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STAFF

## Death from a distance

One of my favorite things to do growing up was to visit my grandfather's farm.

Driving down the gravel road toward his old farmhouse, I'd look out the side window of our 2008 Honda Odyssey, gazing at the creek that ran alongside the driveway.

As I slid open the van door our labrador retriever, Kaleah, would push her way out onto the concrete driveway, her untrimmed toenails clinking against the slick pavement with anxious anticipation. She knew there was a creek nearby and she wasn't willing to wait a second longer to get her paws wet.

I remember sitting with my grandfather on the covered porch in the icy, dead night, trembling at the thought of the local mountain lions making their way down the mountain toward the house. We would sit outside by the fire, telling scary stories and making s'mores. It was nice to be there with him.

When I was 12 years old, my grandfather was diagnosed with dementia. A couple of years later, he lost all of his memories, including those of me and his farm. He fought back but to no avail. Dementia took over and he lost absolutely everything.

For the next few years, he lived in a nursing home. Alongside my mother, I'd visit quite frequently. I witnessed the start of his downfall.

Then, I moved to San Francisco and stopped visiting. I left him behind, along with my pets and everything I ever knew. I had physically moved away, but emotionally I was still attached to Virginia.

One day during my senior year of high school I was walking into my 4th period class and felt my phone vibrating. My mother was calling. She had news that I had long been anticipating: My dog Kaleah was dying. She had been suffering from tracheal paralysis, and at 7 p.m. the veterinarians would be coming over to put her down.

Despite my anticipation, the news hit me like a trainwreck. I grew up with Kaleah by my side; losing her felt as though a piece of my heart had been ripped out. My mom offered to FaceTime me as Kaleah was put down, but I declined. If I couldn't be there in person I didn't want to witness it at all.

Later that day I was at work, filing papers. I let out an exasperated sigh as I watched the clock hit 7 p.m. I held it together; I didn't want to cause a scene. All I could think about was the sharp stab of the euthanasia solution Kaleah must be feeling as it punctured her bare skin. The dark imagery was on repeat, playing itself over again, and again and again.

She was gone, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Later that night, I walked up to Twin Peaks and let out the emotions that had been bubbling up deep inside of me all day. I needed a moment alone. Kaleah's death affected me more than I'd expected it to. I wanted to be with my family but I was 3,000 miles away.

A couple of weeks ago I had a parallel moment. My phone began vibrating. It was a FaceTime call from my mother. I picked it up and was immediately hit with unnerving news: My grandfather was nearing the end of his battle with dementia. She had called so I could say goodbye.

“You haven’t seen him in forever so this might be a bit shocking for you,” she warned.

As she turned the camera toward him, I was met with an image that has been stuck in my mind ever since. He looked emaciated, almost unrecognizable. I was taken aback, trying to find the right thing to say. But I couldn’t. I said goodbye, hung up the phone and cried. I just cried.

A couple of days later, I boarded a flight back to Virginia. The distance was making my grandfather’s passing so much harder for both me and my family to deal with, so I broke it. I just wanted to be with them.

Physical separation can make coping with death even more difficult of a process. When you are conscious of someone’s last waking moments, whether it be a person or a pet, you become suffocated by the distance, not to mention the crippling guilt that comes along with it. You begin to question yourself and your actions: Should I be with them? Am I too late? Do they know that I love them? I just wish I had shown my love when they were still around.

Earlier today, my family and I visited my grandfather’s old farm for closure. Sitting next to the creek, we reminisced over the good times we spent there long ago. We came prepared with painted rocks to toss into the creek with our final goodbyes.

Ten years earlier, I was standing on the same soil, walking toward my mother with her wedding ring as my grandfather watched from the crowd that stood around us. Ten years earlier, my grandfather remembered my name. Ten years earlier, this was home.

It's a different kind of feeling to stand on ground that was once yours but now belongs to someone else. I could feel bittersweet memories shattering my peace of mind. This farm was once my sweet escape, but it now feels like an old friend that has changed so much to the point that they're unrecognizable.

I tossed my dark green rock into the crystal-clear water, finally complete with the words I had been looking for in his last moments: "Papa, I miss you. Thank you for caring about me."

*Ryder Mawby writes the Monday column on his transition from the East to West Coast. Contact him at [opinion@dailyca.org](mailto:opinion@dailyca.org). LAST UPDATED: November 30, 2020*