

## My Last Day Alive

Samantha Mattar



*WRITER'S COMMENT: My father is the apple of my eye. I share most things with him and adore the fact that I have the ability to do so. However, this was not always the case. We have faced some pretty major challenges in the past. Through reflecting on this, I have realized that the challenges I had with my father were not unlike the challenges many other teens face with immigrant parents. I thought it would be an excellent opportunity to share my personal story and explain what life was like for me as a teen living in Australia. By highlighting the cultural differences between my dad and me, I hoped to show other teens that we all face similar struggles with our parents, no matter from where we come. This paper is in honor of my dad and how grateful I am to have him even though we live on opposing sides of the world.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Because so many students take UWP 101 shortly before they graduate, I end the class with a unit that asks them to reflect on their educational experience, and to think about the idea of value in education. After students read an essay by Paulo Freire, who argues that students should assume a defining role in their own education, I ask students to write the prompts that the class will respond to for the final paper.*

*Samantha's group developed the prompt that gave rise to her paper; the task was to detail how they would spend their final day if they had one day to live. The danger of such a prompt is that it can easily lead to self-indulgent speculation or sentimental nostalgia. In her capable hands, though, it became a springboard for a thoughtful, touching reflection on the real nature of love and family. Throughout the essay, she handles the material with the detail, clarity, and grace that defined her work throughout the quarter.*

SEAN McDONNELL, UNIVERSITY WRITING PROGRAM

*To Baba:*

If today were my last day, how would I spend it? I would call my 80-year-old father and say, "Baba [the Arabic word for dad], we are going to spend this day together. Please cancel your plans and come over." We would spend the day going from one coffee shop to another. I would be drinking copious amounts of coffee and he would be drinking tea. I would be sitting beside him, occasionally grabbing his hand to hold and resting my head on his shoulder as he spoke to me. We would be talking about nothing in particular while my dad would be distracted, checking out the latest young lady to walk in the door. He would be telling me the latest new joke he had heard (which he was telling me for the umpteenth time), and I would be laughing sometimes uncontrollably, not at the joke itself but at how funny he thought the joke was. This is how I would like to spend my last day on earth. Let me explain why it is that I would be content doing something so basic – why I would choose to spend the day with my dad at a coffee shop.

I am the first-born child of parents who emigrated from Egypt to Australia two years before my birth. My father is traditionally Egyptian with incredibly old-fashioned ideas about women's roles, childbearing and politics. I am equally opinionated in my very liberal views. I believe in gender equality and gay adoption rights. If there is a god, I believe she may be female. I believe men and women have complementary strengths, and I don't see one gender as superior to the other. My father and I are polar opposites in many regards, yet I have a very deep respect for him. It is ideal for Egyptian parents to have a male first-born, but I burst onto the scene weighing a whopping 12 pounds, creating history in the hospital of my birth, while ruining my father's male first-born "ideal." Around the time I started to walk, I began following my father everywhere. He would torment my mother by asking me in front of her whose girl I was, to which I would respond, "daddy's girl." This is one of my very earliest and fondest memories, but there are many that are not so great.

Growing up with a very traditional Arab father in a very liberal country was anything but easy. My teenage years were particularly hard. I vividly remember at my 10th grade social having what I thought at the time was the unrealistic curfew of 10pm on a Friday night. I recall it was 10:05pm and I was still at the social when I heard the thunderous roar of my father's voice over the music telling me to get home immediately. Oh my shame and embarrassment in that moment. I was absolutely morti-

fied by his encroaching on my space at MY social event! I ran home angered and very embarrassed by the events that had just unfolded. Why me, I thought? Why couldn't I have Australian parents like everyone else?

My late teens were a time when I experimented with everything. I took crazy risks with my health and safety, experimented with drugs of every variety and boys of all types, pushing the boundaries of acceptable behavior in all cases. Have you heard someone say I don't know how I survived my youth? Well I am the poster child of that quandary. I prided myself on my unsavory friends and delighted in being a nuisance. I was an absolute handful in my late teens, and I thrived on freaking my parents out. I saw it as my calling. I am sure my father aged 20 years while I was a teen, but at that time, as with most teens, I felt that life was all about me and the experiences I needed to have. He was my number one enemy and the gatekeeper of the freedom I was owed. To this very day, it has amazed me that my father had the self-control to never raise a hand against me.

My late teens was also when my father found out that I was no longer a virgin, which happened to be the same time he found out I was pregnant. In his Egyptian eyes, I had no more marriage value, and my being pregnant with zero intention of getting married knocked my father to the nearest chair to process these bombshells. This was the first time I had ever seen my father quiet when I had done something wrong. He sat me down and said, "Look, the choice you make in this instance will affect what happens for the rest of your life." This was a pivotal moment for my father and for our relationship. For the first time, my dad had given me a choice as to which direction I wanted my life to take. I chose wisely.

Even with all the hell I put my father through growing up and all his rules I broke, he still stood by me. I have always felt that he would be by my side no matter what and that his love is unconditional. That is so incredibly powerful that I could not imagine spending my last day with anyone but my dad. I watched him go from the authoritarian father from hell who demanded that everything be done his way to a man who listens to his daughter and accepts her views even though they are very different from his own. And in watching this growth, I have learned how to meet him halfway as well.

I would feel I had completed my life's journey successfully if it were with him by my side. I think I would not tell him that it was my last day on earth until the last hours before I was gone. I would want to capture

the carefree spirit of our relationship one last time with our laughter and affection. When it was time to leave this earth, I would want it to be after he told me how much he loved me and how it wouldn't be long until we would see each other again.