

**2024 Ben Straus High School Teen Essay Contest**

**Tuncay Ilbak**

**A Letter to a Memory**

My father tells me stories about how you used to help me learn to walk when I was not yet even a one-year-old. You and grandma would hold my hands and help me until the day I finally took my first three steps. You were always a part of my life, but now all those moments are reduced to nothing but memories. I am addressing this letter to a memory.

        I wish I could lie to your face and say that all of my memories of you were positive, but they weren’t. Growing up I always had a strong gut feeling that there was some sort of unshakable tension within our family. One of my worst memories was having to stay upstairs in my room while you and grandma argued with my dad loudly downstairs. Growing up I could never ignore the difficult feelings that I had towards you, as if there was a constant film of resentment always clouding your memory. I recall countless moments where it felt like your strictness and unrelenting stubbornness was a harsh burden on the entire family, but it was a burden we all simply had to stomach. It might seem cruel and inappropriate to write about your faults at a time when I should be highlighting your virtues. Yet I’m not writing this letter to you, I’m writing it to a memory.

        It’s difficult to grieve over the loss of a loved one. When your memories are filled with joyous accounts of all the times they made you smile, moments that you can never grasp again. However when you lose a loved one that didn’t always make you feel loved, those emotions of anguish can manifest themselves in complex ways that you don’t even know if you completely understand yourself. You feel this wave of guilt washing over you every time you cry and every time you don’t. It feels like your tears do nothing but add salt on the wounds that were already there.

        I was around 12 years old and on a walk with my parents when I learned you were diagnosed with stomach cancer. I learned the news four months after my parents did. I initially didn’t know how to react. I was both shocked and extremely concerned, yet the thought of actually losing you never crossed my mind. The last time I spoke with you was over a video call in the hospital. I remember how weak your voice had gotten and how you barely managed to keep a smile. Although I knew you were in a vital condition, at the time I did not completely understand how severe it truly was.

One day my dad unexpectedly told my sister and me that he would be leaving to stay with and visit some of our family for a couple of days. He reassured us he would be back soon, and I already knew that there were often some issues my dad had regarding his siblings, or yours and grandma’s health conditions that he was obligated to address, so I decided not to overthink the situation. He arrived back home early in the morning before we were even awake, one week after he had initially left. My sister and I were glad that he had returned, and I remember him calling me into the living room, presumably to speak with me about something. I slowly passed the door into the living room and took a seat. Then he began to speak some words, although his speech seemed to be foggy and almost inaudible in my mind. The sorry expression on his face told me everything I needed to know, like a dramatically depressed renaissance painting rendered by an even more depressed artist. My entire body began to shake, and I felt a throbbing pain in my chest. I desperately ran out through the door and into my own room. I fell to my knees and started crying until my eyes felt dryer than my throat. The comfort my parents offered me felt fruitless. There were only two moments I majorly mourned over your death for an extended period of time. This was the first one.

        I think the worst part of losing someone you love is the eventual state you come to in which you have been paralyzed by somber for long enough where you are now able to think of their memory without completely breaking down. It's a feeling of guilt that you can never completely shake off, but it's something you learn to live with as time goes on. On the other hand, feeling guilty about mourning over someone you sometimes feel is undeserving of your sympathy often leads you into a spiral of doubt over both that person's ethics as well as your own. Losing you was the first time I had ever experienced losing someone close to me, and it's an experience that can make someone feel exhausted and on their last legs, unable to get back up again.

        The second time I remember extensively crying over your death took place at least a year after your initial passing away. It was about 8:00 P.M., and the martial arts class I was in was almost finished. I took a glance at the window and happened to see the face of a man passing by, which made me do a double take. I knew it couldn’t have been you, it was impossible, but the face of the man I saw that day resembled you so much that it triggered some sort of feeling or memory inside of me. During the car ride back home, I struggled to remain silent and held my hand over my mouth as tears strolled down my face. By the way, can I admit something silly to you? On that day, I genuinely wondered to myself if the man I saw that night could have possibly been your spirit, passing by to take a look and observing me as I did my karate practice.

        Although handling the death of a loved one from cancer was a gut-wrenching experience, I believe it helped me grow and understand your complex character, personality, and memory. Personally, I think all deaths eventually need to reach a point where pain and anguish can be gently replaced by contentment and understanding over the value of the lives they lived and how they impacted those around them. Grandpa, I believe the memories we keep of you truly keep your spirit alive, and they hold the key to staying content with both your life and death. Your memory allows me to get back up on my feet while being able to properly cherish your death. It almost feels like you’re helping me learn to walk all over again.