Daddy, Don’t Die - 1956

My first memory was watching my dad die right in front of me.

I wish I had more memories of him. The ones I do have — I’ve never been sure whether I lived them or built them from stories my mother and brother told me. I held onto them anyway.

One memory was waiting on the stoop of our 141st Street building with my brother Pat for my dad to come home from his job at the Plymouth Rock meat plant in the Bronx, where he worked as a butcher. I was maybe three and a half, and my brother Pat was seven. I saw him coming down the block and ran to meet him. He ran his hands through my hair, picked me up, and swung me around. He smelled of meat and alcohol.

My other memory was going with Pat to the Irish bar around the corner on Willis Avenue to bring my dad home one night. He was drunk and tried to wave us off, but we wouldn't leave. Finally, he stumbled home with the two of us propping him up.

Both memories feel like ghosts — there, but hard to hold onto.

What I had beyond those memories was a handful of stories my mother told me and three photographs. One photo was of my parents together, both smiling, looking genuinely happy. Another one was of my dad in his US Army uniform. And then there was the one I've always treasured most — my dad at El Floridita, Hemingway's bar in Havana. He was in civilian clothes. He looked cool, handsome, completely at ease — like a man who belonged anywhere he landed. He was on his way to the Philippines to fight against the Japanese in the Pacific in World War II.

My mother told me stories about the meat plant — how they would put all the waste into the hot dogs, which was why she'd never eat hot dogs. Then there were a few stories about the war — the horrors my dad witnessed the Japanese commit during the war, as well as stories of how some of the US soldiers would collect teeth from the Japanese they killed.

That was the sum of what I had left of my father. Except for the one memory I've spent a lifetime wishing I didn't have.

It was a regular August night. I was on the living room floor playing with my toy soldiers. I was shy of turning four. My father was coughing in the bedroom — not a new sound, but that night it came in waves, each one harder than the last.

"Dad, are you okay?"

He answered with a cough that scared me. I got up and walked down the hall.

My mother was already in there with him. I stood in the doorway and watched him cough violently, and then I saw blood come out of his mouth onto the bedsheet.

My mother cried out, “Oh my God, Pat — go get the doctor. He’s dying.”

I started screaming. "Daddy, don't die. Daddy, please don't die."

My brother, Pat, bolted out the door and flew down the stairs. My mother pressed a cool, wet cloth to my father's forehead and prayed. Her Hail Marys and my screaming filled our small bedroom.

Ten minutes later, my brother burst back through the door, breathless, his face red with anger.

"The doctor won't come. The bastard won't come. I pleaded with him. The doctor said he had patients that he couldn't leave.”

My mother went back to praying. Pat raged, and I kept crying for my dad. Nobody was coming.

Pat ran upstairs to the superintendent, who was the only person in the building who had a phone in their apartment. The superintendent called the hospital. My brother came back down and told my mother that an ambulance was on its way.

By then, my father had gone quiet.

When the EMTs arrived, they moved quickly. We stepped back and watched in silence. One of them checked his pulse and listened to his heart.

"I'm sorry, Miss. He's gone. There's nothing we can do."

Something broke in all of us. My mother pulled us in, and we all cried together, the three of us. Pat kept saying, "It ain't fair. It ain't fair."

A little while later, they came and took him away. Not his body — my dad. That's the only way I've ever been able to say it. They took my dad away.

I would see him once more, in the funeral parlor, made up, still and cold. I was too young to understand what I was looking at.

I turned four without him. He never made it to forty-eight.

The Irish wake was at my cousin's apartment in the Bronx. Not the stereotypical Irish kind — there was little drinking, quiet voices, adults comforting my mother while the kids played in the other room, and I tried to stay out of the way.

I have no other memories of him in the casket. In fact, I have almost no other memories until I was past six.

For most of my life, I remembered going with my brother Pat to see the doctor that night. When I finally talked to my brother about it as an adult, he told me I never went with him.

I still wish that wasn’t my first memory.

But it’s the one I can’t ever let go of.