

The Lucky Ones

Losing a Loved One amid a Global Pandemic

By Jack Huber

It was early spring. My dad drove down a curvy, ruddy road lined with trees awakening from winter. A hand-painted sign said *Funeral Directors* with an arrow pointing left. He parked his car about fifty yards from the one-story cinder-block building. The funeral director discouraged him from going, but he didn't want his mom to be alone. As he approached the crematorium, he noticed the closest trees wilted, probably from the smoke. Maybe they mourned too.

A steel door opened and the operator walked out. He flicked his lighter and lit a cigarette. Minutes earlier, he loaded my grandmother's body into a furnace. The process is not instantaneous. Even in death, the human body is resilient. The funeral director said it can take an hour and a half. She'd be identified by a metal block stamped with a number tossed into her combustible casket.

Even at a distance, my dad said he heard the growl of the furnace. Was it angry at being called for such a grievous task? The smoke from the operator's cigarette rose into the early evening haze where it mingled with the plume from the smokestack. Somewhere in that gray dust, a few stray ashes of my grandmother escaped into the sky.

Three nights earlier, my dad waited outside the hospital. He had followed the ambulance there and arrived around midnight. For the next ten hours, he waited in the empty parking lot waiting for a phone call from the doctor. Hospitals had been closed to visitors earlier that month, he didn't expect to be let in. At midmorning, the doctor called and said he should come to the intensive care unit.

He walked into the hospital through the emergency room. A nurse took his temperature and asked a series of questions. Have you traveled out of the country? No. Have you been feeling unwell? Not yet. The same questions I was asked when I went for a haircut last week. He asked for a mask, but the nurse told him that they barely had enough for themselves. It was probably a quarantine breach for him to visit his mother in the first place.

The doctor in the ICU spoke softly. It was a solemn routine. There was nothing she could do. I wonder how many times she has had the same conversation since. My grandmother was laying on her right side. My dad pulled a chair closer to her. He was happy she was in a room with a window, the sun shining through. She saw him and tried to speak, but she was on a ventilator and had a tube down her throat. He held her hand and told her she'd be ok. He watched the numbers falling on the blood pressure monitor. It was her time. He kissed her forehead and told her it's ok to go. He told her Johnny —my uncle who died in December— was waiting. She felt the touch of her son's hand holding hers as she quietly slipped away.

By the time he drove to the crematorium, my dad had a non-stop cough. Fever. Chills. Vomiting. No appetite. Aching ribs. Today that might lead to an immediate COVID-19 test, but this was March and the country was ill-prepared. He called his doctor who quickly ruled him out

from getting a test. He was too young, had no preexisting high-risk health conditions, and the tests were showing many false negatives. Stay home and mourn alone. If you can't breathe, call 911.

My dad did his best to isolate himself. His only travel for three weeks was that trip to the crematorium. He was sick enough where he didn't really want to leave the house anyway. My grandmother had spent her last morning cooking and left a hearty stew on the stove and a stocked refrigerator. Jars of marinated eggplant and roasted red peppers, bread, salami, and blocks of Pecorino Romano cheese. She was born in Italy, and it would be a cardinal sin to leave this world without feeding it for the next month. Below in the freezer, fried eggplant, Ziploc bags of cooked escarole, containers of homemade sauce, prime cuts of meat, and homemade breadcrumbs that she'd made earlier that week from a loaf of stale bread. Another freezer in the garage had legs of lamb and four Butterball turkeys. Nothing ever went to waste.

I talked to my dad often during those few weeks. I was in Michigan at college and with no funeral and the risk that came with flying, I wouldn't be going home for a while. He told me about the empty hospital, the furnace operator's cigarette, and those last precious moments with his mother. Conversations tended to branch off from there, usually landing on books. Recently, he said he didn't remember any of those phone calls. Maybe the memory loss was brought on by his fever, or his mind was wiping away a lonely time.

As he recounted his time in quarantine and I lived alone in my apartment 500 miles away, it felt like we were living in fiction. The virus was omnipresent yet its victims were hidden. Masks in grocery stores, an empty college campus, and a bizarre shortage of toilet paper were daily reminders that it was a pandemic. But it seemed like I was beginning to lose hold of what a

pandemic means. Fifty thousand deaths. One hundred thousand. Two hundred. Those are dead Americans, why am I upset about using paper towels instead?

My grandmother was one of the lucky ones. She tested negative for COVID-19, which gives some peace of mind. Perhaps her death was not preventable, although her final day and the aftermath echo the experience of those killed by the virus. She was fortunate that the doctor who watched over her in those final moments thought it safe enough for my dad to visit her. For many relatives of coronavirus patients, the last time they would see their loved ones would be at the entrance of a hospital when a nurse hidden under PPE, personal protective equipment, wheeled them away. Inside America's hospitals, it is a chaotic and cluttered scene. Critical patients are flipped onto their stomach to help open the lungs and improve oxygenation, which makes them seem dead before their time has come. The doors are closed and the patients lie alone, with a tangle of tubes and wires connecting bodies to machines, some have straps around their wrists to stop them from pulling out their ventilator.

With family members prohibited from visiting, many hospitals have turned to video calls. Voice calls are not an option once a patient has been put on a ventilator. As I log in to an evening Zoom call for class, someone else opens a Zoom call for final words with a loved one. Nurses use iPads to connect families with patients isolated in the hospital. But it is a clunky, artificial goodbye. I read about a chaplain who helped dying COVID-19 patients communicate with their family. He described the difficulty of manipulating an iPad tucked into a plastic bag to prevent the spread of the disease. He recalls trying to flip the camera so a family can see their loved one, but he could not quite find the right button, pausing their final moment for technical difficulties.

Funerals have been able to resume for some, although they look much different. Social distancing must be enforced. No embracing the family. Temperature checks and medical questions at the door. In New York, mourners are limited to 25% capacity at the church or funeral parlor. I spoke with a Roman Catholic priest about his experiences during the pandemic. He presided over a funeral Mass and noticed that temperature checks were not enforced at the door, neither was social distancing. At the graveside, he was the only person wearing a mask. These situations put him in an awkward place. His primary purpose is a religious one, and to help the families find closure in that difficult moment. “Funerals are for survivors,” he said, and he needs to be a calm center for them to turn to. However, when these ceremonies present a risk to not only the family but to him as an older man at risk for the virus, what is he supposed to do? Ultimately, he said nothing.

I asked the priest what end-of-life sacraments look like during the pandemic. He said that Anointing of the Sick and the Viaticum (colloquially known as last rites) can now be performed in New York, if the proper protocols are followed. He recommends that the sacrament be performed before someone is admitted to the hospital. If that isn’t possible, the hospital needs to approve it ahead of time, and it all needs to be performed with masks and at a distance. If a person dies without having received the sacrament, according to the Church, they die with their sins unforgiven. Every death from the virus is a reminder that despite some of our best efforts, we were too late and there is no atonement for the dead. My dad told me that a chaplain was there on my grandmother’s last day. There’s comfort in that. He stood with my dad and said the Lord’s Prayer, without masks and holding hands.

Three months had passed since my grandmother died and I was back home. We unzipped our last frozen bag of her meatballs. The occasion seemed right. It would have been her 80th

birthday. The pandemic was still ravaging most states but had leveled out in New York. The curve had been flattened after the deaths of more than 30,000 New Yorkers. Governor Cuomo commissioned a poster. *Love Wins*, it proclaimed. Still, there are no services for my grandmother. The bag of meatballs had her handwriting on it. 3-1-20 in Sharpie. My dad remembers that day well. When he woke the process had already begun. The kitchen table had been commandeered by aluminum trays and the countertops by meat. When he returned from work, the house was filled with the aroma of fresh meatballs and Italian spices. My grandmother was still hard at work in the kitchen, filling the last few trays. There was an underlying mathematical precision to her work. She never counted or measured anything, yet the total number of meatballs at the end was always even and pleasing. Multiples of twelve usually. Sometimes a square 144.

We didn't have any of her sauce left, so we heated the meatballs in a pot of Paul Newman's instead. My dad took one out, set it on a plate, and sliced it in half with a fork. It was moist and squishy, but not excessively so. Breadcrumbs and the signature trinity of meats — beef, pork, and veal — held it together. My dad asks if I could take a piece of meatball and bring it to a lab to analyze the exact composition of spices and ratios of ingredients. I said it was possible, but we both knew there was no replication. He cut the meatball again, steam still rising, this time into quarters. My grandmother was feeding us one last meal. This was her funeral.