

Open the Door for the Cat

March 23, 2009. It feels like any other Monday. I'm tired and groggy, and can feel myself getting sick, so I choose a comfortable outfit: jeans and a big hoodie. I know I'm not sick enough to get out of school, but I can probably get out of it tomorrow. Today's just another day. Just a normal Monday. I go into my parents' bedroom to retrieve my cell phone. Because I could otherwise be up all night texting evil males, I have to plug my phone in in my parents' bedroom every night before bed. I walk in. Dad's still in bed; I look him in the eyes but say nothing. I'll see him after school like any other Monday. It's cold outside. Mom drives me to school like any other day, and I start going through the motions. First period: English with Ms. Przechacki. Second period: health with Mrs. Groeger, interrupted by music class with Mr. Kelly. I walk to music with my friends, feeling in no way particular. I hardly sit down in my chair across the room from the door when the principal, Mr. Zuckerman pokes his head in the doorway and looks right at me. I'm a good kid. I'm perfect, even, not a spot on my record. He asks to see me, and being in middle school, all the kids do their "Oooooohs" assuming I'm in trouble.

I walk out into the hallway and Mr. Zuckerman tells me to walk with him. He says, "It seems as though you are going to be excused from classes for the rest of the day." Without even asking myself why, I reply, "Awesome!" he responds with a defensive, "Hey!" like any TV principal trying to be funny would. Then it hits me. Something has to be wrong. As we approach the main lobby of the school I see my sister, Cassidy, and Mr. Buschman, a neighbor and family friend. I

barely hear Mr. Zuckerman say the words, “Unfortunately there’s been an accident..” before I am taking in my sister and feeling my face fill with tears. I don’t even know what has happened yet. I don’t remember asking, she just tells me, “It’s dad.” Mr. Buschman escorts us out to his car, and starts driving towards the hospital. Cassidy tries to explain what happened through gasps for air, choking back tears. She was at home, as her private high school was on spring break. Dad went out to get his coffee then he collapsed in the driveway. Cassidy only knew something was happening when she heard a man outside saying, “Sir are you okay?”

We arrive at the hospital and are pushed into a tiny room where my mom and Kari, my oldest sister are already on their knees crying and praying. Kass and I joined them and Mr. Buschman waits outside. In my head I’m concerned, but not worried. I had done this whole thing before- the crying, the praying, expecting the worst, but knowing he’s going to be okay. He’s had a near death experience before, and he was fine then. He’s fine now. I laugh at God, thinking surely he is not about to take my father away from me. People have heart attacks all the time. Then they’re fine. They’re always fine. It’s 2009 people don’t just have heart attacks and die when they’re 46 years old. He runs marathons. He likes his Wendy’s as much as the next guy, but he’s also the man who put 10-year-old me on the Atkins Diet. He is not dying from a heart attack at 46.

We have been in this room maybe 15 minutes when a doctor, presumably from *General Hospital* walks in, white coat and all. It was so predictable, cheesy even, how he says, “I’m sorry it seems we’ve done all we can do.” It doesn’t even hit me, until I think they might have to sedate my mother. She grabs the man by his lapels and yells, “No! Did you cut him open?! Did you cut him

open?! Cut him open! There's more you can do!" The doctor I think says, "Unfortunately we cannot do that." I sit down in awe. What is happening? He's gone? He just *died*?

We are allowed to go in and see him. He looks awful, tubes all through his face. His nose had broken from the fall. I have goosebumps up and down my skin. Surely this cadaver is not my father. This is bullshit.

We go back into our little prayer room to start making phone calls. My brother, Zack is in West Virginia, I think just hanging out at this point, no longer actually enrolled in college. Someone must have called him to tell him he should come home, because when we call him again, he is on the road. Whoever thinks it would be a good idea to have Cassidy call him is wrong. She's the most timid of all of us, but she gets him on the phone and says, "Zack you should pull over." He's livid. "What the fuck is going on? I'm not pulling over just tell me what's happening!" She screams, "Zack pull over!" In her mousy, angry voice. She tells him the news and he explodes.

"Shut the fuck up Cassidy!"

"He's dead, Zack! He died!"

"Stop fucking with me, Cassidy! That's fucking bullshit! Shut the fuck up!"

We stay in that tiny room as long as we can. Friends arrive and soon it seems half the church is there with us. Mr. Buschman, at one point gets me alone to tell me, "You know, this is gonna be hard, but I just want you to keep eating. Don't let your sadness cause other problems, just keep eating." I am bewildered. Keep eating? That's your grand advice for my situation? Keep eating?

I just respond, “Yeah, I’ll do that,” or something to assure him the death of my father would not instill anorexia in me. Marie Buschman has been texting me from school. “What’s going on? Is everything okay?” I finally respond, and just tell her “My dad died.” she said “Are you serious?” and I’m like, “Yes I’m fucking serious” maybe not that profane, but I’m mildly offended that she doesn’t believe me, but I did tell her in a text message, after all, and she was my best friend. I’m not really thinking clearly. I hadn’t eaten.

The youth pastor, Jeremy and his wife Stephanie meet us at the hospital and drive me home. We stop at McDonald’s. They are firm believers that fries make everything better. They do make things a little better, for the moment.

That night I sleep with my mother. We go to bed late, after we spend the day sitting at our neighbor’s house for hours, just trying to get the world to stop spinning. We lie in bed, and I fall in and out of sleep. At one point I just wake up and lose it, crying my eyes out trying not to wake my mom, but unable to keep quiet. She wraps her arms around me, and just says, “I know. Kam, you have to try to sleep. You have to or we’ll never get through tomorrow.” She strokes my arm until I can breathe again and I fall back asleep. Every time I hear the house creak, I think it’s my Dad coming home—a feeling that takes years to stop.

The days that follow are somber. We plan the funeral, hold the viewing, and try to get back to normal, I guess. My favorite part, I think is when the church held dinner for us before the viewing, and my neighbor, Pat Cash, came over to me with an uncomfortable smile. He hugs me

and says, “Hey... how ya doing?” like my father didn’t just die. He doesn’t know what to say.

No one knows what to say. I laugh with him, and say, “As good as I can.”

Afterword: Dad Today

It’s funny. I thought these wounds were all healed. I’ve written about this over and over again. It’s the same story every time. We cried and we cried and it made me a better person. Did it? It made me stronger, I think. Half a decade of this hole in my life. How can you forget a father? Not even a dead-beat dad, a good one. One who thought the world of you, and loved you. Who was always there? How can you think about memories and have to ask yourself “Where was dad?” because it’s hard to imagine what life was like with him, because now all you remember is life without him. Why do you have to call a dead cell phone just to hear him say his name because you forget what his voice was like? Why does he look like a stranger in pictures when you’ve known him your whole life? Would you even recognize him if you saw him again? I guess so. Because I see him in dreams all the time. He’s there. He’s really really there, commenting on your nose ring and shaking his head at the messes you’ve made. Don’t even start with that. What would I be if he never died? Who would I have become? Would I be at this school? Would I have had the same friends? How much did he affect who I am when he was alive? Who is this man? How is it that when people ask “What would your dad say?” You can’t answer because you honestly don’t even feel like you knew him. 12 years. Take out infancy, and that’s still 7 years I knew him. 7 years of memories that now have this fuzzy picture of a man who was definitely there, but why can’t I picture him? I remember the last thing he said to me: Open the door for the cat. Open. The. Door. For. The. Cat. And what did I say? Get up and do it yourself. Get. Up. And. Do. It. Yourself. I thought I was funny. I thought I was hysterical. I looked him in the eyes that morning. I looked him square in the face and said nothing. *Nothing*. Even on a normal day I would have said something. Why was that morning different? Why did God not nudge me to say *something*? Anything? I looked him in the eyes and sighed. I sighed at him. And the next time I saw him he was dead. I had plenty to say then, and he couldn’t hear me. Those memories are crystal clear. They’re the ones I wish I could change. I could have said *something*.