

Recollections on my Father: Courage in a Hospital Room

Sharon Lee

Lehman College '19

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We see troubling signs that do not bode well for the lives following our academic careers as students. We are apprehensive for our quality of living and families. If we were to die at this very moment, would we be considered good people? Should I deem my worth based on factors such as my GPA and the amount of community service hours I can put down on my application? When I think about my indecision and my dread of these matters, I go back to what I thought about my future during the quiet and turbulent end of my father's last days.

It is hard to remember when *Appa* was first diagnosed with cancer, but it isn't very difficult to recall my father's pallid face and the shadow it cast onto our family. It crept on us slowly until it trailed after our own footsteps and eventually, through every corner of that old and musty house. The doctors called it lymphoma, but even to this day I think there is no word in the English language that could possibly summarize the burdens my father carried, the longing and heartache that ensues when there is no one to carry a steady and strong beat in our family's songs, and when there is no one to fill our fourth chair at the dinner table.

When my classmates, my friends, and the world itself seemed to live their carefree lives, devoid of any concerns but their own, I would quietly find my father's hospital room and read aloud for him when his sickness prevented him from getting up. *Appa*, I would murmur, loathing the halting accent on my tongue, *oneul mou eelgeuk ka yo?* Conscious of the other patient behind the curtain and the beeline of nurses and doctors hurrying in and out of the hallway, I often gripped my father's worn leather Bible with sweaty, determined palms and fumbled over the foreign printed letters as quietly but as clearly as I could speak them. I enunciated each word carefully, aware of my growing uneasiness and the hot sensation on my flushed cheeks. I hated that I could never capture the passion or complexity of my thoughts; that speaking in my mother tongue felt like an infantilization of my Americanized self as I stuttered over particles and butchered simple

words. But if I could temporarily transport him away from that dreary hospital room and into the gates of heaven where God promised restoration, living water, and healing for even a little while, I would have gladly swallowed my embarrassment to read a thousand pages. *Anything to make him happy*, I thought as I trudged along the Psalms with uneasy cheer. *Anything to make him well*.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (BibleGateway, Psalm 23:4). I always wonder if *Appa* truly felt no fear as he walked through that valley of death, as the doctor inserted steroids in his ears when he started to lose his hearing, or when he first shaved off his hair after the first round of chemo tests. But we clung to hope, the “thing with feathers/ That perches in the soul/ And sings the tune without the words/ And never stops at all” (Dickinson). We were so excited to have him come home after two months of absence that Mother rushed to the Chinese supermarket to buy a whole pot’s worth of freshly caught lobster. My sister and I were even allowed to drink a little bit of the cheap Moscato wine she bought from Costco. I can still see the broken, untuned piano where it was positioned in the dining room, and the brave smile on mother’s face as she sat next to her dying husband and watched us eat our last meal together. In that small and extraordinary spot of time (Bishop), we were hopeful and certain of the future.

The day after the next, Sunil Lee passed away on October 14th, 2016. His death was sudden and twice as devastating because everyone, even the doctors, were certain he would recover. I remember walking into that solitary hospital room, greeted by a company of somber doctors and sympathetic strangers, overtaken by grief and anger at this unjust death because my father had been taken too quickly, too painfully, and was no more.

Ironically, *Appa* was the only one who seemed to have made peace with the situation. “This is only the beginning,” he had whispered the night before as we cried over his bed; as if we knew

it was the last time we would ever see him in my parents' bed again. Perhaps my father was right after all. Much has changed. Mother meets up with a walking group every once in awhile. My sister is now enrolled in Queens College and developing an interest for photography; I am now studying English literature and preparing for graduate school and other prospective opportunities. We've moved into a small apartment and are greeted daily by our newest family member, a small poodle named Charlie. But with nearly a full year having passed since his death and still, my grief still creeps up on me. It is extremely tempting to hide in that hospital room instead of adjusting to a life without my father.

What does it mean to have courage in spite of all the frightening conditions this world has to offer? Perhaps it will lead to a great movement; perhaps it will lead to nothing at all. When loved ones pass on, how do surviving relatives and friends cope with their loss? In Sonnet XIV, Milton attempted to comfort a family's grieving hearts by depicting paradise and the rewards believers reap upon their arrival in heaven. Do I believe that *Appa* was also guided by Faith, who pointed him in the right direction with "her golden rod?" (Milton) Making peace with my father's death was and continues to be difficult; juggling school, family, and faith without his encouragement and home cooked food seems almost impossible at times. But it is during these times that I look through the window of my father's quiet life and remember his example during that dark period. It is a daily lesson teaching myself that my worth is not based in opulence or affluence, but in kindness and generosity. I plan on volunteering at the Memorial Sloane Kettering Cancer Center next semester to not only repay all the kindness shown to my father, but to serve others as he once did. It is because of his courage that I remind myself to light a candle instead of cursing the darkness (Watkinson).

Glossary:

Appa- Romanized Korean term for Dad.

Oneul mou eelgeuk ka yo?- "What shall we read today?"

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