

Life After Death

I watch closely as his dry throat forces air through to his lungs to keep his heart beating. I wait impatiently between every breath, hoping that one more will follow, and one more after that. I am selfish because I want to watch him breathe for the rest of my life, but death is more selfish. I am determined not to let the cancer take my only father away from me, but the cancer is too stubborn. Each breath becomes shorter and farther apart from the last. I want to reach in and pull out my own breath to give to him. After all, he gave me life.

I desperately want to sustain his life, even for just one more minute, one more beat. I hold his hand in mine. This is the first time that I remember holding my father's hand in my own. I trace the old burn marks that remain on his hand, his scars of life. As I feel his scars, I glance over at my grandmother, who is sitting in the corner of the hospital room. Her eyes are on the floor, yet she is watching as her first-born son slowly dies. She has been here before. When my father was about twelve years old, he had been badly burned in a fire and had spent many weeks in the burn ward. There, too, she had sat and waited, watching for one more breath. One more sign of life. She knows that she has already had her second chance.

I turn my focus back to my pale father and to his weak hand that I have placed gently in my own. I try to

remember my father holding my hand as I learned to survive in this world. I picture myself as a young girl. I picture my father holding my hands as I learned to walk. I quickly discard this image because it is forced, fake, and there is no comfort to be found there. These memories have left me forever. I try to remember the last time I told my father that I loved him. Did I ever really tell him that I loved him? I slowly rub my thumb on the side of his hand. His hand tightens for a moment on mine. My grandmother notices this small sign of life and out of the corner of my eye, I can see her smile. It is now time to leave.

The next day I visit my father as I have for the past couple of weeks. I walk slowly into his room and sit quietly in the same chair that I had been in the day before. I am anxious to see him, even though he cannot see me. I am still excited about the movement of his hand from the day before. I hope that I underestimated the power of life. Perhaps he will be given another chance. Perhaps today he will open his eyes. Before I get too excited, I realize that I cannot get my hopes up and that another breath is all that I can hope for. I remember a month before, when he could talk. He had told me that the doctors had only given him a five percent chance of living. (This was before they had found that the cancer had also spread to his brain). I relive his words: "I will keep fighting for you and your brothers. I love you." I had said nothing. I sat on his bed, as he held me with one arm, and continued to stare at the floor. I wanted to say that I

loved him. I did love him, but like I said before, I am selfish. I did not want to cry.

I place my father's hand in my own exactly as I had done the day before. Only, unlike yesterday, his did not move. Instead, the weight of his hand pins my own hand against the cotton hospital sheets. I feel trapped, forced to listen to each painful breath. (*Breath . . . breath . . . breath*). After I have sat for about an hour, my mother comes into the room, followed by my dad's sister. They have come to relieve me. Although I do not want to leave his side, I figure that a nap will be in my best interest.

I rise from my chair, say a few words to my mother, and walk across the hall to rest in an empty room. Carefully, I climb into a bed similar to my father's, but this one is not a deathbed.

As I sleep my mother begins to notice that my father's breathing is becoming drastically worse. Nurses are brought in, but everyone knows that it is only a matter of time. My mother sits by her husband's bed, terrified. He is silent. "Do you see angels?" she asks.

I awake in the other room. My body sits straight up in the small bed and my eyes look directly at the clock. It reads six o'clock at night. I jump out of the bed and cross the hall to my father's room. There is something about that number, that time. I see my aunt standing in the doorway, with a tear falling from her eyes. I peer in at my father. (. *Breath*). This will be his last. My aunt turns and sees me standing there, and before I know it, she wraps her arms tightly around me and pushes me

out of the room, but she is too late. I have witnessed death, and it leaves me feeling cold and lonely. I wish that it was a physical object so that I could wrap my hands around it and take its breath, revenge for my father. After the nurses and my family have left the room, I return to the chair beside his bed. I reach over and hold his hand one last time. "I love you," I say, but it is too late.

Three years later, on a lonely Sunday night, I find myself pacing around the house, too tired to do anything, but not tired enough for sleep. I tiptoe over to the door to my daughter's room. Slowly I turn the doorknob and carefully step into the small room. The floor creaks beneath my bare feet. I freeze, expecting the baby to wake up and cry. Nothing. I tiptoe, more carefully this time, towards my daughter's crib. There my baby lies still, her favourite bear still snug in the tight grip of her tiny arms. I stare for a moment at my precious gift. Then I slowly reach over the railing of the crib and place my hand gently on her tiny chest. I wait. I feel my hand rise and fall with every breath. (*Breath . . . breath . . . breath*).

I remove my hand and place one finger in the palm of my baby's hand. I hold my hand still for a moment before rubbing my finger on the side of my baby's hand. Her grip tightens, trapping my finger. This time it is comforting. I remove my hand when I am completely reassured that my baby is safe and sound. "I love you," I say. Only this time it is not too late.