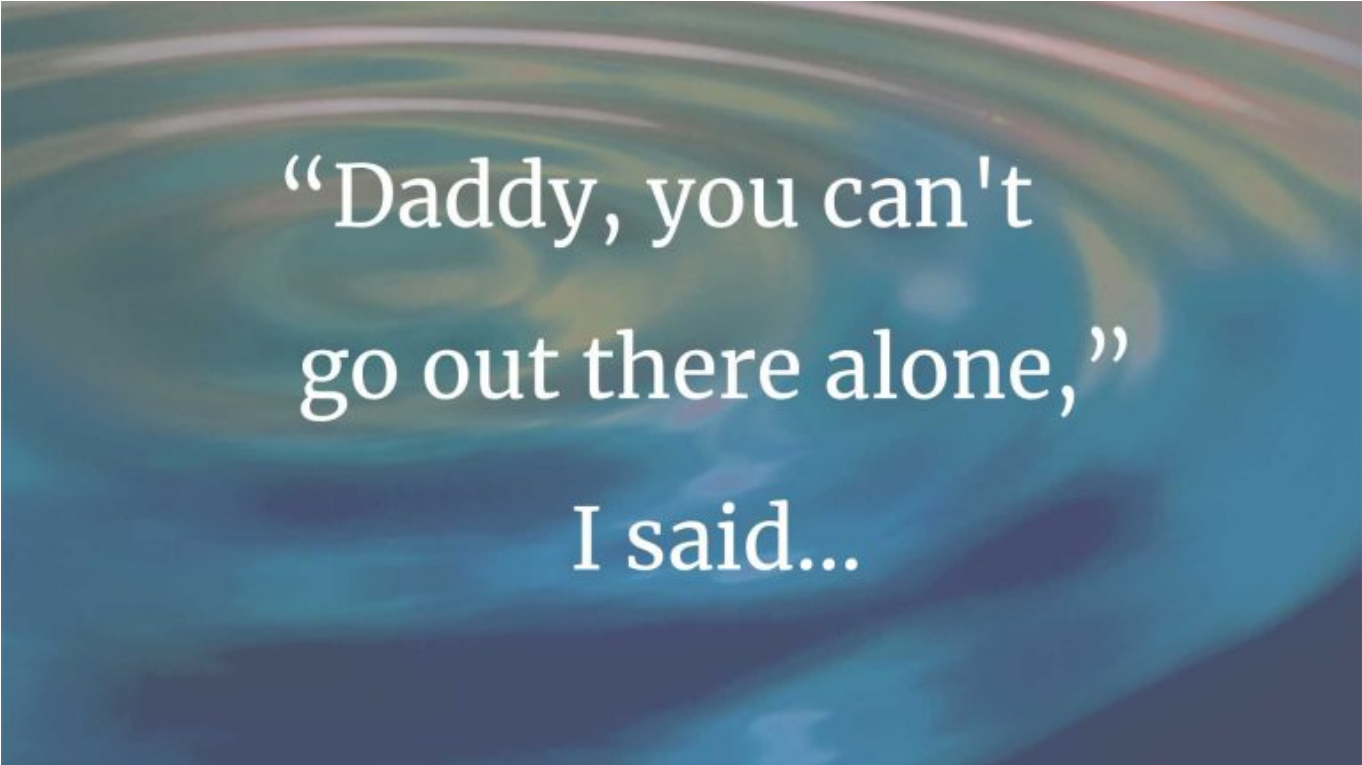


The Screening

Category: Stories

written by Karen Curran | February 6, 2026



“Daddy, you can't
go out there alone,”
I said...

In 2006, my dad was determined to attend the funeral when his last living brother died. The problem was, Daddy, eighty-two at the time, suffered from cognitive impairment bad enough that for months I'd been trying to get him to move to my home in Tennessee. This trip he was intent on taking would have required a cross-country flight from North Carolina to California—maneuvering through airports, finding a hotel and driving unfamiliar roads in a rental car.

“Daddy, you can't go out there alone,” I said, wedging the phone between my jaw and shoulder to free my hands for folding laundry.

“Well, why not?”

“Airports are large and confusing. And driving in LA would be a nightmare.”

“Mother and I did it,” he said.

“Fifteen years ago, Daddy. You were a lot younger, and you had Mother to navigate while you drove.”

“Mother didn't nag me!” Daddy exclaimed.

“*Navigate*, Daddy. I said *navigate*.” It was becoming increasingly harder to determine if his confusion was coming from hearing loss or dementia.

“Oh.” He was quiet for a minute. Then: “You could go with me.”

I pictured him sitting in his usual spot, the blue recliner in the sunroom. He was always there when he wasn't at church, at some funeral-home visitation or eating a chicken biscuit at Bojangles. He spent lots of time out and about since Mother died, in hopes of connecting with people. But when he talked on the phone, it was always from his recliner.

I sighed.

"I can't go with you, Daddy. I just found out I have breast cancer again and need surgery."

There, I said it—what I'd been trying to avoid.

My first battle with breast cancer had taken place six years earlier, in 2000, the same time that my mother had died during heart surgery. I had not planned to tell him, hoping to spare him any reminders.

"Oh, no, Karen," he said, his voice distressed.

In the ensuing quiet, I heard the familiar family grandfather clock chime the hour through the phone line. Three o'clock—my daughter should be home from school soon. Daddy sniffed. Was he crying?

Then he said, "I need to see Dr. Kane about my prostate." Clearly, the mention of medical issues had steered his mind in a different direction.

"Why?" I put the last of the clean clothes in the drawer and walked downstairs.

"I went to a health fair at the State Fairgrounds, and they said it looked like there might be a problem with it."

The North Carolina State Fair, largely an agricultural fair with huge barns for showing livestock, occasionally allowed its facilities to be used for free health screenings.

"So they found that your PSA was high." I assumed that he'd had a quick blood test.

"No. They didn't check my PSA. There was a doctor, and he examined me."

My jaw dropped as I sank into a chair. I'm not a physician, but I do know that the exam for prostate involves a digital rectal procedure. So my lonely old dad, eager for any kind of human contact, had had a doctor he'd never before met look at, and touch, his naked bum at a health fair. At the State Fairgrounds. In a livestock barn. Hopefully behind a closed curtain that shielded his hinterlands from public view.

I was amazed at how far this university professor had declined in the fifteen years since retirement. His mind, which I'd always admired, was sharp no more.

If he was reckless enough to drop his drawers at the fairgrounds, it's no

wonder he was unconcerned about the difficulty of flying across the country. In his mind, he was probably almost there to hug his sister-in-law, niece and nephew and to lament the loss of his dearly loved brother. Contact. Connection. The things most important to him.

Dad didn't make the trip to LA. He did have his prostate checked, with no problem noted. I think he completely forgot that I'd had surgery for breast cancer, since he never mentioned it. But shortly after all of that, I finally convinced him to move to Tennessee, into an apartment in an independent-living retirement home.

Daddy thrived on doing activities with other seniors and sharing meals with them, but after only three months, he suffered a major stroke that caused such extreme dementia, I had to move him to a locked memory-care facility. He was relatively happy there, because he found a girlfriend (whom he often mistook for my mother) to share his time with. Two years later, another stroke took his life.

As for me, following a second lumpectomy on the same breast, I declined to have the recommended mastectomy, choosing to live with a misshapen breast rather than undergo more surgery. Fortunately, all my subsequent mammograms have been clear.

It's been nearly twenty years since my father passed, and I'm steadily moving towards old age. I'm thankful to have enough family and friends around that I don't have to seek the human touch by going to health screenings. Especially if they're offered in a livestock barn.