

A Frigid January River

I remember it vividly. It was a Sunday. I was sitting in the house I'd lived in for years, on the couch I'd sat on ten thousand times before. I was surrounded by two of my sisters and Mum. My other sister was on the other side of the world, racing to come home and be with us. We were deathly silent as this burly, balding, middle-aged man stood looming over us, flanked by one of my oldest friends. We'd known he was coming; we'd seen him pull up. We'd seen him walk up to our door, his face hardened by the burden of the truth he needed to share. Five years later, that look remains burned into my memory. It's a look I'm sure Dad had worn innumerable times before when he had spoken with patients and their families about poor prognoses and death. I remember the despair on this man's face so clearly because this was to become the worst day of my life. On that day, it wasn't my father wearing this look; it was the local police chief. After five harrowing days, the search was over: they'd found Dad, north of town, near where we used to spend our summers. But it was January, and they'd just pulled his body out of a river. He'd drank a bottle of alcohol, emptied a container of pills, walked into the river, and killed himself. He was 58.

The issue of physician suicide has been called an epidemic. We point to burnout, poor work-life balance, suffocating bureaucracy, and disillusionment as symptoms and causes. We know that male physicians are nearly twice as likely to die by suicide than other men, and that female physicians are two to three times more likely to die by suicide than other women. Anecdotally, most physicians I've met or worked with have a friend or a colleague who has died by suicide. The rest will eventually know someone. Two of my own physician communities have been rocked by suicides in the last two months alone. Many other well-crafted papers discuss epidemiology and strategies to improve wellness and, hopefully, reduce suicide. However, my intention is to share a personal story. Maybe it's a cautionary tale; for me, it's certainly cathartic. Ultimately, I hope that through frank conversations we can normalize and destigmatize issues around mental health and suicidality, to the point that those among us who are suffering can be empowered to seek help, before it's too late.

Earlier that week, it was 7:30pm on a Thursday. I was sitting in my car outside a sleazy burrito place waiting for my take-out order when I got a call. The call. It was from Mum. Before I even answered, this feeling came over me that something was wrong.

"I haven't seen Dad since yesterday."

The day before, he'd called in sick to the office. He hadn't come home that night. Today he hadn't even called work; he just hadn't shown up. This wasn't like him.

I knew immediately.

I knew immediately that Dad had killed himself. In reflection, this remains one of the most painful memories of that time. How could I have known so quickly? If I'm completely honest, it's because there had been so many warning signs. In my youthful naivety, I'd either missed them or ignored them. Ours was not a family that openly discussed our feelings. In my adult life I recall telling my father I loved him only a handful of times, and had heard it back just as infrequently, though we both knew it implicitly.

But in that moment on the phone, I finally pieced together the sad picture I'd been too blind to see. Dad had been depressed for a long time, and now he had finally killed himself.

My father was an echo-cardiologist. To the lay person, he was a heart doctor that specialized in reading ultrasounds of the heart. Early in his career he had been a researcher, before shifting into a clinical role. He had been integral in spreading certain techniques and technologies to western Canada, where he settled down after learning and teaching at universities all across North America. Unfortunately, towards the end of his life, he developed an eye condition that made it very difficult to read ultrasounds, and he had to transition to an office-based practice. He had to leave behind the work to which he'd dedicated most of his life, and I think he felt unfulfilled with his new practice. Looking back at the two or three years after that, things changed a lot. He started socializing less. I remember him sitting on the couch and watching TV a lot more. He started calling into work sick when he wasn't. Later, I learned he was missing multiple days each week.

Growing up, I had many disagreements with Dad. I often wondered how such an intelligent man could be so obtuse. Things improved when I moved out, as they often do, and eventually our relationship became a friendship. But there was many a family dinner where all I could do was roll my eyes. I blamed his occasionally crude behavior on alcohol. I so dearly wish that I could have understood that his increasing use of alcohol was his unhealthy way of trying to cope.

I recall being six or seven years old and visiting a provincial park with him. We walked along a narrow ledge nestled into a steep rock face, overlooking a river far below that snaked between two mountains. The way I remember it, I had my belly pressed against the wall, shuffling sideways as I held on for dear life. At one point, Dad told me to sit tight before disappearing around a corner, leaving my little sister and me for what felt like an eternity. He did it as a joke, though I didn't find it funny at the time (or even now for that matter). But he did come back, and we were never truly in danger. Flawed as he was, he could always be trusted to come through when I needed him.

The Christmas before he died, I was living in another province and decided not to go home for the first time ever. Dad called several times to try and convince me otherwise, but I had my selfish reasons and decided to stay. He was disappointed with my decision, and reminded me of this on New Year's Eve, which was to be the last time we spoke. He was gone within a week.

Nearly daily I ask myself: what if I had gone home that winter? What if I had come through when he needed me? Would it have made a difference? Would we have talked? Would he have even been able to talk? Sometimes I scream these questions into a pillow, full of rage; the same rage I used to carpet bomb my own life with bad decisions and hurtful words, before I mustered the strength to seek counselling, and get help in the form of psychotherapy and medications. Other times I cry like that scared child desperately holding onto a cliff waiting for Dad to return. Other times still, I ask these questions coldly, drowning under a current of apathy, washing over me like a frigid January river.

I often think about the day he died. How alone he must have felt. How cold the water must have been. What was he thinking? What in the fuck was he thinking? His own brother had killed himself; did he not remember how much that had hurt him or how angry that had made him? Did he remember he was

loved, or understand how much he'd be missed? Or were those thoughts blocked out by an immense, unyielding despair? He didn't leave a note, so I'll never get to know.

I wish he could have seen the 600 people that attended his funeral, filling the church until there was standing room only. I wish he could understand the emptiness he left. I wish I had talked to him.

The pain of losing a loved one never goes away; it lingers, always present in that dark space in your mind just beyond your consciousness, poised to strike out and overwhelm you when you're standing in line to buy a coffee on your way to work. The pain doesn't go away, but with time and energy, you can learn how to live well in spite of it.

Life has changed a lot since Dad died. My family and I have grown emotionally. We've grown because we chose to. We chose to grow because we had to. We had to if we wanted to break out from the ugly cycle of guilt, anger, resentment, depression, and suicide that lay ahead. Through time and effort and perseverance, we each learned to manage our grief in different ways. We're no longer the family that hides our feelings. We speak openly to each other, to our friends, and to strangers about mental health and suicide (my sister even likes to ask her doctors about their wellness!). Part of our family's goal is to help make it normal to openly discuss mental illness. We all must help to make it normal to discuss our illnesses, or our struggles, or our crises. We must. Lives depend on it.

While I wish that nothing in this story resonates with anyone reading it, I know that's not true.

If you see my father in someone, anyone, please try to find the courage to act. Every individual will need something different. Some people will need a heart-to-heart. Maybe they'll need an invitation to a social event. Others will need to hear that you care about them. But I beg of you, if you see concerning signs, or if you just get that feeling deep down in the pit of your stomach that tells you something is not right, please, don't do nothing. Don't do nothing the way that I did nothing. I was afraid that having an honest, emotional conversation would be awkward and painful. While I know that it wasn't my fault that Dad decided to kill himself, I'd give anything to have that conversation now. Giving a eulogy was a lot more painful.

If you can see yourself in how I described my father, burning out, apathetic, dissatisfied, depressed or considering suicide, please, please, please reach out for help. It takes an enormous amount of strength and courage, but you are worth it. Talk to a friend, a family member, a trusted confidant, or reach out to a confidential help line like what's offered through Doctors Nova Scotia or your own provincial association. You deserve to be healthy. You deserve to live.

Take care of each other and take care of yourselves.

Brendan Morgan