

Erin Hensley
Letting Go

I was born after 42 hours of putting my mother through excruciating pain. When I was finally brought into this world, I was put straight into my father's arms, and he laughed and said, "It's a little girl!" Then I was put into a tub of warm water, and I was the prettiest baby anyone had ever seen. I know this because every year on my birthday my mother takes it upon herself to tell this to everyone. I guess it's a right she's earned.

My childhood was happy and normal. Well, at least I thought it was normal. I grew up where I still live, on a farm with cows and tobacco and cornfields in front of my house for miles, and the woods right off my back porch. Through the trees, you can see, not twenty yards away, the Nolichucky River.

My father was a pilot. Not a commercial pilot, but a private pilot, a flight instructor, an airplane mechanic, whose passion was small airplanes that were about to fall apart but he could resuscitate into new life. The thing I remember most about my childhood is the smell of my father, some combination of Speed Stick, newly mown grass, iced tea, and engine grease. His hands were huge and strong, and he would squeeze me so tightly I could barely breathe and call me his "Leetle Bambina". He would take me flying in our Piper Cub, and sometimes he would try to scare me by stalling the engine or dipping way over to one side, but I was never scared. I knew my daddy wouldn't let me get hurt. He used to say, "You know what? No matter how big you get, you'll always be my little girl."

My mother was the best mother anyone could imagine. When I was little, she would read stories, or make them up for us, and we would go into the woods or the cornfields and play Treasure Island or Robin Hood or Little House on the Prairie. She would play the piano for me and I would sing Gershwin and Cole Porter and Loesser. In our living room, I was Annie Oakley, I was Eliza Dolittle, and I starred in massive productions, as my mother played through every song in "The Greatest Broadway Hits of all Time". When I finished, my father would always tell me that there was nothing in the world he loved more than to hear me sing. He was sure that I was a musical genius, talented beyond my years, and no one could convince him otherwise.

Thanksgiving of my freshman year in high school, everything changed. My father's left side began to tingle during dinner. A week later, he was diagnosed as having a tumor on the right side of his brain.

He held on for three years and four months. The last seven months of his life were spent in a hospital bed in his bedroom. My father, who had once scooped me up in his arms and spun me around in the air, couldn't walk anymore. I had to learn to give him his insulin shots, how to change his clothes, how to feed him, how to bathe him, how to calm him down when he was frightened of death, or of the things that the drugs made him see. The whole time I just kept thinking that this wasn't supposed to be happening to me. I was in high school. I was a princess! I spent hours staring at him, holding his hand, and begging God to stop being so cruel and make my daddy better. It isn't funny, I told him. I'm sick of this. I've learned my lesson, I know that we're not immortal, OK??? So joke's over! Make him better, dammit! MAKE HIM BETTER!!!!

At nights, I would sit up with Daddy for hours, until I fell asleep curled up in an armchair. Sometimes he would wake up and call my name and I would tell him not to worry, that everything was OK and that I was there, and he would ask me to pray for him. "What do you want me to pray for, Daddy?" "For death. I'm ready to let go." Then I would tell him to hold on, that he would make it that everything was going to be okay.

Then one night, I told him he could let go. It was late February, and he had developed pneumonia. His skin hung on his body in folds, and his face sagged on the left side when he smiled, which wasn't often. When he coughed, it shook his entire body, the body that used to be so strong. I sat by his side, held his hand and said to him, "Daddy, when you're ready, you just let go. Go on. I know you love me and that you don't want to go, but if you feel like you're ready, just go. We'll be okay, daddy." He heard what he needed to hear.

Daddy let go on a Saturday night at 11:30. It was early March, and the whole family was there, four generations. I was curled up next to my daddy on the hospital bed. I could feel his breathing, ragged and uneven. I counted the seconds between his breaths. First I was counting to ten. Then twelve. Fifteen minutes later, I counted to seventy-four. My uncle told me to stop, that it was over. I held onto him until his body turned cold and they told me to let go and the men in black suits came from Jeffers Mortuary to take him away from me. When I woke up the morning, everything was gone. They had moved out the hospital bed, and it was like the past three years hadn't happened at all. I wandered into the living room in the clothes I had been wearing since the morning before. The room was full of people, people I had never seen before. I needed a shower. I needed to be away from these people. So I left. I drove aimlessly, for four hours, all over the county, trying not to think or feel or cry.

When I came home, everyone who didn't belong there had left. My brother poured me a glass of orange juice, and after a moment of thought, added vodka to it. I went onto the back porch with the drink and my brothers, downed it, and started to cry. I cried until I couldn't cry anymore, and I was just sobbing without tears. My daddy was gone. He would never see his grandchildren, he wouldn't be there to see me cross the stage at my high school graduation or walk me down the aisle at my wedding. He would never put me to bed ever again, and I would never be able to come home from school crying because Traci Sommers had decided that she wasn't my best friend anymore because I didn't have Malibu Fun Barbie and have him make me a milkshake and hold me in his big lap until I calmed down. Then he would tell me that Traci Sommers was an idiot. It was true. She was.

When I went to school, everyone treated me like I was made of glass, like at the slightest provocation, I would break into a thousand little pieces. Maybe they were right.

My father's memorial service was a blur. I remember standing for two and a half hours in a receiving line, not knowing the faces of any of the people who told me what a great man my father was. I kept repeating "Yes, he was," with a wistful kind of "I'm being strong" smile on my face when all I really wanted to do was sit down on the floor and throw a temper tantrum. But I couldn't. I was a big girl. Senior in high school. "I'm going to Clemson in the fall." Couldn't think of anything else to say.

The burial was the next morning. It was cold, and the sky was covered with a layer of wet grey clouds. The wind blew, and I choked back tears as I sang "How Can I Keep from Singing," one of Daddy's favorites.

As the minister poured my father's ashes into the ground, a miracle occurred. The sun came out, beaming down on our sad party, making us all look up at it, squinting. If I ever knew for sure that there was a God, it was then.

After the service, we went back to my house where there was the traditional Southern funeral comfort: covered dish. As we consumed the most fattening foods known to man, we began to talk about Daddy. We began to share stories of things he had done, ways that he had changed us. And as we talked, we began to laugh. We began to live. We began to realize that we would never be the same, but that this wonderful man had made us all better people.

At my graduation, two months later, my friend Brad, who was sitting in the row behind me, reached up and touched my shoulder. "Your Daddy is proud of you right now," he said. And I smiled. Yes, he was proud of me. Because I'm his little girl and no matter how big I get, I always will be.

I miss my father. Sometimes I feel like I should have died right there with him, like maybe if that had happened, I wouldn't be hurting so much. Maybe. Sometimes I cry for hours just because I don't have anyone to give a "Clemson Dad" coffee mug to. He's here though, in most ways. And he loves us.