

My Name is Dad

A Father's Story of Loss and Triumph

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Preface

“The imprint of a dad will forever remain on his son.”

I remember reading that somewhere. I don't know if I truly left a mark on my son, but I know that the reverse is painfully true for me. The imprint of my son will forever remain on me.

I feel that I must warn you right here, right now. This will not be an easy book to read. It was tough writing it, and it will be tough to read it. Try as I might, there is no easy way to tell a difficult story. And difficult it is.

I must extend a trigger warning to anybody who picks up the book. This is a story about my son's suicide in our home. The days leading up to it, and the aftermath of the tragedy. My emotions when I found his body and my struggle to face every day after that. It will be painful, disturbing, and triggering in all and every sense of the words, but it might also give you an insight into our struggles as we tried to accept the loss, battled through the grief and were able to find our path to healing.

Though I wouldn't even wish for my worst enemy to share this lonely boat with me, if you are in one, I want to extend a hand out to you and keep you afloat amidst this raging ocean that threatens to swallow us whole, every day, for the rest of our days. I hope and pray, with every inch of me, that no father has to live through something as agonizing as watching their own child take his life, but if the story resonates with you, I hope you find peace, closure and acceptance in it. I hope that this book helps you make sense of what happened, and to stop it from taking away everything else in your life.

I might have been through hell, but I have to remind myself that I am still alive. That my son is gone but I am still here. There are days when I wish for nothing more but to join my son wherever he is, but that is not an option and I must continue to live my life till it is time to see him again.

Chapter 1: The Day of the Suicide

At exactly 4:30 AM, on January 23rd, 2017, my eyes flew open. Just as they do every day. This was routine to me. For years and years, for so many years that I have lost count, I have been waking up at 4.30 AM and starting my day. I don't even have to try anymore. No matter how late I went to bed, no matter how tired and exhausted my body had been, I could not sleep past 4.30 AM. I owned no alarm clocks; my internal clock was enough to wake me up, on time, without fail, every day.

The room was still dark, as it usually is. The first rays of the sun will begin to filter through the curtain in a short while, but for now, the faint glow of the lonely streetlight outside was the only source of illumination. My wife was sleeping beside me, and the world was eerily quiet. Just as it always is.

There was nothing out of the ordinary.

January 23rd, 2017. At the moment, I had no idea that the date would become etched on my mind. At the moment, I had no idea that my world was going to turn upside down in a matter of hours. At the moment, this was just another ordinary day. A Monday, of all days.

The air was still chilly, and I bundled up in a thick robe, before heading downstairs for my usual cup of coffee. The thought of a hot, steaming mug of coffee was enough to get me out of bed and hurry downstairs.

I took my time with my coffee, and once I felt energized enough, I walked into my office at 5 AM to answer all emails, messages, and queries that had accumulated over the weekend. For years, my wife and I have been working from home. We both ran home-based businesses and had set up a nice little corner as our office.

Hours passed as I worked. My wife was up and had woken up my school-going daughter. This too was part of our routine. At 8.30 AM every morning, I used to drive my daughter to school.

I got back home at around 9 AM, after dropping my daughter off. I went back down to my office to resume work, where my wife was already at work. We talked for a bit and then I told her I should go wake our son up.

I had delegated a part of my business to my son, for which I was paying him handsomely. He was a smart kid, and I figured it would be good for him to take on some responsibility of work, and it would also give him the necessary exposure, which could prove useful later. He was making very good money for a 21-year-old and was doing pretty great work too.

He had slept long enough today. I went up and knocked on his door, but there was silence on the other side. We, as parents, had always respected my son's privacy. We never opened his door unless he grants us his permission to come in. I knocked again to the same lack of response.

Knock-knock-knock-knock.

My wife came up too around that time, as she heard me knocking on his door. She shot me an inquisitive look. He usually answers immediately. She came over and knocked herself, but he didn't respond to either of our knocks. We had been knocking incessantly for quite a while now, and the sound was reverberating in the house. It was then that my wife pushed the door open.

The room was empty. My son was not in bed.

Bang!

I saw my wife collapsing on to the floor. She started wailing loudly, the sound hitting my ears like a hammer. I had no idea what was happening. For some reason, she was convinced that something bad had happened. I tried to console her and get her back up. There was no reason to suspect that anything was amiss.

He might have stepped out for breakfast when we were in the office. He might have gone out to his friend's early morning or may have spent the night over there. He was merely a 21-year-old, after all.

A million explanations for his absence ran through my mind. The one that made sense the most was that he might have stepped out to the garage to exercise. He had a punching bag there, and he spent a lot of time working out in there. A little morning exercise harmed no one, right?

So, I walked over to the detached garage and opened the side door.

There he was. I had found him.

But there was no relief at the moment.

He was 4 feet away from me, hanging from the rafters. He was looking at me with eyes that were bloodshot and bulging, his feet dangling in the air. His mouth was hanging open, frozen drool dripping down the side of his mouth. His face was pale, and the veins in his neck bulging and green, like snakes crisscrossing across his neck, constricting him, killing him.

Beneath him, I saw four tires that he had used to stand on, while he used one of our tie-down straps to hang himself. His cellphone was lying by the side, and he had set the alarm clock so that it would go off every five minutes. His cellphone was lying by the side, an alarm going off every five minutes. This was probably the alarm that he used to wake up in the morning.

I did not – could not enter the garage. Though my feet felt heavy, I somehow managed to drag them to the front door of the house, screaming for my wife.

I told her to call 911 immediately.

She grabbed the phone and handed it to me for me to make the call.

I tried to stop her, but she ran to the garage to see for herself. She showed more self-control at that moment than I had given her credit for previously. She entered the garage without a second thought and pulled me in after her. Together, we lifted his body and tried to loosen the strap around his neck, so we could bring him down.

His once warm, soft body was stiff against my hands; rigor mortis had already set in. The body was cold and frozen from the cold outside. Judging by the snow on the ground, it looked as if it had been snowing all night.

We hoisted his body and tried to cut the strap that he had tightened around his neck. The strap was so tight we actually had to take a knife to it to cut it loose. We lowered his lifeless body to the ground.

I noticed that our son had soiled himself; he must have lost control of his bladder even as his soul was leaving his body. There was a stain on the front of his pants, frozen and stiff by now. I wondered how scared he must have been.

The stench in the garage almost made me gag; the smell of the rubber tires, the stink of urine, and the smell of death combined were overwhelming. It was all around us, all over us, and it would not leave. The stench had settled into the nooks and crannies of the garage, and even though the door of the garage was open, the smell stayed.

For the longest time, whenever I walked into the garage, I could smell the same stink again. For the longest time, no matter how much I scrubbed my body and showered, I could feel it lingering on my skin. The tires, the urine. The death.

I don't think anybody who hasn't seen death up close could understand that death has a certain smell. It's ugly, disgusting, depressing. It seeps into everything, your hair, your skin, your clothes. Your house, your car, your life.

We lived in that house for 1.5 years after that fateful day. The garage always smelled the same.

We laid our son down on the ground. My wife was shaking him to get him to wake up, and I did not have the heart to stop her. I knew she knew; she knew as well as me that he was dead. But hope is a strange thing, especially hope brought on by grief and desperation.

Panicked, I called 911. The firemen came first since they were the closest to home. Then the sheriff came, and then the coroner came out. The neighbors started peeking out of their windows and doors to see what was going on.

The whole time, my wife lay beside our son on the garage flooring, pleading, screaming, begging him to wake up. Unaware and unconcerned with the rest of our world, she continued shaking his lifeless body.

I eventually pulled her away so the firemen could take a look. They examined his body, checked his heartbeat. The verdict was as we feared; he was indeed dead.

There was nothing anybody could do about it, so the firemen covered him up with a blanket.

Our son was gone. No amount of shaking would ever wake him up.

My wife would not let them cover his face, though. I understood what she meant; once the blanket goes on his face, he ceases to be a person. He becomes a corpse. There is no coming back from it. And though my wife and I are generally practical, sensible people and we know, in our hearts, that he is dead, I requested the firemen to oblige by my wife's wishes and leave his face uncovered.

His bulging eyes were looking at me, and I couldn't decipher what they were trying to say. Were they accusing us? Apologizing to us? Pleading for help? It felt as if his eyes would bore through my soul forever, the questions haunting me for life.

Looking at him, lying on the ground, I wondered how we managed to hoist him and bring him down from the rafters. Our son was a big boy; he was bulky, muscular, and tall. He was definitely not the kind of young man that a frail man and his wife could handle. But at that moment, we barely felt his weight.

All our energy was focused on lowering him to the ground, shaking him awake. That maybe there was the faintest life in him, that maybe we were just in time, that maybe we could still save him.

The sheriff and the firemen led us inside and sat us down in our own kitchen. They tried to talk to us, console us, as best they could. They asked us questions that I and my wife answered with as much clarity and confidence as we could muster.

“When did you find the body?”

“Was there any drug abuse involved?”

“Had there been a breakup recently?”

“Did he get fired from a job?”

“Was he depressed?”

The questions wouldn't stop; they went on and on for an hour. We told them with as much conviction as we could that there were none of those things involved.

We answered as best as we could, but after a while, I think even the authorities realized that there was no science behind this. There were no signs leading up to it. We did not see this coming. We were just as in the dark about why and how this happened, as the rest of the world.

I've heard of young people committing suicide after a tough breakup with their partners. When things aren't good at home with the parents. When they have lost a job or are in a financial crunch.

None of those things were true for our son.

It made me question myself for a while. Did we not know our son as much as we thought we did? What did we miss? What drove him to such an extremity?

Honestly, I don't remember much of that conversation; my mind was still outside, in the garage. Nothing about the next couple of hours was clear; the details of the rest of the day are blurry and hazy, as if I hadn't really lived through it, but observed it from behind a frosted screen.

I saw the coroner taking away the body, wrapped in the blue blanket. They had covered his face after all.

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