

5 December 2022

Dear Jacqueline Woodson,

After reading your book, *Before the Ever After* it really changed the way I think and the way I see my situation. After reading your book, it made me feel so many emotions at once. I relate to the book in a whole different way because nobody had the dad I had.

My father was absolutely amazing. He risked his whole life for my family. My dad had type 1 diabetes as a child. He always struggled with keeping himself healthy because that wasn't his main focus. His main focus was working. He would be vomiting constantly or really sick, but he would get up at 4 am to go to work. He would do all he could to provide for my family, making sure we weren't ever left without something. Other than being such a hardworking dad he still had the time to make us smile, happy, and laugh. He was the funniest person I've met. He could make anyone laugh by having the simplest conversation. He would get down on his hands and knees to play horse with me and my siblings. He would play hide-n-seek in the dark, he would trip over something, causing us to burst out in laughter. He was always such a happy person until he wasn't. He started getting super sick and he wasn't himself anymore. He suddenly stopped playing with us. His behavior changed drastically. He wouldn't really smile. He was always kind of sad, and he got moody. He got really serious sometimes. I knew the reason he was acting that way was because he was in serious pain. He was hurting so much it would hurt me to even see it. I missed my old dad, like ZJ. Your hero changing into this whole different person, like mine and ZJ's father, it hurts. Especially having to watch your father go through something like that.

My father suddenly passed away March 9, 2022. He had a diabetic stroke, causing his brain to bleed. When he got to the doctors they told my mom there was no chance of saving him.

For me, it felt like the whole world had ended. My hero left the world 9 months ago leaving me behind. The person that could always and would always make me laugh. If I was ever having a bad day, I would run to my dad. The human being that I would sit on the floor with, sobbing into each other's arms. The person that would always brighten my day with one word. My dad who would tell me which path to take. Who would always tell me never to give up. The only person that actually understood had left me. While ZJ's dad didn't leave him physically, mentally he was a different person, and that pain is something I can sadly relate to. My dad would always reassure me that everything was going to be okay. When he left this world at 11:12 am I felt the whole world caving in on me. I felt like I was drowning in deep water. I could feel myself getting sadder and sadder every day that would pass. Everyone was pushing themselves away from me. They were giving up on me. The worst part was I was giving up on myself. Like ZJ in the story it seemed that nobody cared, not even family or friends.

Somebody finally grabbed my hand and pulled me out. My family helped me so much. They told me never to give up and they started making me feel happy again. My family taught me to value what we have in life before it's gone. Both mine and ZJ's family were there for us. They never left our sides once. I will always love my family for helping me at my hardest times. My family now is the only reason I'm still trying not to give up. Your book helped me more than anything. It showed me so many things. It helped me realize there will always be someone there. I learned I'm not alone. There is someone out there who feels the same. Even though it sucks going through something like this, it helps knowing you're not going crazy. It helped me see things that my eyes couldn't see before. It helped me learn that it's ok to feel sadness, hurt, and pain. It helped me see that it's ok to grieve. I know I have someone who relates to me.

How do you say goodbye to the person that was going to walk you down the aisle? How do I say goodbye to the dad that was going to dance with me at my wedding? How do you say goodbye to someone that was with you for your entire life? You can't. Thank you, ZJ, for letting me know some things are impossible to do.

With appreciation,

Cynthia Gonzalez