

The moments before the worst moment of my life

“Time of death, 4:02 p.m.,” an EMT said.

On June 9, 2020, I stood in my living room, hugging my father’s lifeless body, begging God to bring him back. Through the roar of my grief, I wondered if there was any such God who cared.

Three months before I lost my father, COVID-19 had just begun to spread, ending my sophomore year at Pike County Central High School. On March 12, 2020, the intercom came on in my 5th-period biology class, and I heard the words that I didn’t know at the time would impact the rest of the school year, all up until the beginning of my junior year of high school.

“The Pike County school district will be releasing early at 1:00 p.m. today and will not return until further notice due to COVID-19,” my principal, Dr. Cline, announced.

My small hometown, Pikeville, hadn’t had anyone test positive for COVID-19 yet, but there were positive tests in the surrounding counties. With Pike County being the biggest county in Kentucky, you would think we would have a higher chance of sickness. Pikeville is located at the main end of the county, closest to West Virginia. My small hometown is as Eastern Kentucky as Eastern Kentucky can get.

When I say I’m from Pikeville, I mean Kimper. Kimper is 30 minutes from Pikeville, where the nearest hospital is. Hardly anyone knows where Pikeville is. Therefore, certainly no one had heard of Kimper unless they were from my side of the county. Kimper consists of no stoplights, one gas station, coal mines, curvy roads, and one Dollar General that we refer to as the “Kimper Walmart.”

Shortly after my school shut down, my life started to shut down as my father first started getting sick. On March 16, 2020, my mom was still working in her office, 30 minutes away from our

home. On the other hand, I was home adjusting to doing school online. While working on my high school yearbook, I heard my dad screaming for me.

“Come here, Clarissa,” he said.

Concerned, I walked from my bedroom to my parents' bedroom to see my father unable to make it to the bathroom. I helped him to the bathroom, walked him to the couch, brought him a Bud Light from his dingy, old-school mini fridge dedicated to only alcohol, and watched TV with him.

His health kept declining. The next day, I remember my father talking “out of his head.” He wasn’t his normal self. Usually, he would be wide awake before 10:30 a.m., already on his 3rd beer of the day, and watching Duck Dynasty. For some people, drinking three beers before noon could seem like something only an alcoholic could do. Admittedly, my dad was an alcoholic. However, it didn’t affect him anymore. He became immune. He drank to be normal rather than to be drunk.

Aside from the drinking, my dad was unlike any other dad. I looked up to him. I will never forget the characteristics he carried.

He was a vibrant conversationalist who could strike up a dialogue with anyone, effortlessly drawing people in with his genuine warmth. If you were walking down an aisle in Walmart past my dad, there is no chance that he wouldn't ask you how your day is going, especially if you were in the beer aisle.

Passionate about politics and history, he had a straightforward approach to life, cussing at the TV every time Hillary Clinton was shown. He never shied away from sharing his thoughts, even if he was just talking to himself.

His handwriting resembled a children's doodle. He wouldn't write anything unless it was with a green pen, his favorite color. He always said he liked green because it was a nod to his appreciation for money, but it also symbolized his love for growth and connection with others.

He treated my mom and I with unwavering respect and love, always prioritizing family. Above all, he truly embodied the spirit of a people person until his last breath, fiercely protective and devoted to those he cared about.

His communication on the first day he went to the hospital was familiar to my family. He used to talk “out of his head” when he got pneumonia. Once, he tried to convince my mother and me that my grandmother was riding a bicycle around the living room when I was a child.

This time, it was worse; it was weirder. His words didn't make sense. He was mumbling— almost like he was dreaming out loud. However, he was very much awake.

He couldn't get off the couch, constantly moving it with his body weight. He wasn't eating or drinking— not even Bud Light, his favorite.

Seven days later, on March 23, 2020, my mom came into my room and woke me up. As a high school student during the pandemic, I slept all day and did schoolwork at night. It was around two in the afternoon when my mother said she was calling an ambulance for my father, and I rushed to the living room.

Once the EMTs arrived, I guided them through our house, over the dog piss stains of our gray wooden floor and to my father who was still talking “out of his head” on our gray, cigarette burnt couch. Urine soaked his pants, adding yet another stain to the worn-down couch. Frozen, I watched the paramedics lift his still figure onto a stretcher. Their grim faces tensed as sirens wailed and a cold shiver ran down my spine. My mother followed the ambulance to the hospital, but because of the pandemic and the hospital rule of one visitor at a time, I had to stay home, staring at the couch my father had once sat on.

I spent the day praying. I didn't eat, drink, speak, or think about anything else except my dad. My mom came home later that day to fill me in.

"He's okay," she said in her deep Eastern Kentucky accent. "But Clarissa, he is on 100% life support."

Life support was something my father always said he never wanted. When he woke up, he was mad, but thankful to be alive.

My mom visited him daily and came home with updates. The doctor told her he had a respiratory infection that turned into pneumonia, which explained his talking "out of his head."

No person in Pike County had tested positive for COVID-19 at the time. They tested my dad for the deadly virus as soon as he got to the hospital, and my mother was tested two days later— it came back negative. They still quarantined him and told us to quarantine as well. Three days later, we were told my dad's test also came back negative.

My mother contacted his family doctor, Dr. Parker, to inform him of the situation my father was in. The doctor told my mom that he believed my father was the first case of COVID-19 in Pike County. He also insinuated that the health department did not want to admit it was a positive test.

Thirteen days later, my dad was finally released from the hospital with an oxygen tank. When he opened up the car door in our driveway to get out, along with my dog, I ran to hug him. He was sore, weak, and had grown a small beard. The first thing he said was that he couldn't wait to shave. He had a unique sense of humor. When he said that, I thought to myself that maybe everything really would be okay.

Everything was normal, or so I thought.

On June 7th, 2020, my best friends at the time, Emily and Trisha, came over and we finally got to be girls together again. My dad didn't like the idea that we were having a sleepover while COVID-19 was still going on. However, the quarantine was lifted, and all three of us hadn't been anywhere in weeks.

My mom ordered us a tent from Amazon, her lifeline. Instead of going camping, we decided to set the tent up and sleep in my backyard. Emily, Trisha, and I alone couldn't figure out how to set the tent up. My parents came out to help, but like us, they were clueless, even with the instructions. We resorted to asking my neighbor for help, who eventually figured it out. When we were done, we had the perfect set-up: an air mattress, tons of blankets, an extension cord, an Alexa, snacks and drinks.

Before we ventured into the tent for the night, my parents ignited a fire under our metal two-car carport for us to prepare s'mores. The carport was built in a rush by one of my dad's friends, but somehow in perfect condition, going right to the edge of our light green double-wide trailer. Everything seemed fine until it wasn't. My dad began struggling to breathe like no other. While he experienced breathing problems to start with, this was different. He returned inside to use his oxygen machine to regain his breath. After that, everything appeared fine.

After a night of fun, we woke up around 5 a.m. and decided to go back into the house to sleep. Bugs were swarming the tent, the dewy morning air made us feel disgusting, and I wanted nothing more than to shower.

After waking up for the second time, the clock said 10:04 a.m. My mom was in her office working, and Trisha decided to make us all breakfast. While the smell of fresh biscuits filled the house, my dad was asleep on the couch. This wasn't unusual— he slept on the couch most nights to be elevated due to being crushed in the coal mines.

My dad was a coal miner in West Virginia up until I was three years old. On a cold, rainy morning, he took a shift for his friend and went in to work for what he thought would be a

normal day on the job. However, he was rushed to the hospital 3 hours into his shift. After an excavator put too much pressure on a heavy piece of coal, it came crashing down and took my dad with it. He ended up having to have a double knee replacement, a hip replacement and had to learn how to live with an unfixable broken back.

After groaning and attempting to face the pain, he woke up soon and asked me to help him get up. Still in his underwear, I helped him put his pants on, stand up to his walker, and lead him to the bathroom. I stood outside the bathroom door waiting for him to call me. I helped him up and grabbed him a beer. Thankfully, he didn't notice that one was missing from the night before.

By the time I got him settled down in the kitchen, Trisha was done making breakfast. She made my dad a plate as I laid his medicine out on the counter for him to take. We all sat and ate with him before he asked me if I could help him back to the couch and turn on CNN on the television for him.

Trisha, Emily, and I headed back to my room to watch Netflix. Three hours into Gossip Girl, my mom came into my room and told us to get ready to leave so we could take Emily and Trisha back home.

Before I could start helping them grab their things, I heard my dad yelling for me to help him up. I helped him walk to the bathroom once again. By the time I came back, Emily, Trisha, and my mom were waiting to leave. Feeling rushed, I helped my dad back to the couch, brought him another beer along with a piece of Werther's candy, and turned his oxygen on for him.

As we were in the car on the way to drop Trisha and Emily off, my mom said we should hurry so we could get back to help my dad in case he needed anything. After dropping them off, my mom called the house phone because it would have taken a miracle for my dad to learn how to use a cell phone. She wanted to ask my dad if he wanted anything for dinner. He didn't pick up the phone, which was unusual for him considering we laid it next to him as we left.

Finally, we arrived back home and found my dad in the same spot he was in as we left. Only this time, he was talking “out of his head” again.

While there were moments of clarity where what he said did make sense, he just assured us that he was fine. He stayed like this for the rest of the night and honestly, my mother and I thought it was normal after inhaling so much smoke. We got ready for bed and told him if he was still talking “out of his head” in the morning, we were making him go to the hospital.

I didn’t admit it to my mom, but I was scared. Thoughts flooded through my mind— “What if this ends up like last time and he has to go on life support? What if he never gets better?”

While my mom drifted off to sleep, my dad slept on the couch again, which was expected for his back problems. I went to my room and tried to sleep but I couldn’t shake those thoughts off of my mind. I found myself constantly going into the living room to make sure he was still breathing throughout the night.

After tossing and turning all night, I finally fell into a deep sleep. The first time I looked at the clock when I opened my eyes was at exactly 3:01 p.m. I wish I could say I woke up on my own. Instead, my mom woke me up wearing a tear-stained shirt.

“Clarissa, I’m about to call an ambulance for your daddy,” my mom said.

Thinking nothing of it because this has happened before, I replied with, “Okay, I’m coming in there.”

I wish the conversation would have stopped there, but it only escalated.

“But Clarissa, I don’t think he’s breathing,” my mom said with tears rolling down her face.

I couldn't reply. I couldn't speak. I couldn't breathe. All I could do was run to the living room, hoping what my mother just said wasn't true. Once I arrived in the living room, my mom started to explain what had happened.

She said my dad laid on the couch sleeping all day while my mom worked in her office, surrounded by three computer screens and a vintage dark brown desk, which doubles as our "junk room." She said she left her office frequently throughout the day to check on him.

My mom said that he insisted that he was fine and was making sense of his words. She said he was too weak to eat, although she offered him food. While my mom begged him to let her call an ambulance for him, he refused. Then, he did what my mom described as the "unimaginable."

My dad said to my mom, "No, baby. Tomorrow I will feel better; I promise."

For most couples, this may be considered normal. My mom and dad were different from any other couple. He hadn't called her baby in five years. As a child, I don't remember them ever being affectionate. I only saw them kiss when my mom left for work.

After my dad reassured my mom he was okay, my mom said she went back to her dimly lit office and got on her virtual meeting. She wasn't able to check on him for three hours. When she was able to check on him next, it was too late. He was gone. My mom blamed herself, saying she could've prevented it if she had checked on him more. We think he knew what was coming from the way he called my mom "baby."

After standing frozen on the cold, tiled kitchen floor while my mom updated me, I tried to put his oxygen back on him and told my mom to turn the machine back on. Later on, I found out that she had turned it off when she realized he was already gone. She said she turned it back on because of the unnerving state I was in, to help me process things.

I put my hands on his already blue, cold cheeks and shook his head, screaming for him to wake up. My mom stood there crying and watching as her daughter realized her father was gone.

“Call 911 now,” I screamed to my mother. “Tell them to hurry!”

While my mom called 911, I ran outside, barefoot on my gravel driveway, and screaming for my neighbors. I went up to their door with my foot bleeding from running on our gravel driveway and begged them to come help. The woman who answered the door said she knew CPR. She sat her newborn baby down in a crib and ran over to my house with me— the house that would normally be filled with love and laughter but instead filled with screams and cries.

“It’s too late,” she said.

Still, she performed CPR for the sake of us wanting someone to just try.

I went on the porch once again, barefoot and gaining more splinters, to flag down the ambulance. While waiting, I called my cousin, who was practically raised by my parents, and told her what was happening. She was driving on the interstate, pulled over, and screamed as loud as she could. Afterward, she turned the car around and started the journey to Eastern Kentucky.

The house phone rang shortly after the ambulance arrived and the caller ID showed it was my uncle, my dad's brother. My mom was too torn up to answer. I was, too, but I still answered.

“Hey little one,” my uncle R.J. said. “Where’s your daddy at?”

I froze. How was I supposed to tell him his brother was lying on the couch, dead? I handed the phone to my mom and let her explain the news.

After checking his vitals, the EMTs told my mother and I that we could come say our last goodbyes before he was removed from our home. I grabbed my dog, Sadie, and my mom as we lay on his chest to say our final goodbyes until the funeral three days later.

After 10 minutes of lying with my father, an EMT came up to us saying, "It's time."

It wasn't time. There was never a time my father was supposed to die when I was 15 years old. My mom dragged me away from my father's body and I heard the words that still echo in my mind to this day.

"Time of death. 4:02 p.m.," an EMT said.