

Superman

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My dad was Superman. Sure, he was a 6 foot and 2 inch, bald, beer-bellied FedEx driver, but nonetheless — Martin was Superman. He was always home early and always helped my sister and me with our homework. He wasn't perfect. He smoked and drank and had a gruff voice that matched his goatee. He often got us into trouble, but to my family, he was Superman.

My dad woke up at 4 a.m., got ready for work, and left to do deliveries around five. He was off work by noon, and when I got home, he was napping in his chair, legs propped up on the ottoman. He was everything to us, a short-order cook, a reader, a coach, a husband, a father. His gruff voice got me kicked out of an after-school program once, but that's okay. I got to ride in the front seat of his Saturn with him for the first time afterwards.

My dad was Superman. If I ever had a nightmare, I could always run to his room and sleep between him and Mom in their queen-sized bed. And I often did this because I found comfort between them.

One night, while I was with them, my dad woke up past midnight. Yet it wasn't four, and he wasn't leaving for work. He woke up clutching his chest, trying to be quiet. He was Superman. He couldn't get hurt.

He was Superman. He was clutching at his chest, wheezing, panicking. While Mom was calling emergency services, she asked me to help him get downstairs.

I dragged him past Sam's room. At nine-years-old I wasn't even up to his shoulders, so it was a struggle to help him down the stairs. I made it to the kitchen counter-top where we rarely ate, and I couldn't help him anymore. I tried and tried but I couldn't. I wasn't able to hold him up. He slipped out of my arms and crashed into the corner of the counter. I failed.

The paramedics put Dad on a stretcher and rolled him out to the ambulance. Sam and Mom were crying as the ambulance rushed to the hospital.

We all hurried into Mom's new Sonata and chased after them, going 80 in a 50, streaking down the highway.

The pain of not knowing what was wrong, not knowing how long it might take, and how much it might cost, made it a long night. We spent Saturday at the hospital, heading home well after sunset. On Sunday, we were called at 3 a.m., the doctors telling us he was getting worse.

The doctors told us that he had to be moved. His health was deteriorating. I overheard something about kidney

failure, arterial clogging, lung complications. He would be flown out the next day in a helicopter to Piedmont Orthopedic Hospital.

The thudding of the chopper was drowned out by panic as we followed him to the next hospital, watching as he was being carried away once again.

The worst part was that my dad didn't look like himself. All the fluids, drugs, and everything else made him look bloated, like an infected zombie from a video game. He was discolored. His weathered skin was various hues of red, yellow, orange, and blue, colors unnatural to his tanned complexion.

I remember spending the next night there at the hospital, somehow ending up watching episodes of "1000 Ways To Die," including one about how a boss locked his employee in a freezer, and how one woman's heart exploded after drinking an unhealthy amount of caffeine. It terrified me — I ran into another room to find cartoons playing in the early morning, just like when Dad woke me up on Mondays to watch TV.

The people who tried talking to me and consoling me faded. The visitors in the waiting room, the doctors by the bedside, the words they said, all of it faded into the background. The diagnosis, the wishes, the I'm sorrys never caught my attention. They couldn't be talking to me. My dad was Superman. The hugs and tears and apologies, they didn't stick — unlike the feeling of the cold

hospital, or the unsettling bright lights of the hospital, never knowing if it's day or night.

Family and friends. Sam's softball coaches and Dad's coworkers - people close to us visited. I don't remember their names, and I can't recall their faces. I sunk into a shell. Even though I was surrounded by people who cared, it felt as if I only had books for company.

I never said goodbye, never said I love you one last time. I was stuck in denial that this could ever happen to us. To me. My life wasn't supposed to be a sob story, it wasn't supposed to be an untouched subject that made people uncomfortable on holidays, that estranged me from my friends. I was supposed to be a normal kid.

I never said goodbye, and I will regret that. I talked to my mom about her regrets, how she never made him go to the doctor, how she never made him stop smoking, or never spoke up about his pain.

But we never really knew that Superman could get hurt.

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