

My Girl Lydia

I would've hugged him longer, held him closer, if I had known it would be the last hug we would ever share. I walked down the stairs of his new house in Longview: the ritzy house in the ritzy neighborhood my step-mom Gail pressured him to buy, finding my dad twiddling his thumbs on the dark leather couch. He hated this house. It wasn't like his house in the country. It wasn't a home. He designed our house in the country himself. It had gorgeous bay windows to let the sun in, a big back yard, a fire pole, and my favorite childhood memories. My dad was staring out of the window blankly that Sunday afternoon in January. "Hey," he said, aware of my presence.

He invited me to sit next to him on the couch, tapped my knee gently with his palm, called me 'my girl Lydia' affectionately. He always called me 'my girl Lydia.'

"I hate this weather." He returned his gaze out the window again. "I'm really depressed Lydia, and I don't know how to kick it. I'm getting old. My legs are getting old and I can't do anything I love anymore."

It broke my heart to see the spark within him extinguished. My father could fill up a room so fast. He could charm his way through any sticky situation with his enchanting Texas twang. My dad always made me feel larger than life and we shared a special bond my brother and sister never shared with him. I think as middle kids we understood one another. For my dad, looking at me was like looking at a carbon copy of himself.

The next weekend was my older sister Mary Margaret's 20th birthday, so we all went to Nashville where she was a freshman at Vanderbilt. I fought with my mom about the trip. I didn't want to go. I had promised my dad I would see him that weekend and he sounded so down. He told Mary Margaret, "If I don't talk to you on your birthday, I just want you to know I love you." I think I was the only person who really knew how bad it was.

Mom, John Allen, Mary Margaret, her boyfriend, Tim, and I all went to the Episcopal Church that morning because Mary Margaret had wanted to. Mary Margaret shared my dad's devotion to the Christian faith. I played Tetris on my phone during church, making sure it was on silent so I wouldn't disrupt the sermon. It's so weird to think about; I was probably playing Tetris when he did it. After the service ended we walked to The Tin Angel, a local diner. We had already ordered our food and were working on the appetizer when Mom got the call. I could tell by her face that something was wrong. She sat up from the metal diner chair, excusing herself from the table, saying, "Wait! Wait! Slow down!"

She made her way toward the exit, seeking privacy outside. I kicked Mary Margaret's feet under the table and motioned for her to meet me in the bathroom.

"What's wrong?" my little brother John Allen asked as we both pulled out our chairs and got up from the table.

"Nothing," I lied.

Mary Margaret looked at herself in the mirror, smoothing the wrinkles out of her skirt.

“Marge, there’s something I should tell you and I don’t want to freak you out, but the last time I saw Dad he was really depressed. He was talking about suicide and I think this call has something to do with it.”

“No, it can’t be that. He would never do that to us.”

She kept looking in the mirror, twisting her blonde curls.

“I just have a really bad feeling about this.”

I pictured my dad in the hospital, unsuccessful in his attempt to take his own life. Mom came back inside and tears stained her face. This was serious.

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong?” John Allen and Tim pleaded impatiently.

Mary Margaret was completely silent...dumbfounded. So was I. Mom took a wad of cash out of her purse and dropped it on the table next to the cheesy bread. We left before our meals arrived.

“Is Dad ok?” “What’s wrong?” “Is Dad alright?” We begged hysterically, barely able to form words, pleading for her to tell us what she knew. We followed Mom out of the restaurant and back towards the church. I think she wanted to tell us in the church.

“He’s dead isn’t he? Fucking tell me!” I screamed in The Tin Angel parking lot.

She nodded her head. John Allen looked over at me with his big blue eyes as if I could make it better.

“He shot himself this morning.” She choked on her words.

My mom and Tim grabbed us and pulled all of us close together. I pushed them off of me. I didn't want to hug anyone. I cussed. "This is all my fault. He told me a week ago and I didn't do anything about it!"

"You knew?" John Allen's eyes were robbed of their childhood innocence.

I was too upset to formulate any sort of response. Snow fell onto the icy pavement around us. The hair on my arms stood up on end. The tights I was wearing failed to protect me from the cold. We never made it back to the church. All I could think about was how I would never feel the warmth of my dad's giant hand on my knee and hear him call me 'my girl Lydia' again.