Lukas Aeschlimann

10/22/2014

“Mr. Aeschlimann, it’s time to wake up.”, says the nurse.

It’s October 22nd, 2014. I am sitting in a hospital room working on homework on my computer. My mom, similarly, is doing her actual work on her computer. Next to her are two pamphlets the doctor gave us a couple of hours ago. One is for a potential treatment, the other a hospice. My dad is asleep on the bed. He’s been asleep for two or three hours now, which is good. The pain from the cancer usually makes it too hard for him to relax into sleep. Today, they gave him something to help him relax, and so far he’s been able to take a decently long nap. At one point, he made these funny hand gestures and expressions in his sleep. It looked like he was talking to someone in a dream. I wonder who.

Regardless, the nap time is over, and now it’s time for him to wake up and eat dinner.

“Mr. Aeschlimann, time to wake up”, she says again, giving him a little nudge.

No response.

“Mr. Aeschlimann?”

The nurse glances nervously over at my mom, whose eyes widen. I feel my stomach implode. At least I think I do. Everything’s suddenly hazy. My mom and I stand up and walk over. My mom asks if I want to step outside for a moment. I don’t know if I do. I’m in such a daze though, I just do it.

After stepping out into the hallway I just try to process what is going on. I’m still not quite sure. Everything just feels weird. Like a dream, or an out-of-body experience. I just can’t quite connect with myself. I’m shocked back to reality, however, when I see my Aunt and Uncle walking down the hall, along with my little cousins, one 5, the other coming up on 2, coming to visit Uncle Larry. My gut seems to sink down even further. I walk quickly over to them. If I’m showing my emotions on the outside at all, they don’t notice. They just seem to be very happy to see me, smiling and waving. I don’t quite register what they’re saying.

“Um, I, uh, I think maybe you guys should go down and wait in the lobby. For a little bit. We’ll, uh, we’ll call when you guys can come up.”

My Aunt and Uncle’s faces snap from smiles to frowns and furrowed brows. They do as I suggest and take my cousins down to the lobby. As they walk away, I can hear Baz, the 5–year-old, speak.

“Why is Lukas talking so funny?”

After a minute, my mom emerges from the room crying. She confirms that dad’s died. A hospital chaplain takes us to her office, gives us pamphlets. When we return to the room, she asks if we have last words we’d like to say to him. I ask if I can say mine alone. My mom says her words first, then I go in and shut the door so there’s no one else in the room. Just me and “dad.”

Except it’s not dad. Not quite anymore. They say that dead people look like they’re asleep. They have no idea what the fuck they’re talking about. Dead people don’t look asleep. They look dead. The skin is a sickly yellowish-green shade, easily the most disgusting color I’ve ever seen. One eyelid is half-open, the other only a quarter open. The worst part is the mouth. It’s gaping open, all strength gone from the jaw muscles. It looks like whatever spark of life was in there has been ripped or vomited violently out through the mouth, leaving nothing behind. As I start to speak, my eyes water up. Every muscle in my face screams at me to cry. I really, really want to. I don’t though. Not can’t. Don’t. I strengthen my face, force my tears back, back in me as far as I can. I can’t cry right now. I have things I need to say. Crying can wait.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

I don’t remember exactly what I said to my dad that night, not that I’d share it if I did. Whatever was said there was said between him and the me of back then. It was a private moment, meant for one particular place at one particular time. If anything, I’m glad I don’t remember what I said; it’s more appropriate that way. At least, that’s what half my brain says. The other half says “Lukas, you stupid fucking idiot, what is wrong with you, why is your memory so fucking garbage you stupid little shit, I know you can’t remember the exact words people say even *five fucking minutes* after they’ve said it, but come the fuck on it was your *fucking Dad dying* and you couldn’t even be bothered to make some fucking space in your thick fucking skull for that?” But I don’t think my dad would have wanted me to listen to that half. And not just because of all the cursing.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

After saying the words I won’t remember, I step back out into the hall. My mom is talking to the chaplain. Not a lot is being said that truly needs to be said. That changes with me back out. The body will be taken away later tonight, to be prepared for a funeral followed by a cremation, as he would have wanted. Details will need to be finalized, but that’s enough for now. The last thing we need to do for tonight is grab our stuff and head home.

The body that used to house Larry Aeschlimann is still lying on the bed in the room as we pack up our stuff and his, looking less and less like something which was once a living person and more and more like a prop he would have made in his special effects shop (well, not quite. It would look more real if he’d made it). If what I felt earlier was a weight being dropped on me, what I now feel is the way one feels after working out with heavy weights. Lighter, tired, something far removed from numb, despite a distinct familial resemblance. I double, triple, sometimes even quadruple check every nook and cranny, the way I’ve done everytime we’ve left something like a hotel room, making sure we’re not leaving anything behind. Some last words of goodbye, a kiss planted on a forehead that feels like cold, hard rubber, and we leave the room for the last time.

Everything feels surreal as we walk down the hall. Like someone gave the world a thin coating of fiction. There’s a sense of tilt to everything, kind of like how one feels after spinning very fast and stopping, only muted and steady. As we go we receive a buffet of condolences from the various nurses and hospital staff we pass, each of whom got to know Larry during his stay, and, unsurprisingly, all quite liked him. The confirmation from outside sources doesn’t make this seem any more real, though by the time we’ve gone out the corner exit of the hospital floor, the tilt has… well, no, it hasn’t really gone away. Not even close. But at least we’re out of the floor.

Of course, exiting the floor is only the first step of exiting the hospital itself. Doing that just puts you in a little room with elevators. Once you’ve taken the elevator down to the *second* floor, **not** the ground floor, then you turn left and walk a short-ways towards two large double doors. When entering this wing of the hospital, you have to wait to be buzzed in, but when going out the doors open as easy as any other. Then you move down another hallway that quickly becomes a kind of long balcony overlooking an expansive lobby wide and tall enough to fit several of the smaller medical practices I’ve been in stacked on top of each other. Well, that might be an exaggeration. But it certainly feels that big. When the balcony becomes a hallway again, you turn left to go down a flight of stairs walled off from the lobby, and turn right into the lobby at the bottom of the stairs, away from the restroom entrance to your left. When you first go through that process, it feels long, but subsequent visits shorten the walk. As we exit this night, it feels long again.

One more obstacle before we can leave. My mom and I hold the tall glass doors open for a group of very happy people entering the hospital. They thank us on the way in, telling us excitedly that a relative has just given birth inside the hospital, and they’re coming to see the new baby. My mom and I congratulate them and close the door behind us. We walk a few feet, turn to each other, and laugh.