

“Dad’s Girlfriend”

Tomorrow is Valentine’s Day. February 14th. Let me confess at the outset, that, for a long time, I had little affection for this holiday. Growing up, I loved those little heart-shaped candies, with their endearments, but that was about it. For most of my life, I rolled my eyes at Valentine’s Day.

But, in recent years, I’ve come to understand what Valentine’s Day really means. And that’s what I’d like to share with you tonight. This speech is my Valentine’s gift, to you.

About a week before the start of my freshman fall, around 3 ½ years ago, while I was away at pre-season camp in New Hampshire with Harvard’s cross country team, my dad had a cardiac arrest. His heart stopped and he collapsed on the floor of my kitchen. My mom, a nurse, performed CPR and saved his life. He was taken in an ambulance to Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, where wonderful doctors performed emergency surgery. He barely survived... but he did.

I came home from New Hampshire to find my dad in a coma. When his heart had stopped, he had gone without oxygen for several minutes, and his brain had been damaged. The doctors didn’t know how badly. He remained in a coma for about a week, which was the most terrifying of my life. When he finally woke up, his memory was gone. He couldn’t remember how to speak or swallow. He couldn’t remember how to walk. He knew nothing of his life. He was a 50-year old newborn infant. A blank slate.

Over the course of the next several months, my father fought to relearn everything that he could. I would visit him at the hospital, bearing coffee ice cream milk shakes, his favorite, and watch him struggle to stand up. My mom was a fixture at his bedside. Day in and day out, she sat beside him, held his hand, and tried to teach him his life story. He had no idea who I was, or who she was—not our names, not our identities, nothing.

Gradually, my dad began put the pieces back together...He relearned how to speak, how to eat, how to walk. His memory of his life before the cardiac arrest was lost, but he was capable of forming new memories. He began to recognize those of us who visited him. My father didn’t know who we were, that we were his family, but he knew that we visited and he was grateful for that.

One day, soon after my mom arrived at the hospital, my dad told her, very seriously, that there was something they needed to discuss. My mom, somewhat taken aback, agreed to talk.

“I just want to tell you,” Dad began, “that I don’t think this will work out.”

“What won’t work out?” replied Mom, confused.

“You and me,” he said, very matter-of-factly. “You’re a really nice lady, and you’re very good to me. But it isn’t going to work.” Mom started to smile.

“Ok,” she said. “What’s the problem?”

“It’s just that...” he said slowly, “I’m married. And I’ve been faithful to my wife the whole time. So I just don’t think it will work out with you *and* her.” Mom sat there for a second, speechless, not sure whether to laugh or cry.

“Ok,” she said finally. “I understand. That’s fine.” She stayed with him, and by the end of her visit, he had forgotten their whole conversation.

I wish I could say that this story has a happy ending, but I can’t. My dad still struggles with his memory, and the rest of us still struggle with the loss of the person we grew up with. He knows now who we are, and he loves us, but things will never be the same. Our history has been erased.

Still though, this story has what I think is an *important* ending.

For me, it is a story about love, about the people that we remember, somehow, when we remember nothing else. In that hospital room, my dad didn’t recognize my mom. He didn’t remember what her name was, where she was from, or that she had been his wife, and the mother of his five children, for nearly 20 years. But my dad did remember that he was married to a woman he loved very much. Somehow, that fact survived. He remembered that he had a wonderful wife, that he had loved her, and been faithful to her, for the entirety of their marriage. And that tiny memory, one of the few he had left, was enough to make him turn away my mother, his only daily visitor, his only friend at the time. For this love, which he barely remembered but still clung to, my father sacrificed what little he had in that moment.

This story is also about loss. It reminds me that life is fleeting, and that everything can change in an instant, quite literally, in a heartbeat. Life is short. The time we have to make memories, to love, is limited. We have to make the most of it.

Tomorrow is an opportunity. It is a day to cherish and remember the people we love. To tell them that we love them. And to make new memories with them. Make tomorrow about these people—the memorable ones. The ones who you would **never** forget.