

I rode to the hospital in the back of a police car, in tears. I was sure my dad would be all right. My dad was my best friend—not just mine but everyone’s in the community. Growing up as a black individual, he became a police officer to try to change how police officers are viewed. He treated everyone with care—not only like human beings, but like his family. I remember having strangers come up to me saying, “Oh my god! You’re Officer Williams’ daughter! He gave me a DUI! I love that guy!” He was not only a role model to me but to our whole community. I was always feeling a lot of gratitude towards my dad as well, making sure to tell him how much I loved him every day.

We got to the hospital and they put my mom and I in a small room with a lamp, a couch, and a box of tissues. That’s not a good sign. I was trying to comfort my mom while she tried to contact my two older sisters to tell them what was going on, but she was so upset that she didn’t even know how to use her cell phone.

We heard the news: He died of an enlarged heart. He was obese, and his heart was trying to keep up with the mass of his body. But I like to say he had too much love for a human to give. My mom and I hold each other—we’re all we have. I couldn’t wait for tomorrow, to wake up from this bad dream that was so much more than temporary. We go home that night in a procession—sirens flood the streets, people step outside from their homes and businesses.

The director asked if I could still do *Annie*. Pretending to be an orphan for weeks on end might be hard on the girl who just lost her dad. There was nothing I wanted more. What seemed like a simple middle school play to most students was the therapeutic escape I needed—replacing the vivid images of my father's dead body with lines, cues, and lyrics, drowning out the sounds of grief with show tunes and stomping to the rhythm of hard knock life. Though I was still in a state of shock, connecting with a character who just wants a set of parents to take care of her felt effortlessly relatable. Even so, I had to focus more on my mother’s mental health than mine. I only had one parent and I had to keep her well.

Some might say it’s a shame my dad never got to see any of the goals that I’ve achieved, but I disagree. He follows me everywhere I go, and somehow manages to get a seat at every show. His body may be cremated, but energy is forever. Yes, I miss him, but I’ve realized there are so many beautiful things that you learn from loss. Having traumatic experiences at the age of 13 is hard. That’s the age your brain begins to develop a sense of self, gets ready to learn how to drive a car, gets excited for your first job. Meanwhile, I was busy making sure my mother’s will to live remained intact. Between my own healing, my struggles with dyslexia and ADHD, and the global pandemic, I decided that a gap year was the right choice. I simply wasn’t ready for college. But now I’ve never been more eager to learn.