



One Last Hug

T. Austin Reason

It was one of those times in life you don't forget. My Aunt Debbie and my three cousins were in the process of moving in with my mom, my sister, and me. My cousins were out in the neighborhood trying to make new friends. I was at my friend's house across the street trading baseball cards. As I look back, I kick myself for being there on that life-changing afternoon. I never even liked baseball cards! But I was eleven years old and trying to be normal.

After a few hours of negotiating, I headed home. I noticed a bunch of the neighborhood ladies standing in the yard. "Oh, great," I thought sarcastically. "What's going on? Some boring old parent party or something?" Then I noticed that some were crying. I saw my cousin Candice sitting in the yard almost in shock. The looks on their faces were the kind that could mean only one thing. Slowly the images began to sink in: red, white, lights, truck. I had been so wrapped up in my dislike of my mother's get-togethers that I had missed the large, cubical truck parked in front of the house. Had I not noticed the ambulance before?

I asked the first face I saw what had happened. "It's Debbie," she said. No other details were available and I didn't need any. My aunt was in trouble, that's all I knew. I stood outside with my family for five minutes or two hours, I don't remember which. It was odd. My house, my home where I was always welcome, became off limits. Not because I was banned but by my own restriction. I was in shock like the others, numb.

I'll never forget the sight, and my dread, when I saw the paramedics wheeling my Aunt Debbie out, pushing on her chest, some sort of plastic apparatus on her face. I was terrified. My good friend Nicole was holding my bawling cousin, Candice. Through her own tears she asked me, "Why aren't you crying?" I'm stunned when I think back on my answer at the age of eleven, "The man of the house doesn't cry." The paramedics boarded the ambulance with my aunt and sped away.

My family flocked to my house to await any updates. The excruciating night drew out forever. “Bad news travels fast,” they kept assuring me. The hours dragged on. Apparently, this news, good or bad, was taking its time. Eventually it came: fatal cardiac arrest. We were crushed and spent what was left of the night crying in each other’s arms.

The next few days went by too slowly, though in my memory they seem to go too fast, like a blur. I wanted to remember every minute. But I was too numb, too busy being strong for Mom, to experience it in real time. I wanted it to all be over with, to be able to feel again. Now I wish I had allowed myself to grieve more, to be sad.

Debbie was in the funeral home for our family to view for two days. The funeral service was on the third. The three times I saw my Aunt Debbie, I wanted to reach out and touch her, to hug her. She used to give the best hugs, especially when I was crying. Every time I went up to the casket, I was crying.

But I was eleven; I was new to death. I was especially new to the social aspect of death. Was it wrong to hug someone at a wake? Certainly not anyone still alive but what about the one person I really wanted to hug? The one that wouldn’t be there next week to hug when I was crying? Being who I am, I didn’t ask. I just didn’t touch her.

At the funeral service, when they closed the casket, I knew. I had waited too long. My last chance had passed and I hadn’t realized it. I thought surely there would be more time, time to ask if I could touch her. Surely there was more time, there’s always more time...later. When the lid closed, it set in. There would be no more time, no later. I wept.

One day the following year, I came home from school and my mom and step-dad had that look on their faces. My grandfather had died. On the nights of the viewing, I told myself I wouldn’t let him slip away too. Each time I went to see him I was determined to touch him. But I didn’t. I realized it was happening all over again. Finally, I asked my mom, “Can I touch him?” “Of course,” she said, “do you want to?” I nodded. She took my hand as I reached out and placed it on his chest, like I had done for so many years. I took his hand in mine and held it. It was cold and wrinkled more than normal, but it was still Granddaddy. When his lid closed, I was ready. I said goodbye the best I could with the opportunity I had. I cried, but only for him, not the lost chance to say goodbye.

I've determined to never let the lid close again. Not before I'm ready. If I feel that someone does not know how I feel toward them, I make a point to tell them. If I have anything to say about it, no one will leave my life again unprepared. They will know all the things I've thought about them and prayed for them and wanted to tell them. I don't wait until they're leaving. I tell them while I have the chance. The only chance I have is now, before later is gone.