

Feeding Frenzy

Prepared for story-telling event Prose of Pie

It's Sunday, and I'm taking my kids for a nature walk. It's not because it's a beautiful summer day, though that's also true. It's a test. I've spent the last few days catatonic on the couch, trying to recover from the sudden death of my dad. Tomorrow, my husband's going back to work, and I have to be able to make lunches for my four and seven year old kids, drive them to camp, and basically do something other than watch Buffy the Vampire Slayer on Netflix. So I figured I'd drive the kids to Halsey Pond- it's close to our house, and it's an easy, flat walk. If I can do that, maybe I can manage.

Just a week earlier, the previous Monday, I'd gotten a Facebook message from my cousin Jill. My dad was in the hospital with a serious infection, she explained, and she and her mom had assumed my sister and I were in the loop. Then Jill realized from seeing our lighthearted vacation posts that my dad's wife Carol had never called us. On the phone, my aunt Pam said, "How far are you from Syracuse?" I said, "About five hours." She said, "You should go now." Pam's a nurse. I knew what she was saying. I made arrangements for the kids, threw some stuff in a suitcase, and went.

By the time I got to the hospital, my dad had been there for about 24 hours and was already on a ventilator. Carol kept talking about how he'd been fine just that morning. She and my dad got together right after he divorced my mom, when I was in my 20s, and she and I never developed much of a relationship. But Carol and I were polite and friendly when we did see each other. Why hadn't she called me?

Things were going downhill fast. He had meningitis and was septic. When Pam arrived from Boston, she asked the nurse a few quick questions and then said, "So what you're saying is, he's not gonna make it through this." The nurse reluctantly nodded. Pam wanted me to understand. She said, "Look, Katie, his hands are already cold." He flatlined at around midnight, six hours after I got there, and 12 hours after I found out he was sick via a facebook message. Carol jumped onto his body, keeping him all to herself even at the moment of his death.

My dad and I were really close. He was from Montana and grew up hunting and fly fishing. I grew up in upstate New York, and he used to take me fishing all the time. I'd look under rocks for crawdads and he'd let me pull in the fish after he hooked them. He and I were good buddies and so much alike.

The wake that Thursday was my first time having to stand in a funeral receiving line. The funeral director prepped us, saying "Don't spend too much time talking with any one person- keep the line moving so you don't get tired out." But Carol went on and on to each guest about how my dad was her soul mate and that she'd be lost without him; as she'd done when he was alive and since his death, she wanted to make sure everyone knew she was the most important person to him. While the Carol Show dragged on, I'd get stuck next to one of her relatives. "I never met your dad, but I heard he was a nice guy." "Well, thanks so much for coming, it means a lot." That's when they'd start busting out the religious stuff. "Your dad wouldn't want you to be sad. He's in Heaven now, looking over you." It really pissed

me off. He didn't believe in Heaven and neither do I. People like to fall back on these religious sayings, mostly for lack of knowing what else to say. But when you don't believe, it's like you're starving, and everyone around you is telling you there's an ice cream truck right outside the door. But you know it's not true, and you wish they'd shut up about it.

On the nature walk, I keep seeing my dad's cold yellow fingers, while struggling to be present with my kids. We get to the pond and I'm surprised to see a family there fishing; I never had before. They've got a cooler, grandma in a lawn chair, kids mucking around the edges of the water, it's great. They're fishing for carp with bread balls. But the turtles are used to people feeding them bread, and they start showing up in droves. Then the dad, a big guy, built like a linebacker, hooks a painted turtle. The hook is down its gullet pretty deep. I'm waiting for the guy to bring out pliers- you always bring pliers when you fish, to get the hooks out- but he doesn't have them. He's standing there holding the turtle but he's afraid of getting bit and he keeps jerking his hand away. Finally I say, "Let me try." The frightened turtle keeps drawing his head way down into his shell. There's a trickle of blood coming out the corner of his mouth. I say, "Hey there little guy, it's alright, I'm just trying to help you." I reach into the turtle's mouth, grab the hook, give it a little twist, and get it out. My kids help put the turtle back into the water, and it swims away. The dad's a bit sheepish, having been shown up by a little lady. I feel like the sheriff of the pond. "Y'all make sure you bring those pliers next time, y'hear?"

Me and the kids continue on our walk. I think to myself, "What are the chances that they'd be fishing today? And that in this area full of people afraid of critters, I'd be here just at the right time to save this one?" It feels like a sign. I wish I believed that my dad was up on a cloud somewhere giving everything I do a thumbs up or thumbs down. I just don't. But I realize that in a very real way, my dad is with me. My experiences with him shaped me, and I carry that inside me wherever I go. It's not as good as believing in that ice cream truck. But it's enough.