

“Living On a Prayer”

by Tahna Moore

“You never truly understand the value of a moment until it becomes a memory.” I didn’t realize the level of truth in that quote, until it became a reality for me. Truer words were never spoken as I stood at my father’s bedside, surrounded by my family, hand-in-hand with Betty, my dad’s former wife. My eyes were fixated on dad’s chest, rising and falling, as I’ve done so many times before when I’ve visited him in the hospital. But this time was different. This time, I am interrupted by the welcoming of a Pastor, who has been called in. I don’t want to notice him. My mind begins to drift off, sinking into the depths of denial at the acknowledgement to the purpose of his presence. Instead, I search for contentment, reminiscing on memories from the past – a happier time that seems like yesterday.

“I can’t do it, dad. I don’t want to kill the worm. Here, you do it,” I said, as I handed dad my fishing pole. Dad laughs and pats me on the head.

“Well, you’re definitely all girl,” he says as he baits the hook, reminding me that I was his last chance at having a boy to carry on his namesake. He has two older daughters by his first wife. I came along 18 years later, another girl, by his second marriage. Truth is, I hated fishing, but I never told my dad that. I knew how much he wanted a boy to take fishing with him and do boy things with, so I went along with it. I just wanted to spend time with him, and if it meant fishing, then I was ok with it. I was just content to see him enjoying time with me and happy to see him sober for a change.

It was the summer of ’87, I was 9 years old. My mom and dad had been divorced for about two years. Shortly after, dad moved to Connersville, Indiana, about a half hour from Richmond. He had picked me up to spend his weekend with me and my step-mom Betty, at the Doc-O-Lake camp grounds in Connersville. Betty seemed to have a way with him, unlike my mom or his first wife. He bullied them. But not with Betty, she had a strong presence about her. It was clear that she wasn’t going to take any shit from him. I felt secure when I was with her and dad because she was the only one who would stand up to dad and he listened to her. He respected her. She brought out a side of dad I had never seen before, a nurturing side of him. She encouraged him and supported him. He wanted to be a better man when he was around her. It was nice seeing him that way—happy. He tried, but just like all his other relationships, she too, would end up, at best, second place to his drinking.

Dad was an alcoholic his entire life. When he was sober, he was the kindest, most thoughtful man one could ever meet. My sister told me that they once lived next door to a family and the man had recently lost his job. He had a wife and two small children to support. So every week when dad would go to the grocery store, he would buy extra groceries and leave them on the neighbor’s front porch until the neighbor found a job.

“I can’t stand the thought of little babies ov’r there going without food while I

am coming home to a hot meal every night,” he’d say.

“He did that for about 2 months. I don’t know if that man ever figured out that it was dad who was doing that or not,” my sister said. But when he was drunk, he was cruel, mean, even violent. I can’t tell you how many 2 a.m. phone calls my mom received from dad, calling from the jail or the hospital because he got into a bar fight over a card game. Dad had some wild hobbies when he was younger. In addition to fishing, he liked to drink, gamble, and fight.

He finally decided to quit smoking by the time he was about 40. He burned the tips of his fingers when he was lighting a Winston cigarette one day. He got mad and promised to never smoke another cigarette. I was there when it happened, but I didn’t believe him. I even laughed when he said it. But he was a stubborn man; he never did pick up another cigarette. My sisters and I held our breaths, waiting for him to make the same stubborn decision about drinking. Unfortunately, we would’ve turned blue in the face before that day ever came. Drinking had taken its toll on his life. I don’t think any of us realized just how strong that hold was, not even him.

Alcoholism was beginning to take its toll on dad. The physical signs had reared their ugly marks on dad’s health; his deteriorating condition was one thing he couldn’t deny. After marrying and divorcing his last wife, Betty, three times, she finally gave up on their marriage for good in 1999, when she asked dad to choose between drinking or her and dad reached for another bottle. But she always asked us about him and would occasionally call and check on him, bring food by for him, or show up at the hospital when she would hear about it.

“I love your daddy. But I just can’t live with him and watch him destroy himself with that drinking” She would say.

It’s the fall of 2005, the phone rings. It’s my sister, Eva, who also lives in Richmond. She tells me that dad has had a heart attack and is in ICU in Connersville Hospital. Her voice is rushed and worried. I could feel my heart rate go up. I start praying, out loud, in the car, while my sister holds my hand and rushes towards Connersville.

Eva and I walk into dad’s room in ICU where monitors, tubes, and wires are spiraling from dad’s body, leaving him looking like a spider of some sort. I walk up to dad and touch his shoulder, my sister and I pray for God’s strength to withstand dad’s condition. He wakes up shortly after, smiles, and says hello. I reply, trying to lighten the situation.

“Hey Spiderman, how are you feeling?”

“I’ve seen better days,” he smiles and continues, “I’m a tough man, but I have to admit, I was scared. I don’t ever want to have to go through that again. If I’m ever in a position where this ol’ heart of mine quits ticking, please don’t let me lay there and suffer. I don’t want to be put on life support or none of that, just let me go.”

“Don’t talk like that, dad. You still have a lot of years left yet. I don’t wanna hear you talking like that” I say.

The mood lightens; dad starts engaging in conversation with us, asking us how

the grandkids are doing. We fill him in on small updates of our lives and ask about his. He looks at me and smiles and says, “Honey, I want you to know that I am so proud of you for going to school and getting your education like you have done.”

“Thanks dad, that means a lot to hear you say that.” I replied, fighting back the tears because I sensed the animosity from my other sister, Bonnie, who was also there. Bonnie also lives in Connorsville, so she was there before me and my sister arrived. Minutes later, Bonnie chimes in, “Oh here we go, Tahna’s the smart one, Tahna has her education, blah – blah – blah!”

“Do you hear Peacock over there? My goodness, she’s something else,” he replies with his southern Kentucky accent. Dad had a way of keeping us in line by coming up with these clever nicknames to describe our bad behavior.

Dad ended up having to have open-heart surgery that time, the doctors told us because of his age and the other factoring conditions of his health, he may not make it. The doctors had previously put a stent in, by running it up his leg, prior to this surgery. In addition to his heart problems he also had cirrhosis, emphysema, and arthritis. We prayed for dad to make a full recovery. The doctors were surprised at the way he was sitting up in the bed, laughing and joking with us after surgery. But the doctors didn’t know dad the way we do. He’s a fighter, he pulled through. I think the entire decade of dad’s 60’s and my 20’s were spent on one hospital stay after another. I am not pleased to admit, that I know the Fayette memorial emergency waiting room area and ICU unit like the back of my hand. I went to visit dad a couple weeks later at his house. We started talking about country music. He asks me and my sisters if we’ve heard his favorite country singer, George Jones’ newest song called “Choices.”

“That’s my favorite song by him. I want you girls to hear it,” he said. Dad played the song and we listen to the lyrics:

“I’ve had choice...Since the day that I was born.
 There were voices that told me right from wrong
 If I had listened, No, I wouldn’t be here today,
 Living and dying with the choices I made
 I was tempted, by an early age I found I liked drinkin’
 Oh, and I never turned it down.
 There were loved ones, but I turned them all away
 Now I’m living and dying with the choices I made
 I guess I’m payin’...For the things that I have done
 If I could go back...Oh, Lord knows I’d run
 But I’m still losin’...This game of life I play
 Living and dying...With the choices I made”

“Hey now pops, quit crying before you make me cry too” I tell him.

He smiles and reaches for his handkerchief, tucking into the back pocket of his blue jeans. Clearing his throat, he begins to speak.

“I want you three girls to know that I love all three of you girls so much.

I would lay down my life for each of you. You girls mean the world to me. I'm getting older now and we ain't promised tomorrow, so I want you to know these things while I'm able to tell you. I am sorry for all the bad things I've done when you girls were young. I made a lot of mistakes in my life that I'm not proud of. Sometimes I was mean to you girls and your mothers'. My dad was mean and I had it rough growing up, so I didn't know any different then; I just did the best I could. I know that's no excuse. But I know better now, and I want to apologize for the things I did wrong, from the bottom of my heart, I am truly sorry."

Each of us get up, walk over and hug dad around his neck.

"We forgive you and we love you," we all say.

The next five years would consist of dad falling or passing out and being escorted to the emergency room, due to what we believe was a series of mini-strokes. Dementia began to set in, but dad refused to give up his independence. On August of 2012, the phone rings. It's dad.

"Hey dad, how are you?" I ask.

"I'm not doing too well honey, I've decided I'm going to sell my house and move in with Mandy." Mandy is my niece—Bonnie's daughter, who also lives in Connersville. "This ol' body of mine is breakin' down on me, honey. I don't have much longer... I can feel it. And to be quite honest, since Bob died, I don't wanna live any more anyway." he tells me casually. I feel the lump building in my throat. He's never been so forward about this before.

Before, he'd just smile and say, "Guess it just wasn't my time to go." I try to disguise the emotion in my voice but it's no use. My voice shakes as I speak, "Don't say that Dad! Quit talking like that! You have a lot of years left yet dad. You're a fighter, you're tough! You always taught me to fight. Don't talk like this, dad." I say with frustration.

"I'm 75 years old, honey, and I'm in constant pain. No one lives forever."

"Well dad, I worried about you all the time when you were living alone. I'm glad you are going to move in with family members that can take care of you but you know me and Mandy and Bonnie haven't been getting along these past few years. I'm not welcome at her house so I probably won't get to see you much, but I want you to know..." My voice starts to shake, tears fill my eyes, I regain control of myself and continue, "I want you to know that I love you dad and I'm praying for you all the time. I'm going to miss not seeing you as much but it isn't because I don't want to..."

"Listen, I don't like you girls fighting, you're sisters—blood. Me and my brother Bob damn near killed each other several times, but we always worked things out. My brother was my best friends, and now he's gone. I don't want to die knowing that two of my daughters ain't speaking to each other. It would break my heart." He says to me.

"Well dad, I do love her...from afar," I reply. We say our goodbyes and hang up the phone. The next few months dad is in and out of the hospital every other month and I rush to see him every time I get word that he is in the hospital, know-

-ing that those are the only visits I will have with him now.

On Thursday, February 21, 2013, my sister Eva calls me and tells me that dad is in ICU at the hospital again and that it's serious. The following Saturday I make my way to Connersville to see dad. I enter the room. He is sleeping. He looks pale, fragile and weak. I grab his hand and pray for him while he is sleeping, asking God to remove this sickness, to restore his health, and strengthen his body. He struggles to open his eyes and say "hi". His mouth is dry; his voice is too weak to speak.

He whispers: "Well...that's my baby girl, Tahna."

"Yes dad. It's me." I smile at him. He points to some sponges, his way of asking me to wet his mouth with the sponges.

"Thank you, honey." I smile back at him.

"No problem dad." Then he nods his head, asking me to remove the restraints on his arms. I pull the covers back and notice the restraints. It was tough seeing him this way. Compassion and sympathy overwhelmed me. I fought back the tears and responded, "I know that has to be uncomfortable, dad, but you can't take them off yet because you have to keep the feeding tube in. But the nurse told us that if you're feeling better tomorrow and able to eat on your own. They'll be able to take the feeding tube out and take the restraints off. So you just hang in there and get some rest, so you'll feel better tomorrow, okay?"

Disappointment runs across his face, but he knows he is too weak to fight with me, he nods in agreement. I rub his forehead while he falls asleep. I kiss him on the forehead and whisper. "Love you dad" in his ear before leaving, hoping not to disturb him. He awakens as I am leaving and I hear him strain to whisper.

"I—love—you."

I turn around and smile. "I know you do dad. Just get some rest, okay?" He nods and drifts off back to sleep.

On March 13, 2013, 9:29 a.m., the phone rings. It's Eva. She tells me that dad stopped breathing and that his heart stopped. She says he is being rushed to the hospital by ambulance. Eva and I rush into the Fayette Memorial emergency waiting room. Eva greets Bonnie and Mandy while I rush up to hug Betty. I ask Betty about dad's condition. She tells his heart has stopped 5 times and that they're trying to stabilize him now. She sinks her face into my shoulder and starts to cry. I start crying too.

"No. No. No. He's gonna pull through! These doctors, they don't know..." I tell her. The doctor comes out from the emergency room and tells us that they have stabilized him, but they believe he suffered a major stroke and that it is unlikely that he will survive. The doctor claims that if he were to pull through, he would likely be fully-paralyzed or brain dead. Because dad's wishes were not to be revived, the doctor urges us to visit him and say our goodbyes now.

We rush back to see him, I am the first one to go in the room.

"Oh dad, dad..." I cover my mouth, shocked at the frail, weak body laying before me, with a machine hooked to him, breathing for him. I rub his hand. It is stiff and cold.

“Hi dad, we’re all here and we love you,” I say. Mandy’s husband tickles his foot, a game we have always played with him when he’s in the hospital to ensure he responds. But this time, he doesn’t. I begin sobbing, I rubbed the top of his bald head, kissed his forehead.

“I love you, dad.” He doesn’t move. I can’t stand seeing him this way. His eyes are half open, but he doesn’t blink.

“We’re all here for you dad, and we’re going to stay right here with you,” Eva says.

The nurse interrupts us, “Well, I can tell you one thing; since all of you have been in here talking to him, his heart rate has gone up and is more stable than it has been since he’s been here.”

We sit there quietly, until the doctor enters and asks to speak to me and my two sisters. This can’t be good, I think to myself. He takes us into a vacant room and asks us whether or not we want to keep him on life support. The doctor tells us he can either leave him on there until his heart stops again, in which case they would not try to resuscitate him, or we can take the breathing machine off now and let him go naturally.

“I can’t handle this. I just can’t! What if he’s just paralyzed and he can hear everything around him but he just can’t respond to us. I can’t handle this. It’s too much! It’s just too much!” I run outside to smoke a cigarette and try to compose myself. This can’t be real. This can’t really be happening, I think to myself. Bonnie discusses dad’s condition with us and asks us how we feel about taking him off of the life support, since it is what dad said he wanted. Eva and Bonnie discuss taking him off the machine while I sit there numb and silent. I don’t want to be a part of the decision. “Who am I to play God?” I think to myself.

Bonnie looks at me.

“Tahna, we’re going to honor dad’s wishes and take him off the ventilator.”

“It’s your decision. I’m not making that decision. I don’t want to live with the blood on my hands.” I mumble, as I walk away. The doctor lets us say goodbye, then he enters the room.

“Everybody ready?” he asks us.

“No. I can’t do this! I can’t be in here! Excuse me.” I blurt out, as I make my way through the crowded room to the hallway. I couldn’t be in there, witnessing it. I felt like it symbolized us giving up on him.

My sister, Eva, joins me as I stand outside the room. We hug each other and I can’t stop crying. It’s that deep sobbing, feel like you’re going to throw up kind of crying. I can’t seem to bring myself to face the dreaded reality that is occurring on the other side of that curtain.

The doctor exits. “12:15p.m.” he solemnly tells the nurses at the desk. To him, dad is just another day at the job, another patient, but to us he is our father!

“Why did he just say that? What does he mean by that? What does he mean, Eva?!” She won’t answer me. Instead, she just hugs me and we cry and cry, trying to conjure up enough strength to reenter the room.

“I’m scared, Eva. I know that I have to do this. I have to go back in there, but I don’t know if I can! “What if he struggles when he goes? We’ll remember that for the rest of our lives.”

“C’mon, we got to do this. We have to be strong for dad and let him know we’re going to be here for him. We have to see this through.” She says.

We go back in and gather around his bed. His breaths are deep and long. Our eyes are fixated on his chest, knowing it could be any minute now. The pastor enters and asks for us to gather hands and say a prayer. Betty grabs my hand. The pastor begins to pray.

I don’t remember much, but I do know that the pastor asked God to allow us to turn these tough decisions over to Him and asked God to call dad when it is his time to come home and asked the Lord to welcome him and allow dad to leave without fear or guilt but to leave feeling comfort and peace. We all begin to say “Ame—” when we are interrupted by a long beep from the machine.

“What was that? What was it?” I ask Betty as I look up, I see dad’s chest fall. I wait, but it doesn’t rise again.

“He’s gone, honey.” Betty replies, crying into my shoulder. I grab her tight and sob. The room is replaced with the sounds of weeping and bawling at the response of the loss of dad’s presence. I feel the loss immediately. I wait for everyone to leave. I approach the body that was once so full of laughter and strength, now vacant. I kiss dad’s forehead and run my hand down his eyelids.

“Rest in Heaven dad. I love you” I leave the room in a daze. And the loss settles in, carving a hole deep within my soul. I feel orphaned.

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