months, he was moved in with another woman named Terri. I couldn’t stand that lady. She was the prosecutor of Branch County, so she was naturally mean and unfriendly. She had a raspy voice (which sounded like she smoked twelve packs a day), and was built like a man. She had biceps that were slightly smaller than my dad’s, and was about 6’1.” Terri was even worse than Tammy, so eventually I stopped going to family gatherings, and only saw him at Christmas time. I don’t really know what happened with his relationship with Terri, considering I had limited interaction with him, but they were finished. My brother was different. He was always loyal to my dad and his decisions—just like a son should be. He stuck by my dad’s side through everything and supported every decision he made.

After he moved out of the latest woman’s house, he moved to Battle Creek. He bought his own house, fixed it up really nice, and got a new job downtown. I was happy for him. Maybe he was finally growing up, right? Wrong. He found yet another woman. Lori. She was different than the rest. She was kind and light hearted. My brother said she treated him really well, and he even started to call her “mom”. Maybe she would be good for my dad.

Christmas time came. We were out of school for the holidays, and everyone was in a cheerful mood. It was my sophomore year and I was ready to get a little break from basketball season and the stress of school. Little did I know, my life was about to be flipped upside down. I’ll never forget the news I received on December 20th, 2012. My dad had been diagnosed with stage four terminal cancer. The dreadful disease was all over—colon, kidneys, adrenal gland, you name it. Needless to say, it was the most depressing Christmas I’ve ever been through.

I lived in denial for a long time, and that’s not something I’m proud to admit. I didn’t change. I didn’t go see him. I didn’t text him. I didn’t call. Nothing. That is one of my biggest regrets. I didn’t want to see what the disease had done to him. The summer before senior year it hit me. My dad had lost over 100 pounds. His skin was just hanging off of his body—lifeless. He looked like a Jewish man in a death march. Everything hit me when he was hospitalized—kidney failure. I cried all day and night. My grandparents started to ask me about funeral arrangements. Do you know what it’s like to be 16 years old and be planning your father’s funeral? Didn’t think so. I don’t know how it happened, a gift from God I suppose—his kidneys turned around and he pulled himself out of the deepest hole he’s ever been in. He made it through.

I owe a lot to my swim team. They helped me stay strong. They allowed me to vent when I needed to vent. They allowed me to cry when I needed to cry. They had my back. My coach provided me with a great support system. She gave me a lot of advice on what my next move should be, and I am extremely grateful for that.

From there on out I changed. I visited him a few times a week to check up on him and to get closure for myself. I knew he was going downhill quickly and that he wouldn’t last much longer. I wanted to make things right before the inevitable happened. It wasn’t easy for me. In church they always said “forgive but never forget.” That’s what I followed. I based the next few months on that one line. I forgave him for every bad decision he ever made and put all of our disagreements behind me; I lived in the moment.

In late July he became bed-ridden and fluid began to build up in his stomach. Everything was going south. My birthday came on August 11th. I went to visit him for a little while and to my complete surprise, he was feeling wonderful. We had a nice little get together with family and everything was going swell. My grandma, who was taking care of him at the time, told me that he would be so sick that he could barely move, but when he heard that I was coming over, he perked right up and said he was feeling better. I had mixed emotions about this, but I continued to live in the moment. Little did I know, that was the last time I would ever see him. My birthday.

Twelve days later, on August 23rd, my mom came into my room to wake me up. It was just past 3 A.M. and I had a gut-wrenching feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“Heather, wake up. Your dad passed away in his sleep last night,” she said.

“No. No. Are you sure?”

“Yes, do you want to go over to his house?”

“I don’t know,” I choked.

I couldn’t breathe. It was like a 300 pound linebacker just knocked me out. This isn’t real, this isn’t happening. I didn’t really know how to feel, but I refused to break down and cry in front of my mom—the woman who had endlessly praised me of my braveness. I wouldn’t do it.

We drove over to his house—which felt like a three hour drive but in reality it was 15 minutes—and it still didn’t feel real. I was in shock. My mom and I walked up the steep hill that was lightly coated in crisp morning dew leading to the front door. Knocking wasn’t necessary and my mom pushed on the door handle. As I took a step inside, I saw him. I let out a whimper. The room was spinning and the tears began to fall. I was going to pass out. He was just sitting there, head pointed down at his lap. Lifeless. This isn’t real. This isn’t happening.

The funeral was, without a doubt, the hardest thing I’ve ever been through. Seeing him in a casket was strange. I kept telling myself the same thing over and over again. He’s just messing around. He would pop up in a matter of seconds and scare the crap out of me just like he used to do when I was little and trying to mess with him while he was “sleeping.” He’s just sleeping. That’s it. This isn’t real.

I was wrong. This was 100% real. Every part of it was factual, and I had yet to accept the fact that I would never get to have another father-daughter experience with him. I would never get to tell him I loved him again. Nothing. It was over.

Looking back now, I’m glad my family, coaches, teammates, and friends pushed me to make things right with my dad. If I wouldn’t have, I could never forgive myself. Forgetting all of his mistakes, and receiving closure with him during his final moments on earth is truly a blessing. I know he is at peace now and is no longer suffering. I can’t wait for the day when I join him in heaven and get to hear his voice again. I love you daddy.