On His Terms, In My Words: A Narrative Exploration of Family, Loss, and Grief

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This narrative is an exploration of the complicated relationship between my father and me as he battled cancer. It hopefully contributes to the field of qualitative inquiry at large, particularly in the domains of family, loss, and grief. This text shifts in time, tense, and voice. Part homage, part confession, it looks at the notion of voice from different angles.

Keywords: Loss; Grief; Voice; Family; Personal narrative

This piece began as a summer writing project after the first year of my doctoral coursework, was cut down for a performance at the 2011 National Communication Association Annual Convention in New Orleans, LA, and has since been revised at least once a year until this current incarnation. Developing this essay has been a journey unto itself in coming to terms with my place on his side of the family, with the relationship between me and him, and his death.

Breaking Silence

My mother called me on a spring afternoon in 2008 to tell me my father had late-stage cancer and that I’m not supposed to know. She promised him she wouldn’t tell me. My mother is perhaps the lousiest secret keeper I know. In retrospect, I believe he knew this as well. Suck it up, shut up, just listen.
Dad and I aren’t speaking. We’re both stubborn and are playing a long-distance game of chicken, each waiting for the other to call. My mother, assuming her familiar role, plays intermediary. Negotiator. Translator. We speak through her, dropping digs about the other: “I tried calling and he didn’t pick up.” “I called the last three times, the phone works both ways.” I should note here that as this story unfolds it may appear I diminish her presence in his life, in mine, or the importance of her presence between us, but mostly she stayed out of it all, stepping in only to pass on this message or that. Thinking back on it all, I question whether this may have been by design on her part in an attempt to force a reconciliation.

Tick tock. Should I just pick up the phone? If I do he’ll know mom told me. If I don’t, I’m not sure I can live with myself knowing I did nothing to make amends. Goddammit, he always does this to me. Why do I always have to be the one . . . Suck it up.

Her call haunts me for a few months that feel like years. I’m on edge, depressed, helpless. Thankfully my family are all hours away, and I work what amounts to two fulltime jobs. It’s easy for me to hide. Until . . .

The phone rings, and to my surprise, it’s him. I’m stunned. I always break down and call first when we do this. I hear something in his voice, something I’ve never heard there before, and it rattles me to my core. Fear. He does his best to put on a show, he’s always been a joker and world-class shit-talker, but I know.

I want this piece to be about him, his choices, his voice, but it’s impossible to separate him from me. No matter how much space has ever existed between us, I’ve always been bound to him. I suppose it’s about us. All of us. I cling to the notion we are all fundamentally one, that our stories utter one another.¹

We were always different. He said I was “soft.” He made fun of the smoothness of my hands, the books I chose to read over the pursuit of more “manly” activities, the career I wanted. I resent these indictments, they clog the space between us, making it near impossible to traverse.² I’d stopped trying—I could love the old man and still accept that this was not likely to change.

He always told me to “suck it up.” At seven years of age I fell out of a two-story tree house, breaking several bones. After getting me patched up in the emergency room, he wouldn’t let the nurse take me to the car in a wheelchair, nor give me crutches. His son wasn’t “a fucking cripple.” I’ve recently been dealing with one very broken foot, five years after his
death, and I still can’t shake the timbre of his voice, the sharpness of his judgmental smirk piercing a hole in the back of me as I limp about attempting to downplay the pain I’m in. It’s fucking absurd, I know this, but there you have it.

Macho-guy bullshit and all, I loved him. He was a good man and father . . . but things are rarely tidy and he was by no means perfect. He always practiced what he preached though. If he could move, he worked. *Suck it up.*

He says the doctors tell him that without treatment he has four months, six tops. I do math in my mind as I drift from what he’s saying on the other end of the line . . . it’s already been three months. *Ugh.* When I snap back to the conversation, my voice begins to match his as my grip on the phone tightens. My native Southern accent, long ago beaten out of me by voice teachers, empathetically bleeds back in. *Am I doing this intentionally?* Careful! Don’t make a fuss, don’t go getting all *emotional.* Don’t be soft. *Just listen.*

He’s refused treatment because he won’t “go out in a bed hooked up to tubes” like he saw his mother and too many of his friends suffer. He’ll die on his feet. “When it’s my time, it’s my time.”

“Four months, six tops.” That’s now one-to-three months. What the fuck am I supposed to do with this information? Paralysis sets in. I just freeze up. I always have, I still do. The first death in my family that I can recall is that of my great grandmother, who suffered from dementia and spent her final days strapped to a bed no longer able to speak English. I was afraid of her. I couldn’t connect to the rest of my family around me who knew her before that period. It was alienating. My grandmother died a few years after that, and once again I was frozen and alienated, convinced that no one could possibly understand what she meant to me and what I was going through. This doesn’t make me unique, I get that, but death is about the loneliest thing I ever experience. Even in putting words on a page I find it hard just to allow a reader into this intangible space with me.

*Tick tock.*

In my thirties, at the time of the call, it seems I blink and one-to-three months evaporates.

*Just shut up and listen.*

He says he wants to see me. “We gotta get past all this.” I agree. “Don’t say nothin’ to anybody else,”3 your momma’s the only other person who knows right now.” *What?!* “It don’t matter anyway, so no
point in them gettin’ all worked up.” It bothers me to know others close to him are walking around with no idea of what’s coming. I want to talk him out of his secrecy, but think better of it. How am I any different? I got the news about his health and went to rehearsal, not telling anyone what was going on with me. Truth is, things like this do matter. Acknowledging it—for either of us—would just make it that much more real. *Suck it up. Tick tock. Just listen.*

**Making Good, If Not Breaking Through**

We make good on our promises. *Tick.* We talk at least once a week. *Tock.* We try to see each other in person, but it never seems to work out. Money. Time. Obligations. *Or . . .* at least that’s what we both say. Did fear (of death, of the chasm between us) and distance (emotional, geographical) sit beneath more pragmatic concerns? Thinking back, and speaking only for myself, I knew the prognosis he was given and yet somehow I convinced myself there’d be time. Of course I was also frightened, and the physical space between us and the demands of my schedule didn’t make it any easier to take action.

May becomes June, then July. *Tick tock.* As each week passes, it gets harder not to worry. Not that I mention it to anyone. *Tick tock.* I’m consumed to the point that I don’t see a reference to the date without hearing *tick, tock.* I’m scared. Am I afraid of what I might see, or that a visit *now* might make his passing harder?

I am shamed by this. Not that these were the thoughts that occupied me in the moment, but now, as I revisit all of this in my private moments and continue to bend back in an effort try to make sense of it all, these thoughts of fear had to be lurking somewhere, just outside of my periphery, but there nonetheless. I never turned my vision to face them. ⁴ Why go out of my way to fix things when I know it won’t last? Time, death—these things attract and repel sometimes with equal strength.

“Worst damn thing about all is that I just gotta lay down sometimes.” That might not sound so horrible to some, but this is an agonizing admission for someone so proud. “I brought in a coupla guys to help me with these last few houses, ain’t no way I’m gettin’ ’em done myself.” No longer taking on new jobs, he’s trying to finish up a smattering of projects already begun. He *has* to. Not just because he gave his word, but so he can save enough to retire to the Ridge.
The Ridge—the Blue Ridge Mountains in Tennessee—hasn’t changed since his childhood and has always been a place of peace, of comfort. He tells me I’ll have to go up there and claim his boat and bike when he goes because he wants me to have them. For a moment I’m deeply touched by this before my stomach turns. “At least I won’t have to claim the body,” whispers the lurking darkness.

I’m shamed by that, too.

“Dislocated my shoulder the other night haulin’ a roll of drywall tape up two flights of stairs.”

“Wait . . . you said you were taking it easy, that you hired guys on?”

He makes a noise somewhere between a grunt and a sigh, “I go in at night because I don’t want ‘em to see me like this, and it gets me out of the house. I can’t lay on the couch all gyatdamn day, it makes me feel better . . .”

“I don’t want ‘em to see me like this . . .” I’m bothered by what “like this” means, yet, it didn’t push me onto a plane or into my truck any faster. Frozen. Afraid. I justified my absence with work. I’m good at that, and it’s not lost on my family. My mom confessed to me some years back that she felt responsible for me turning out “almost too independent.” Not too long after that I skipped her sister’s funeral. I said it was because I couldn’t take the time off and make the trip. You decide.

His doctors fight him. “Mr. Jenkins you’re making a mistake . . . Think of your family . . . We can give you more time.” He sits in waiting rooms, arguing his case to anyone within earshot: “Doctors don’t give a shit about what a person wants or needs, just the gyatdamn money.” He will not be silenced, nor made the bad guy. He will do this on his terms.

The cancer spreads. It pumps through his veins, bones, and lymphatic system. A large tumor sits in his throat. I’m terrified. I can’t say it though, not to him. I can barely acknowledge it myself. Suck it up.

It’s now Christmas, almost a year after the prognosis of “four months, six tops.” I ask him what he wants, a habit I’d given up years ago. We’re given latitude as kids when we give gifts that I don’t think holds up once we’re adults, and he was impossible to shop for. He surprises me for once with the alacrity of his reply: “A bottle of Crown and a joint.”

Fearing Him

He was an intimidating man. He towered at “six-foot-six and a half,” a phrase he repeated proudly with his distinct Northside twang. Large,
hairy forearms end in hands like cinder blocks from decades of manual labor.

His appearance frightened me as a child. He was The Largest Man on Earth. He snuck up on me once and scared me, sending me speeding across our backyard as fast as my little feet would carry me. Thinking this was play, he gave chase, alternately laughing and yelling “I'm gonna gitcha!” I screamed, heart pounding in my throat, looking over my shoulder as I raced until... both feet left the ground and I crashed flat on my back. I never saw the support cable from the utility pole before it clotheslined me.

He felt absolutely horrible, scooped me up in his massive arms, carried me inside, and cleaned me up. Later I overheard him confess to my mother his concern over my fear. “Michael, he’s six, and you’re almost seven feet tall.”

To look at him you’d think biker. Work boots, Harley Davidson shirt, Levi’s straight cut jeans. He cared deeply for his family and those he chose to call “friend.” If he cared he’d give you the shirt off his back, the last 20 dollars in his pocket, or just put in a new bathroom for you over a weekend. If he didn’t, well, you can probably fill in that part for yourself. In many ways, he was a walking contradiction. But so am I. Aren’t we all, really?

This is who I want to see at Christmas. This is who I am afraid I’ve already missed.

Coming Together

The man who greets me on the porch of my mother’s house is older than I remember. His hair is thinner, more gray. His back is a bit hunched and he moves deliberately—not at all the jaunty larger-than-life man of my childhood. He looks exhausted, but his spirits clearly soar. He touches me more than I expect, but it’s comforting. He clears his throat often, drinking more water in a few hours than I’ve seen him drink throughout my whole life. These signs are small, but serve as nagging reminders of the battle going on inside his body.

We spend the night sharing story after story—the two of us and my wife Summer, my mother and her boyfriend, a few of their old friends, and other assorted family members from my mother’s side of the family. The Crown is opened and passed around. God, he loves Crown Royal—says it’s the best there is. The night gets murky around 9. He’s
impressed Summer keeps up with him shot for shot. He hugs her over
and over, too. Kissing her loudly on the cheek, he brags what a righteous
daughter-in-law he has and how I “did good” in marrying her.

He holds court all night on that small back patio. It’s only when I let
go: of the need to control the situation, of the need to make this night
perfect somehow, of the need to squeeze in so many neglected years of
our relationship—ticktockticktock—that I am able to enjoy myself and
him in the moment. Just listen.

And I did just that. Time was not only at a standstill, but also
looping around itself into a tangle. This man in front of me, who by
appearance should have been from some future time, not now—it’s too
soon—makes me feel like a child again. I suppose parents always have
a way of making us feel like less-than-an-adult, but there was always
something about him, about how I felt in his presence that took me way,
way back. I didn’t always like that feeling; at times I raged against it in
my moments when I wanted to be taken seriously. Tonight, I just
allowed it, allowed my mind to go quiet, allowed even the ambiguity
and awkwardness of it all. A comfort comes with that kind of surrender,
it has a way of healing even when no direct words are spoken.

He is the first person I call at midnight on New Year’s, and his is the
first voice I hear on my birthday. He’s now a month away from making
the drive up to the Ridge and we’re making plans for another visit.
I continue to bury my fears—suck it up—and do my best to Just Be.
If only I could effortlessly be, do without doing. Wei wu wei. I embrace
paradox, so why is this so hard? But this infernal tick tock is paralyzing.
It’s only now, years removed from the experience and even from my first
attempt at telling this story, that I understand the sensation is almost
like my own hellish Tell-Tale Heart beating. I also have a greater appre-
ciation for Captain Hook being chased by that ticking crocodile while
he’s still chasing down that boy-who-does-not-age. The evolution of
this piece, then, is likely my confession.

4 May 2009

4 May 2009: Michael Glenn Jenkins was working on a roof in Savan-
annah, GA, on an unseasonably hot afternoon for so early in the year. He
had promised this job would be finished today and this was his last
obligation before the Ridge. Growing weary in the unforgiving South-
ern heat, he knew he wouldn’t finish with the daylight he had left. The
elderly woman who owned the house stepped out to check on him, offering him an ice-cold sweet tea. He accepted happily and asked sheepishly if he might be able to come back and finish up in the morning. She assured him that was more than fine and went inside to prepare his drink. Mike packed up his tools—everything in its place and a place for every thing—and descended the ladder. With his feet firmly on the ground, he took his final breath.

He did it. The old man went out on his terms, on his own two feet, tools in hand at the foot of a ladder after roofing alone all day in the hot Georgia sun with cancer running through every part of his body. It could have all of him or none of him, and he held out far longer than anyone thought.

A chain of phone calls begins—the woman calls Mike’s wife, Mike’s wife calls his brother, his brother calls Mike’s first wife, and then she calls their son.

The son chokes on a wave of guilt and remorse. For all the years that he and his father didn’t connect, that they ignored their relationship, that they allowed pride to get the best of him. He was a week away from seeing his dad, the five months’ distance from Christmas now an eternity. Where does time go? Tick. Tock.

He was not sad about his father’s death, which is not to say that he didn’t grieve. He thought about the old man coming down that ladder and collapsing, precisely as he said he wanted to go, and he pictured a smile on the old man’s face. The son thought of the year the old man stole from cancer and the son smiled. You did not tell Mike Jenkins what he couldn’t do. Not cancer, not a doctor, not anyone.

**Ascension**

It’s never tidy though, is it? Despite the peace I have that he died on his terms, part of me still can’t move on; not based on my regrets about our relationship, but because of what others allow to count. His final wishes regarding the passing on of a few things to me were never honored, and there is nothing I can do about it.

That final blow to our relationship was in many ways the “icing on the gravy.” We spent a lifetime struggling, then had a reckoning after spending years with what felt like an impossible void between us. Maybe I feel a bit entitled. There’s now an entire half of what should be my family out there from whom I now feel completely severed, and that’s
a distance for which I don’t feel responsible at all. That drift began when my parents got divorced and intensified over the years—first with my grandmother’s death, then with the distance generated between my father and me. There’s nothing to do now but move on. I’ve tried to reach out on several occasions, and have been met with either silence or excuses. I’m (quietly) angry about it. I feel slighted, disregarded, cast aside. We could have grown closer through this, through the absence of my father or perhaps with who my father was as a bridge, but it went the other way.

My father’s siblings and their children have two things, a motorcycle and a boat, which were more than just things for me; they represented what he and I shared once we put aside the years of baggage in the time that preceded his death. I was honored he wanted me to have those things—the one who didn’t do “real” work, the one who seemed to him never to sever the “apron strings,” the one he said often was “too good” to live in the same world he did. They were to be reminders of overcoming that tumultuous, tempestuous time that separated us. They also felt to me like a physical, tangible legacy. One I would be able to pass on eventually. I will always know what he wanted, how he felt, but I still feel like the rug was jerked out from under me by others who I still don’t believe have the right even to be in the room. That was my dad. This was our deal.

If he were my biological father, or if I would have let him adopt me, part of me argues that I wouldn’t even be in this situation. Yet, another part snaps right back in the old man’s voice, “Yeah, and if Grandma had nuts, she’d be Grandpa.”

This “biological father” stuff may seem like critical information to drop now, but that’s another story for another time. Look, I’ve been upfront—I have a hard time sharing. I’m working on that. My point is that he is the only father I’ve known. This is now my burden to carry and I just have to suck it up. The old man also could have put together a will, and before his death it never really crossed my mind that these things should have been on paper—much the same way I felt about his legal status as my father. I knew. We knew.

And I know, I know, that so much of the regret and the anger I feel now—this load I’m bearing—is as much about that ridiculous period of time we spent not talking and about the time I let slip by that I could’ve been by his side but wasn’t, as it is about the feeling of being denied what he wanted me to have. The stuff is stuff, and I can still be angry
about it at the same time that I take comfort that in the end we did come back together and that our relationship was able to be repaired before it was too late.

He finally made it to the Ridge the following spring once the frost broke. An oak now grows atop his ashes—well, most of them. In my living room, on a high shelf, encased in a regal glass bottle within an imperial-purple bag stitched with gold, rests the rest.

The best for the best.

Notes

1. I read Della Pollock’s “Performing Writing” for the first time shortly before beginning writing the first draft of this story. There is a rawness to that piece, an honesty, that I admired. The structure and overall feel of this piece was inspired by Pollock and the taut emotional economy I find in the writing of Stacy Holman Jones. I think it is human to seek comfort in the personal details of a piece like this and hope that readers allow for the intentional dis-ease.

2. A nod to Martin Buber’s conception of dialogue. For some reason, as my adult life progressed, it became harder and harder to be open to or “turn towards” him, or as Ronald J. Pelias might say, to lean.

3. This included his brother, sister, their children, and my grandfather. An awkward spot in which to be put.

4. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observes, “that’s the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality” (37). My shame is both “deconstituting and foundational” (36). Sedgwick differentiates between shame and guilt in that “shame attaches to and sharpens the sense of what one is, whereas guilt attaches to what one does. . . . shame effaces itself: shame points and projects, shame turns itself skin side out: shame and pride, shame and dignity, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove” (37–38).

5. The north side of Jacksonville, FL. Pretty much the northernmost part of the state, minutes away from the Georgia border.

6. I was profoundly moved by Judith Butler’s exploration of grief, mourning, and what is allowed to “count” in Undoing Gender and in subsequent interviews she has given on the subject. She calls writing itself an act of mourning, as she notes Jacques Derrida’s work functions for Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, among others. As she remarks of Derrida’s work, I too am trying to come to terms with the deaths of others, my debts. As Butler points out, in this attempt is “a longing that cannot reach the one to whom
it is addressed, but does not for that reason forfeit itself as longing. The act of mourning thus becomes a continued way of ‘speaking to’ the other who is gone, even though the other is gone, in spite of the fact the other is gone, precisely because the other is gone” (“Jacques Derrida” 32).

7. Another nod to Butler. I did not pursue the “quick move to action,” as she describes in an interview, whereby we foreclose grief. She explains that process as one that eviscerates personal vulnerability, resulting in “a kind of horrid masculinism” (“Judith Butler”).

8. What a delicious turn of phrase from Eric Bogosian’s Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll (40).

9. A very long story short, my father has been caring for me since before my birth, marrying my mother when I was around one. I was 13 when I learned he wasn’t my birth father. Shortly before I went to college, he offered to adopt me officially and I said it wasn’t necessary. We knew who we were to one another, all of that at the time just seemed like unnecessary hassle and expense.

Works Cited


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