

**2012**

“I just thought you oughta know,” MJ’s Arkansas drawl dragged the remaining words, “your dad has stage-four throat cancer.”

What did she want me to do? My heart seethed with twenty-three years of anger. When Mommy died, he left me to fend for myself. Daddy moved on by dating a light-skinned Creole stranger. He introduced her at Mommy’s funeral. He and Creole woman spent several nights together just weeks after the burial. His absence grew frequent. Sometimes he announced his intentions of *going to get laid*. Other times he simply left. Three months later, for the first time in my life, I awoke to Christmas in an empty home. He introduced me to loneliness. He demonstrated the ease with which one could shift priorities.

Daddy’s role in my life faded with each passing revolution, especially after he sent me to live with my maternal grandparents. Eventually, he and Creole woman

married. Then, they divorced. Daddy wasn't single long. MJ replaced Creole woman and vowed to love him forever. Two decades yielded sparse interactions, unless I initiated them. It had become a game of imbalanced burden. My side often weighed heavily with calls and visits. His piece included thin, father-like appearances during major milestones.

MJ's news interrupted a year's worth of silence. It broke my conscious decision to drive to Chicago without seeing him. It disrupted my choice to sever communication: no calls, no emails, no Facebook. Before she phoned, there was little reason. Always being the so-called bigger person had gotten old and I'd refused to carry the weight of our dysfunction.

MJ's message hung there, somewhere in between two and half decades of waning devotion and her perception of my obligation.

Weeks later, it turned to judgment. "You could send a card or something."

"Are you sure you don't want to do something?" my husband, Dwight echoed.

Memories of where I ranked on Daddy's to-do list had hardened me. Financial support replaced care and concern for him. Dwight and I loaded a pre-paid Visa card each month to help with medication. And we found a final expense insurance plan to supplement his policy.

It was irrational for him to want more from me than he'd sown.

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## 2013

So, he began to give more of himself. Though chemo and radiation captured his voice and health for six months, the following year brought frequent and authentic communication. He whispered through conversations, many times asking me to recount

tales of my daughters and what they were into. The doctors felt hopeful that reconstructive surgery would repair his vocal chords and also help avoid a tracheostomy. Daddy's confident nature kept family encouraged. His optimism led us to believe that the future would hold sounds of his renewed speech.

Emotions stirred. Towards the end of that year, my family and I made our bi-annual trek to the Windy City. Years of tradition dictated that we stay at my great-aunt's house on the west side, spend Christmas day with my mom's side of the family, and then travel south to visit Daddy around eight o'clock at night.

"It's like you just do a drive-by," MJ once commented, "I mean you come by, but then you don't never stay long."

She was right. Her home didn't hold my childhood. Her name graced the deed years before we met. Daddy moved there after their nuptials. Each wooden step that creaked under my feet held her nostalgia, not mine. Not ours. Sure, he was my dad, but he made memories under her blue roof, not I. Most years, I did well just to stop by at all. But this holiday, a line of concern began to outline the periphery of my heart. It mattered not where he lived, but rather that he survived cancer and post-ops. We created a new ritual. Dwight, the girls, and I arrived at his house during the daylight hours.

A smile spread across his face as he opened the door. He hugged each of us through our winter wear bundles. A white patch protected his throat's incision. Later, I would learn about the careful process of cleaning this wound. Blue and white cans of meal replacement shakes sat on the kitchen table, some empty, others waiting their turn. Before I could sit down, he cupped my face in his palms as if I was six.

"You and I need to have a talk," he whispered.

I rolled my eyes. “Alrighty.”

He winked at my family, who sat single-file on the white, leather couch. “Just a little daddy-daughter talk,” he reassured them.

He handed the girls the remote. I followed him up the rickety, narrow staircase to their attic’s makeshift office. The black swivel chair swooshed air as I plopped down. He sat across from me on a black folding chair and leaned over. Our eyes met, his already watery.

“I feel as if you’ve been mad ever since your mom died.”

I maintained my stoic gaze. “I used to be. But not anymore.”

“What did you want me to do?”

He wanted to know what he could have done when his anger led him to pack up all of my teenaged belongings one night and throw them in black trash bags in the middle of my bedroom. He wanted to know what he could have done after he sent me to live approximately 100 miles east in a rural, Michigan township. And he wanted to know what he could have done after giving up his parental rights when I had just turned 17.

“You could have called to see how I was doing.”

His eyes could no longer hold the tears. He removed his glasses and wept. “That’s all?”

“Yep. That’s it. You left me there and didn’t look back.”

Tears crawled down his face. “*Who* put your stuff in black trash bags?”

*Chemo brain.* The effects of treatment left him with selective memories. While I could never forget how my clothes and stuffed animals rested haphazardly in those garbage bags, now he couldn’t recollect who’d filled them. He attempted to recall why

his former self would've engaged in such an egregious act. Eventually, he determined that he must have been "really mad."

Our talk continued. I described the difficulty I'd faced defending him against my grandparents. They paid for my wedding, while I bargained for Daddy to walk me down the aisle. They funded my baccalaureate degree, while he and MJ attended, beaming with pride, as if they'd contributed. Grannie supported me through my PhD, while he primped for commencement. I did my best to explain the loneliness of losing one parent to death and another to abandonment. But it's a challenge describing experiences to a clueless perpetrator. In fact, I'd shared these stories many times before. But this was the first time he listened.

"Why did you decide to ask me now?"

He cleaned one lens, then the other. He placed his glasses back on his face. "It's the threat of mortality, baby. Death makes you see things differently."

Our talk lasted 45 minutes. By the end of it, my face had softened. Care crept closer inside my heart. Daddy promised to spend the rest of his life repairing our relationship. He and I set up his Skype account for frequent visual chats.

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**2014**

He kept his word. Daddy assumed more of the onus of our bond. Consequently, the scales balanced toward parallel understanding. But a new barrier surfaced. Having diabetes hindered his previous throat operation from properly healing. He had to have tracheostomy surgery after all. He would be able to eat solid food. However, he'd have to learn to use a tool to talk. We Skyped. We could see each other, but his words garbled.

We called. We could hear each other, but unclear phrases lingered. Life is interesting that way. The voice required to fix missing decades disappeared.

I suggested texting. He agreed. He often forgot to power his phone and sometimes he would take several days to return a message. But overall it worked. Conversations centered on the girls, Dwight, my endeavors, his health, and when we would re-load the pre-paid card.

He reminded me of his promise. *I'm going to spend the rest of my life making sure you know that I love you.* Though I'd carved out a space for hope, a large percentage of skepticism remained. I was a 41 year-old, married woman. My oldest daughter was a year shy of when I'd lost my own mother. My youngest daughter had little knowledge of who "Grandpa Tony" was and secretly called MJ by her first name, instead of Grandma. Wasn't it too late for the type of mending that he wanted simply because of the *threat of mortality?*

Regardless of doubt, we persevered.

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**2015**

Hard work and commitment heals most wounds while wrapped in the movement of time. And our recovery was no different. The daddy-daughter scale equaled compassion and concern on both sides. But past insecurities remained. I struggled to embrace a repentant father. I had one foot in therapeutic overhaul and one cautious foot out. But this experience left me little choice but to leap forward.

Soon it was May. I outlined our broken history via blog. Descriptions devoted to Daddy's role in my teenage life and lack of participation in my adult life characterized him as a deadbeat.

He was hurt.

I reminded him of our deficient relationship and assured him that these were *past* feelings, not current ones. He thanked me for the clarification. But I didn't hear from him for three weeks.

My birthday came and went. No text from Daddy. I wallowed in old emotions and I thanked God for the noncommittal foot because no communication signaled past behaviors that I'd once endured. I reached in my bag of coping mechanisms and chose the most familiar one, detachment.

Just when I decided to disengage, my cousin's message flashed. *Mom wants to talk to you.*

*Alrighty*, I wrote back.

Aunt Dora revealed that Daddy and MJ had moved to Atlanta. I had no idea. She continued with pleasantries and wished me well on my family's upcoming Japan trip.

Another message glowed from my cousin. *Did you ever hear from mom, Uncle Tony, or Aunt MJ?*

*I talked to Aunt Dora, but not Daddy.* Little black dots rose and fell as he typed.

*Do you want me to tell you or do you want to wait? They have something they need to say but they don't want you to worry.*

I braced myself and answered, *tell me.*

*He has cancer on his lungs now and it's hard for him to breathe.*

Thoughts about Daddy melded into one glob and froze. That night, I slid under the covers and slipped into an unsettled sleep. The next morning I awoke around five, lay in bed, hopped out, and then brushed my teeth. Dwight stared from the corner of his eye, worried about my early rise.

Thoughts thawed over the next few hours and spilled into a pool of panic. What if he dies while we're overseas? They can't bury him without me. Oh no! He's gonna die, for real. This means the opportunity for a father-daughter relationship is ended. My mind shifted to childlike desires. Why couldn't I have had parents devoted to raising and being with me? Where were my quirky mom and dad who embraced relationships, grandchildren, and family vacations? Compassion cracked my heart open. Daddy had endured cancer without his only daughter. There was time and space for me to choose a different path.

Silently, I stood in the middle of my kitchen. Both hands wiped my face clean of tears. I said a prayer that his spirit and soul be at ease through transition. Then, I consciously put both feet into the relationship renovation. At this point, I wanted Daddy to know that I cared. My will to forgive became greater than decades of resentment. It was time to move on. He was right. The threat of mortality does shift one's perspective.

I texted. *Hey Daddy. Hadn't heard from you in a while. Hope you're okay.*

No response.

I texted MJ.

No response.

A few minutes later, he answered.



He described the move to Atlanta. He explained his breathing trouble. But he didn't mention lung cancer. I told him we'd visit before leaving the States. Three smiley-faced emojis accompanied his *Yay*.

He was just as happy to see us in person two weeks later. But I was dismayed. A brown bag of bones stood before me.

"Never thought you'd see me this skinny, huh?" He joked, revealing several missing teeth.

His receding mini-afro had turned a snowy shade of white. He shuffled around showing me his room, bathroom, and patio. Having mastered the talking tool, his words, broken and robotic were now comprehensible.

MJ's weariness made itself a visible part of the room's energy. Her voice trailed behind as she described the new cancer developments on Daddy's lungs. They had just found out right before they'd packed up a new life 700 miles away from years of familiarity. She needed directions to Emory. I wanted to ask why they hadn't mentioned the move. But somehow, it seemed meaningless.

Dwight, the girls, and I moved a few boxes to and from the outside storage. People walked directly past their porch. Third-floor dwellers peered down, invading their space.

Daddy frowned. "We need some iron bars out here."

I laughed. But sadness filled my heart. I promised to try a little harder. They were only five hours away. I had no idea how long Daddy would live. And it didn't matter anymore. They were close enough for me to offer more help.

He cupped my face in the palms of his hands.

“Come back,” he whispered to me.

“I will,” I promised.

But my newfound commitment was too late.

When we arrived back in the States, Daddy had an oxygen tank. He couldn't speak without coughing, spitting, or gasping for air. Shortly after, doctors refused him chemo. Frailty wouldn't allow it.

He refused to eat.

Three more days, the hospital moved him to hospice.

The next day, he was unresponsive.

My daughters and I returned to Atlanta. The nurses' soft, overly kind voices coupled with sunset lighting cued me for the end. The girls and I entered his room. HGTV blared. Deterioration set in and left a shell of his former self, absent of spirit. He lay amongst white blankets and pillows: limp, mouth open and body angled up enough to appear as if he was actively breathing. But he wasn't. His connection to a sugar IV gave us time to make funeral arrangements. Although MJ had warned me about his coma-like state, I still tried.

“Daddy,” I said above a murmur.

His breath belabored. In. Out. Gasp.

I handed the girls my car keys. There was little reason for them to witness the moment. I held his skeletal hand and regretted that I didn't accept his apology sooner. I'd wished we both could've done better. But acceptance set in. This is what was supposed to be.

The following morning, MJ and I met with the funeral home, and then returned to hospice.

All the patients' doors were open, except his.

We entered. The sun's light shone through cracked blinds. Quiet filled the remaining space. No apparatus. No wires. No machine. My gaze shifted towards the window. All of his blankets were neatly folded and all of the white fluffy pillows stacked one on top of another. His mouth was still open. His body laid flat, the woven white covers neatly folded across his chest.

Daddy transitioned about fifteen minutes prior.

He seemed to be at peace. And so was I.

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