

As I sit in the duff I think about taking off my chaps.. but I am too tired.. it is lunch time, and I smell of a strong mix of sawdust, bar oil, and sweat.. the day is warm enough to push me into the shade of a tree.. the crew is quiet until blood sugars are restored by the first few mouthfuls.. but quickly the conversation fades away. The cycle plays through and I am surrounded by lightly sleeping firefighters. I have learned to sleep on the ground.. but today I am too conscious.. too alert..sleep is never going to come.

I am struck by the completeness I feel.. the simple pleasure of a mind that wants for nothing.. my life has simplified by becoming a wildland firefighter. I do what I am told to do, I learn, I try hard not to let the crew down, and I want to get home to my family in one piece.. these are not complex goals, but they are not altogether easy things to achieve either. I have to work hard to keep up. I am older than most of the guys on the crew, and I am the new guy. But at 40 years old, I am 5000 miles from home, sitting high in the Colorado foothills, eating lunch on a bed of rotting pine needles, and I am truly happy.

The journey to get here has been long and characterized by one supremely dark moment. When I was 24 I was working for a record company, dj'ing and generally making the best of my post university life. I lived in East London and one day my dad hung himself. It is hard to describe how central to my life he was. He was the pillar on which my entire understanding of the world was based. He was wise, well travelled, supremely kind, talented, and a mentor to me and many others. He was very successful in his work, and he had transcended his field into the public consciousness, meaning that his untimely and shocking death was not only a private grief shared with my family, or even with a large circle of friends that felt his absence very keenly but was also a public event under media scrutiny. However the public or private nature of a suicide rapidly becomes secondary as the powerful blanket of grief settles over your life, every single thought and action is a struggle at first. Little seems possible or worthwhile, possibly because the mind is working so hard to process what has happened that there is room for little else. Simple life functions like eating and sleeping are overwhelming and unimportant at the same time. I don't know whether the shock of suicide or its stigma do more to add to the already massive grief of losing a loved one, but I certainly felt completely lost, hurt and numb in a way that was far beyond any emotional frame of reference that I had.

The numbness in retrospect was a blessing, the body must throw it into the cocktail of pain so that as it dissipates you can bite off chunks of what has happened. It took me over two years to become less of a zombie, and to be honest I remember little of that time.. just the struggle of having to do everything in life for the first time without my dad. But eventually I got my strength back, and weirdly I began to grow beyond it. At first it was hard to see myself as more than a victim or survivor of suicide, it felt very defining. But slowly I noticed a fearlessness in myself that hadn't

been there before. It was subtle and hard to notice at first, however it became clearer and more helpful as time went on. As the years went by I grew far beyond the boy that lost his father in such a tragic fashion into a man that was pretty sure that he had already faced his darkest fear and survived. I looked at others and realized that I had endured a pain that is rare, acute and truly hard to understand, and coming through that experience allowed me to pursue the next 15 years with a strength and maturity that hadn't previously been there.

Almost two years to the day after my father died, I got on a plane to America and with the support of some incredible friends I went on to be very successful in the entertainment business in New York. I was able to retire young and could provide a comfortable future my incredible wife and new young family. I never chased money or success, my father always told me to do a job that I loved and not to worry about anything else. I took his advice, before and after he died, and it paid off. I worked incredibly hard and achieved far more in ten years than I could have ever imagined, but still something was missing.. I needed to keep moving. Success wasn't enough to justify staying still. So one day i just left the business I had helped create, I didn't really know why, I just knew that I needed a change, and again the strength I had gained from surviving his death helped make some very hard decisions.

5 years later, here I am sitting in the dirt eating lunch surrounded by a bunch of guys in dirty yellow shirts. I couldn't be further from home and the majestic visuals of wildland firefighting make me acutely aware of how much I would like to share my new life with my dad, but it is happiness that makes me want to share it with him.

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