



Six Months

I pulled up the “Kind of Blue” album by Miles Davis on my Spotify and let it play softly on the small speaker I’d placed on the nightstand by my father’s bed. It was about 11:00 p.m. on a Sunday night, in February, 2014, and my dad loved straight ahead jazz. Snow was falling outside of my brother Ethan’s home in central New Jersey at the rate of about an inch or so an hour. I sat at my father’s bedside, not fully comprehending what my sister-in-law Inga was trying to tell me. Inga is a hospice nurse. She and my brother Tim, who is Ethan’s twin, arrived about noon today from Reading, PA. They intended to visit with my dad and then check into a nearby hotel this evening, but Inga felt they should stay the night. She said she wanted to keep an eye on my dad.

In December, 2013, my father was given six to nine months to live. He was dying from stage three lung cancer. My brother James and I had arrived from Atlanta, the day before, Saturday, and my dad was wide awake! When I walked into his bedroom, he was sitting up in bed, alert. His eyes lit up and he cried out,

“My girl!” I went to him and lay on his chest. He wrapped his arms around me. His face was clean shaven and he appeared to have had a fresh haircut. My brother Ethan and his wife Raquel were taking good care of him. I was there to help them with his care and planned to stay for at least a

month. His skin was so soft and smooth. He was golden and gleaming as if he were filled with some inner light. He looked beautiful. I told him so. He was glowing. We talked for a while, and then his words became harder to understand, garbled and it seemed he could hardly keep his eyes open. I said,

“It’s ok, rest now. Sleep well and we’ll talk tomorrow. We have plenty of time to catch up. I’ll be here at least a month.”

He smiled a wistful smile, squeezed my hand and mouthed the words “I love you.”

I hadn’t seen my dad in two years, but we had talked often. I tried to check in with him at least once a week. It hadn’t always been this way between us. My relationship with my father had been.... complicated. I began to rebuild my bond with him about a year before he was diagnosed.

I am the oldest of eight children (seven living.) I was the only girl for 15 years and then my baby sister Sara was born. My mom called us her book ends. My dad loved his boys and spent a lot of time with them. Up until I was about ten or eleven, I was included. I was a tomboy who loved to watch and play baseball, basketball and football. My dad and I watched the various games together and he taught me how to throw a perfect spiral with the football.

I was an avid reader and a few times a month my dad and I would spend Saturday afternoons at either the library in Neptune or at the larger Monmouth County Library in Shrewsbury. It felt nice to have some father/daughter time together and we would talk. He took me to the bank to open up my first account when I started earning money babysitting and encouraged me when I got my first “real” job as a camp counselor at 14.

My dad was one of just a handful of black students in his high school class in Derry, PA, but was elected Student Body President of his senior class. Popular, he went on to attend Central State University in Ohio on a football scholarship. A family tragedy caused his college career to be cut short. He dropped out and joined the army. It was during his stint in the army that he met my mother. After marriage they settled in Long Branch, NJ and when I was about nine, they purchased a modest split-level home in a nice middle-class neighborhood in Neptune, NJ. My mother was a stay at home mom, all of us children had bikes and plenty of toys. We were well cared for, quite an accomplishment for a black man at that time.

But there were secrets in my father’s past that none of us children knew about then. Those secrets often caused an underlying tension in our household that often rose to the boiling point, causing conflict, arguments and screaming matches between my parents. These were the things I thought about as I watched the snow fall gently outside his window and jazz played softly in the background.

My dad had slept through the rest of the day Saturday and only had a few waking hours on Sunday. Inga took responsibility for administering medication and keeping him comfortable. His

assigned nurse was off until Monday. All of my siblings were there at Ethan's by happenstance, except for one brother Joe who was in Atlanta.

Around midnight, I went to bed. Inga said she'd wake me if anything changed. My sister Sara and I slept in the bedroom right next to my dad's. There were three bedrooms on this, the second floor of Ethan's home. He and his wife slept in the remaining bedroom and the rest of my brothers were scattered throughout the downstairs family room and basement on sofas and pull out couches. We did not plan to all be here together, but the snowstorm had caused several of my siblings to turn around after starting out for home. I settled in for the night.

Around 2:00 a.m. Monday morning Inga woke us with an urgent whisper saying,

"Hurry, it's happening now!"

'Huh?' I thought. 'What's happening now? Surely, he wasn't dying! He had at least six more months to live.' I grabbed my robe and Sara and I quickly followed Inga. My brothers, James, Timothy and Ethan and their wives stood in a semi-circle at the foot of the bed. Sara found her way to the other side of the bed and took my father's hand. Jason stood next to her. I took my father's other hand, standing on the side of the bed closest to the doorway. I stared at him in disbelief. The beautiful golden complexion of the previous day had been replaced by a greyish ashen tone to his skin. Where his cheeks had a warm fullness to them just a few hours ago, his eyes were now sunken and his cheeks drawn and pale. His eyes were closed and I felt as if all the air was being sucked from the room. Minutes passed and everyone but me was crying. Inga, said,

"He's fighting, tell him its ok. Tell him you will be okay." I looked around the room as my siblings spoke those words, to put him at ease. I said them too, but my mind screamed, 'Not yet! No! Not yet! I need more time! I have six months.' I held my father's hand and stroked it softly. A complex man, with many layers and hidden grief and pain he could not share took his last breaths. The room felt as if it were moving, the air was electric and active. And then something happened that shocked us all. My father raised his head from his pillow, opened his eyes and said softly,

"I love you all."

He laid his head back onto his pillow, closed his eyes and the room was still, quiet and I knew he was gone.

This was the saddest, most fascinating, terrible, beautiful, awful, almost supernatural thing I have ever experienced. His life force left us actively, dramatically just as he had lived. He was a man I loved but didn't know well or fully understand. I would come to know years later how much my relationship with him has impacted the decisions I've made throughout my life. No matter where our relationships with our parents take us over the course of our lifetimes, at the end, when all is said and done, all you are left with is the love.

