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## In the Quiet Place

Tina M. Higgins Wussow

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Yesterday, the Monday before Christmas, marks the beginning of my dad's dying week two years ago. I hardly experienced the events of these days, even though I was there for every moment of it. Technically, my mind, body, and spirit were only present for about 10 minutes. I fully entered my body after the hospice nurse came on Christmas day and said, *He only has a few hours*. The word *entered*, as in *I entered my body*, has a gentleness to it that I don't intend. More honestly, I should say I was slammed back into my body, forcefully & fully aware of what was happening for the first time since his diagnosis.

I held his face in my hands; he had been unconscious for well over 24 hours. I was not thinking anymore. I had a pure bodily response that was operating completely outside of my control. I yelled at my mother when she touched my back and asked if I heard what the nurse had said. There was a deep and visceral love for him and a hatred for language during those minutes. *Don't talk, I don't want to fucking talk*. She ran off crying, and I continued to look at his sleeping face and drown in the impossibility of that face ever leaving me.

It had been 11 months since my dad's terminal diagnosis of esophageal cancer, and he'd been given 12-15 months to live. Every week since the talk with his oncologist, I drove two hours to their house and spent the night and most of the next day with him. That Monday before Christmas didn't feel like a new or unique experience. I packed up my computer, grabbed my backpack with a few sleepover items, said goodbye to my husband, and drove south. It was just another week.

It's no wonder I was sick of words by the end of those six days. I had talked to family and old friends who came over to sit awkwardly near him and pretend he was not dying. I talked to the priest who my mom insisted we needed even though my dad had been denouncing his Catholic upbringing his entire adult life. She said his mother made her promise to give him his last rights. The priest had a dog in the car, and it was nice weather, sunny, and he already had enough coffee that day, thank you. I talked to my uncle who told me he wanted to hunt on the land I had recently bought, and I shook my head, the deer are safe with me, I told him. I talked while holding forks with my brother and my other uncle over the Keto pecan pie I made at my brother's request that was far too salty because the half tablespoon measurement looked a lot like a teaspoon. I talked with the hospice nurse and the young girl who came to clean my father's body and change his sheets behind a closed bedroom door. Blah, blah, fucking blah. We talked. And no one said it out loud, except my dad on day four.

He was still insisting on getting himself to the bathroom and he needed a lot of help to do so. My brother was holding him up on his feet and moving slowly from the bathroom back to his bed when my dad asked him, *Am I dying?* He was looking at all the people in his living room. No one dies alone in his family. They gather and sit and wait and talk and wait and talk. Together. It was his turn. So, he asked his son, *Am I dying?* And I hear his voice now sounding out those words and in those words hovers innocence and fear and disbelief. His son replied, *Yeah, that seems to be what's happening*. And our dad just said, *Bummer*, and kept dragging his feet across the carpet, and kept willing his body to be the body he had always known, and he scowled at us all sitting there pretending he wasn't dying, but only gathered because he was. What a convoluted game we play.

Images from those days come back to me in flash floods of anxiety, dull headaches, a tightening of the muscles between my shoulder blades, and sucker punches of grief. Last night I huddled in the corner of a theater while some of the most talented artists in Duluth performed a hilarious Christmas play and I cried because my dad wasn't there to see it, because he'd never been a part of something as beautiful as this life I am blessed with, that he never really knew me and what I love and he's gone now and for the rest of my life I will feel this emptiness.

But all of that was just thinking, and I can handle thinking. Thinking is my safe place. Somewhere in the mess of thoughts is an answer that is just waiting to be discovered and I love clean conclusions. Thinking is the easiest part of what happens in here.

While my mind held me safely just outside of the experience of my dad's dying time, the slammed-back-inside time was full immersion, akin to throwing a child into the deep end of the pool to teach her how to swim.

When I stepped through the doors of the funeral home nearly two weeks after he was gone, a few younger cousins were already there in that vast carpeted room with elegant couches in the center and tall fake plants in every corner. The cousins were crying, and my brain said, *I don't know what they're crying about. Nothing happened.*

All that day I talked and talked to my dad's neighbors, to an old friend of his who hadn't seen me since I was just knee high; to my aunt who wondered where one of the photos pasted down to one of four poster boards was taken; to an old family friend who used to slide down the stairs on pillows with us and who held my face and told me I'd grown into such a beautiful woman. I talked and I hosted and I smiled and I hugged and when the funeral director handed me a wooden box that held the ashes of my dad's body, I was struck by how heavy it was, but I was not allowed to enter my own body. I was not allowed to know, really know, that what I held was all that was left of him. I led the procession of people outside to the military salute while carrying him and wondered why I couldn't get myself to stop trembling. Why couldn't I stop shaking and why with every pop of the rifles did my body leap off the ground? And why were we even doing this? He hated every second of the fucking Marines.

Three days after the funeral, I collapsed on my bedroom floor. My dad had died. It was seventeen days later. I had just gotten the news.

Yesterday, when my husband picked me up to go to the play, I told him that I'd had a little meltdown in my office, that I just had to leave and I didn't understand at first, but later realized what day it was. It was the Monday before Christmas, the beginning of my dad's dying week. He told me he remembered me going through this last year, too. A vague recollection of discomfort came up. *Yes, I guess I did.* So, it's an annual thing. Like cicadas know when to emerge, so does this grief. It lives beyond thoughts and words and logic and certainly well beyond any plans I may have made for how I will use my time. Yesterday I was working in my office on campus, quite focused on getting all my grading done so I can shift my attention to other things for winter break. All was well. And then it wasn't. Suddenly I was anxious, achy, hungry, angry. Needless to say, my grading is still not finished.

In the two years since my dad died, I have made a practice of being very quiet. When I do speak, I try to speak the truth, to say the hard thing out loud and if I cannot muster the courage to say it to someone else, I always try to say it to myself. In the past two years I have tried, when I can, to be fully alive and I have found that my aliveness is most expansive in that quiet. The best part about the quiet is that my father waits for me there.

The ten minutes I spent with him as he lingered somewhere between this world and the other were the most rich in pure love I have ever lived. Those moments said to me with gentle reverence, *Be quiet* and *Just this, sweet girl. Just this.*

So now, I've decided, every year during this week for the rest of my fully alive life, I will plan for nothing other than to create an opening for the experiences I missed over those lost six days. I will let them enter my body, my heart, my quiet mind. I will not fight them or deny that they happened and that they are happening all over again.

Right now, if I allow it, I can hold his hand again and I can hear myself say, *Dad, you're so cold* and I can open the curtains and watch the light fall over his glistening forehead and notice how his skin has yellowed and his eyes are still alive beneath his closed lids and I can be there with him, for real this time. The full body feeling that my mind protected me from then is allowed passage now. When it comes, there is physical pain, yes; an ache, a tightness, a tremble. But there is also an iridescent lifting up and out of the chatter and it is life affirming. My life. His life. And the one we still share.