

Goodbye

Sunday, August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2010

“Can you go down to forty dollars?” I ask the vendor. He looks down, looks back up at me. “Yeah, sure” he replies. “Excellent. I’ll take it.” I am now the owner of a new, Dion Phaneuf, Toronto Maple Leafs jersey. I’m ecstatic. I cannot believe the deal I just got. I can’t wait to tell my dad and show him. I’ll wear it when we go to the Leafs games this year. Hockey season is just around the corner and I’m looking forward to our shared experience of Leafs games.

I saunter around the rest of Hall A inside the Direct Energy Centre at the CNE and head back towards the red booth that sells garden bulbs. I mainly work for the CNE, but on some occasions, as I am friends with the booth owners, I will moonlight as a bulb seller. The girl working there is a Leafs fan so I tell her about the deal I just scored. She says she needs a quick bathroom break so I offer to watch the booth while she runs off. My CNE boss comes by and we begin to chat about the day’s events and what the night shift will consist of. I worked the day shift, so I tease about how tough he will have it on the night shift. We laugh as I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. A text message, but from who? My mates, seeing if there are plans for brews tonight? Or perhaps the girl I’ve been talking to the past week. I reach into my pocket, pull out my phone and read the text:

“Come 2 hospital when u can. Dad really not good! Room 403. Txt or call if u need directions.”

It’s from my brother. My dad has been in the hospital for the past month or so. His health has not been very good in the past couple years. He had been getting better, but when he was hit with an infection of sorts a month or so ago, he went in and has been recovering ever since. Once the infection was resolved, something else had come up which kept him in there. I hadn’t seen him in a week because of my shifts at the CNE, but I had talked to him over the phone and gotten updates from my mum. He seemed to be doing better, but now this text arrives and my heart drops. I am breathless for what seems like several minutes but is only several seconds. Dammit! I’m downtown at the CNE and I have to get back to Mississauga Trillium Hospital ASAP! And it’s 5:00! Rush Hour! I scream inside my head. I look up from my phone at my boss. “I have to go,” I tell him and I rush off. I reply to the text with my own saying I’m leaving now and I’ll be there as soon as I can. The building is somewhat crowded but I manoeuvre around and between people until I reach underground parking. My phone rings, a withheld number. I curse, oh no, what happened between the text and now? I answer. My mother is on the other end, in sobbing but holding back the tears as best she can.

“Dad’s not doing well, Christopher. Are you on your way?”

“Yeah, I’m coming mom. I’m leaving now. I’m coming as fast as I can. Hold on!”

“Ok,” she stifles out between snuffles, “just drive safe, ok?”

“Yeah I will,” I grit my teeth, holding back tears, “I’ll be there soon.” I hang up. I try to fight back the tears, they’re staying inside for now. “Hold on dad, hold on. Don’t you go now, you

wait for me!” I say to the heavens. I throw the car into drive and hit the gas. I drive through underground parking, up the ramp into the sunlight which temporarily blinds me. I regain my sight and drive out onto Strachan Avenue. Down a bit and turn onto Lakeshore. Dozens of cars pack the road. It’s jammed up. I swear loudly and turn the radio up to try to take my mind off of my situation but it doesn’t work. Thoughts of my father and what may or may not be happening drift into my head. “Don’t die, please don’t die Dad. If you need to go, at least wait for me to get there.” Lakeshore moves at a snail’s pace. So slow it’s just stop and go. Get up to ten kilometres per hour and then back to zero. I look up ahead. Red lights. Why can’t they all be green! Dammit! I punch the arm rest. I think to myself, I’ll never make it there in time. I grit my teeth, holding back tears. One sneaks out and crawls down my cheek. I wipe it away with haste. No! I can’t cry, I must stay strong. Halfway down lakeshore now towards the Gardiner. Come on cars! Why is everyone so slow! Not only is it rush hour, but the road is clogged with CNE traffic, and the onramp for the Gardiner at the Jameson bridge is under construction, so all other people that would normally take that entrance are using Lakeshore now. Minutes pass that feel like hours. I finally get past the last set of traffic lights before road curves into the onramp for the Gardiner. Foot down. Engine revs. Needle moves up past sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety. Signal on. Merge into the left lane. Finally on the Gardner. Foot down. Ninety, one hundred, one hundred ten, one hundred twenty. Gardiner is pretty open considering the time it took on Lakeshore and the amount of cars that were there.

I fly down the Gardiner, get off at The Queensway. I can take The Queensway all the way to the hospital. Red lights hamper my progress. Time ticks by slowly and quickly. My perception of time is distorted. I can only concentrate on what I see in front of me. There it is, the hospital, on the left. Finally. I turn in at the lights and enter the parking garage. I drive up and down a couple of rows until I finally see a spot. I park, grab my wallet and dash out of my car. I want to run, but I don’t want to create a scene. People would probably understand if they knew my situation but I’m not going to tell them. I walk briskly across the walkway, over the bridge, into the entrance. Room 403. Forward I move to the elevators. I push the button and wait an antagonizing, long minute until the doors open. Two other people get in with me. I hit the fourth floor button. They hit the second floor. The elevator stops and lets them out. I slam the ‘close door’ button and pace around the elevator. It finally reaches the fourth floor. I get out, make a right, no a left. I look at the room numbers. 401...402...there, 403. I turn in and see my father laying in the bed. My mother at his left, brother at his right. My brother and mother turn to look at me as I enter. My father doesn’t move. His eyes are open. He is breathing but only with the help of an oxygen mask. My heart sinks but beats furiously against my chest. My hands turn cold and clammy. My eyes well up with tears. I bite my tongue and grit my teeth. I can’t bear to see him like this. He does not look well, even from the last time I saw him. He is skinnier, a shadow of his former self. But he is my father, and as he soldiers on, I feel pride. He’s fighting to hang on. I stand beside him, stone faced and still. I don’t know what to say and I know if I say anything, I’ll break. No, I must stay strong.

The hospital room is dim, one fluorescent light above the bed illuminates the nearest wall while the disappearing daylight attempts to fill the rest of the room through the window. My brother sits beside the bed, his wiry frame leaning against the side of the bed. My mother stands at the foot of the bed, shorter than me, she turns and looks up at me, cheeks puffy and

eyes red. My brother tells me dad was fine earlier in the day. He was talking and joking, but all of a sudden in the evening he turned. Don't really know why or how. But we can feel the animosity in the air. We all know that this is near the end. There is nothing we can really do except wait. My father looks a lot worse than the last time I saw him. He is down to probably ninety five pounds, more likely less. His skin is sunken and waxy, tight on some joints, hanging off bone in others. He is a skeletal representation of who he used to be. His six foot frame is curled up under the covers making him look small and frail. He groans and moves his hand towards his oxygen mask. I push his hand back down, scratch where he began, perhaps it was just an itch. He groans some more, tugging at his blankets. We adjust accordingly, move them up because we figure he is cold, move them down because we figure he is hot. My brother jokes "Dad, what do you want? What're you trying to do? Strip for us?" I appreciate what he's doing. He's trying to avoid the situation. He can see the fear in my eyes. The fear of losing my father. Like a good brother he tries to protect me. We never got along that well, but now is the time for brothers to bond. We all sit in the room, around my father, for an hour or so until a nurse enters. My mom leaves the room to talk to the nurse out of earshot of both of us. A couple minutes pass and my brother goes out to talk to her. I get up and join them. We discuss what to do. I have work the next day, and my brother has work back in Sarnia. I'm exhausted, my brother is tired and my mother is a wreck. We decide that my brother will go to Sarnia, grab some clothes that may be necessary, a suit for certain occasions, and then come back in the morning. I am to go home tonight and come back tomorrow after my shift. My mother will stay by my father's side all night and day. We call up some family friends to come and be with my mom tonight because we think she should not be alone. I will stay until they arrive.

"Just in case," my mother says, with swollen red eyes, "you two should say your goodbyes."

My brother goes in first, since he will be leaving first. Several minutes later he comes out, fresh tears on his cheeks, and looks at both of us. He wipes away his tears, tells my mom he will be back tomorrow and to call if anything happens, and gives her a hug. He looks at me. I look at him.

"I know we're not much for this stuff, but..." he says and we hug. My brother walks to the elevator and I enter the room with my mom. We sit quietly, the only sound is my father's laboured breathing. The nurse returns and my mom goes to talk to her outside the room. I move close to my father. Looking at him. Fighting back tears either by gritting my teeth, biting my tongue or punching my thigh. I look into his eyes. He is somewhere in there. His body is shutting down. He no longer produces tears and his eyes are dry. He hasn't blinked in hours. I get up and go outside.

"His eyes are really dry, can't we put eye drops or something in there?" I say to the nurse with all the naiveté of a small child. She shakes her head no. "Well I just thought..." I say and turn back into the room. I go and sit back down beside my father. My mother re-enters the room and sits for a bit. Soon our friends show up. Sev and Lydia. We don't see them that much but they are good friends of my mom, and they've been by her side the past couple weeks. My mom leaves the room to talk with them and let me say goodbye to my father, the hardest thing I've ever done. I don't know how my brother did it so quickly. It felt like it took me forever. What do I say? What do I do?

I grasp his hand under the sheet and hold it with both of mine. His touch is cold. I look into his eyes.

“Dad, I don’t want you to go. I need you to stay. We have to go to Leafs games.” I break, tears start to stream down my face. I grab some tissues and wipe them up, but the dam has been broken. There is no stopping them now. “Dad, please. I can’t do this.” I clench my fists and turn away. I turn back, he still stares with empty eyes, but I know he’s in there. “You did a good job Dad, you raised good son, “ I muffle out through tears and sniffles, “you were a good dad, I love you.” I turn away, wipe the tears, but more stream out. I grit my teeth, try to hold them back, at least a couple. I release his hand and begin to get up. He moans a bit, his hand shifts. “Dad?!” I grab his hand. “I love you Dad, goodbye.” I lean in towards him and kiss his forehead. “I love you dad, I’m going to miss you. Goodbye. Dad. Goodbye.” I release his hand and look into his eyes for the last time. I turn away and leave the room. I go home, sit in my room and cry. When I wake up in the morning, my mother is home and tells me that my father is gone. He went last night, after everyone had said goodbyes. He waited for us and then he slipped off into eternal rest.