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Forgive Me

Brenda Hernandez
Loyola Marymount University

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My days in the Dominican Republic have been wonderful but my dad is constantly on my mind. It is a free day and the class is spending the day at a beautiful beach. The water is a beautiful crystal blue and cold to alleviate the sun's heat hitting our skin. The director of the program and I are talking about how beautiful everything is. I share with her that I feel guilty for being here and not with my father who is in the hospital. "I'm sure he wants you to experience this," she tells me. "Yeah he does. He told me that not coming wasn't an option. We agreed that when I got back we'll go somewhere as a family. His birthday is coming up in August. He told me that 'Life's too short'."

I pray that he is okay and that he will be back home and healthy. My nights are difficult and I can't seem to fall asleep no matter how tired I am. He is on my mind. *I shouldn't be here. I should be at home. With him. By his side. I kept replaying our good bye:* "Mija te cuidas y diviértete. No te preocupes por mí. Yo voy a estar bien. Love you mi princess." *Take care of yourself. Don't worry for me. I will be fine.* My dad lies in a hospital bed. His bad eating habits have caught up to him and he needs heart surgery. He had such a worried facial expression as he says bye to me. I'll only be gone ten days, we remind each other. I say my goodbye, "Love you Pa," and caress his soft and smooth hair that has gone white. I hug him and I give him a kiss on his forehead. I have to catch my flight and he has to go into surgery.

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The morning of May 25, 2015

My host mother has prepared breakfast and she urges me to sit down and eat. I quickly get dressed and go to the dining room only to find the program coordinators waiting. *Am I in trouble?* I'm told to sit down.

"Brenda I am sorry to tell you that your dad passed away last night."

I have never felt my heart break the way it did that morning. And the pain I felt when I called my mom after hearing the news—her pain, her cry—it was indescribable. I could hear it in her voice with every word she spoke over the phone and there was nothing I could do in that moment. I needed to get home.

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Now, I could tell you how my relationship with my dad was rainbows and butterflies—but it wasn't. My dad suffered from alcoholism. It caused a lot of problems in my family. My brothers could go months without speaking to him because of their anger, and so could I. Two years prior to his death, I hadn't talked with my father for almost a year. I felt so much anger and resentment. He

had chosen the drink over me and I couldn't bear looking at him. I would get home and completely ignore him.

* * *

April 2014

He was drinking again. He wasn't working because he was let go from his job once again. It was a Sunday night at around 10pm. I was stressed out preparing for my final exams, working late on the papers and assignments that would be due over the next couple of days. My mom had gone to bed; she worked at four in the morning. My dad had been outside in his car drinking, talking on the phone—that's what he would do when he drank.

He comes in drunk and slams the door behind him being loud and obnoxious. I am working on a paper in the dining room. He's hungry and looking for food in the kitchen, making it hard for me to concentrate. The anger begins to build. He doesn't care how he is hurting us all. My mom wakes up because of all the noise and before you know it they are arguing:

"Arturo, I'm going to call the police," my mom tells my dad.

He tries to snatch the phone from her hand and my brother pushes him back. My dad loses his balance and hits his head on a cabinet door. He faints and is unconscious. The police and ambulance arrive and take him to the hospital. *I am in a state of ambivalence at this point. Sadness. Anger. Disappointment. Rage.* My blood boils just thinking of him.

The next day he is released and walks through the front door as if nothing has happened. My mom tells him to leave and that he can no longer live in this same house as us.

"Paty adonde me voy?" *Where do I go? I have no other place to go.*

"No se Arturo, pero aquí no puedes vivir." *I don't know Arturo, but you cannot live here.*

I felt rage, but at the same time I felt pity. He would be homeless, living in his car for a few days. After this incident my grandmother had passed unfortunately, and my dad had to return to Mexico for her burial. He was torn. *I don't remember him being like this when his dad passed. My mom went with him even though she was upset.* "I have to go. As his wife it is my commitment to be by his side." My parents were gone for a few days. My mom had come back early and my dad stayed for a month or so.

* * *

May 2014

My oldest brother called home to let us know he picked up my dad from the airport and that my dad was on his way back home. I'll never forget my dad's face when he walked in. He needed his family, our love, and support. He was in a lot of pain. I felt sympathy yet I was still so angry with him. These instances were nothing new. He would drink, get aggressive, and him and my mom would fight; sometimes they would just yell and sometimes things were thrown and the police would pay a visit. But this time it was different because he had promised he wouldn't drink and he broke his promise to all of us. He'd made promises before but this time I had warned him that this was the last time and that we have all had enough.

He'd make scenes at family parties and would not be able to remember the embarrassment and frustration he'd caused the night before. There was an instance where we had visited family in Palmdale, a two-hour drive from home, and he refused to come home with us; he made a scene in front of everyone. He said we could leave and that he was going to stay and keep drinking. So we left him. Of course, the next day he was upset and said that he never said that. That's how it always was, really. Then we would all forget about it until it happened again. I think we forgot because it seemed easier that way. But eventually that caught up with all of us.

I think what hurt the most was that he chose to keep drinking instead of us. He wanted to numb his pain but he didn't know that he was numbing more than his pain but also deteriorating our relationship. *We were not worth it. I was not worth it.*

He walks in and puts his luggage next to the dining table. My brothers Daniel and Erik look at each other.

My mom tells my dad, "Arturo, no te acuerdas que ya no vives aquí?" *Don't you remember that you don't live here anymore?*

"Paty, adonde me voy? Se acaba de morir me madre" *Where do I go? My mother has just died.*

"No te acuerdas lo que asistes? Lo que pasamos por tu borrachera" *Don't you remember what you did? What we went through because of your drunkenness.*

My anger bursts and I start telling him how his negligence has broken this family. My brother Daniel, who at the time had already gone years without speaking to him after yet another drunk incident, tells me to stop talking to him. But I ignore him and I tell my dad, "Hablamos tu y yo solamente." *Let's talk just you and I.*

I'm not sure what came over me. I felt the need to talk to my dad— real conversation with him being sober. I told him how I felt. *You tell me to work hard in school so that I won't have to work hard like you and my mom, but you aren't*

letting me focus. I had a paper due and if I don't do well how can I get a good grade? You tell me that the doctor said that if you drink anymore you could go into a coma and never wake up. So you want to stop drinking now because it is beneficial for you not because of me or your family.

He looks at me with a face of astonishment. “Ya no eres una niña. Perdóname,” *You're not a little girl anymore. Forgive me,* he tells me.

And I did.

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I had to forgive him. He was the father God gave me. For some reason, things were meant to be this way. My dad was fighting his own demons. He would tell my mom how he couldn't control himself sometimes. His dad, my grandfather, would hit him when he was drunk when he was growing up. He had to work at six years old selling gum so that he could bring back money and help his family put food on the table. Those experiences marked his childhood and shaped him into the man he would later become. And I think he turned out well despite it all. Our relationship was an emotional rollercoaster, that's for sure, but I think that's what made it so beautiful; despite everything he had been through, everything he had put us through, he finally made the decision to change.

His last year on this earth he spent demonstrating commitment and true love for his family. He stopped drinking. His relationship with me began to flourish; something I always knew was there just hidden somewhere. He started working, and my parents finished paying off our house after 25 years. Every morning as I left for school he would make my coffee. He'd wake me up with, “Mija Ya esta listo tu cafecito” *Your coffee is ready.* It would be eight in the morning and he had already gone to the store and brought my “pan dulce” *sweet bread.* I would cry to him because I was so stressed sometimes and he would tell me with his eyes, “If I could take your pain away I would,” and reassure me not to worry because everything would work out. *Everything always did.* Regardless of our ups and downs, my dad was always my person. We were most alike—goofy and always getting in trouble by my mom for messing around too much when she wanted us to be serious. He would take me outside and watch me ride my bike and walk the dogs—anything to spend time with me. He was the one person who would always watch scary movies with me, only to let me regret it later when I couldn't sleep, and then crawl into bed with him. “No tengas miedo. Mientras que tengas tu papa todo esta bien.” *Don't be afraid. As long as you have your father everything is okay.* And he was right. Because now that his warmth is gone,

things don't seem okay.

His things are the way he left them. His car full of the memories when he would pick me up from school and be waiting outside after school so I wouldn't wait in the cold. I'd walk up to the car and see him sitting there reading the newspaper holding his glasses in his hand because he could only read by squinting and being five inches from the paper in front of him. He would look up and the first thing he would do is wave and ask how my day was. I would tell him it was okay and he would always respond with, "hechale ganas," *Don't give up and persevere*. After school he would say, "Se me antoja un cafecito" *I'm craving coffee*. So we would drive to McDonald's. I would get the ice cream cone. Per usual. Then we would eat it in the car before we got home so my mom wouldn't find out. It was like tradition. It was *our* secret. Although my older brother would find the evidence— wrappers and cups in his car. But he kept quiet for the most part. His car was this old pickup truck that struggled to even turn on sometimes. But he loved it. We would listen to my music or his. I sit in the dark remembering. In the driver's seat, I look over to the passenger seat where I would sit. His music playing through my earphones: "Si Dios me quita la vida antes que a ti, le voy a pedir ser el angel que cuide tus pasos." *If God takes my life away before you, I ask that he let me be the angel to guide your steps*. I look through his things. Pieces of paper where he would write prospective job numbers. The CD he left playing. His smell is stuck to the seats. His presence still lingers— my heavy heart to remind me that he was here and never left.

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"Princess, ya ha dormir!" *Princess, time to sleep*.

"Pa, ya estoy en mi cama" *Dad I'm already in bed*.

He gets my two favorite teddy bears. "Hola amigo como estas?" He makes his voice sound funny. He makes me laugh.

"Ya princess, es tiempo de dormir. Tienes que levantarte muy temprano." *Okay time to sleep. You have to wake up very early*.

He gives me a big long kiss on the cheek. His beard makes my face itchy but that's okay.

"Goodnight Pa."

He asks me, "Hasta donde me quieres?" *How much do you love me?*

"Cielo, suelo," *From the sky to the ground*.

"Goodnight mi princess. Love you tooooo much."

He turns off the lights.

