

Tom Loliós -
Charlie [unclear]
Ken Demary -
Jessica Ryan
Nathan Tyson
ST [unclear]

JESSICA RYAN

TASK: Write a funny, touching narrative series for Medium that explores the business side of death and how it affects the grieving process.

TARGET: NO LIMIT

DEATH FOR DUMMIES • CHAPTER 2

When the nurses told us it was time—time to say anything to Dad we hadn’t said because there wasn’t going to be another chance—I couldn’t make anything come out of my mouth.

That’s not just a turn of a phrase, by the way. We’re talking full on refusal of service by the old brain to lips expressway. Now, this is kind of mind blowing because my mouth and I have a pretty solid relationship, if you know what I’m saying. If you don’t, let’s put it this way: I’m what they call a “talker”. I have something to say for every occasion and I’m always good for a quippy sound bite.

With an impending deadline like death, it’s not a great time to be abandoned by your greatest personality strength/flip, right?

...



Not my best look. I think I did the snotty-chic thing for the better part of six months.

Anyway, as I stood there, crying and stammering and snorting (in no particular order), something pretty extraordinary happened. My younger brother, who always let me do the talking when we were kids, stepped up and knew exactly what to say:

Dad, we don't need to say
anything because we've always
told you everything.
We love you

CON'T

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That's an incredible thing to be able to speak at the end of someone's life. No unfinished business. No regrets. No words left unspoken. In fact, it has just occurred to me as I'm writing—to be able to say that may be one of my proudest moments.

But here's the thing: I realized yesterday that there was something that I didn't say, and I found myself feeling regret over it.

I really, really wish I could go back in time and apologize to Dad for making fun of his electric letter opener.

. . .



The offending tool. Of all the things I could regret in my relationship with Dad, this stupid thing is it. Unbelievable.

I know this sounds ridiculous, and you're probably thinking I made it up for the punchline, but I swear to you it's true. Between the lawyers, and the court, and the banks, and the bills I have NEVER had so much freaking mail in my life, and that stupid thing makes my world a little better every time I use it. Yesterday as I was sifting through mail, I caught myself wishing I could apologize to Dad. I gave him a lot of shit over his refusal to open mail with his bare hands. I totally get it now.

Weird thing to have as your only regret. Really weird.

. . .

So, what's up with this random sidebar of a story? Well, aside from the fact that this actually happened to me yesterday and I've been thinking about it, I was surprised to find out there's really not much on the very first To-Do List of this whole adventure. Based on a calendar of events, I know that the bottom part of the page was written much later. But on the day my Dad died, June 18th, 2013, apparently all I wrote were the names of three of his best friends that I wasn't in touch with.



For the record, Dad's friends were awesome about the whole thing (as I knew they would be) and I think this is the appropriate time to also point out that they were freaking bad-asses in the 70's. This is them (Dad is sitting) looking suspiciously like Crosby Stills and Nash plus one outside a cabin in Minnesota.

As I mentioned previously, everything happened so fast I wasn't able to tell anyone outside of our family what was happening before it was all over. I remember being worried that those friends of Dads might be mad at me for not telling them in time to see him before he passed.

And that leads me to PRO TIP #3:

Don't worry about other people. Worry about yourself. Friends and family will get it. And if they don't? Don't spend time worrying about that either. We have permission to do the best we can in these situations.

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At any rate, since that's everything on the first List, I'll just take a quick step back to those last few moments with Dad. If you'll bear with me, that will complete the backstory portion of this series and we can get to the fun stuff, like safety deposit boxes and credit reports and mortgages. Because I know you can't wait.

. . .

In those last few hours, I think Dad was on 100% oxygen with a Pulse Ox of something like 76. To give you some context, I understand that you're usually at 95–100 when you're getting enough oxygen to be healthy and mid 80's starts to get scary. His tumor took up his entire lung, and the doctors said he was essentially breathing through a pinhole.

He'd fought through the last three days, cracking jokes and asking questions about his medicine, discussing his options with me. But at some point around 10pm the night before he died, lack of oxygen got the best of him and his brain checked out. We spent the night at his side, while his body fought on instinct.

The next morning the nurses informed me that it would be my great honor to have to decide to take the oxygen off, because apparently Dad's body didn't get the memo that it was time to throw in the towel. They assured me that he had not been conscious for some time and that they would make it painless for him with their nurse-y wizardry.

You know that Andy Daly show on Comedy Central, Review, where he reviews everyday experiences? Here's my take on being the one to decide to pull the plug:



As with Andy, I'll accept that you have to give the experience something, so 1/2 star it is, with the only upside being there is no upside so I have no confusion about my feelings on the matter.

. . .

Anyway, having to actually say 'take him off oxygen' pretty much wrecked me. I just couldn't shake the feeling of sentencing someone to death, even though I knew in my logical mind that was completely ridiculous. So I decided to opt out of being in the room when Dad died. I just felt like I'd probably hit my capacity to handle, well, anything at that point. And I had to go on living, so I figured I'd treat myself to not having that image to contend with for the rest of my life.

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Haha.

Jess thinks she's in control.

Ha. Ha.

. . .

Sure enough, my aunt came out into the hall seconds later.



And my first thought, of course, was:



This is a man who was DEFINITELY not conscious, who should have been dead hours ago, according to the nurses. And he grabbed my brothers hand after they took the oxygen off? In my mind, I begrudgingly shuffled into the hospital room, giving the nurses big time side eyes as I took my place beside the man I had essentially killed based on apparently faulty information.

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But the truth of the matter is, it was just one of those weird, unexplainable things. I went in. It was messy (see ‘snotting all over everything’, above). And I’ll be damned, he grabbed my hand.

Oh, and as if I wasn’t already being forced into watching my father die in front of me, he looked straight into my brother and I’s eyes until the second before he died, when he looked behind us at what I really, really hope was my Mom, waiting for him.

As per usual, my master plan of false self protection was foiled. But I’ll tell you what, regrets don’t make an appearance in this story either. I’m really glad it happened the way it happened.

. . .

So, that just leaves the stupid electric letter opener. I incessantly heckled a man who, turns out, was much wiser than me when it came to the ways of opening mail. And I regret not understanding in time to apologize. He was right. I’ll use that damn thing til the day I die.

But if that’s the worst of it? Not bad, not bad at all. I think I can live with that.