

## A Nine-Year Progression of Grief

LYNDSEY MARSH



*WRITER'S COMMENT: For our fourth essay in UWP 18, we were allowed to write about something we hadn't had the chance to experiment with yet, whether in content or style. I really love the way second person flows and puts the reader in the place of the author like in Van Meter's, "If You Knew Then What You Know Now." With a lot of personal changes I made this year, Van Meter's piece really made me reflect on where I was versus where I am now in my life. I've struggled a lot with depression from losing my dad and failing to meet expectations of how my grief should appear to others. Although there are hundreds of books on grief and how to handle it, I've learned grief is as unique as an individual. Coming to terms with this fact helped me begin to move forward and inspired me to write this piece. I'm thankful that Dr. Karma Waltonen encouraged me to write this.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: When I assigned a profile this year in UWP 18 (Style in the Essay), I cautioned the students against writing about a close family member. Lyndsey wanted to write about her father, who had been taken away from her when she was a teenager. I will admit that I had reservations – "witnesses" don't always tell you the truth about relatives. I knew that – and more – from experience, having lost my own father before I could even form a memory of him. We proceeded with caution, and Lyndsey wrote a strong piece. She wasn't done, however. When it came time to write the last essay, she returned to the subject, but from a very different angle – hers.*

*In my class, we don't just focus on what we say; we focus on how we say it. I give students a lot of unconventional pieces so we can think about concision, point of view, tense, repetition, and many other factors in new ways. They are encouraged to try on the techniques other authors use to find their own style. Here, Lyndsey blends second person, future tense, and repetition, used effectively by many of our authors, to make a heartbreaking, brave, honest piece about loss. This was a privilege to read. Lyndsey, I'm so glad we took this chance!*

– Karma Waltonen, University Writing Program

“Daddy’s dead.”

The words don’t settle in, not in the moment. Instead they sit on your shoulders as if to mock you and the seriousness of the situation. People pull at you and hold you, but you don’t understand. They are trying to comfort you, but you’re already a thousand miles away in your head, detaching yourself from reality. Your mom is huddled on the grass, rocking herself and her phone is lost, dropped from shock. She’s not crying, but everyone around you is. Security guards at the horse show grounds walk over to check if everything is ok. Someone quietly explains that you just found out your dad passed away unexpectedly from a heart attack. They offer to drive you to your car so you can go home. Your mom gets up, but you take a step back. “I’m not going home. I don’t want to see him.” You hear a friend’s parent offer to drive you home later and your mom agrees.

“Daddy’s dead.”

Your brain tries to protect you, hiding the truth of everything happening around you. You won’t remember who’s at your house when you finally get home. You won’t remember going to bed or how you even ended up in your parent’s bed. You won’t remember who visited on the days you stayed home from school. But, you will remember the song that was on T.V. the morning after finding out. “Where’d You Go?” by Fort Minor will haunt you by rubbing it in your face that your dad is gone. “Where’d you go? I miss you so. Feels like it’s been forever since you’ve been gone. Please come back home.” This will repeat itself over and over again in your head. It’ll make you cry, it’ll make you angry, but above all else it will bring you back to that day at the horse show.

“Daddy’s dead.”

You’ll remember sitting in the family room at the mortuary before the funeral. You won’t remember the wall color or the rabbi’s face; chances are you won’t even remember which family members are in the room with you. “Did you want to say goodbye?” You shake your head, again refusing to see him dead. It’s fear, fear that instead of words that won’t leave you alone in the middle of the night, it’ll be his cold skin and lifeless body. You’ll question if you’re making the right choice. You’ll wonder if you’ll ever have closure because you never said your final goodbyes.

“Daddy’s dead.”

You’ll return to school in hopes of things being “normal.” You’ll try to blend back into the chaos of your final weeks in sixth grade. It won’t

happen. The bell will ring and you'll pull out your notebook and pencils waiting for the teacher to start class. Instead at the beginning of every period the teacher will touch your arm and ask to speak with you outside. You'll oblige as your heart drops into your stomach. They'll kneel down to your level and tell you not to worry about any assignments for the rest of the year. They'll assure you that they are a resource if you ever need help. You'll nod, but instead look right past their shoulder, watching late students rush to their classes. You don't want to hear what your teacher is saying. People in the hallways will stop you and say how sorry they are for your loss. You'll smile and nod. Your friends will ask who they were and you'll shrug. They are people in your classes who had never bothered to stop and say hello before. You'll hear the rumors of old elementary school friends telling people you didn't care about your dad. "I mean, look at her. She's not even crying. I'd be hysterical if it was me!" You'll pretend it doesn't bother you, but it feels like someone is ripping your heart out every time you make eye contact. They don't know how you wished you could cry, but for some reason the tears wouldn't come. They'll hate you and you'll begin to hate yourself. You'll ask yourself over and over again, "What if something is wrong with me?"

"Daddy's dead."

You'll pull up in the driveway after an especially harsh day at school. Everyone's opinions have felt like punches in the stomach. You'll feel sick and on the verge of tears. That's when you'll notice your dad's little red MR2 in the driveway. You'll feel relief. You'll rush into the house, screaming his name. His office will be empty and that could only mean he's taking his afternoon nap. When you burst into the room calling for him, the silence will knock you back, but the emptiness of the room will make the floor disappear beneath your feet. Fear will creep into your heart as the reality of the situation settles into your bones.

"Daddy's dead."

It'll take years before you begin to accept his death, but when you finally realize he's never coming back, it'll turn your sunny day into a rainstorm in a moment. You won't realize you're crying until either someone asks you what's wrong or the sound of your own sobs echo in your ears. You'll be in your boyfriend's white Honda outside his house the first time he sees you cry. He won't understand, but he'll hold his steering wheel tighter and try to avoid looking at you. "What if I made a mistake not seeing him after he died?" you'll cry. He'll ask if you want to

talk about your dad, but you'll shake your head. He won't let you inside his house until your eyes aren't so red. He'll worry his parents will think he's the cause of your pain. He doesn't want them to get the wrong idea. You'll nod in agreement, trying to stop the tears just as he'll stop trying to understand your pain in the following years and instead tell you he doesn't get why you're so upset. "You have everything going for you, why can't you just be happy?" You'll remember those girls' words from middle school and you'll begin to believe that maybe something is wrong with you.

"Daddy's dead."

You'll never forget sitting in your room as a twelve-year-old, listening to your mom's cries through the wall. You'll never forget the way she'd wipe the tears away and smile if you entered her room to ask if she was ok. You'll never forget her silent sobs as she held you as you cried. You'll never forget how years later, she'd come in your room in the middle of the night with her eyes red, tears streaming down her face. Barely understandable, she'd cry, "He should never have died. I should have died instead, not him." For once, you'll hold her instead and try to hide your tears, your panic, and your fear. You'll wish your brother would talk about him so you weren't so alone, so there was another person who could share the burden of your mom's bottled pain.

"Daddy's dead."

You'll sit across from a psychiatrist and avoid eye contact. You'll see her bright smile out of the corner of your eye and wonder what she's thinking. You'll wonder if she sees what everyone else has seen in you – the emotionally shut off, unappreciative girl who doesn't love her dad (obviously) because she couldn't cry, but in the following years couldn't stop crying. You'll look up as she holds out a tissue and you'll realize you're crying. You'll take the tissue and hold it tightly in your hands and glance at her as she speaks. "So what do you want to talk about?" She smiles at you. Her eyes are comforting and her voice sincere. Maybe it's ok to trust her. So you start at the beginning of everything that's been beating you down. She gives you a hug as you leave, her smile never wavering. You wonder if she's ever lost someone.

"Daddy's dead."

You'll move upstate for college, a seven hour drive from the only family you have left. Your mom is still at home, and your brother is across the country finishing up school. You're in a new place where no one really

knows your past, so you keep it a secret, but you sit outside your dorm room with a friend one night, crying. He doesn't say a word; he just looks at the ground.

"Daddy's dead."

As the nine-year anniversary of his death approaches, your brother messages you. "Did I ever show you my essay about dad?" You tell him no just so he'll send it to you. You've read it before when he was out of the house and left his computer on, but you don't want him to shut down, not now. You'll read his essay over again and think about how he found your dad unresponsive in the kitchen while you and your mom were miles away at a horse show. Would you have had the strength at fifteen to call 911 and try CPR while waiting for help like he had to?

"Daddy's dead."

You'll return home to be with your mom on the ninth anniversary and you'll go to the cemetery with her. You'll eat lunch on a blanket in front of his headstone across from her. She'll look at you and ask, "Do you think dad listens?" Without thinking you'll nod. "I believe he listens, and I believe he answers when you talk to him. I know he helps when we need him to. I really believe he's helped me figure out the important things." You'll finish your lunch in silence before heading back to the car, and she'll ask you a different question this time. "Do you hear dad?"

"Daddy's dead."

You'll read the last essay assignment and instantly know what you want to write about, but you come up with a few different ideas before presenting it to your professor just in case she says no. Instead she'll ask you which one is calling to you. You'll answer and open up to her. She'll tell you to take care of yourself and that's what you'll do. It's what you've done more or less for nine years. You know some days will trap you in darkness, but you know there are people around you who care about you, friends who will sit up with you at two am to talk until you stop crying or hang out until you feel better. You have a mom who supports you. You'll be strong for her, just as she's been strong for you. You have learned over the years it is okay to be scared, but more importantly, it is okay to move forward.

## Your Fifteenth Year

JANETTE CEBALLOS



*WRITER'S COMMENT: When our class was given the assignment for a profile essay, I panicked because there are only about six or so interesting things I personally know of and can write about. Coupled with the fact that I had no clear direction to guide my writing, my concerns only grew. After a week of thinking, I decided to make a straightforward profile of an interesting person, but the struggle continued: since I couldn't contact my subject, I had to go with my backup topic: quinceñeras, specifically focusing on the experiences of my cousin, Ketzal. Luckily, this happened to be the better choice. With this subject, I finally had goals to shape my essay. For one thing, I was genuinely curious about quinceñeras. Like many other people, I understood that they were big Hispanic parties thrown for young girls, but I didn't know much else. After learning more, I wanted to inform readers about the real reasons anyone is willing to put themselves through this kind of stress. Besides these goals, I think I really just wanted to show how families like mine willingly sacrifice time and energy to making one perfect night for someone they love.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: I had never assigned a profile in UWP 18 (Style in the Essay) before this year. I adapted Pamela Demory's assignment – to "write a profile of an intriguing person, place, or thing." It proved challenging for the students, since we wanted to build on our skills in the class – choosing great topics to explore and exploring them in unexpected, stylish ways. In this class, we think through point of view, tense, word choice, sentence structure, organization, and concision in a focused way. Students come to see each paragraph, each sentence, and each word as a choice; they must ask if their choice best suits their idea and their audience. In writing this extraordinary profile of something many Americans know little about – the quinceañera – Janette made some bold choices inspired by our readings in the class – using second person and present tense to put the reader in the unique position of preparing for and experiencing one of the most important days of our subject's life.*

– Karma Waltonen, University Writing Program