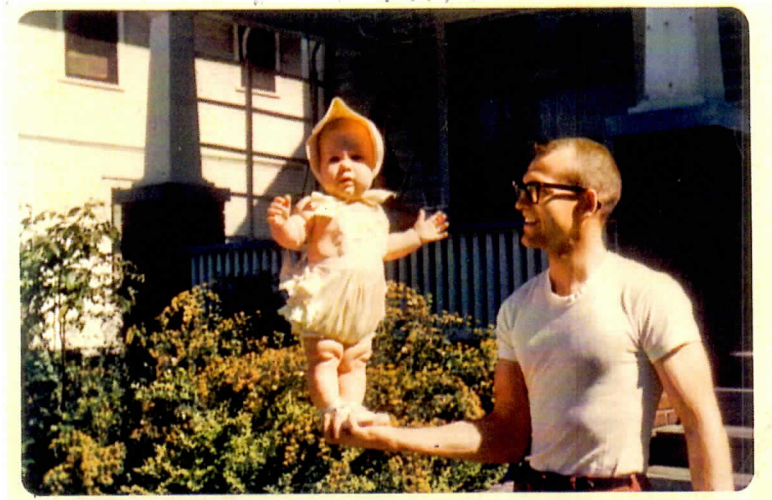


Losing Papa
(Memoir/Personal Narrative)

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“Nothing has really happened until it has been recorded.”—Virginia Woolf

Prologue

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My father died exactly a year ago today, stopped breathing in a hospital in Nashville, 2,282 miles away.

It was my children who called him "Papa." Not out of any resemblance to "Papa" Hemingway—although as a writer myself, I liked the illusion. Sometimes pretended our Papa was also a big bear of a man, with a white beard, larger than life and wildly talented. But the reality is my daughter christened my dad Papa because she couldn't say Grandpa. And except for the excessive drinking and series of wives, he shared little in common with my favorite writer.

Yet it's this reality that interests me—not the illusions. I briefly considered writing about my dad in a novel: A woman travels east on a train to bury her father in a small family cemetery in Missouri, the state his people were from. With her are her children and her husband—and of course, as she travels along, she confronts the issues in her life. Even thought it'd make a good movie—all those long American vistas from the train window.

But in the end, fiction is too glossed over, too tidied up, for me. It's like this scene at my son's art school the other day. Magical place, in an old farmhouse painted dark green with white shutters, surrounded by acreage, protected wetlands. The director is an elegant woman, with long tan legs and a South African accent that makes you feel cool all over—especially if you're an anxious, wealthy parent. This particular moment, she's talking to a mother whose son just started a preschool art class. "That is such a good group today," the director says in her lovely tone, as they peer in together through a

window from the waiting room, watching the class pack up. "They were very engaged at circle time." *What do they do at circle time?* asks the mother, who'd dropped the boy for his first day and run. "They work on drama and language arts and other right brain activities," says the director. "Then they work in several mediums, and later they go outside, where they have a snack." *What do they have?* "Oh, often fresh fruit, or apple juice," she croons.

Now, I love this director, love this place, have been taking both my children there for years, and I'm sure at some abstract level, she was giving this mother an overall correct impression. But my son is most often asked—at circle time—what movie he saw over the weekend. Or what he wants to be when he grows up. (He invariably says, "Workman.") And he's never seen a piece of fresh fruit while on the property. Snack is Dollar Tree animal crackers. Or that day, they ate crayon Popsicles left over from the end-of-summer party.

I want to tell my story—about losing Papa—but I want to tell it for real, as it happened, as I thought of it at the time. And that woman on the train conflicted about her life after her father dies? Well, of course that's just me, sitting here at a computer desk in some hot Northern California suburb. I want to tell the whole story, but not in some wish-it-had-been fictionalized account. Because in the end, losing people is what life gets increasingly more about as we age. And there must be, must be, some point to it all.