



**4<sup>th</sup> Annual Ben Strauss  
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1<sup>st</sup> Place**

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## *The Privilege of Missing Someone*

I was walking down the hallway when I heard it.

A group of girls stood by the lockers, talking about college essays, laughing as they tossed around ideas. One said, almost casually, “I wish I had a dead parent. That would make such a good essay topic.”

They laughed. The bell rang. The moment passed.

And I kept walking.

I didn’t say anything. I never do.

Because what I would have said doesn’t belong in a hallway. It doesn’t come out cleanly or casually. It sits heavier than a joke, heavier than a conversation people can move past.

I have a dead parent.

But I’ve learned how not to say it.

My dad passed during my freshman year of high school, but losing him didn’t begin the day he died. It began the day time stopped making sense.

When he was diagnosed with stage four bladder cancer, everything I thought I understood about time unraveled. It no longer moved in a straight line. It crept forward in quiet car rides, in hushed phone calls, in the distance between what I knew and what I feared. And then, without warning, it collapsed – weeks folding into days, days into moments I couldn’t hold onto fast enough.



I kept thinking time would prepare me. That it would ease me into reality. It didn't. No one really did. I was given pieces – fragments of information, softened explanations, half-answers easier to say than to live with. So, I filled in the gaps myself. Late at night, in the glow of my phone, I searched for answers I didn't fully understand, hoping that if I knew enough, I could make sense of what was happening.

I never say how terrifying that was. Not just the possibility of losing him – but the not knowing. The feeling that everyone else understood something I didn't, that there was a truth just out of reach, and I was left alone trying to find it.

By the time reality caught up to me, it was already slipping away.

I spent my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday weekend packing his hospital bag, folding his clothes carefully, deliberately, like if I did it right enough, it would all stay normal. Like this was temporary. Like we would come back from this. We didn't.

The next time I saw him, he was already fading – too weak to speak, too distant to fully recognize me. The man who once felt permanent, larger than anything I could lose, was suddenly fragile. Temporary. And there was nothing I could do to stop it.

I don't talk about that either. I don't talk about how helpless it felt to watch someone disappear slowly enough to notice, but quickly enough that you can't catch up. Or how, when he died, everything else kept going. Nothing pauses. The world doesn't acknowledge what just happened the way you need it to. There are still classes, still conversations, still ordinary moments that feel almost offensive in their normalcy. And you are expected to step back into them.

I didn't feel like I could. I felt stuck in the exact moment he was gone, while everything else moved forward without me.

I never say that out loud. Back then, I didn't have to. My school announced it over the loudspeaker. Emails were sent. Everyone knew. I became "the girl with the dead dad," and for a while, that visibility made things easier. People gave me space to not be okay. They understood, or at least tried to.

Grief was something I was allowed to carry openly. But grief doesn't stay loud forever.

Now, as a sophomore in college, it has softened into something quieter – living beneath the surface instead of in front of it. No one knows unless I tell them. And most of the time, I don't.

It's always the simplest questions that catch me off guard.

"What do your parents do?"



“Are you going home this weekend?”

“Is your dad coming for family weekend?”

There’s always a pause – a small, almost invisible moment where I decide which version of my life I’m about to share. The honest one, where everything shifts. Or the easier one, where nothing does. Most of the time, I choose the easier option. And then I carry the weight of what I didn’t say.

It’s a strange kind of dissonance, living a life that looks whole on the outside while quietly knowing it isn’t. Smiling through conversations that skim the surface of something much deeper. Letting people believe in a version of your life that feels incomplete, because correcting it feels too heavy for the moment. I’ve gotten good at it. Too good. But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t affect me.

Because silence doesn’t erase grief – it just changes where it lives. Some days, it feels manageable. Distant, even. Like something I’ve learned to carry without it disrupting everything else. And then there are days when it isn’t. When something small – a question, a song, a memory – pulls it right back to the surface, and suddenly it feels just as immediate as it did years ago. There’s no warning. No pattern. Just the quiet realization that it never really left.

I don’t explain that to people. I don’t explain how quickly I can go from feeling fine to feeling like something inside me has shifted completely. How grief doesn’t ask permission before it returns, and doesn’t leave on command. So instead, I say nothing.

But there are things I wish I could say. I wish I could explain that missing him isn’t abstract – it’s specific. It lives in details.

I miss his cooking – the way something simple felt like more because he made it.

I miss sitting next to him watching Marvel movies, even when we already knew what would happen.

I miss Jeep rides to the beach, the windows down, music loud, the kind of moments that didn’t feel important until they were gone.

I miss his laugh. His sense of humor. The way he kept everything so neat, like order was something he could control. I miss the way he texted me – always the same emojis, always something small that meant more. I miss his black Ray-Bans, the way they were just part of him.

These are the things I carry now. Not just the fact that he’s gone, but the reality that he was here.

Time keeps moving – for everyone. Every year on his birthday, I go on his Facebook page. People still post messages. “Happy Birthday.” “Miss you.” “Thinking of you.” But each year, there are fewer. I notice every single one. I notice who still remembers. Who doesn’t. How the



space he once occupied in other people's lives slowly quiets over time. And I hate how much that matters to me.

I never say that out loud. Because it feels selfish, like I'm asking the world to hold onto something that was never theirs in the same way it was mine. But there are moments when it feels like I am the only one still carrying him this fully – where his absence isn't just something that happened, but something that continues. That kind of loneliness doesn't have a simple explanation. So I don't try to give one.

For a long time, I thought this silence meant I was moving on – that not talking about it was proof I was okay. But I've started to understand something different. Silence doesn't mean something is gone. It just means it's being carried alone. And carrying it alone taught me more than I ever expected.

My experience with cancer didn't just teach me about illness. It taught me about uncertainty, about the weight of unanswered questions, about how deeply people are affected in ways that aren't always visible. It taught me how much people leave unsaid. And how much that matters.

That is how I grew – not in a way I would have chosen, but in a way that shaped everything I am now. I notice what isn't being said. I recognize the hesitation, the pauses, the things people are holding back. Because I know what that feels like.

And that is why I am in school to become a nurse. Not just to treat illness, but to care for the parts of people that aren't always spoken. To sit in those moments where there aren't easy answers. To offer honesty instead of avoidance, presence instead of silence. Because I know how much that could have meant.

And maybe that's why, when I think about my dad now, what I feel isn't just loss. It's something more complicated than that. Because underneath everything I don't say – the grief, the silence, the anger I once felt at time for moving too fast and not fast enough – there is something else that has never left.

There is *love*.

And that's what changed everything. Because I've come to understand something I couldn't before:

It is a privilege to miss him. Not because it doesn't hurt – but because it does. Because that kind of absence only exists when there was something worth losing. Something real. Something lasting. It is a privilege to carry memories that still feel alive. A privilege to feel his absence in ordinary moments. A privilege to know what it meant to be loved by him.



So no – I didn't say anything in that hallway. I didn't turn around. I didn't explain. Some things can't be understood in passing. Some things live in the quiet, in the pauses, in the things people don't think to ask. And some things, I still don't say out loud.