

My Father, My Dad, My Best Friend

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I was twenty-eight years old and it was early in the morning when I received *the* call from my mom. Her words were harried, filled with fear, and intense as she proceeded to tell me that my dad had a heart attack, and the paramedics had taken him to the hospital. Also, one of the paramedics had told her it was a severe heart attack and to prepare herself for the worst. In that moment, it felt like I had been stabbed by a knife, and the pain hit deep. At a loss for words, I dropped the phone and immediately doubled over sobbing. My father...my dad...and my best friend was the one who understood me the most. Regardless of my mistakes, he never gave up on me. Suddenly, I felt as if I was slowly dying because a huge part of my life was being stripped away. My body began to wrack with sobs, and I was unable to move, talk, or focus on anything other than my mother's words repeating over again in my mind.

Thankfully, my friend Reese was with me, and she picked the phone up from the ground and found out what happened. Once mom informed her about dad, Reese ran to my sister's door and banged loudly to wake her up because she had not answered her phone the million times my mom had called, which was due to her being a deep sleeper. During this difficult time in my life, my kids and I lived with my sister, Lisa, and her family. My dad and sister were helping me to get out of an abusive and toxic relationship. Funny enough, it was my dad that called my sister to ask if I could come live there because he could not let me live at home. My mom and I did not get along very well at the time. Little did I know that today would lead to a better relationship with my mom.

Finally, Lisa came to the door, and Reese told her what happened. Lisa was at my door, dressed, and ready to go within minutes. She told me that we were leaving for the hospital...*now*. It felt like I was in a nightmare and trying to wake up, yet nothing I did would let me. While I

listened to the conversations going on around me, my vision tunneled, and the only thing I saw was my dad.

During the drive, I cried uncontrollably and screamed that dad was dying, as my sister drove us to the hospital. I remember her calling hospitals to find our dad because mom did not know where they had taken him. She tracked him down to Loma Linda University Hospital and called mom. The rest of the drive faded into convulsive sobs, fear of loss, and memories that flashed before my eyes, as I shattered to pieces inside. Once we arrived at the hospital, Lisa told me to pull it together or they would not let me see dad because they cannot risk the stress it would cause. I gathered everything within me to calm down enough so that my strong sobs became quieter. The last thing I wanted to do was risk not seeing my dad again.

As we walked through the hospital doors, our mom was off to the right of the vast lobby, tears streaming down her face and worry in her eyes. She was scared and that made me even more scared of what could and eventually would happen. We waited for the doctor to come out, which seemed like an eternity. The surgeon informed us that dad had suffered a massive heart attack and they had just barely gotten him stable enough to bring us back to see him. The problem was that, just when it seemed he was stable, he would go into cardiac arrest all over again. The surgeon told us to prepare ourselves because dad was not in good condition, but he was alert enough that we could see him.

Before they allowed us to go into the emergency room, two of the doctors took us into a side room and showed us an image of our dad's heart and an image of a healthy heart. Once we had taken a moment to look at the two images, the difference was painfully obvious. It was explained to us that they had tried to put a stent in, but our dad's arteries were almost one-hundred percent blocked and it was like trying to drill through iron. They all said it was a miracle

that he had not died at least six months earlier. Mom, Lisa, and I were in shock and knew that it was the end. The doctors said they had tried everything and that if our dad wanted to they could attempt surgery, though it was unlikely he would survive, and, if he did, he would never live a normal life again.

Mom and I were in tears and breaking down hysterically. Lisa, being who she was, talked to the doctors and then helped calm us down because we would not be allowed in to see dad if we did not calm ourselves. I remember Lisa went in first, then me, and finally mom. Seeing dad lying there on the table hooked up to machines, shaking, and barely able to talk or even breathe was terrifying. Each action took so much effort that his body no longer had the energy to give. Dad was the strongest person I knew and had lived through more than anyone, yet here he was, so frail, helpless, and in pain. I almost lost it again, and I pleaded with dad to please not leave me. Dad shakily agreed to try surgery though you could see it in his eyes that he knew he would not survive. We all stood around him, told him how much we loved him, and, though we hoped for the best, we all knew it was his time to go. The surgeon's prayed over our family and for the surgery they would attempt. Then the three of us said our goodbyes, kissed him on his cheek, and left for the waiting room knowing that was probably the last time we would talk to or see dad alive again.

Within less than ten minutes, the surgeon came out and told us that dad's body had shut down before they could even begin the surgery. They had him on a pacemaker to keep his heart pumping and a ventilator to keep him breathing, and they assured us he was not in any pain. However, for all intents and purposes, dad was gone. I broke down in loud, uncontrollable, sobs that made my body convulse. I screamed, "No, *no!* He can't be gone. No!" I had lost touch with reality as my heart, mind, and soul went to a very different place than it had ever been in my

twenty-eight years of life. I had been through many things, learned several hard lessons, and thought those were difficult. Now, I know that none of those things compared to losing my dad. To this day, nothing in my life has come close. The surgeon said they would prepare his body and move him to a room so that we could gather any close family and say goodbye. Dad was to be cremated, so the last time we would see him was in his hospital room on life support until we authorized them to turn off the machines.

We were all in tears, and Lisa worked with mom to ensure everyone was made aware of the situation. Our sister, Eva, had already left Arizona and literally arrived within two hours of the news, but she lived three hours away. Our sister Suzie would arrive eventually, and our sister Dana, who had just flown back from a business trip, received our call as she was getting off the plane and arrived at the hospital within an hour. Then, one of our uncles, Robyn, showed up as well. As my sisters, uncle, cousin, and Lisa's husband, Christopher, arrived, each person went in to pay their respects and have time alone with dad. I could barely tear myself away from the room because I was afraid that if I took my eyes off of him that he would disappear. My heart and mind were too fragile to accept that I would never get to talk to him again, cry on his shoulder, receive his never ending words of encouragement, and dad was one of the few at that time who chose to love me in spite of myself.

What would my life be like without him? I was so close to my dad and talked to him on the phone at least two to three times each day. Even if he was at work, he would take the time to talk to me because he knew I needed him. He would always say things like, "Now, Cara..." or "What's going on now?" As it was always something, though most of all I just needed to hear his voice, but now it would not be there. This was such a difficult time in my life, when I leaned so heavily on my dad to lift me up and support me as I tried to navigate the events of my life.

Though my dad is gone, his words continue to run through my mind, and the encouragement he showed and belief he had in me shines through my actions every day. Even though my best friend is not physically there, or a phone call away, my dad lives on in me through the decisions I make and the woman I have become over the last eight years. My father will always be my dad and my best friend because no one can ever replace him.