

# Losing my Father

*Brenna Larkin*

Well-known antonyms for hope: doubt, despair, pessimism. Most people forget to add 'cancer' to that list. For me, hopelessness was the only thing I felt throughout my father's struggle with cancer. If hope was the thing with feathers, then hopelessness must have been the ball of abnormal cells in my father's throat.

My father was diagnosed with esophageal cancer the summer of 2015, right before I started my freshman year of high school. His chances were good: he was early fifties, physically fit, and had a healthy diet. He'd go through some chemo and radiation to shrink the tumor, and most likely have surgery to remove what was left of it. It was a plan, and my family had to calm down and not worry. His chances were good! Great, actually. But I didn't let myself get my hope up. The hope that this was a minor bump in the road of his long and fruitful life, something to look back on and think what a scare it was, a story to tell my future kids to make sure they're grateful to have their grandfather in their life. But as hard as I tried, the sickening fear that it would not be okay never left my mind. My stomach was in a constant state of knots and my eyes felt like they were ready to burst into tears at any moment. I put on a brave face and supported my father in every way I could. Making grilled cheese for the days he was simply exhausted, re-watching our favorite shows, playing long games of chess even though we both knew he'd always let me win, and going out to his house as much as I could. My parents divorced when I was in kindergarten, my mom got full custody and his house was half an hour away. After a few months, the chemo and radiation did their job in shrinking the tumor. The surgery was scheduled for a few days after my 15th birthday in November, and that was when the beginning of the end started. My dad's esophagus was shortened when they removed the tumor - so a portion of his stomach was taken out as well. I remember sitting in school, staring at my phone for an update and feeling so anxious I thought I was going to pass out. My aunt texted me everything had gone well and he was being stitched up. I told my teacher I needed to go to the bathroom, and proceeded to cry tears of relief in the hallway. My celebration was too soon. A few days after the surgery, he wasn't recovering as well as he should have. There were complications with his lungs and it became quite clear he was going to be in the hospital much longer than we could have ever expected. He was diagnosed with ARDS, acute respiratory distress syndrome. His lungs were filling with fluid and he was getting worse. It got so bad he was placed in a medical coma for a few days. I remember the first time I visited him in the hospital, I could barely recognize my own father. Tubes covered his body, he was so sedated he didn't comprehend any of what was going on, the sounds of the machines surrounding him filled my ears and drowned out any voice trying to talk to me. I held his hand as the tears I held back for so long finally flooded over my red cheeks. Everything felt broken, this wasn't supposed to happen - his chances were good. I couldn't understand how this came to be.

Slowly, he recovered. Very slowly. He spent about a month in the hospital and another month in a physical therapy rehabilitation center. I spent Christmas on a hospital bed with him. Unknown to me, this would be our last Christmas together. Eventually, he was cleared to go home mid-January of 2016. He was still extremely weak, had lost most of his weight, and our family members would take turns staying with him until he was strong enough again. X-rays and scans showed no more cancer, and I allowed myself to celebrate that this whole ordeal was finally over. Again, I celebrated too soon. After more complications, my father visited the doctor again. He had a broken rib. He had spent nearly all of his time in his recliner chair or bed, only getting up to use the bathroom occasionally because that was all his energy allowed him. There was no activity he did to break a rib. We knew what had broken it:

the cancer was back, and it had spread.

My father had to look me in the eye and tell me he only had six months to live. Strangely, it seemed like the words had already processed in my brain before he told me. The way he looked at me, the only thing present on his was hopelessness. It was March, he had only returned home a couple months prior.

Chances didn't matter now, and hope didn't matter. He was going to die and there was nothing anyone could do about it. It was the last bump in the road of his shortened life, a horrible story my family will look back on, and the only way my future children will get to know their grandfather will be through the stories I speak and the pictures I have. The only thing in my heart was hopelessness.

The six months turned into three weeks. He died April 4th, 2016. It's a day forever seared in the folds of my brain. My mother came into my room with tears in her eyes. She didn't tell me he had died, she didn't have to. I knew. Numbness took over my body and reality became a bubble. My sister didn't even know yet, she was out shopping with a friend. She was still living in a world where our father was alive. I wished to be her in that moment; just to get a few more minutes in. The funeral came days later. My father was a fireman, and his death was considered as killed in the line of duty due to the fact it was assumed the esophageal cancer had come from years of smoke inhalation. Hundreds of firefighters and police officers who didn't even know my father still came to pay their respects, and to shake my hand and give me their condolences. I didn't want condolences, prayers, or thoughts; I just wanted my dad back. I wanted him to teach me how to drive, watch me graduate high school, scream with me when I got the acceptance letter from my dream college, have tears in his eyes as I got my degree, walk me down the aisle, be there when I had my first child, to hold his grandson or granddaughter for the first time, and to pass away peacefully after he lived a fulfilled life. I didn't get any of that, and neither did he.

I wish this was a triumphant story, but it's just my raw and unwrapped narrative. It's been two years since he died, and quickly going on three. I accepted the fact he's gone. I think of him everyday and he will always be in my heart, replacing the hopelessness that once filled it. I have finally let myself celebrate, and this time, I know it's not too soon. I celebrate his life, the kind and honest man he was. The firefighter he was, a captain who saved countless lives and constantly risked his own. The father he was, one who taught me valuable life lessons and loved me with every fiber of his being. The brother he was, one who was the oldest of seven siblings and made sure to set a good example for all of them. The son he was, constantly making sure my grandmother was comfortable in her retirement home and that she never felt lonely. I will never forget my father. He will always inspire me to work as hard as I possibly can, and I intend on doing everything in my power to always make him proud.