

The following was an “autobiography excerpt” assignment from one of my many Journalism classes:

The feel of my grandma's paper-like skin can still be felt in my hands years after her passing. For far too long I lived a life too fast for anyone to catch up and at times too distant for someone like me to completely understand. That was just how life was for a kid that grew up in the town I did, so small you'd miss it if you blinked, and yet so backward in its views and thinking that you probably wish you had. But my grandparents called this place "home," and I learned to make do with what I had . . . that is until I came to terms with the word "loss."

Awkward, confused and seemingly challenged when it came to social settings, I was the "weird kid with a smiling problem.” It's true, I was probably too nice for my own good, especially in a town that found those traits among men odd and out of place when brute force and vulgarities would do just fine to get what you wanted. Overly sensitive and a knack for wearing my heart on my sleeve, I was a child often misunderstood and shunned by the children in the schoolyard, forced as an outcast before ever getting a real chance.

Day after day I'd run back home, finding solace in the understanding and love my mother showered me with. But even then, I was never at ease. Caring and good-natured, my parents expected great things from my sister and I, and even though they never realized it, the stress alone from trying to please others can wear on a person. My mother had stayed in the small, sleepy town of Palacios for her entire life, from childhood to her high school graduation to where she currently resides . . . and for all intents and purposes, that's all she has really known. My father, on the other hand, had a tough upbringing, dealing with the abuse his aunt dealt him, the apathy his mother shot him, and the loneliness his father's absence gave him. Dropping out of school in the 8th grade, he enlisted in the army, serving time in Germany and other areas before finally coming back to the states, marrying my mother, and trying to make ends meet as a carpenter/painter. They expected us to achieve where most had failed in our town; to work hard for opportunities they never had.

My grandparent's home was a labor of love; the blood, sweat, and tears they shed to make sure their family was content and secure was evident immediately to anyone that knew them. They were the backbone of the family: strong, independent, and the true definition of hard work. And yet, they were also the voices of reason, embracing diversity and respecting other lifestyles when the rest of the town remained content with its racist and close-minded attitude. They would give the clothes off their back if you needed it, not hesitating in the slightest.

I learned a lot from them, gaining strength and confidence to fight against the grain, become independent, and truly make something of myself. During my years in high school I did a complete 180, building my communication skills, overworking myself more than ever to escape the pains of reality, finding talents I never knew I had in acting, writing, music, and many others. Although I still had several low self-esteem issues, I pushed myself to succeed in whatever I did; remaining humble and embracing the old Dustin I once was; the weird kid who smiled way too much. Walking the hallways of my high school never felt better as I was a changed man, taking up challenges, fighting for what I believed in, and not letting anyone bring me down. I finally learned to embrace the term "weird," because I wasn't like anyone else, and I was damn proud of that fact. "If only the children in the schoolyard could see me now," I thought . . . and to my surprise, they already had been.

I lived a fast-paced life, working, studying, joining as many organizations as I could, applying for college, and making sure I walked away from everything with success in my hands. It became an obsession, taking me away from the ones I held dear and never allowing me the chance to just stop for

a while and smell the roses. An insomnia-driven workaholic, and I never realized what I had until it was gone.

By this time my mother had been working her hands to the bone as a custodian at a local elementary school and taking care of my now bed-ridden grandmother, who had been diagnosed with bone cancer. The severity of the situation didn't dawn on me until it was too late. She laid there seemingly lifeless on her bed, breathing sporadically. I visited her when I could, but never gave her the attention I once did in my earlier years. Besides, I had a state-wide music audition the next day; I'd be able to visit her later that evening, right? That thought would come to send chills through me even to this day.

Driving back home in the dark from the audition, an eerie feeling of grief and loneliness hit me out of nowhere, and it was only when I heard the answering machine from both my parents' and grandparents' phones did I know that things had taken a turn for the absolute worse. I walked into my grandparents' humble home, now reduced to a place of mourning and loss. I saw the sad eyes of my grandfather across the room, who said bluntly and to-the-point "She died." Those words pierced my heart, and it was only downhill from there.

I stared out to a sea of faces, all looking at me in a depressed state of disbelief, letting my voice carry throughout the chambers of the Catholic church that I often questioned rather than found comfort in. But I put those discomforts aside; this was my grandmother's day, and I intended to do what she would have wanted: to hear me read a passage from the Bible, something that would always make her proud when the compliments poured in about her "talented grandson with the reading skills." I suppose the residents of that sleepy, coastal town always had a penchant for the dramatics.

There is an old saying that when it comes to an elderly couple, when one passes, the other simply just "fades away." I refused to believe that, and yet, exactly three months later, my grandfather started complaining of pains in his chest. We took him to the hospital, but I already knew the diagnosis. Beyond all his ailments and discomforts, it was really a broken heart that would come to claim his life. He died on the same exact day and time just three months later without any warning. It came as a surprise to many of my relatives, but I always liked to think that my grandmother was calling him, telling him that it was time to meet her somewhere better than this wretched place that lacked any sort of decent human being. The backbone of my family, the strength it had, crumbled in a short matter of time, and there were only a few of us left to remain strong and carry on with the lives we led, it was what they would have wanted.

A sea of faces. The echoing chambers of the Catholic church. I stood there once again with a strange sense of *déjà vu*, knowing this had all been done before, and yet the same people in attendance stared back me, most likely wondering the same things they continually asked me: How was I holding up? What about my family, were they doing alright? I really couldn't answer those questions because there was no honest, clear-cut answer. No one tells you how to move on with your life, and there surely aren't any textbooks on the best way to pick up the pieces and continue on with whatever you have left. I remember the lack of tears I had at both funeral services, wondering what the hell was wrong with me and trying to come to terms with what was happening. The small amount of family I had left disbanded, leaving me with my father, mother, sister, and little else to bear the grief with.

Harder I worked. More often than not I tried to forget and move on. But to forget is to erase completely from your life, so I learned to cherish the memories while still charging ahead through my senior year of high school, looking to get out of this hypocritical town in the hopes of something better.

There was no amount of time to spend with anyone, I was a man on a mission, and I intended to succeed by any means necessary. I wanted to make the ones I cared about proud, but at the same time I suppose I pushed everyone farther away in retrospect. I found out not even four months after my grandfather's funeral that my mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer, and it was then that I realized I needed to slow down and understand exactly where I was going with my life.

My mother had come back from a check-up with the local doctor, her eyes stained red and mascara running down, outlining what she tried hard to hide. Stronger than anyone I had known, she took up after my grandparents, and it showed as she continued on as if nothing had happened. I would take the occasional day off from school so that I could drive her to the monthly chemotherapy appointments that were scheduled. And yet, the final realization came to me when I saw my mother laid out in a hospital bed, tubing and wires connected every which way, and still in high spirits, that I knew I was not going to make the same mistakes again. I needed to slow down, I needed to enjoy the precious moments I had with anyone that gave me a chance, I needed to become a human being again rather than the robot I programmed myself to be.

All I can be is thankful for everything that has happened to me, both good and bad. I took on challenges, I began to write and communicate more, and I made my fair share of mistakes. And yet, even with all that in the past, I'm still learning as I go, sometimes resorting back to my robotic ways of overworking myself, and not stopping to smell those beautiful roses I've heard so much about. I falter, I stumble, and I get hurt, sometimes more often than not. Sure, I could mention all the other things that I have went through, both good and bad, the successes, the tragedies, the hardships of life. But at the end of the day it is what you take away from those experiences rather than the sounds of sympathy so many people crave from others. It is a divine right for sure, but one that is not exercised for the right reasons sadly.

There are times when I reach for my phone, dialing my grandparents' home, only to realize what I still find hard accepting. And there are times when I simply can't shake the feeling of my grandmother's paper-like skin and all the memories that rush back . . . mainly because I don't want to forget something so beautiful. I call my parents more, and take opportunities to talk with my sister, friends, and even strangers. I've finally learned to be a human being, content with my flaws, accepting the things I can not change, courage to change the things I can, while having the wisdom to know the difference. Who would have thought that the weird kid with the goofy smile had finally found a little more comfort in his own skin? I never would have, but that's the beauty of life I suppose: you learn as you grow.