

**It's hard to believe that it has been almost four years since my father passed away. Reflecting back, those horribly freezing cold weeks seem as if they were a dream, and yet are as vivid as if they were only a moment ago. I also realize that even though what everyone says is true, the first year after a loved one dies is always the hardest, it doesn't exactly get easier. It just gets becomes more of a reality, instead of constantly feeling like you are waking from a nightmare, you just become more accustomed to the emptiness. When my father passed away, it happened during the coldest ice storm that Texas had seen in about seven years. It was depressing, and yet fitting that the earth should mourn my father's life the same way that I was. To add to the grief and shock we were feeling, my own little family of 8 was experiencing a lot of bad luck. My older children had picked up lice while I watched my friend's kid, our washing machine had broken, and all my kids got food poisoning from a cub scout banquet we attended the day after my dad passed. Three days after his passing was also my wedding anniversary. My husband and I both cried, saying that one day it would make a great story that on our 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary we were cleaning up puke, combing out lice, and trying to change our spring break plans to accommodate a funeral.**

**One day. My sweet middle daughter turned six on the day of my father's viewing. We went to the beach that morning and had cake and presents later that night, after I had spent hours at my father's viewing greeting old friends and sobbing my guts out. I know it sounds odd, but the juggling of the normal with the surreal is all that helped me survive those difficult days. Sometimes I think it is the normalcy of life with small children that has helped me cope these last few years as well.**

**My father's death happened so quickly and unexpectedly, that it truly took all of the first year he was gone to even process. The pain and the loss still feels so fresh and so raw, that I find myself sobbing from the smallest memory. Out of nowhere it can all come rushing back. That's because there is not a time limit on grief. Even when our lives keep going, we grieve for the rest of our lives. Even when we experience joy and happiness, the grief becomes a part of our human experience. Our joys become deeper because we have experienced such a loss. At times my heart still doesn't quite accept that he is gone. Four months after he passed, I would still text his phone with funny comments and little quips that were part of our everyday banter. I keep our last text messages saved on my phone as a treasure, and could kick myself for all of the texts and voicemails that I erased. Ironically, on my first birthday a couple of months after he passed, I found an old voicemail of him calling and singing happy birthday to one of my sons. It was so good to hear his voice, but I was racked with sobs for a while. Death is like that. It is a thief that sneaks up on you again and again--even after what you love has been stolen you can still feel the loss so intently months and years later.**

Six months before my dad died, I gave birth to my sixth child. My water broke at 9:30pm on my kids second day of school. I had planned to drive myself to the birthing center and have my husband meet me there, but my father insisted upon taking me. I could tell how nervous he was as we drove in semi-silence. I remember assuring him that we would make it with plenty of time. He told me he wasn't worried, even though I could see his knuckles white with fear on the steering wheel.

After he passed this memory became so special. The significance was not lost on me. My father was driving his sixth child, to deliver her sixth child. How poignant it would all seem just 6 months later once he was gone. I know that my baby girl will not remember her Papa at all. Sadly, most of my children will not remember him well because they were all so young. But I am so incredibly grateful that he got to meet all of them. We can learn a lot from death, and if the weeks during his rapid illness and decline in the hospital taught me anything it is gratitude. Gratitude for how much we have been given; grateful for memories to hold on too. In my fathers' death somehow I also found the joy of life. I found the importance of knowing that each moment—for good or bad—could be someone's last impression of you or yours of them. So take the pictures. Give them hugs. Realize that "this too shall pass". Know that the child who will not sleep in their own bed, potty train or give up their "binki," eventually will, and they will always remember the love you showed them. Put forth the extra effort even when it isn't convenient. Say what you need to say. Be better. Be kinder. Forgive often. Let go. Smile. Laugh. Cry. Experience moments to their very fullest. Give service often, with love and an open heart. Remember that each human being you encounter is full of their own pain, losses, and complexities and respect that.

Most importantly, know that your life is enough just the way it is. Don't waste any more time wishing away the monotony of your days, or the simplicity of your relationships. Those moments will be the ones you cherish the most when all is said and done.