“Tethers” by Marisa Gray Atha

My dad taught me how to ride a bike. I was old enough to have opinions about how this all should happen—firstly, that I be well-prepared in case of disaster. Surely, I’d seen this in some TV show or another, a comical 1980s ode to the scene: “kid learns to ride bike.” However I’d come across this idea, I was convinced it was the right way to go. Although it was a hot Sacramento summer day, ranging from 90s to 100 plus degrees, I rifled through my closet, reaching into the back abyss to find a full sweatsuit. Once my skin was securely covered, I headed for the bathroom cabinet to find as many rolls of toilet paper as I could. Taking my time, I unrolled, balled, scrunched, and shoved, creating a Pillsbury Doughboy effect.

When I finally waddled out to the front yard to greet my dad, he burst out laughing. “You look prepared,” he said with a smile of encouragement. Granted, this was the 1980s, so it is probable that neither of us considered a bike helmet.

I felt as prepared as I could be, yet still convinced I would fall when he let go of the bike. On our sleepy suburban street, cars did come, but with ample time between, and the drivers were mostly family-folk who knew to drive slowly through the neighborhood (the morality of “drive like your kids live here,” existing long before it faltered and signage was needed to signal empathy in a new world of cars, people, and technology paying more attention to speed than decency).

Dad wheeled my bike out to the street, and I climbed aboard. It felt wobbly without my training wheels. It felt wrong, like trying to balance on the top of a hard-boiled egg while being

told it was perfectly flat. I knew I would fall when he let go; it was certain. The only unknowns were how long it would take me to fall, and how badly it would hurt.

I don't remember how we pushed off. I don't know if he counted to three, or if he waited until I gave a signal and began the movement.

I do remember riding. When I'd gained enough momentum to continue on alone, he let go, but I don't know how long he held on before that moment.

I remember passing our house, and our neighbor's house, and marveling that I was still on the bike seat, and not splayed out on the asphalt. I remember the blushing surprise of it all, the thrill, still tangled in with anticipation and fear.

I didn't fall that day. I waddled back into the house, puffed up with both toilet paper and well-deserved pride.

Now that I'm a parent, and have let my girls go take their first steps, fall into their first boo-boos, stay alone in their first classrooms while I left, make their first friends and watch feelings get hurt, and yes, see them ride their first two-wheeler bikes (given to them by my dad), I understand what it means to let go and let fly.

Letting my dad go was the flip side of everything I thought I knew about this process. I was not letting him go to live and grow and thrive, but to detach, to wither, and to die. That last week I held him close, holding his hand and protecting him from every force that threatened to take him. As his body grew weaker, and even his breaths became painful, I watched him slowly move away from us. He slept longer, he spoke less; the worldly goods offered fewer treasures—a clean bed, a sip of water, a friendly face. That's all that was needed at the very end.

Although he was slowly letting go, part of him still resisted. Even his last night and last morning, he hung on. Barely able to breathe, he clearly wanted to be here, with us. When death called, and we offered to let go, he simply replied, "Uh-uh." No. Not yet.

As in watching a child go forth into the world without you, without a safety net to cushion all falls, we eventually had to let go. And he had to find his own trust and willingness to let go and ride alone, no one holding on to meet him where he landed, and to cushion the landing.

All we could do was trust, offer faith and send him off, with love, into the unknown, hoping that his journey would be beautiful, bounteous, and free.

My husband had gone home with our girls. It would be the first night I'd spent away from my daughters for any reason other than giving birth to another of them. Birth, and now death—the only powers strong enough to wrest me from the duties of nighttime motherhood.

All the visitors had left—the siblings, the friends, the neighbors. After dinner, we'd sat around the table for hours longer, as a couple of my dad's old friends told stories from the 1960's—tales of jumping trains, of hitchhike racing from California to Colorado, of ski-bumming in Vale, of interviews with the SP Railroad, of commitments and of baulking them. We laughed—my mom, brother, and I, and the other buddies round table—as we either relived or heard these stories for the first time. Dad lay silent, stretched out in his hospice bed in the center of the family room. Every so often, as we heard something especially hilarious, or heartwarming, or heartbreaking, one of us would look over at him, reflexively expecting a sign of recognition, hoping for communion in the spirit of what we were sharing. His mute reply

would instantly smother the eruption of comic relief. When his friends left, they took turns squeezing Dad's hand, or kissing his forehead, saying goodbye. Some of them had visited before, but this would be the last.

He'd stirred later, cringing with the pains of his last days, as we offered another dose of liquid morphine to settle him back into sleep. He was beyond eating or even drinking. We simply swabbed the insides of his mouth and tongue with a dampened sponge, enough to keep the tissue from drying out. My mother, brother, and I'd sat in the family room together until nine o'clock, then ten o'clock. Dad seemed peaceful and we agreed to get some rest while we could.

I walked to the back of the house where I'd set up camp on the upright futon in my brother's old bedroom, as my old room now served as a playroom for my daughters, with a doll table and chair set occupying the center of the room, rather than a bed. I wedged my suitcase between miscellaneous piles of deferred projects and agendas, all put on hold for the duration of illness. Wearing pajama bottoms and an old t-shirt, I lay on my side, facing the large IKEA wall-clock. My eyes drifted upward to settle into focus on the wallpaper border near the ceiling, a color palette of burgundy, gray, and black, with dashes of plant leaves and geometrical shapes that conjured a sentiment of the sophisticated, business-modern, edgy 1990s. Thirty years post-installation, the outdated style just added to a sense of foreboding, a single aspect locked in place, a task requiring attention left permanently pending.

For now, I let my eyes come to rest. Listening to the sounds of the far-off dishwasher cycling, the air conditioner clicking on and puffing dry air through the ceiling vents, and the rhythmic decompression and pumping as the oxygen machine piped air into my dad's nostrils, I tried to find sleep.

By eleven thirty, my brother was already entering the room. I woke even before he'd walked from the brightened doorway to the futon. He tapped my shoulder and said, "I think it might be time."

"Okay," I said.

Moving with automation, just as I had so many times responding to an infant, toddler, or child waking during the night and needing me, I propped my torso quickly up, swung my legs off the edge, and stood upright with immediate readiness to follow the trail to wherever I was needed.

In the family room, my mother was sitting next to my dad, and my sister-in-law had returned from her visit home to feed the dogs. My brother sat next to her, and I took the next available wooden chair, near my dad's legs.

His breathing was labored. We could all see it and hear it—as he efforted to accomplish each inhalation, we could hear the stridor, the constriction, and could only imagine the sharp pinch of pain that each of these breaths wrought. We grimaced round our small circle, watching him fight for air. During the long pauses, we held our breaths as well, wondering if this was indeed the moment. We let some tears well and slide, we offered him kisses and "I love yous," and we gave each other small acknowledgements as to the hardest part of the most awful situation in which we all played part. After some time—too much time—my brother stood.

He suggested we try to move Dad. The rest of us were unsure, as this position had been unquestionably the most comfortable during that day, and we all knew by the expressions of sheer agony how painful it was for him to shift his body in any way. But after forty minutes of

listening to each breath ripping inward, and ripping us each apart, we couldn't take anymore. We nodded in agreement that yes, my brother should try.

It worked. With a nudge leftward, a pillow propping him, and his chin resting closer to his chest in a confounding angle that somehow seemed to open his airways, rather than restrict them, the breathing eased. We all exhaled. The worst was not over, but these terrible moments were. And he was still with us. His breathing regulated, and then eased into the sounds of restorative sleep. We sat for a long while after, each of us slumping further down into our stiff wooden chairs, yawning with the sheer exhaustion of extended caregiving and extended heartbreak. Finally, one of us gave permission to the others: "We should probably get some sleep too."

A numb shock walked with me back to the bedroom, back to the futon, where I slept for a few hours. The darkness was a comfort after the bright lights of the family room. The muffled sounds of the house provided a haven from the tortured croaking gasps for air that we'd listened to for far too long. I closed my eyes, thankful that Dad was resting, comfortable, and living.

In the predawn of the morning, I woke and crept quietly out to the family room. My brother lay snoring on the couch, my mother on the recliner. Dad lay in his bed in the middle of the room, still peacefully asleep and temporarily unaware of the pains that consciousness would bring. I lowered myself into the chair where I'd sat just a few hours previously. I lightly picked up his hand into mine, holding it with tenderness and familiarity—this was now my life. This was the seventh day of the seven days that I would hold my dad's hand in mine for as many moments as I could. I now lived to provide comfort, to bestow grace, and to offer up my love to a person who'd given me a lifetime of these. This was the quiet in the eye of the hurricane.

I sat next to Dad in the silence that I'd grown accustomed to. For a week now, he and I'd barely exchanged words; and even when we had, most of our words had been made up of exchanges of "I love yous," a string of words that flowed back and forth anyway, no matter whether voiced or unvoiced.

The night before, we'd almost lost him. We'd said our goodbyes—again, these just a few more to add to the many we'd been saying for six days and seven nights. Today was the seventh day, and it was to be the last.

When the hospice nurse arrived, and my brother and mother described the harrowing time spent listening to Dad labor for air, she replied, "Most people wouldn't have fought that hard. Most people would have given up. He isn't ready to let go yet."

There were moments during the week when I could hold back the tears that threatened to brim over, and there were moments when I let them come. This time, I didn't have a choice—the tears surged, fast and strong. Because the nurse had just voiced what we already knew: Dad didn't want to leave us, and we didn't want him to leave.

But seeing how much he suffered that last night, and knowing that he hadn't eaten or drinken in days, and that every time he roused, he felt excruciating pain, we realized our terrible task that day: we had to help him go.

As if we all suddenly came into this awful awareness together, each of us took turns whispering to him our last rounds of goodbyes, sending him reassurances that we would be alright, telling him we would take care of each other, making promises about all that we would do and be to fulfill and honor his legacy. We lied the necessary lies one must to let go of a person most dear. Our lies sawed at the tether holding him to his earthly life.

While the hospice nurse moved about, checking, resupplying, noting, we sat near Dad. We noticed a wave of apnea—one of so many over the course of the week that had posed the question, “Is this it?”

We waited.

And we waited.

As one inhale came, finally, we breathed. He exhaled.

And then we waited through another long pause.

And waited still.

My mother, holding my dad’s hand, and stroking his head gently, turned to the hospice nurse and asked, “Could this be it?”

The nurse nodded.

We waited.

Silently screaming, “Please don’t go!” but knowing he had to, we waited.

Tears were spilling from us, quiet puffs of anxious breaths, listening, waiting.

There remained only stillness from my dad’s body that had grown subtly more still with every day since this all began.

We waited, frozen.

The nurse approached, unwrapping the stethoscope from her neck. She placed the buds into her ears, and the disc gently onto his chest, above his heart.

She listened, and we waited.

She nodded, and with the embodiment of tenderness and empathy, she said, “He’s passed.”

My mother let out a sickening moan, and lowered her head to his, sobbing out all the fear and grief she’d been holding inward with such strength and resilience for the past days, weeks, and months.

I felt the warm, heavy presence of my dad’s hand in mine, knowing this was the last of it. I’d held that hand for every moment I could for the past seven days, and after this, it would be no more. I studied his hand—the age spots, the curling fur, the wrinkles and lines of his fingers, the wideness of his fingernails. I longed to memorize the strength of those hands that had held me, propped me, hammered and painted and carried for me. I kissed that hand. I kissed his head, and I whispered my very last goodbye.

When I returned, hours later, after picking up my daughters from summer camp, and after his body had been taken by people whose jobs are to take away those who have passed, I walked into a house that was very different than the one I’d spent the night in.

This house was filled with activity, voices, and people. The immediate family had gathered again, but now the dinner would be one of the *after*, not the *before*. The lightness was palpable—the thing we had most dreaded and feared was done. The girls were tasked to acclimate to a house that now and forever would be one without the presence of their grandpa. My own grandmother chatted with her newly widowed daughter—ungracefully loud since she was a ninety-four-year-old who refused hearing aids she so desperately needed. My sister-in-law

was vacuuming the family room, where all the medical equipment and bed had recently been cleared away. This house was loud. It was jarring. It was all wrong.

When the noise of the vacuum eventually stopped, my mother headed for the kitchen to put some dishes away, my husband was busy getting the girls occupied in the playroom, my brother was in the back room making headway with the many phone calls to be made, and my grandmother was heading out of the room, I found myself alone.

I walked straight to the middle of the family room, to the spot where Dad's hospice bed had laid, where he had been with us, and then left us just a few hours earlier, last breath exhaled.

I stood bereft, gazing through the sliding glass door into the backyard, adjusting to this unfamiliar landscape, the aftermath of what had cleaved this house apart overnight.

A few white butterflies flitted on an invisible August breeze.

My eyes tracked their flashes of movement, all else fading into background.

Dad's presence wrapped around me.

His body was gone, pain gone. Yet his untethered spirit winked its wings as he rode on an unchartered wind.