

A Frigid January River

"I haven't seen Dad since yesterday."

I was sitting in my car outside a sleazy burrito place waiting for my take-out order five years ago when I got a call. The call. It was from Mum. Before I even answered, a feeling washed over me. Something was wrong.

The day before, Dad had 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. That wasn't like him.

I knew immediately.

It's painful to think about that phone call now; how could I have known so quickly? If I'm honest, it's because there had been so many warning signs... I'd just either missed or ignored them. Ours was not a family that openly discussed our feelings. In my entire 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 picture I'd been too blind to see.

A week later, I was sitting in the house I'd lived in for years, on the couch where I'd sat ten thousand times before, surrounded by two of my sisters and my Mum. My third sister was on the other side of the world, racing home to be with us. We were silent as the burly, balding chief of police stood looming over us, flanked by one of my oldest friends. We'd known he was coming; we'd watched as he walked up to our door, his face hardened by the truth he needed to share. Five years later, that look remains burned in my memory. Dad must have worn it many times when treating the dying and consoling the living that they'd leave behind. I remember this look so vividly because this was to become the worst day of my life. 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 whiskey, swallowed a container of pills, walked into the river, and killed himself. He was 58.

When I was six, Dad and I visited a provincial park. We walked along a narrow ledge nestled into a steep rock face, overlooking a river far below that snaked between two mountains. I remember my belly pressed against the wall, shuffling sideways as I held on for dear life. At one point, Dad told me to hold tight before disappearing around a corner, leaving my little sister and me for what felt like an eternity. He'd done it as a joke, but he did come back; we were never truly in danger. While his sense of humor often left something to be desired, ultimately, I could trust him to be there when I needed him. And he was, over and over again as I stumbled through life.

My father was an echo-cardiologist, a doctor who specialized in reading heart ultrasounds. He'd started his career as a researcher before transitioning to a practice that included ultrasonography, hospital call, and clinic. He was well respected, and many of his patients have shared fond memories of him with me. Unfortunately, towards the end of his life, an eye condition impaired his ability to read ultrasounds, and he transitioned out of the hospital to an office-based practice. This meant leaving behind the work that had previously defined his career, and I think he lost a sense of fulfillment. Unfortunately, the impact of

that change wasn't limited to his professional life. In the following months and years, he started socializing less. He quit the activities that he'd loved and watched a lot more television. He began calling into work sick when he wasn't. Soon he started missing several days a week.

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 it a final time on New Year's Eve. That was the last time we ever spoke. He was gone within a week.

Nearly daily I ask myself: what if I had gone home? What if I had listened to him calling out from his ledge and been there for him when he needed me? Would it have made a difference? Would we have talked? 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 through therapy and medications. Other times I cry like that scared child desperately holding onto a cliff waiting for Dad to return. More often, 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 the immense, relentless despair of depression? He didn't leave a note, so I'll never know.

I wish he could have seen the 600 people that attended his funeral, filling the church until there was standing room only. If he had been able to ask, any one of those people would have found a way to help him. 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 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. It never goes away, but with time and energy, one learns how to live well in spite of it.

Life has changed a lot since Dad died. My family and I have grown emotionally. 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. We all must help to normalize and destigmatize discussing our illnesses, our struggles, or our crises. We must. Lives depend on it.

While I hope nothing in this story resonates with anyone reading it, I know that's not true. Most physicians I know have a friend or colleague who has died by suicide. The rest will eventually know

someone. My own communities have been rocked by two more physician suicides in the last two months alone.

If you see my father in someone, anyone, please try to find the courage to act. What you do or what you say depends on the person you're trying to help, but be honest and be frank. Just 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 or 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. You deserve to be healthy. You deserve to live.

Take care of each other and take care of yourselves.

Brendan Morgan