

Father's Day
by Elizabeth Schwing

I often wonder how different things would be with my dad had I opted not to go with him to Tulsa to see his mother before she died. When I talked to my parents, they insisted that grandmother would be fine and there was no reason to go. As always, I believed them, even though she was ninety-four and had just had a massive heart attack. When I hung up and looked over at my husband, Ned, he just shook his head and said, "You're going." I recited all the reasons my parents had given me not to go, but he didn't budge. He handed me my plane ticket and gently but firmly told me, "Go. Now. Think about how you felt when this happened to your grandfather. You never got to say good-bye. Plus, your dad shouldn't have to be alone."

It was a nonstop flight to Tulsa and then a short cab ride to St. Joseph's Hospital. Growing up, I spent summers in Tulsa with my grandparents. When I was ten, Grandmother taught me how to crochet baby blankets, and we dropped them off here, at St. Joe's. When I walked into her room in ICU, my dad was sitting by her bed, holding her hand. He looked up, and his bloodshot eyes belied the smile on his face. I asked him "Oh Pop, how are you holding up?" His answer came in the form of an enormous bear hug. Then while whacking me on the back, said, "Sister, it's so great you came. I'm really glad you're here." Ned was right, and I wondered how I ever considered not coming.

Her doctor looked like a teenager; in fact, Pop even asked if he could call him Doogie Howser. Quickly, he countered with a compliment: "Hey, everybody knows that you young guys fresh out of medical school know a helluva lot more than the old goats my age. So doc, what's the story here with my mother?" The doctor spoke slowly and deliberately, "Well, sir, as you can see, Mrs. Pullen's body is in the initial stages of dying." He gestured towards her feet, then her hands, both of which were curled and closed tightly. He continued, "Sometime over the next few days, her organs will simply shut down and then she will be gone. Of course, we will provide oxygen and IV fluids, but that's all as she has a DNR order in her chart." Pop stared blankly at the doctor for several seconds then hoarsely replied, "Thanks very much, son."

The next thirty-six hours were a blur. We took turns sitting with her, so she didn't have to be alone. We napped on the couch in the lounge and got coffee out of a machine in the basement. Late in the middle of the third night, a nurse gently shook me awake and told me that I should go see my grandmother. Pop was already with her, and I quietly joined him. We sat

together with her until the monitors slowed then finally ceased beeping altogether. We were left with an eerie still silence that told us she was gone. As the doctor had said, her heart gave out. There was no room for words, so I simply put my arm around Pop while we cried bittersweet tears.

He was the only child of a frugal Depression era couple who worked hard but enjoyed a simple, content life, revolving around church, family and friends. No matter how old you are, you only have one mother. It was here, under the constant flicker of bright fluorescent lights, that a sure but imperceptible shift took place between us. For the first time, I saw him not just as my father but also as a son who rightfully mourned the loss of this woman who had given him life. I was overcome with gratitude for the different colors of love that filled the room, my heart and my life. I glanced at my watch for the first time in days, smiling as I realized it was Father's Day.

Author Bio: I am a native Houstonian and a freelance writer. I am a married mother of three children and former elementary school teacher. When I am not writing, I love to read, drink coffee with friends, take walks with my husband, practice yoga, and piddle around in my garden with my dogs. I graduated from the Kinkaid School (1983) and then the University of Texas at Austin with degrees in Speech Communications (1987) and Elementary Education (1989). I attended Salem College, a women's college, for one year in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.