Matthew Ward

Honors English 165

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Yellow Butterflies

“Daddy went to heaven today” are words that are engraved in my mind to this very day. Sitting there in an open field near the beach with green sandy grass, the sun high in the sky, under an oak tree, my four siblings and I received news that would radically alter our lives forever.

On January 15, 1999, I was born into this world. It was a cold and snowy winter Colorado day. Born to David and Nicole Ward, my Dad was a family physician, which kept him very busy, while my Mom served as a stay at home Mom. Six years later and I was the middle child of five children. Two older siblings, my sister Mady and brother Caleb and two younger siblings, my brother Luke and sister Rachel. Our home was always filled with laughter, love, and joy. Weekdays were always filled with busy fun. School during the day and a variety of activities in the afternoon. After school, Mom and Dad were always taking us somewhere. From soccer practice, baseball practice, karate lessons, church events, swim lessons, basketball practice, and school events. You name it, we mostly likely did it.

The weekends were filled with the best memories. Saturdays were filled with playing around the house, in the backyard, or watching the Tar Heels play. We bleed Carolina blue, thanks to my Dad and the long family history tied to the school. If not at the house, you could probably find us at the soccer park, baseball park, or hiking some majestic trail in the Rocky Mountains. Sundays were my favorite day. When 5 AM Sunday morning came around, it meant watching westerns with my Dad. We would lay there next to each other on the couch. As a young boy, feeling the tender touch of my Dad meant the world to me. Laying next to my hero, I could feel the prickly, yet soft brush of his facial hair on my hands and face as we laughed and dreamed on those mornings. We dreamt of riding horses in the open western front, wishing we were John Wayne slaying the gunslingers of the wild west. So much so, we’d wear our cowboy boots, tuck our plaid shirts into our worn out jeans, holster our wooden six shooter on our faded brown leather belt, slip on our rough edged vest’s, and dust off our cowboy hats and pretend we ran the town. We’d say, “Howdy partner” as if we had just met. “It’s time to get ready for church boys”, my mom would yell downstairs. We laughed, chased each other upstairs and by 10 o'clock we were at church as a family. Every weekend was like this. Although, sometimes our time ran short due to his work. My Dad was always on call and could be paged into deliver a baby or treat a patient at any time. One day, we had just stepped outside on a Sunday afternoon to play catch. I threw the ball to my Dad, he threw it back. By the time I was ready to deliver a fast throw to show him how strong I was, he was called into work. Playing catch had ended, and he was swiftly off to deliver a baby. Life went on, and my family and I grew up.

In 2008, we moved to Wilmington, North Carolina to start the next chapter of our life. The new house, new people, new schools, new teams, and new location wasn't a problem for our family. We loved the new journey and challenge. We were involved quickly within our community through sports teams, school, and church. Life was good and my family was doing even better. We were all together, and that’s all that mattered.

The morning of October 20, 2009 was just like any other morning. My dad was off to work, the kids got ready for school, and my mom was making breakfast. The day went by like another day, class, more class, recess, lunch, and more class. It was close to the end of the school day when the crackling sound of the intercom came over the school. Each fourth grader in my class began to fill with excitement hoping that their name was to be called, so for some reason or another, he or she was called out of class or dismissed from school. Each kid waited in anticipation and hope that their name would be called. The time came and it was my name to be dismissed. I grabbed my books and my backpack and scurried up to the front office. Little did I know my emotions were drastically going to change.

My mom had picked up all the kids from school and she was driving us somewhere. My parents had recently surprised us with a family trip to Disney World and my older brother and I joked about how my parents had planned yet another secret vacation. I said, “Where are we going as a family this time?.” I can't imagine how my Mom felt at that time, knowing now, what was about to happen. I regret the naivety and ignorance of myself in that very moment. We pulled up to the pasture under an old towering oak tree. In the distance was tall grass that faded into a vast tree line. The tall grass elegantly blew in the cool wind, flowing from left to right. Sitting near the beach, it was coarse yet soft as you rubbed your hands in the sandy grass. All five kids and my Mom were sitting in a circle under that oak tree. Time had never blurred so much. Looking back, I don’t even remember feeling emotion at all. Just silence of my soul, and an emptiness I had never felt. Yet, no one had said a word, but my hands began to shake and my stomach sank. I knew something was wrong. Tears filled my mothers eyes, followed by a deep breath, and in the saddest most simplest tone I’ve ever heard in my life, "Daddy went to heaven today."

My hero, my sheriff, my best friend was gone. I’d never hear his voice again. Never watch another western or hike another adventure with my Dad. My life long battle with grief began. Grief, a small five letter word to describe the largest depth of pain. There is nothing like losing a direct family member. Nothing. As my Mom told us our Dad had died, flying around us as tears streamed down our face and our hearts feeling an incomprehensible pain, were a hundred yellow butterflies. These butterflies followed our car home. What was the sweet, beautiful, and gentleness of not one, but a hundred yellow butterflies doing there? Looking back on that event, there is no worldly explanation.

Shortly after my Dad’s passing, my family and I attended a grief therapist together. I was entirely indifferent to going to this place. Looking back, I remember sitting there and that’s it. We were sitting in cream-green chairs in a circle with my siblings. That is the only visual memory I have during the few sessions we attended. My Mom began to talk to us individually, after we felt the therapist sessions just weren’t for us. She described to us the five different stages of grief. We defined what grief was and it’s different stages in the therapy sessions, but I never truly retained this information until it was from someone who I trusted. The stages of grief are denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and acceptance. These stages come in no particular order, and the cycle may repeat itself over a lifetime. One may also fall into one stage, fall into another, then return back to the previous stage. I have experienced all of these stages in some shape or form in a small underlying way. I have dealt with the emotions and struggles of all of these emotions and stages. Yet, there are three of them that I have truly and fully experienced in different time periods of my life.

The first year after my Dad’s death, I immediately went into a season of denial. I was completely in shock constantly, not fully realizing and understanding what had happened.

I once asked my mom, “ How long did it take me to go back to school after Dad passed away? Three - four weeks?”

She shook her head and replied, “ It was more like five - six days.”

I was stunned at this. My mom felt as if it was best for the kids to return to routine-life as soon as possible. I had lost all sense of time after he passed. I denied that he was truly gone and this season led me to feel a bit emotionless and timeless. By the end of this season, I learned to fully accept the reality that my Dad was gone and there was nothing I could do to fix that.

After traumatic loss, you are left grieving for the rest of your life. There is no scheduled emotional order to describe your feelings. Over the years, my family and I experienced a plethora of emotions. I missed my Dad, everyday. Every time we went to go to his grave, I either stayed in the car or walked away into some distant soy bean field. I didn’t wanna go there, he wasn’t in that ground anyway. It made me angry, but I didn’t show it because it was important to my Mom. Year six was the year I experienced myself reach the full extent of the bargaining stage. I began to bargain what if he didn’t commit suicide? What if someone killed him? I thought to myself, “ surely the police missed something.” I asked my mom if the police investigated his death at all, she explained to me how they approached the scene, didn’t think any investigation was necessary, and pronounced it a suicide within minutes. This baffled me. It made me angry. I was waiting for the day I turned 18 and could go look at the records myself to try and “solve” the case. There was no case, it was suicide, he was gone. Through this season I learned that within trying to figure out if there was a different cause of death, I put the pressure on myself. I had to figure it out. I had to disprove the police. I had to somehow justify my own fathers death, but I couldn’t. I learned that there is no justification, only perspective. The perspective to see things as they are right now in reality, to wish on things that could’ve been, but ultimately be grateful for what I did have. I had to forgive myself, my Dad, and ultimately God, too. I had to let go of the “what if’s…” and realize that this wasn’t my fault.

Anger. This is the next stage I had to face in the roller coaster of grief. In fact, I’m still in it. The past year I have been going head to head with this stage. This season has been the most emotionally exhausting thus far. It builds up and boils inside of you. I am the least likely person to let it out, so no one really knows and that is dangerous. Yet, recently, I have talked to people about how I’m feeling and that has drastically helped my emotional exhaustion. Although, some of these battles must be fought on my own because no one can conquer them for me. During this stage I haven’t been angry at my Dad or anyone specifically, but more at the situation itself. A young girl, my little sister, trying to grow up without the love of her earthly father. She naturally longs to be told she is beautiful and cherished. My little brother has torn his ACL, broke up with his first girlfriend, been the star in the school musical, and is now thinking about college. He is growing up and longs for the “Son, I’m so proud of you” from his Dad. My older brother has graduated college in the last year, has put money down to save for the ring to marry the girl of his dreams, and has decided to bring the gospel to remote areas of Nepal. Some of biggest decision in his life he’s confronting right now and his heart longs for the advice and guidance from his father. My older sister has a three year old she’s trying to raise. She is working hard to financial support her family as a single mom. Her hard work is exhausting and her heart longs for the reassurance and underlying support of her Dad. My Mom. Wow, she has raised us all by herself. She has been the rock of our family after losing the love of her life. Her strength is supernatural, and she’ll tell you it is too. Her devotion to serve God and her family blows my mind. She longs to feel the touch of the one she loves and to her one more “ I Love You”. I get so angry being five hours away from them at college. My heart longs to be able to love and serve them because they deserve it. I want my little siblings to receive the pride and feeling of awe from me. I desire to tell and let my older siblings know that they are doing such a good job and they are appreciated in leading the way for us. I want to clean the house and go on long walks and have even longer life talks with my mom. It makes me angry that I can’t do this.

While I ramble through the anger in wanting more for my family, I forget about myself and I am left emotionally exhausted. Angrily questioning if I am supposed to be so far away from home at college. Then I digress. I wanted my father to be in the front row when I started my first college soccer game. I want to talk to my Dad about this girl. I need my Dad’s spiritual advice. I need help on my anatomy homework. A lot of help. I long to watch one more western. I long to know how he dealt with all the craziness of college. I long to hear his voice. Often times, I don’t release my feelings so the sadness boils up into anger while I sit there alone.

Hopelessness seems to be a reoccurring theme some days, but I also thought that on the darkest day of my life. Yet, then a hundred yellow butterflies showed up. Is this journey explainable? No, in fact, it never will be. But will it always contain unforeseen hope? Always.