

March 7

by Susan_Estrich

It has a way of sneaking up on me, like the unhappy anniversary it is. Who knew?

The first March 7 was a Monday. I was a law student, and my father died in a hospital bed where he had been hovering between life and death for 10 terrible days. Terrible for us, anyway. By the end, he was somewhere else.

The second March 7 came 23 years later, of all things, of all the days in the year, after almost two years that my best friend Judy fought that bear, gave up her leg and learned to swim with one, and would never have complained except the bear wanted more. March 7, of all things. What are the chances that two of the people you've loved most should choose the same day to exit, making March 7 thereafter a day like no other?

You get to a certain day; almost everybody has these days. I always try to make them special. I light my candles, twice, on the Jewish day (the date in the Jewish calendar that corresponds with the death is when we "officially" light a Yahrzeit candle), and then I usually light two again on March 7, because it's March 7. What makes March 7 different is not the candlelight, but how sad I feel.

I think of all the things they missed. I think of my father, never getting to meet any of his grandchildren. I think of the law practice my father and brother might have had, of how many lives would have been so different, maybe mine, too, but mostly my father's. And it doesn't seem right. I think of how much Judy loved life, of how young she was, and of how much pleasure she took from her family and her dogs and her radio show, and of course it doesn't seem right.

It just is.

I used to be very jealous of Catholics. When I was a kid, they looked like they believed in something "the afterlife" that made it easier to let go. I grew up watching Kennedys at funerals, figuring they must have something, a secret belief to repeat to yourself, because otherwise how do you stand there and watch a coffin with someone you love in it lowered into the ground? And then, the first and second and third time I did that, watched the coffin, I realized that there are no words. No secret mantra. That's what is so scary. For Catholics, too, I am afraid.

And then I survived. I have cried until I thought I would never cry again. And then I laughed at funny movies.

When you are in the middle of a terrible time, you sit and think: I will never be happy again. I remember, after my father died, looking in the window of this famous sandwich place in Harvard Square and thinking I will never again just be happy to get the Turkey Delite. But I was.

Some months later, I was standing in line and got to the front and got my sandwich, and in that moment, warm sandwich in hand, belly growling, waistline temporarily forgotten, I was actually happy. It was just for a second, perhaps, just in that tiny space between worrying about really not having any money for a turkey sandwich and the loneliness of my life and on and on that I found the moment of true Delite. But it was there. And if I stayed in it for just one minute longer, who could it possibly hurt?

It's hard to be miserable when you're eating an ice cream cone or a turkey delite. Silly, trite and true. Also, playing with a dog. I try to remember things like that on March 7. You can't take the sting out of a day. But sometimes you can take yourself out, just for a minute.

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