

Father's Day 1972

The chair was hard, but big enough to swallow me up. Dingy stains covered the thin cloth covering – no doubt with the hopeless tears of many who occupied it before me. I was twelve, smack in the middle of awkward adolescence. The hospital waiting room at the University of Utah Medical Center in Salt Lake City, was bleak, with throngs of anxious visitors. I felt alone – even while overbearing Aunts, cousins and grandparents felt free to heave themselves into my personal space with crushing hugs that my freckled, boney body could not easily absorb. Aunt Jaimie's attempts were the toughest to avoid, but still I tried my best to dodge them. On this Saturday in June – one day before Father's Day, the sun was shining so brilliantly that its blinding presence through the window somehow warmed me, regardless of the frightening chill inside me. Some fifty years later, sunshine still makes everything alright in my world, no matter the circumstances that surround me.

Just up three flights of stairs, my Daddy lay in a hospital bed fighting for his life. Kidney disease had ravaged him. But at age 37, my twelve-year-old self imagined he had already lived a good, long life. At least that is how I justified the dire situation. My mother, fresh from the unexpected and painful divorce, refused to leave his bedside. If he opened his eyes, she still wanted to be the first person he saw – his high school sweetheart – no matter their current status. My proud grandmother Mimi was equally as doting. If ever there was a favored child, Robert O. Bruce was Mimi's most cherished. She frequently boasted of his skills playing college basketball, his handsome mark as a television sportscaster, his witty and popular 'Early Bird Bob' Radio Show, and his impressive entrepreneurial skills that turned his hobbies and dreams into profitable businesses. She would not allow my mother to be the only face he saw when he emerged from the darkness. His jaundiced face obscured with plastic tubes, monitors and beepers - pushed and pulled for his every breath. This is the scene I imagined from the waiting room below.

I still do not know to this day if anyone was aware that Aunt Jolene was in the adjacent room, having just been sliced open in an act of great sacrifice – my Dad's body now fighting to accept her kidney as his own. She lived well into her 70's with one kidney, but in all those years after the surgery, I never was able to grasp just how much hurt and guilt she must have carried - the act of donating her kidney, only to lose her beloved brother a few hours later. I never personally thanked her for her act of gallantry – for reasons I haven't identified.

My little golden-haired, blue eyed seven-year-old brother joined me in the chair, just as my older sister descended the stairs. At that moment I felt compelled to escape but had nowhere to go without casting my brother aside and ignoring the fact my sister was headed our direction. Black mascara stained her swollen face. She was the beautiful sister in this family. Lezlie (with a "z" emphasized this fact), the bronzed skin, brown-eyed, curvy, tough, eloquent, confident first-born. She never crumbled. That's why it disturbed me to see her so disheveled at this moment. Directly addressing me, she said "Lori, don't go upstairs. Remember him as he was. Not as he is right now. You will not want this vision to be the last memory of him." Only half registering what she said, her words floated and hung like the sagging weight of heavy snow. Questions deluged my mind. Would he not make it out of here alive? Would he never come home again? Had Lezlie already said goodbye to him? Had she touched him through the shroud of machines? Did he know she was there, and I was not? Could he feel her love and not mine? Would he view me as the coward that slumped deeper into the chair doing everything possible to avoid the decision to go say goodbye?

While digesting her words, my baby brother took Lezlie's hand, and she ushered him up the stairs as if he did not have the same choice that I did. I had been dismissed. In seconds, the space between us became a lifetime – my siblings walking away from me, to see our Dad one last time. I still question that moment, and wonder if it represented either my sister's selfishness – or selflessness. She denied me the proper goodbye, but maybe it was her way of fiercely protecting my heart. Regardless of her intentions, I did not go up to the third floor in that moment – nor did I ever.

Robert Bruce died the following day – on Father's Day, 1972. His death became known to me in the early morning hours, as I listened to the sobs of my grandmother. On the other end of the telephone receiver that she held with her long, elegant hand, the University medical doctors were seeking approval to perform an autopsy on her son. His cause of death was not necessarily a mystery, but an autopsy would provide greater clarity about his disease and why he passed away shortly after the surgery. "Please just leave him alone. He's been through enough. I don't want anyone else cutting him open," she cried. And so, they surrendered to a grieving mother. I suppose if the autopsy were granted, we could have known more, but it would not have changed a thing.

The next day was Monday and through my mother's insistence and for a reason I still cannot comprehend, we went to the mall. We had purchased my Dad a slick new electric razor for Father's Day and the trip to the store to return it was tragically memorable. The young clerk inquired about the reason for the return and my mother uttered four simple words – "he didn't make it," as if the girl knew what she was referencing. As we left the store, I finally broke and my Dad's death became real. My brave defiance shattered into a million tears. In the back seat of the car, my sister held me in her strong arms while I processed the significance of returning the razor he would never use.