

In December of 1996, my dad was diagnosed with a rare, malignant, metastatic, and ultimately inoperable brain tumor. The prognosis was three months, but he would live for three more years. I remember my first grade classmates and I following along with small slate chalkboards as we were learning how to read and write. I struggled with the material, and felt extremely frustrated and embarrassed. We took a break at one point, and I was out in the lobby getting water from the drinking fountain. I rubbed my eyes nonchalantly, but my teacher, Mrs. Holt, spotted me and asked if I was feeling sad about my dad. Rather taken aback, I lied, and said yes. It was easier at the time to admit that which I could not understand, and the twofold nature of that sentiment came to light only in more recent years.

During this last year, I have been thinking a lot about food - what we eat, why we eat, the colors we eat, how we eat - the curiosities go on. There is a lot of inherent joy and grief when it comes to food, especially in the form of nachos: the crunch, the melt, the spice, the salt - often cooled down with dips paired along like sour cream and guacamole. You start with a mountain, you end with crumbs and swiftly unbuttoned pants. Recipes for nachos are as vast as they come - from a simple three cheese blend, to 24-hour root beer marinated pulled pork with cilantro aioli and candied pecans.

Nachos were the cornerstone dinner for our Friday nights when I was a kid - there must have been hundreds of these Friday nights, and I can still smell everything coming from the kitchen, and feel the particular brightness of the overhead flood lights. My parents would pair it with homemade frozen margaritas, affectionately referring to them as *greeters*. The jarring metallic sounds of pulverizing ice would interrupt whatever it was my sister and I were trying to watch on tv in the living room. I would smash my ears closed with my fingers, both in fright and annoyance.

My dad always made the nachos, and the recipe was simple: tortilla chips, copious amounts of melted shredded cheese, sliced grilled steak, and pickled jalapeños. The key to great nachos was in the layers - always the layers. Shreds of cheese and other toppings

needed to be woven *between* the layers of chips, otherwise everything would be gone after a few bites. It was a simple meal. It was a comfort meal. It is a meal I wish I could share with my dad once more.

I do not remember a single thing I ate on the day that my dad died. In the weeks leading to April 27th, 2000, the kitchen was bursting with casseroles and cakes and cookies and other various lidded containers of comfort one might make for the loved ones of those who are about to experience death. At school, we were working on a group project constructing dioramas of a house that had to include a battery-operated light source. At home, I learned the terms *meals-on-wheels* and *hospice*.

At his funeral, I sat at the front as family members often do. It was not until turning around and proceeding out of the basilica that I saw the pews were so packed, hoards of people were standing along the surrounding walls. If the key moments in the timeline of this narrative did not age me already, the mentioning of slate chalkboards likely did. Grief no longer courses through my 34-year-old body the way it did when only 10. The grief I experienced then felt more like I was swimming through the motions. Today, social media tells me repeatedly that my aching hips are actually holding hostage deeply rooted emotions - that all I need is 30 days of somatic stretching to release everything.

TikTok often serves as my manic lullaby, and I fully acknowledge the addictive grasp it has on me. In the swift swipe of my thumb at any time I choose, I can watch people tell me how to eat, how to dress, how to paint, how many squats to a fatter ass, how to lose that stubborn belly pooch, how to deep fry a whole pizza, how to make no fuss keto soy matcha green tea protein bites - *organic* of course. One night, taking a pause from the more surface-level content, the algorithm aligned to tell me about Einstein's idea of time: more or less, we are all experiencing it on a timescape basis, with all of the past and all of the future already in existence. Our loved ones are simply further ahead on this timescape, just beyond a hill we cannot yet see.

My dad loved to sail. He loved stand up comedy, cold beer, and reading hoards of books. We both shared a love for horror movies. He taught me what sex meant over a game of chess. He was a doctor, and had begun family practice at an office just up the road right before the diagnosis. When he had to turn in his medical license, he started referring to every day as a Saturday. He read the Bible in its entirety. He graduated at the top of his class in high school in Columbus, Ohio, and attended the University of Notre Dame on a Fulbright scholarship. I told him once about a dream I had just the night before, and he suggested I try and draw it. He often took me to our favorite hole-in-the-wall buffet called China Wok, and we would almost always go next door to Mega Play right after, playing games and eating orange sherbet. He taught me how to soothe a stomach ache by taking deep breaths, long before mindfulness became a buzzword. He loved to laugh, and make others do the same. My mom often said he was the first to arrive at a party, and almost always the last to leave.

So where do I leave this? I have never really been great with goodbyes - bursting into tears when friends moved away, on the last days of school, final moments in the doorways of rented apartments. I have a vivid memory of asking my dad - *what are we doing after this* - while on vacation in Atlantic Beach, North Carolina. I do not recall his exact response, but remember him telling me patiently (and repeatedly) to *try and enjoy the moment*. That is a tough one for a Virgo/Leo cusp such as myself, always wanting to ensure that this moment will be great, as will the next, therefore making this very moment all the more better. But no moment is a given. Nachos certainly make any moment better - a dwindling piled-high plethora of toppings serve as a reminder that time is fleeting, but life is sweet. Grief does not wait. Neither does joy. Perhaps the answer is somewhere in the middle. Perhaps it is simply the layers between now and then.