

The long goodbye

Molly Rosen Guy turned to her dad whenever life got tough. Now, she's facing the hardest task, grieving his death, without him

On the last lucid afternoon of my dad's life, I sat at his bedside while he ate a Popsicle. It was the dead of winter. He'd recently received a stem cell transplant for a rare form of blood cancer called myelofibrosis, and his immune system was shot. I was scared, but also optimistic. In a few days, said the doctors, he'd be feeling better. Later, when the nurse stopped by to check vitals, Dad told him, 'I can see the light at the end of the tunnel.' I, of course, grasping for good news, thought he was referring to his healing process. It was only the next day, standing over his slack body as he'd just slid into a coma, that it occurred to me: he had been staring into the abyss of death.

A few months earlier, when it became clear that Dad would need a stem cell transplant, he left Chicago, where he lived with my mum, and moved to New York City (where both my sister and I live) to begin treatment. He slept in my 11-year-old niece's bedroom, and spent his days Ubering to and from the hospital for chemotherapy. I became his wingwoman. Accompanying him to doctor's appointments, emailing his friends back home, encouraging him to eat... it was the first time in my life that my dad needed taking care of, and I was hellbent on doing it well.

My dad, Robert, was the firstborn son of four – meticulous, a team sport player and a natural leader. I was the second-born daughter – sloppy, lazy, corner-cutting and fashion-obsessed. If our earlier relationship was a

film montage, you'd see a rebellious, ratty-haired teen in dirty jeans yelling swearwords at her straight-shooting, former Boy Scout, businessman father. But Dad always showed up for me, even at my worst. He taught me how to make a budget, a fire and pasta from scratch. When it was time for me to show up for him, at the age of 40, I did. 'You're my rock,' he said one Sunday afternoon after I sat with him in the ER for nine hours. People say the second you hold your baby, you become a mother. Maybe that principle also applies in reverse. You only really become a child when you're forced, as an adult, to take care of your parent – take care of them like your life depends on it – the way they once took care of you.

The beginning of my dad's diagnosis was fairly hopeful. 'Seventy per cent chance you'll survive and resume life as usual,' said the doctor. Up until recently, he played basketball and tennis several times a week. He was 6ft 6in, with a full head of black hair. He ran a non-profit foundation. He was deeply in love with my mum – his wife of 46 years. 'She's the most interesting woman I know,' he often said. And then the odds changed. Chemo wasn't working. 'Odds are one in five,' said the doctor. He died two months later.

The night Dad stopped breathing was one of the most peaceful of my life. After all the waiting, my body eased into the realisation it was over. I slept for eight hours. Outside, New York City was blanketed in snow. The weeks following were not peaceful. Grief is one violent motherfucker. Real sadness is not quiet, it is chaos. 'My heart is broken, I have to take it easy,' I told the teacher at Pilates when she asked if anyone had injuries. Mourning was a physical experience. Constantly heavy, swollen and sluggish, a roving pain moved throughout my back, neck and stomach at all times. I often walked

out of work events mid-conversation to weep in a bathroom. Thank God for my kids, who kept me functioning when I was at an all-time emotional low. Being a mum – and therefore required to make lunches, wipe butts and sing lullabies – was the reason I got out of bed each day.

I was also in the process of divorcing my husband. It was a sudden, hellish split, but despite the rancour that existed between us, we managed to behave kindly to one another (most of the time, anyway). My dad wouldn't have wanted it any other way. Sometimes, though, I snapped. Once, in the waiting room in the ICU, where I sat sobbing, my ex-husband placed his arm around my shoulder. 'Take your fucking hand off my back!' I screamed. 'Just because I'm sad does not mean I want you to touch me!' The connection I once had for him, no longer romantic, became almost sibling-like. Nothing was more important to my dad than family, and keeping my daughter's father around, despite my personal gripes with him, became a priority. My ex was the last person to hold Dad's hand before he slipped into unconsciousness, and for that I will for ever be grateful.

At my Dad's burial, unknown to me, my brother-in-law took a picture of me crouched over his grave while he was being lowered into the ground. That night, I posted it on my personal Instagram account @mollyrosenguy with an excerpt from the speech I'd read at the funeral.

The comments were so supportive I decided to post another excerpt the next day – along with a picture of me and Dad from my childhood. Then I decided to write a letter to him every day for 30 days. I am still going strong 199 days later. I've amassed a following of 11,000 people who write to me daily sharing their mourning

stories. We are called the #cluboflostdaughters. In Judaism, ancient mourning rituals include reciting the Kaddish prayer every day for a year, covering all the mirrors in your house, entering the temple through a separate gate and tying a black ribbon to your clothes. None of them felt right to me, but the daily remembrances do. The Club Of Lost Daughters community has become one of my temples. It's where I go to lessen the load.

Growing up, my dad mopped the floors and ironed our clothes for the week every Sunday. He was a licensed pilot. He was the first in his family to go to college. He could stuff a chicken or fix a clock or a car; he had tons of friends but loved being by himself. He was good with numbers, and he was a woodworker, a poet, a philosopher.

'MY DAD WAS WHO I CALLED WHEN I FELT UNMOORED'

I used to phone him when I had 10 minutes to spare to ask for his recipe for cabbage soup or granola, or just to 'chitchat' (his words). He was solid. A Taurus. He was who I called when I was feeling unmoored and needed to remember where my roots were. His ability to remain calm and present helped me through all my hard times. The irony of this whole grieving thing doesn't escape me: I need to mourn the death of my dad with my dad.

But everything is different now. My world has a before and after: Before Dad Died and After Dad Died. I have little patience for people who don't get that. Before I go to sleep, I say a prayer to be clear-headed so that Dad will come to me in my dreams. His death has turned me into an amateur clairvoyant; some days I think he comes to me through signs like pennies and butterflies but other days the floor drops out and the truth hits me and it hurts so bad: he is never coming back.

Six months ago, my dad took his last breath due to complications from a stem cell transplant and now he is gone for ever. I can't talk to him, hug him, laugh with him – and I never will again. There is no light at the end of that tunnel, and that's where I've landed for now. Walking alone in the dark, staring at the stars.

Molly Rosen Guy is founder of Stone Fox Bride and author of *Love, Lust And Wedding Planning For The Wild At Heart*. Follow @mollyrosenguy

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT MYELOFIBROSIS, CHECK OUT THE MPN RESEARCH FOUNDATION (MPNRESEARCHFOUNDATION.ORG), WHICH WAS FOUNDED BY ROBERT ROSEN

