

**Assignment:** Write a personal experience essay. Tell your story using description, dialogue, and figurative language.

### **Time to Say Goodbye**

by Dawn Uza

My mom and I drive to my aunt and uncle's house. The air in the car tingles with nervous electricity. Out the window I stare, glad, for once, to be listening to my mom's light rock station. With Air Supply and Carpenters songs playing, I worry about not associating any of my usual tunes with this day. The drive is short, but I wish it were longer. Can one ever have enough time to prepare to visit someone about to die?

Sudden: that is the way of death with which I have been familiar. I found myself, in previous experiences, wishing I had more time: time to say what I had learned and loved about that person; time to say thank you; time to say goodbye. Time is what I wished for. Now I have that time, but am left confused, overwhelmed, and afraid. What will I say? How will I say it? Will I be able to look at him, the life of every party, the great teller of jokes, the epitome of a gentleman, and hide the way my heart is breaking?

I wipe moist palms on faded jeans as we approach the front door. She says that Wil, her husband, is resting. Her smile is triggered as she tries to be strong for us. Necessity masks the despair that must be inside her. *I can't imagine watching your husband deteriorate by the hour.* The three of us speak for a short while in the front room. She and my mom smoke. Perhaps my aunt is mercifully giving us a moment to prepare. My attention turns to their courtyard, and I am lost in my thoughts, wondering if we will be having snow this Christmas. I snap out of my irrelevant daydream. What a stupid thing to think about now, while the man who could light up a room with his smile and make a woman of any age giggle like a little girl succumbs to cancer. My ears tune into the conversation.

"If he stops breathing," my aunt explains, "they cannot resuscitate him. His bones will all break." They put out their cigarettes and we go to see Wil.

She leads us down the hallway. My pace is slowing. The air in front of me pushes me back. The air behind me pushes me forward. All the air becomes too thick to breathe. The hallway is longer than I ever remember it being. I trip over my trepidation.

"Honey," my aunt says, "you have visitors!"

The wrinkles that circle their eyes look like ripples from a pebble dropping in water. I sit on the edge of their bed, beside his hospital bed. The metal rails remind me of a zoo cage, separating the beautiful creature from the world he once knew. At first I do not touch him. As children, after all, we are taught not to reach into the cages.

I kiss the top of his hairless head and gently squeeze his hand. I compliment him on the lovely shape of his head. The conversation floats, each word dangling, disconnected. I make sure to monitor my comments. Remember to be cheerful. Don't ask *how are you?* We speak of school. I am reminded of what he told me when I, unsure of my choice, decided to return to college. He had leaned in close to me, put out his hand squeezing my shoulder, and said, "You know what one of the saddest days of my life was?" He leaned closer, and with a lowered voice said, "It was the day I graduated from college!" He had then leaned back, with a beaming smile and twinkled blue eyes, and patted me on the back. He started to laugh, and I then knew that I was making the right decision. How could anyone doubt eyes that sparkled so confidently? We speak of travel. I admire his worldliness, his having been places, such as Italy and France, which I dream of going to. He encourages me to pursue my goal of studying abroad, suggesting Denmark. We speak of this and that. *Do I sound as stupid as I feel?* I am so large and so small; so powerful, so weak. Sadness and happiness fight for the space inside me like territorial beasts. I am

intelligent and wise, yet so naïve to the ways of . . . of what? Of God? Of the world? I ponder life, death, and everything in between. Oh, and remember to smile.

I feel the relief of death in the room. If I sit here long enough, will it consume me, too? My aunt smiles at Wil and jokes as she helps him move his legs. He laughs. I cherish that sound, heard so frequently, accompanied by his jovial smile. Never before have I met anyone so sincerely interested in everyone, always making each person feel important, powerful, and beautiful. With the dedication of an aching athlete running the last mile of a marathon, my aunt lifts some water for him to sip. Perhaps she, like the runner, has been conditioned for this in some unspoken training. A moment later his eyes close. *Is he dead?*

I am not breathing.

My emotions revolve like merry-go-round horses. Wil's eyes open slightly and he says he needs to rest. I breathe again. It is time for us to go. Will looks at me, looks *into* me. I quiver at his penetration, but welcome his unspoken wisdom. His eyes are bloodshot, but gentler than red . . . more like magenta. Wil always knows exactly what to say and when to say it, something I wish I could do now. I numbly rise. I cannot say *goodbye*. I cannot say *thank you*. I cannot say *I love you*. I cannot create words to mirror all that races inside me. Come late spring I cannot pick the last wildflower in the meadow. So I smile and say, "I'll see you soon."

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