

Noun: Cercueil; le cercueil; coffin, casket

My father's death wasn't a long drawn out thing. It was an oh-shit-this-defibrillator-isn't-working, sorry-to-ruin-your-Valentine's-Day, kind of thing.

The last time I saw him was a Sunday in January of 2006. He was sitting on a kitchen stool, chewing at the ends of his yellow-white mustache, telling me about a wake he had been to the week before.

He said he found himself in a group of strangers who were eating Swedish meatballs, spurting canned condolences, and eyeing the clock to see if the socially appropriate threshold of mourning had been met so they could leave.

Nodding solemnly in unison with the group, he waited for the indulgent wave to land on him. When it did, he said, "Did you know the word coffin is French for the word *coffin*, which means coffin?"

The group looked back at him bewildered and he walked away because those idiots didn't appreciate comedy.

Poking at other people's discomfort was my father's sense of humor. I wasn't surprised by what he had said, or how his fellow funeral-goers responded. I listened to his story I cleaned up his bushy brows with a beard trimmer, a forced but welcomed act of daughterly duty given the many years of distance between us.

He rolled ice cubes around in his glass. I put the trimmer back in the case. It was a watch-Die-Hard-on-cable-with-commercial-breaks kind of day. Strained but unremarkable. Until a few weeks later when he was dead, and it became the last day we ever had.

When your father sends you a Valentine's Day card with a check in it, but it doesn't arrive until the day after he dies, do you cash it?

Asking for a friend.

On September 12, 2001, my new life would begin. I would board an American Airlines flight at Boston Logan and fly to San Francisco to start my first job as a marketing assistant. I

was a huge success. I was adulting at its finest. I was drunk, sitting on an air mattress in my mother's living room.

Impressed with my neatly folded stack of tank tops, I placed them in my suitcase. I was folding laundry like a grown up, or someone who worked at the Gap during summer break which I never did. My mother had freebased anxiety into my veins about building a resume with office-related experience. In her estimation this would ensure I'd not repeat the mistakes she had made, which included marrying my father in a funeral parlor using the flowers from the burial held the day before. Note: marrying my father was the error, not the flowers or the location.

Thanks to my flush resume, in thirty-three hours I would be on my way to California where it was shiny and warm, and people ate fish tacos. Tomorrow I would finish packing, say goodbye, and become the new me. The latte-drinking, drive with the windows down, California me. I fell asleep with my butt cheeks flat against the honey oak floor as the air mattress slowly deflated beneath me.

My mother's scream woke me. She led me and my hangover to her room, bawling about planes flying into the World Trade Center. We laid in her bed and watched in horror as the Towers fell. She cried and squeezed my hand and told me the world would never be the same for me as it had been for her.

I didn't go to California, and my mother didn't get a Christmas Tree that year.

When you offer to do the grocery shopping for a single working mother, it's easy to get cashback at the register with her debit card. Then you can go to the bar in her car and pretend you aren't smoking cigarettes. This is payment because you picked up the seltzer water and spaghetti sauce.

Another good financing option for a rapid descent into wasted youth includes dedicating a song to your friend Siobhan for her birthday at Thursday night karaoke so you can get free drinks because everyone's too drunk to remember it was her birthday last week too.

These foundational skills prepare you to obsess about boys who live in their parents' basements and look like Keanu Reeves and deliver frozen fish and treat you like crap and have a water bed.

These skills are required when your sensibly-conceived life plan implodes and no one is grading you and you have a pathological need for approval. Luckily, at the bar, no one

cares about your GPA or your 25 voicemails from worried friends you can't seem to call back, or the drop shot of Jägermeister and Red Bull you need to fall asleep.

In February, I decided to go to California anyway. Most of the world still believed in being grounded and terrorism-adjacent, but I was becoming a loser. I was not well, even though no one around me seemed to notice.

"You're not depressed, you're the happiest person I know," said my mother.

I sat on the kitchen floor with my back pressed against the hot oven. My little sister asked me to film her Blair Witch impression.

I used the last of my money to buy my plane ticket and tossed tangled balls of dirty laundry into my suitcase.

"Why do you have to leave me?" my little sister said.

"You just need to get a job," my mother said.

My older brother shrugged

The day before I left, my father came to drop off the child support and say goodbye. I sat on the stairs, and he stood in the doorway. He didn't come into our house anymore.

Years before, I had picked a side. It wasn't his. I hated him for things he'd done. Still, I invited him inside.

He declined.

He always said I was the most like him because we were both middle children. Unseen, overlooked, integral to the family function. The peacemaker. The caretaker. The mediator. I'd nod obligingly and internally rage at his obvious miscalculations about me.

That day, from the doorway, he spoke to me in a way I didn't recognize but would later understand as the way adults speak to other adults.

He said, "I see you Caity. Go get better. Then start your life."

The tightly wound threads of fear and shame knotted in my throat and gut loosened a fraction, and I could feel him seeing me, my raw ends. For the first time I saw him too.

The screw up, the failure, the daddy who never made me feel bad when he had to pick me up in the middle of the night from a sleepover because I had a panic attack. The disappointing husband, the mediocre traveling salesman in a car with no inspection

sticker who always made sure I had my favorite donut for breakfast when I woke on Sunday mornings. The broken guy who called my mother a lesbian and accused me of being “in on it all” in the weeks after he left home, but never made me feel guilty about choosing to spend time with my friends instead of with him.

I saw him. He saw me. And I realized he was a person, not just my dad.

When you are 15 and your parents get divorced, sometimes they are dreamy and distracted with their freedom or so broken they become an alien, and they leave you on your own. You get to paint your boundaries and build your barriers and write angsty poetry all over the basement bathroom walls. You can date the boy with the bleached pointy mohawk and eyebrow ring, and the baseball player with the Ford Probe and the twin with the cute brother and the too-old for you musician.

You make ramen noodles for your little sister whose bangs have grown past her nose. She kicks your shins because she has to share a full-size bed in Dad’s new apartment on Saturday nights while you stay home alone and listen to Tori Amos. And your Mom’s sleeping at her boyfriend’s house. And your brother is at college and never comes home. Ever.

When you are 26 and your father dies alone in his tiny apartment while you’re on a Valentine’s Day date, sometimes you aren’t prepared for the crash of your knees against the hardwood floor when your uncle’s voice cracks through the phone and says, “He’s gone.”

Then you will have bruises for weeks, but you are the lucky one because you are the middle child and so was he, and he saw your mushroom cloud when no one else did, so you started answering his calls a little sooner than the rest of your family.

If that happens, you may find yourself in the position of being the one who healed the most before time ran out. Then you might find yourself standing in front of a room of well-meaning head-waggers who are eating Swedish meatballs while your father lays with his eyes sewn-shut in a mahogany casket behind you. And you will tell a joke about how the word coffin is French for the word coffin which means coffin.

And no one will laugh. And it will be perfect.