

Abigail Hindhede

Professor Decker

English 101

17 September 2022

### Three Hugs

Waking up to the sun shining through my window, I could hear the birds singing to me. Growing up, they never failed to wish me a good morning. We lived right on the Rock River, the end of our back yard turning into a marsh, where bugs would surprise you and wildlife would scatter at the sounds of our footsteps. I remember my father keeping bird feeders, beautiful, intricate bird feeders that made tinkling sounds in the wind and attracted all kinds of birds to our backyard. He taught me all their names and their calls, so I could recognize which of my winged friends were singing to me. My favorite chore was helping my dad refill the bird feeders; he would always lift me up to pour the birdseed into the bright red funnel at the top. I remember feeling as though I was on top of the world when he did this. Breeze flowing through my hair and tickling my neck, smelling the fresh flowers, seeing through the trees, I felt as though the world was mine for the taking. One day, it was time to refill the feeders and I ran over to my father expecting to get the thrill of him lifting me up into the sky once more, but he couldn't do it. His strong hands grasping me under my arms, he tried with all his might, but let go and clutched his lower back. "I need to go sit down," he said to me. I was left outside wondering what had changed, and if I would ever get to share the chore, I so loved, with him again. This was my first experience with my father's age and ailing health but not the last. The ailing health of my father not only helped me come to terms with my own mortality but also taught me to appreciate moments as they happen and not after they have become a memory.

From a young age, my greatest fear was always death. For most children, sharks, spiders, and snakes consume their mind and fill their nightmares. What kept me up at night was the question most of us still ponder, “What will happen after I am gone? Where will my loved ones and I go?” These fears emerged after I realized my father, the man who was supposed to protect me and never falter, was slowly changing. He became softer and more fragile. There was no more playing outside or running into his arms. One day, he decided to come to my school as a volunteer reader. I did not realize my father was different until I first introduced him to my classmates. His first time coming to read to my class was second grade. I remember the feeling of excitement knowing that my dad would be here in the afternoon. In elementary school, that is like your two separate worlds colliding in the most wonderful way. I remember being so overjoyed to show my teacher and friends the person I loved most in the world. I wanted them to love him just like I did. When he came, it went the exact opposite of how I dreamed it would go. As my dad walked in, the classroom went quiet as we waited for the teacher to introduce our guest reader. I remember beaming as I waited for her to announce that “Abi’s dad is here to read to us today.” Instead, she said, “Abi’s grandfather.” My face dropped, and I loudly corrected her, wondering how she could have made that mistake. My father went through the reading and after he left, I asked my classmates what they thought. All they had to say was, “He looks old” the meaner boys going so far as to call him, “On his death-bed”. As they said this, I felt my cheeks get hot and eyes start to sting. I left crying that day. Looking back, it was not as big of deal as I made it out to be, but at seven years old, it broke my heart seeing the man I loved received in such a way. I am ashamed of this, but after that day I asked him not to come again. I did not want to face the teasing that stemmed from my father’s differences.

This started the three-hug rule. Unfortunately, the “death bed” comment stuck with me and from that point forward I had a crippling fear of my father passing away. From ages seven to ten anytime he or I would leave the house without one another, I would give him three long hugs. I treated each goodbye as if it was the last time I would get to speak to my dad. Anytime he left, I would get my three hugs and sob as he left the door – heart shattering sobs, ones that left you dizzy and with a sharp pain in your chest. My former fear of death slowly morphed into fear of my father dying. I no longer cared what happened after I died; I was more focused on making sure my father stayed with me. Reflecting upon this now, I realize this must have been detrimental to my father as well. While we have not had a conversation about this phase since its passing, I can recognize that no one wants to make their child feel that way over elements they cannot control. In addition to that, no matter how accepting of the fact you are, no one wants constant reminders of their own mortality. Being quite young at the time, I was never able to see my fear from my father’s perspective. He was probably just as fearful as I was about his aging and projecting that upon his young daughter was never his goal. I sometimes wonder, if he could go back in time if he would choose to have a child at his age; knowing the fear caused by it even if it was completely out of his control.

I witnessed my father’s first surgery at the beginning of sixth grade. He was getting a knee replacement, which is an easy surgery with a very low mortality rate. I prepared for weeks, trying to get a grip on my emotions and reminding myself that I was too old to be crying over a minor surgery. My mother made arrangements for me to sleep at one of her friend’s house that night. They had daughters around my age, and she thought it would be a good distraction for me. They took me to the park and out for ice-cream. I remember them carefully dancing around the subject, ignoring the elephant in the room. I spent as long as I could holding

back my painful tears and fighting the impending sense of doom I couldn't shake. Unfortunately, as soon as we arrived back at their house for the night, I broke down. The same sobs from the three-hug phase washed over me once again and I found myself lying on their tile, drowning in the fear and sadness that once consumed me. I vividly remember my mother's friend looking down at me and saying, "Why are you crying, we took you out for ice-cream. You should be happy, there is nothing to worry over." While I now understand that she was trying to console me, it sent me spiraling once more and begging her to call my mom to pick me up. Of course, the surgery went perfectly, and my dad returned home a few days later. I avoided my dad as much as possible during recovery. I still feel guilt for it, but seeing him in bed, debilitated from the pain, hurt much more than ignoring the issue.

My father went through four more surgeries by the time I was a senior. By this point, I had grown accustomed to his recovery and the impending sense of doom had shrunk to a pinch of dread. This was until the beginning of senior year; I came home from school ready to tell my dad about my day and complain. When I walked in the door, I knew something was wrong. My dad was not in his usual chair and our family dog was pawing to be let inside from our backyard. I let our dog in and called for my dad once more. Hoping he was napping; I went into his bedroom to find him on the floor. I tried my best to pick him up, but it was no use, I called my mom in a panic and begged her to hurry home and help. I missed work that day. Staring up at the ceiling, watching my fan make circles over me, my childhood fear crept back into me and I contemplated how much time I had left with him. He made a full recovery, but because of this I declined my dream university's offer and chose to go to my local community college. I wanted to make the most of the seemingly limited time I had left with my favorite person.

The summer before this school year started, my father got spinal fusion surgery. Beforehand, he was in immense pain, and it had worn on every aspect of my families' lives. Over the past year, it seemed as if my dad had aged five. Once he had made it through the most difficult part of recovery, my father gained his life back. He regained his humor, his happiness, and his mobility. Nothing brought me more joy than watching him get up from his chair to give me a hug or walking around the house unassisted. I finally felt as though I had my father back and the overwhelming worry of spending as much time with him as possible faded once more. I spoke to my dad on the subject of mortality. I asked him if he feared his final days and if he felt as though his life was meaningful. He told me that he was also scared of death at my age. He explained that as you accomplish things, that fear slowly fades. He told me how proud he was of his beautiful family, that he feels lucky to have experienced a career he loved, and that he loves his life even more as the days pass. As our conversation finished, he told me something I will never forget, "It is important to live in and enjoy the moments as they happen, worrying over your future won't change the present. Enjoy today and deal with tomorrow as it comes." As I am finding my bearings in newfound adult hood, I put effort into carrying my father's wise words with me – reminding myself to stay in the slow lane and enjoy life as it passes.