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Cracked Helmets and College Applications

Sometimes your life changes and you’re not even there to see it happen. For me, it was when my father skied into a tree in the backcountry of British Columbia, hundreds of miles away. He’d planned this trip a year in advance with two of his best friends. But on the second run of their first day, my dad caught his tips under a downed tree buried under snow and flew head long into a huge Pacific Cedar, falling six feet into a tree well. His friends pulled him out of the well, sucked snow out of his throat and laid him flat in the snow. Within an hour, my dad was laid flat in a helicopter on his way to Kootenay Boundary Regional Hospital. All of this happened while I was sitting in my macroeconomics class in Portland, Oregon, worrying about finishing my college applications.

“Dad smashed his skull on a tree,” my sister blurted when I walked in the door from soccer practice. “Isn’t that classic dad?”

Stunned. Confused. Terrified. I looked to my mom for clarity.

“Yeah. He’s in the hospital. They heli-vacced him out of the backcountry. He’s got a cracked cranium, concussion and a severely dislocated shoulder. I think there’s a piece of bone floating around in there, too.” My mom was very matter of fact about it all. I think she was one part scared and one part annoyed. My dad did stuff like this often, but a helicopter? Cracked skull? I just didn’t see the humor in it that my sister seemed to see.

To say my father and I were close would make people who know us laugh. We weren’t “close.” We were connected. I heard people call me “Mini Me” a lot. My dad loved Arsenal? I loved Arsenal. My dad liked Radiohead? I liked Radiohead. My dad loved soccer. I lived soccer. It wasn’t that he forced his passions on me, I happily accepted them. But over the previous months, I’d started to find my own path - things and ideas that were mine, and mine alone. I still loved Arsenal, Radiohead and Air Jordan 1’s, but I also loved Dennis Villaneuava’s films and Kendrick Lamar’s flow. After a difficult junior year with the pandemic and an unsupportive soccer coach, my dad and I found ourselves arguing constantly about what he and I both wanted for my future. Especially my future in soccer. But now he was laying in a CT scan machine in Canada to check if his brain was swelling too much.

When he called after his brain scan, he promised me he was ok. I wasn’t so sure. Adventures and injuries were just part of life with my dad. He’d once encouraged me to ski a black diamond run when I was five. I skied into the trees and bit a hole in my tongue. He still chokes up and almost cries when we joke about it. My pain was his pain. Now his pain was mine.

But I was still focused on finishing my college essays. They wanted to know about me. Who is Henry? What is Henry all about? What motivates him? What matters to him? For so long, I had looked to my dad to help me fill in the blanks to every question. I had started to find my own steps, but I wasn’t sure I knew how to proceed.

“Dad, I need your help finishing my essays for CU.”

“Absolutely, mate. I’m here. Shoot over what you’ve written so far and I can help edit.”

I sent a rough draft. A few hours later, my inbox was flooded. My father had composed what he thought to be a meaningful, detailed essay about who I was. Clearly, the painkillers had kicked in. Uncharacteristic grammatical errors and misspellings made it clear to me that my dad was not going to be able to help me. This was a first for us. He’d always been there for me. Every school assignment, every soccer challenge, every emotional need. And now, when I really needed him, he was in a hospital bed, drugged out of his mind. I was pissed. I was scared.

I texted him the next day telling him that I didn’t need his help. I’d just do it all myself. I didn’t want to hurt him, but I wanted him to know he’d let me down. My phone rang within seconds. He was sorry. He wished he’d never come on the trip. He was going to come home immediately and fix everything for me. He broke down in tears and admitted that he couldn’t think straight and was in so much pain that it hurt to read. The doctors had reprimanded him for even looking at his phone. He was terrified and ashamed to tell me.

What happens when you see Superman without his cape? How do you make sense of it when the one who knows everything doesn’t even seem to know who you are?

“Dad, what am I gonna do? These are due this week!”

I was panicking. Part of it was the applications, but most of it was coming to grips with the sudden realization that my father was human. And not just human, he was fallible and fragile.

“Hey, buddy,” he managed to get out between tears and coughs. “Only you can write your own story. Not me. Not mom. Not your coaches or teachers. You. I can tell anyone who you model your soccer game after or that you used to be afraid of thunderstorms or that you like queso on your burritos. But you’re the only narrator of your movie, mate. All of my opinions and arguments don’t mean a damn thing compared to what you know is in your head and heart. Write your script. I know it will be incredible.”

I laughed and asked, “You ok, dad? That’s pretty corny for you,”

“Shut up, boy. My brain hurts.”

I’m still writing that story. And my dad will always have a role in it. But it’s my story and I think it’s going to be a cool movie. By the way, my dad and I skied together all weekend. I didn’t bite a hole in my tongue and he didn’t end up in a helicopter. But who knows what could happen in the next chapter.