

Bike Rides

“You would have to pull me out from under the bed,” my mother would say. “I have to go before your father, because if he dies first, you would have to pull me out from under the bed!”

“I will remarry,” my dad would respond.

We talked like this around the family dinner table as if it was a reality we would never have to face. We spoke about death casually because it was far off in old age, when we all were ready. I was the youngest of four children, and thus assumed naturally eventually when I’m a hundred years old I would have buried all of my family members, but I would join them soon.

From a young age, I was no stranger to death. I remember visiting my paternal grandfather in the hospital, and in my memory watching him take his last breaths. He was in his nineties, and ready to go. It was my first funeral, and one of my earliest memories. It’s fuzzy, but I remember how confusing open casket funerals are to toddlers. “Dad, why is Uncle Patrick crying? Are you gonna cry? *That’s* Grandpa? But we just saw him yesterday.”

My mom’s family was much smaller than my dad’s. He had 5 brothers compared to her one sister. One morning I was lying in bed watching TV with my mom when the phone rang. I recognized the 765 area code as Indiana, where her family lived. She picked up the phone and a

cry, “What?! NO!!” followed. Her Uncle Pete had passed away in his sleep. My mom wept, and I didn’t know what to do. I cried with her.

My mom flew out to Indiana by herself for the funeral. My dad stayed and took care of me and my siblings. I remember sitting next to him in church that weekend and wondering if this was what it would be like if my mom died. I had no reason to think that way—both my parents were healthy and barely middle aged. It was just a strange occurrence that my dad was the only parent around. He went on business trips all the time, but my mom was always home.

At the time, my dad was training for his first marathon. He would take us down to bike along a trail the ran next to the Delaware & Raritan Canal. He took us all over the state training for this marathon. We loved biking, and he got to get his miles in. That day we biked all the way to Frenchtown, 20 miles from where we started. We ate ice cream before we headed home. It was a fine day, but I had this overwhelming sense of melancholy I couldn’t comprehend at the age of 6.

On the ride back, my sister swerved her bike in front of mine. I stopped short and went flying over my handlebars. For some people, time during a crisis goes into slow motion and they’re able to process every millisecond. I am someone who in a crisis, essentially blacks out. I didn’t see myself do a flip, I didn’t feel the jab of the handlebar into my gut, I didn’t think about the terror of if I had swerved and gone off the path over a cliff into the canal. I just landed.

I thought about the accident long after I walked my bike back to the car. What if I had gone into the canal? Would I have died? It was a very fall far, and I was wearing a helmet, but how deep was the water? How strong was the current? Was my dad even nearby to have been able to get to me in time? Would anybody have saved me? All questions I didn't need to answer, but still questions I asked myself. Where were my parents going to be if I needed saving?

A perfectly circular bruise appeared on my stomach from my handlebar. My mom arrived home that evening and I was eager to show her the only mark I had from my close encounter with death. The bigger story of the day was about my dad dropping his cellphone on the path, and a kind stranger calling my mom (still in Indiana) who then called my sister to get the phone back to my dad.