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On Love and Grief

The line kept moving in the El Paso funeral parlor. Each family member approached the front and left, a mixture of grief and finality etched into their faces. Their silent cries confirmed what we knew (and what we feared). Abuelito, my mom's dad and my grandpa, really had died from a sudden heart attack and lay in that wooden box. Little by little, my family — my mom, Dad, Yazmine, and myself — approached him, bracing for the moment we never wanted and never expected. Tears welled up in my eyes as I backed up into my dad. I didn't know if I had the heart to say goodbye to Abuelito.

We left Southwestern in quite a hurry. Elena and I needed to drive back to my hometown near Dallas to watch my sister Yazmine play her last soccer game of the season. At the time, none of us knew Yaz would play her last high school game there, but no one really knows when the "last time" for anything happens.

Elena, the more time-aware in our relationship, kept glancing at the clock on the microwave, announcing as they chipped at their nails that we were running five minutes late. Still packing my duffel bag, I responded with a chuckle, "You know that clock is ten minutes ahead, right? So technically, we are five minutes early. Right on time." This would've been true except when I actually checked the microwave, I realized Elena already accounted for my microwave trick. We were, in fact, five minutes behind.

A relatively quiet three hours later, we arrived in HEB, Hurst-Euless-Bedford — three towns growing into one mini city with a series of suburbs, apartments, and restaurants nestled between Dallas and Fort Worth. Pulling up to the field, we saw the soccer players donning their respective red and blue uniforms, chasing each other and the soccer ball back and forth across the turf.

I couldn't see my parents or Yaz from this distance, just small blurs in different team colors. My mom, as usual, didn't pick up her phone when I called for her to meet us at the gate. My mom, a school employee, could get us into the game for free.

"She's probably recording the game," I quickly explained as we continued our search for the entrance.

Passing by familiar faces of highschool students and soccer parents, I kept noticing a series of conscious decisions to avoid eye contact. You know the kind: the determined "I'm-looking-forward-to-avoid-conversation-and-not-get-noticed" staring off into the distance, the same kind we used as we speed-walked past a table of Army recruiters at school. There's no way it's because they're embarrassed to say hi to me, right?

I try my dad, pointing Elena in the direction of the bathroom when they ask. He picks up quickly, as usual. Normally, his tone alternates from caring dad to determined military officer depending on the situation and how late we are to a function. This time, there's a certain...strain to his voice, almost like he tried ever so carefully to pick his words. "Stay where you are," he said, "You're mom and I are coming."

Exiting the concession stand bathroom, Elena clocked my furrowed brows. "Everything alright?" Their pitch rose in concern.

"Yeah, nothing's wrong. Dad's coming to let us in." We didn't go in.

Reflecting on that moment now, I realize the rest of the night becomes a semi-blur. At some points I remember exactly what happened with painful clarity, but not now as I write this. Other times, there are just feelings with no images attached to them. Both times, I remember my slight step back after my dad broke the news, my heartbroken mother in tow. Then there was the sudden urge to run that filled my veins followed by my dad slowly reaching for me, asking me to stay. Yaz, on the other hand, burst into a sprint after hearing the news. I'll never forget how her face contorted, mixed pain and disbelief. I followed the last order I heard: I ran after her.

Yazmine, the fastest and most athletic in the family, ran a short distance while I jogged shortly behind, giving her enough room to process the information and following closely enough to not lose her. Eventually, exhaustion took over, and she slowed to a stop out of public view. Yaz hates crying in public. She stumbled forward and dry-heaved. A series of sharp exhales pierced the night air before she knelt to the ground where I met her. Then came the questions.

“What happened?!”

“I don't know.”

“How'd he die?!”

“No one told me yet.”

“Are you sure it was him?”

“That's what I've heard.”

Each of her cries were met with a quiet response. What words are there for a grieving grandson to comfort a grieving granddaughter?

It used to be that Abuelito was always there to help us. Regardless of the day or time, he would always come over and offer a lending hand. Whenever something went wrong, from mundane overflowing toilets to more serious car crashes, Abuelito always had a solution and a calming presence.

My first true memory of Abuelito occurred shortly after a car accident in El Paso.

When I was about 10 years old, my sister and I took karate classes. The reasoning feels lost in time, but I imagine it had something to do with “discipline” or something similar. At this point, my parents were divorced, so the staple food in our household was pizza. On our way home from karate, with the pizza box in my lap, a car sideswiped us at an intersection. The driver had taken a red light.

We found ourselves wedged between a car and a pole after the collision. We were all fine, but what the accident lacked in danger it made up for with dramatics. Smoke filled the air and clouded my mom’s vision. I sat in the passenger seat stunned. The pizza splattered onto the floor. Yazmine was crying in the backseat.

My mom kept commanding us to get out. To her, smoke meant the engine could be on fire, and she did not want her kids to be trapped if the car exploded. Only afterwards did she find out the steering wheel airbag caused the smoke, not anything explosive under the hood.

Eventually, we got out with the help of strangers, and my mom called Abuelito for help. The minute he arrived, everything started feeling better. Clad in his standard attire, shorts and a shirt proudly proclaiming him a Puerto Rican, he helped my mom calm down and take a breather.

“Don’t worry, Mari. Don’t worry.” For the night, “don’t worry” became a mantra as he helped my mom, frazzled and still in mild pain, talk to the tow-truck people. Upon hearing of the

tragic loss of our dinner, he bought us pizza without hesitation, refusing to take my mom's money. He even let us spend the night with him, doing his old Yogi and Boo Boo impressions on the way home to distract us and make us laugh until we were tired enough to sleep.

What Abuelito did feels like a small action now, but it sealed his role in my mind. He was no longer just a grandfather. He was a provider. He was a comforter. He brought joy and laughter into a terrifying situation. He inspired me to copy some of his traits, though I don't think I can ever be the jokester he was. When the world turned upside down, he made it right again through laughter and jokes and peace. He was there, and everything felt better. And almost every time we thanked him for his help, regardless of the situation, he always replied with a similar response: "Well, shucks, of course! You guys let me know if you need anything, ok? I'll always be here." I never quite imagined that it was a promise he couldn't keep.

Driving in the desert on the way to El Paso, through the "Middle of Nowhere" part of Texas, grants one a lot of time to think and reflect. The problem was I didn't want to think or reflect. I wanted to sit in the back of my dad's truck and stare outside in a daze, watching the sand whip back and forth with each incoming command of the wind. I wanted to forget. El Paso reminded me of the past and brought up memories of my recently departed grandfather, my abuelito. I'd much rather sleep than dream in a waking nightmare.

On May 23, a little over a week after Abuelito passed, the family pulled into the funeral home's parking lot and filed into the beige building as the clouds began to darken. I saw familiar faces as I began to recognize family members from my Titi Crystal's wedding a couple years back. Weddings and funerals, I suppose.

Abuelito had one rule for his funeral, and he would tell everyone he met: “I don’t want no one wearing black at my funeral. Be happy. I’ve gone with the Lord. I’ll be playing the saxophone and practicing to beat Chispi in our next race. Don’t worry about me.”

“Chispi” was the nickname for my Titi Crystal. She ran marathons as a hobby, and Abuelito did not. But, he knew the joke would hopefully keep things light at his vigil, and he was mostly right as Titi Crystal joked about their future race through a saddened smile.

The family followed his last request, adding a Puerto Rican flair to honor his legacy as a proud Puerto Riqueño. The guys wore white Guayaberas, a loose shirt worn in Puerto Rico and Cuba, with dress slacks and a fedora. Abuelito loved wearing fedoras and owned almost a dozen. The women wore light-colored dresses, ranging from white to a light pink. All of us had Puerto Rican jewelry and/or Puerto Rican face masks. All of us agreed the best way to honor him was to wear, at the very least, a Puerto Rican bracelet, a Puerto Rican face mask (he had five unopened bags in his possession), or a Puerto Rican pin (he bought nearly twenty to support a charity sending money to help Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria). We all had Puerto Rican blood running through our veins, and we all displayed our heritage proudly.

Even today, I still wear the necklace and bracelet he handed down to me. The bracelet (he had five or seven identical ones) has mini Puerto Rican flags lined around it. The necklace has one Puerto Rican flag the size of a dog tag with red, blue, and white beads on a string. They provide comfort and peace whenever I’m upset, and I’ve found myself doubling back to put them on before leaving the house. I feel incomplete without them. And a part of me worries about breaking or losing them, almost like they’re sacred artifacts from a time lost long ago.

The front of the room had Abuelito's casket with a picture of him smiling directly to its right. Above on the wall, two projector screens played a slide show. His image scrolled across the screen. His smile appeared and disappeared within seconds. A lifetime, 68 years, was compressed into an hour long slideshow. 68 years. He was cheated out of at least 12 more years. A picture of Abuelito at my graduation passed. *He'll miss Yazmine's high school graduation*, I thought. I glanced at Yaz. Her tears told me she thought the same thing.

Finally, after taking in the room, we approached the casket. Almost immediately, I saw one of his fedoras as it rested on his stomach. The sudden realization of what happened last week hit me like a sucker punch to the gut. The shock, the pain, the memories rushed through my mind, a whirlpool of thoughts and images. I braced myself against my dad as we inched forward. *Can I actually do this?* I wondered. *I already know he's in there. Is there a point in confirming what I already know?* Regardless, I knew I had to see him for myself and confront this harsh reality. I knew I would regret not seeing him one last time. I knew I would regret not saying goodbye for the last time. I knew I would regret not letting him know how much I loved him.

Yaz and I approached the casket, my parents following closely behind in case we needed support. Almost immediately after seeing his rigid body, I cried and took a step towards the door. I didn't want people to see me cry. I wanted my grief to be private.

Then I looked around.

The room was filled with people crying, people staring silently at the pictures passing on the screens, people grieving. All of us grieved for a dad, for a brother, for an uncle, and for a grandfather. We all grieved without worrying about how our grief looked.

After the initial crowd around the casket dissipated, I walked towards Abuelito again. He looked so peaceful, possibly even sleeping if I imagined hard enough. I adjusted his fedora,

making sure he looked perfect with it. I gently kissed his forehead, just like he'd done to me before. In that moment, I realized my own universal truth, a comforting thought in the middle of the turmoil: grief and pain is an equal but opposite reaction to loving someone after they've died. In a non-mathematical way, the pain I felt (the pain we as a family felt) was a testament to how greatly Abuelito and I loved each other and a testament to how greatly he will be missed.

Author's Note

Writing about my abuelito's funeral was my first real idea for this article, but I almost immediately shot it down. I didn't want to write another article about my abuelito. In the last semester alone I wrote two papers about him and the funeral, and I didn't want to use his funeral or his death as a creative crutch for a grade. I despised the idea of continuing to write about him.

It's been over two months, but the last semester felt like a year. I thought I should be "over it" by now and try to move on to writing a different topic. But idea after idea, false start after false start, I realized that I wouldn't be able to write about anyone or anything other than him. How could I? He continues to occupy so much of my mind. I even started wearing Puerto Rican jewelry to honor him and his memory.

I've already written two papers about the funeral for two classes in the spring semester: one over the gendered dynamics between my mom and her siblings, and the other just an emotionally raw poem describing my grief. I hadn't actually written about his funeral or about him. My other papers merely grazed the true topic in a "touch-and-go" encounter. Elena, my partner, encouraged me to write this article. They reminded me of the grandparents they've lost (three before their freshman year of high school) and how they continue to think about them and write about them. With this article, I am recording his memory. And although I doubt this will be the last time I write about him, I feel more at peace choosing this topic and confronting my buried memories instead of running away.

I feel most in my element when I'm crafting scenes and imbuing them with emotions. Joy, pain, grief — I want my readers to feel it all. I want them to laugh when I laugh, smile when I smile, and cry when I cry. Through my readers, I want to feel emotions. That's not a typo. I

want to create so much emotion that I feel my readers' emotions. Through my words and scenes, I want readers to experience stories and confront emotions.

And a side note to future students: trust your gut and your writing style. It may take time to learn how to trust your gut and cultivate a writing style, but it is beyond worth it.