



The Illy Espresso Can

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I WAKE UP TO THE FAMILIAR LUMP LODGED IN THE BACK OF MY throat. It metastasizes to my lungs, my belly, my limbs, until I'm pinned to the bed by the force of my own doubt. Doubt that I will ever amount to anything to anyone, doubt that I will ever feel better, doubt that it isn't already too late for me to reconcile my failures.

It's too early to be spiraling, I tell myself, blinking my eyes open to reveal a room cloaked in darkness. Once again, my mind outraced earth's rotation. I scan the space around me, my gaze catching on a glint of metal—the can sitting on my windowsill. It reminds me of what I need to do.

I drag myself out of bed and prepare for my daily ritual, my offering. I pour water in the electric gooseneck kettle and measure out twenty grams of coffee beans on my food scale. I dump my drug of choice into my dad's old burr grinder and bring out the ceramic pour over, Housing Works bookstore mug, and paper filter. I grind the beans on the medium-fine setting, my brain buzzing as I inhale the familiar scent. I empty the grounds into the filter, tare the scale, start the timer. I pour forty milliliters of water over the fertile bed of soil I've created, pausing to watch it bubble and bloom. Thirty seconds pass, and I continue to swirl a steady stream of water until the scale reads 300 milliliters.

I cup the mug with both hands, allowing it to warm my fingertips as I tiptoe back to bed. I slide the bottom half of my body back under the covers, sitting upright against my pillow. I sip the scalding liquid and sigh in relief. I stare once again at the Illy espresso can across from me, memories swirling up in the steam of my cup. I close my eyes.



I'm nine, standing in my childhood kitchen in Bernardsville, New Jersey, on a cold December evening.

"I saved this for you to open," my dad says, handing me the red and silver Illy cannister. Smiling, I unscrew the top and pull on the aluminum tab to break the seal, releasing the intense, earthy aroma captured inside. The scent washes over me in a wave of comfort, warmth, and aliveness. I watch as my dad loads the grounds into the tamp of his espresso machine, now humming as it heats up. Within minutes, a trickle of liquid streams into the tiny cup on a saucer. My dad mixes the crema-covered liquid with

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two sugars, takes the first sip, and lets out a relieved *ahhh*. I giggle at the noise, taking a sip of water followed by my own dramatic *ahhhhh*.



When my parents got divorced the summer before I started middle school, the giggling and the sighing and the smell of coffee brewing became rarer occurrences. Mornings at my mom’s house meant making my daily peanut butter and jelly sandwich in the quiet kitchen and hopping on the school bus before my mom emerged from her bedroom. I’d shut the door of the dark, empty house and return eight hours later to find the lights still off and no sounds or smells awaiting my arrival. My mom had never left her bed. With bated breath, I’d knock on her bedroom door and peer inside.

“I’m here,” she’d respond in a barely audible voice, “but I’m not feeling well.”

“What are we doing for dinner?” I’d ask, watching her body sink deeper into the covers.

“I couldn’t make it to the market,” she’d say, her words steeped in sadness—a sadness that meant she lost her appetite, her ability to complete daily tasks, and her own taste for coffee.

“I’m going to go to Dad’s,” I’d say after weighing the possibility of another night alone. My shoulders sagged with guilt, and my feet lifted purposefully as I shut the door and left the darkness behind.

Unlike any other divorced family I knew, my dad moved across the street from my mom and one house down on Fox Hollow Trail. “I want nothing more than to be close to you and Conor,” my dad reassured my brother and me as he broke the news. I sighed in relief. The neighbors whispered. My mom protested—albeit unsuccessfully.

By fifth grade I began my almost nightly trek across the street to spend time at my dad’s. On weekdays I sat at the living room table, books and papers scattered in front of me as I awaited his return from work. Just before the silence turned into loneliness, he’d walk in and exclaim excitedly, “Caleigh Deirdre! What a treat,” as he turned on his espresso machine. “What’s on the agenda for tonight?” he’d ask, pointing to the papers in front of me.

Weekend mornings at my dad’s meant walking down the stairs to find him measuring

out tablespoons of coffee beans, pouring them in the grinder, and starting his automatic drip coffee maker. I watched, mesmerized, as the droplets fell and collected in a pool at the bottom of the glass carafe, filling the whole house with its rich fragrance. On Sundays he sat in an armchair with the steaming mug to his left as he read the *New York Times*, the Marble Collegiate Church service playing in the background on his TV. An article or cartoon waited for me on the kitchen counter, marked by a post-it note with his familiar loopy handwriting: “Thought you’d like this! Love, Dad.”

By ninth grade, I’d developed my own taste for coffee. The bus no longer picked me up, so my dad offered to drive me the mile to Bernards High School so I didn’t have to walk solo at 7 am. He’d show up in my mom’s driveway in his white Ford Explorer with two thermoses of coffee: one for himself and one for me. As I sipped the potent black liquid that brought me to life, we’d discuss my upcoming history test, my mom’s latest treatment regimen, or my essay for English class. “Send me that essay—I love reading your writing!” he’d voice eagerly as I stepped out of the car.

As the caffeine lost its potency in carrying us through the daily grind, we learned to celebrate making it to Friday by going to our town’s only dedicated coffee shop: Starbucks. I’d order an iced coffee with milk and sugar, savoring the sweet liquid that meant I was another week closer to graduation. When I told my mom about the tradition, she responded bitterly: “I can’t believe he spends all that money he doesn’t have. How does he even pay for that house he lives in?” I learned to make it my dad and my special secret.

By my senior year of high school, I was eager to escape my New Jersey suburban bubble. It was clear that my mom’s mental health couldn’t stay stable for long, and the darkness, I learned, was contagious. College was my exit strategy, and I wrote essay after essay for that golden ticket. I set my sights as far away as Colorado, where I heard there was an average of 300 sunny days a year.

When the acceptance letter for a small school in Colorado arrived, my balloon of excitement deflated a few breaths as I imagined breaking the news to my dad.

“I got in!” I shared over the phone so I

didn’t have to see his facial expression upon learning that his only daughter might move across the country.

“Congrats! Why am I not surprised?” he responded encouragingly.

My dad boarded the plane with me to Colorado that 2014 summer before my freshman year. As I stood in my new dorm room and squeezed him in a soft good-bye embrace, my chest tightened, and my eyes blurred. Was I making a big mistake? It was too late, I realized, as the door clicked shut. My dad had a flight to catch.

My eyes darted between the unfamiliar objects around me—three raised twin beds, three desks, a mini fridge, a microwave, my new Keurig. I knew what to do. I filled the small plastic and mesh reusable pod with grounds from the bag of Starbucks coffee that my dad left me. I poured the water, positioned the mug, and let the aroma fill the 225-square-foot room that I would now be sharing with two strangers. I breathed deeply, cupping the mug, and letting the warmth melt the ice-cold panic that froze me in place. I sighed in relief at the first sip.



For four and a half years, Colorado became my home, and New Jersey became the place I visited twice a year, a week or two at a time. My dad insisted on picking me up from Newark Airport each time, going so far as meeting me at the baggage claim to see me sooner. That first Christmas visit after graduating college, the blood drained from my face when I first laid eyes on my dad. I realized it had been six months since I’d last seen him, and I barely recognized the person standing before me. His face looked like it had shrunk, the extra skin creating canals running from the bottom of his nose to the corners of his mouth. His normally olive skin was now jaundiced. His blue fleece jacket laid loose around his shoulders.

“When was the last time you went to the doctor?” I asked, my eyebrows creasing in concern on the drive back.

“I have an appointment coming up next week,” he reassured me.

“I love you. I don’t know what I would do without you. Please see the doctor,” I said as I hugged him good-bye, leaving once again.



I was standing in my co-worker’s hallway at an office holiday party less than a week after returning to Colorado when I got the phone call.

“The doctors found some lumps on my colon, liver, and lungs. It might be cancer, but people get worked up about that word. Even if it is cancer, the doctors seem optimistic about treatment,” my dad told me confidently. I felt the ground beneath me sinking, the nearby sounds of music and pleasant conversation moving further and further away. I may have made a big mistake.



Three weeks later, I walked into my dad’s hospital room to find a gaunt figure attached to machines. His pale face lit up when he saw me. We hugged for the first time since his diagnosis; the embrace was bony, interrupted by IVs, and the most incredible thing I could have imagined—*he’s still alive*.

“Do you want me to bring you anything tomorrow?” I asked.

“Coffee,” he responded without hesitation. “This stuff doesn’t do it,” he said, pointing to a small white paper cup on the tray beside him.

I smiled. I really am my father’s daughter.



Maybe my biggest mistake was believing that we had more time.

After the memorial service, my brother handed me a plastic sandwich bag of gray dust held shut with a rubber band. Leftover ashes. I stared in disbelief at the tiny bundle that fit in the palm of my hand. At twenty-three years old, I hadn’t prepared for this moment. Where would my dad have wanted me to put his ashes?

I looked around at the items I had salvaged—the books, the Housing Works bookstore mug, the tiny espresso cup on a saucer, the unopened can of Illy ground espresso. I peeled back the aluminum tab for the last time, releasing a burst of memories in its aroma. I emptied the grounds and replaced them with what was left of my dad. I put him on my windowsill to remind me of what I need to do when I can’t imagine moving forward without my dad: make coffee. ☼