

My Father's Girl

Category: Stories

written by Maureen Hirthler | March 20, 2015

I'm walking very slowly with my dad down the produce aisle at the local supermarket, past the colorful waxed apples, Mexican mangoes and Rainier cherries, and imagining my life's blood trickling onto the floor from an invisible wound.

As I pass by the misting system spraying the bins of green, red, yellow and orange peppers, past the lady reaching for carrots, past the stock guy balancing the heirloom tomatoes into a precarious stack, I want to scream. The sense of loss is overpowering.

But no one notices as I inwardly watch my life's blood—my father, age eighty-six—flow away, here in the grocery store.

I feel as if we've walked these aisles together forever. When I was a child, my father worked in a supermarket. He taught me how to bag groceries, cut meat, fill displays and manage people. One of my earliest memories is of riding on the checkout conveyor belt; I couldn't have been more than three. Now, decades later, we shop together again. Here in this store, I feel the passage of time, and the forces of change, most acutely.

This is what I'm thinking as I watch Dad struggle to find the items that he needs. He always brings a half-finished list scrawled on a gray scrap of paper torn from one of his crossword-puzzle books, and he reads it over and over again. He insists on pushing his own cart, although today he's so short of breath that I wonder if we'll make it to the checkout counter.

I make a mental note to start him on an antibiotic; he frequently gets lung infections brought on by food fragments going down his windpipe. Because he cannot swallow properly, he has a gastrostomy tube in his stomach. Despite the risks, he insists on eating.

Radiation therapy cured his head and neck cancer fifteen years ago, but it left him with many other problems, all getting worse with age and requiring multiple medications. A large squamous-cell cancer eats at his face near his left eye; we fight wet macular degeneration in his right eye with monthly injections. His blood pressure is difficult to control. He has a stent in his left carotid artery, which narrowed after the radiation; he takes one blood thinner for that, and another for his atrial fibrillation. He bleeds a lot. Nerve damage from diabetes makes him unsteady on his feet, and he requires insulin six times a day.

Last week he felt too weak to go to the store, so I went alone.

"Where's your father?" asked the checkout clerk.

"Not a good day," I said.

"Tell him we miss him."

Over the last three years, they've gotten to know him well—shared in the news of his illnesses, his gradual loss of independence, the death of his dog. He has charmed them all.

But I hate taking him shopping or for a haircut or even to a ballgame.

There, I said it.

He looks so diminished—unsteady, unsure, his pride dented like a kicked pail. Not like my father at all.

I'm a coward, I think. I wish I were dead and didn't have to do this. I can't stand it.

I want to scream and run away. But there's nowhere to go.

I've always been my father's girl. Growing up as an only child, I had a contentious relationship with my mother, but that's another story. Dad was the one who drove me to school, listened to my woes and waited up nights until I came home from a date or a party, just in case I needed him. Being here for him now feels only right.

Dad has lived with my husband and me for the last seven years. He's gone from being completely independent—living alone after my mother died, working at a golf course, walking the beach—to this: housebound and in chronic pain, trying not to be a burden on me. He still manages his money and medicines (correctly most of the time), works crossword puzzles and talks to his favorite brother every night promptly at six, but some days he gets forgetful and confused.

When my husband took a job in Missouri five years ago and we left our previous home in Florida, I decided to retire from medicine and become a writer. I needed more control over my schedule, and I was tired of the battle that it had become to provide good care to my patients.

Switching from being a doctor to being an MFA degree candidate made it easier for me to get Dad to his appointments and to help him fill his days. He enjoys watching me struggle through my classes and is proud of my perfect GPA, although I don't always let him read my writing.

The only important thing is that we are together. We watch baseball most nights; Dad still calls strikes and balls better than the home-plate umpire. He enjoys taking the helm of our pontoon boat out on the lake; my husband sits beside him to prevent close encounters with swimmers or other boats. We tell one another "I love you" every day.

Last night, at Dad's request, we played pinochle with my husband and stepson. Dad has played the game his entire adult life; he's a formidable opponent. Or was. Now I bite my cheek and force back tears when he misdeals or makes an

error.

My husband catches my eye and smiles gently. I'm bleeding even at home.

I want to hide—not from Dad, never from him—but from *it*: old age. I despise the losses it is inflicting on us all. How much longer can my husband and I leave him at home alone when we travel? I can't bear the thought of having to administer his insulin and dozen other meds, of handling his tube feedings and taking care of his hygiene.

Although I hate the idea of doing these things, I hate the thought of *not* doing them even more, because that will mean that Dad is gone. What will I do then?

As painful as it may be, I prefer to keep our current situation in place as long as possible—even if it means imagining myself slowly bleeding to death, day by day, while I make our last memories from the time remaining to us.

Yesterday he called me downstairs to the deck outside his living room to show me, in the garden, a huge hibiscus bloom the color of sunset.

"I don't know how you grow such beautiful flowers," he said.

With love and tears and time, I think. The same way you raised me...the same way I'm caring for you.