

Dear Dad

Dear Dad,

It's been a long time since we last talked, hasn't it? Eight years. Three years since you died. I'm all grown up from the scrawny nine year old I was when you had to leave. I know you wanted to see me after the divorce, but I was terrified of you. I was terrified every time I heard a car rolling down our driveway. I was terrified every time Mom mentioned your name. I was terrified every time I had a nightmare with you in it. I once heard this analogy for domestic violence: when you see a bear in the forest, your pulse quickens, your flight-or-fight response kicks in. Which is great, if you are in a forest with a bear. But what happens when that "bear" is around all the time? What happens when he becomes excessively intoxicated? What happens — when he's your dad?

You weren't always like that. I remember going to rodeos with you, and you making mac and cheese for us, and how much you loved fly-fishing. But mostly I remember the sound of your yells late at night, the way your breath smelled like alcohol, and when we had to call the sheriff. I do not write to you with the intent of reviewing every scar you have left on me, but I need you to know that you hurt me, and my sister, and my mother. Too often I have refused to speak — or even think — about what you did.

Five years later and there I am, sitting across from Mom in the living room as she tells me you were found dead. Suicide. It is May of 2021, and there are thousands of questions racing through my mind. But I just sit there with dry eyes and whisper "oh."

Three years later and here I am, still wondering what you thought as you raised *your* gun up to *your* head. Were you counting your losses? Were you scared of the future? Did you think at all? Last week I talked to a police officer who read me the court case. He said he was sure it was guilt. That's why you did it. But, Dad, if I'm being honest, I carry guilt, too. How can I not when the only thing I felt after you died was relief? I didn't have to watch out anymore.

I want to tell you about who I am now. I've come so far from hiding from you. I have a perfect gpa, friends, and I've become a strong runner. Mom is doing ok, too. She loves her job, and her kids, and she's got a really good life now. I'm running at Portland State University next year, near where you grew up. I'm going to study public health and someday I will be a doctor. It wasn't easy to get to where I am, though. I am still haunted by the fear of becoming you. Sometimes when the last lap of a race gets hard, or when I don't want to finish my homework, I tell myself I will become you if I don't try. But I don't want that to be the reason for my tenacity. So I set more goals. I want to run faster and farther. I want to take harder classes. And this time it's not because I'm scared I will become my father's daughter. It's because I know I never will.

I know you missed me, and you loved me, but I don't want you to worry about me. I am a tough person despite you, because of you, and without you. I am going to accomplish so much. I just wish you were here to see it. I'll never forget how you made me feel, but I want you to know that I'm okay, dad. I'm okay.