

Rediscovering Daddy

Susan Long



*Jack of Diamonds, Jack of Diamonds
I've known you from old.
You've robbed my poor pockets
Of silver and gold.*

Daddy loved to drive. He'd hop up on U.S. 119 along the Elk River between Clendenin and Charleston, West Virginia and we'd fly down the two-lane road, windows open, with him singing *Jack O' Diamonds*. "Why are you such a horrible singer, Daddy?" I'd ask. He would laugh, and then he'd sing even louder as he put the pedal to the metal.

I was only about ten years old then. I recall my daddy years later, sitting in his rocking chair with his head hung over from exhaustion and pain. Even then, he still wanted to go in the car. Only those times, I drove.

Driving together one of those times, as we merged onto the interstate, he looked over at me.

"Do you like to drive?" he asked.

"I love to drive," I lied.

“I always thought I should have been a truck driver,” he said. “Could’ve driven all over the country and seen a lot.”

To change the subject, I asked, “Will you sing *Jack O’ Diamonds* for me?”

That’s just one of many memories I have of my daddy. I’m fifty-three years old now, and my question reflected the instinctive knowledge that what makes our hearts sing at ten probably has the same effect on us when we’re adults. But maturity has also taught me that when *my* heart sings, I need to return the gift.

The six-month period which began with his diagnosis of lung cancer in May, 2005, and ended when he died on November 22, 2005, became a lifetime—a shortened lifetime by normal standards, but one filled with moment after moment, hour after hour, day after day of rediscovering my daddy. During the Meso Lifetime, as I now refer to it, there were no days, no weeks, no seasons. Time seemed suspended. But the clock kept ticking.

My parents divorced when I was twelve and my two sisters and I moved away from West Virginia with my mom when I was fourteen. Over the years, I’d see my father maybe once a year, sometimes every other year. In some ways our relationship was frozen in time, which I guess is why I still call him Daddy.

Daddy remarried shortly after he and my mom divorced, and he had another daughter. He wasn’t a great communicator; we didn’t talk much between our infrequent visits and I always waited for him to make the first move. He didn’t, but my stepmother, Dee, did. Our visits were always enjoyable, but I didn’t mind when they ended. But then one day, everything changed.

Daddy and Dee were planning to drive down from West Virginia to visit me in Orlando, after which they’d continue to Miami to visit my sister. But Daddy hadn’t been feeling well since Easter time. He had congestion in his chest and shortness of breath. He was losing weight and was extremely weak. I insisted they post-

pone the trip, but Daddy was determined to come anyway. Yes, he was “West by God Virginia” stubborn.

Daddy was admitted to the hospital in late May and had about a gallon of fluid drained from his right lung. Further testing confirmed that he had mesothelioma, which few in our family had ever heard of, and which all of us, initially, had great difficulty pronouncing. The doctors explained that it was a relatively rare cancer of the lining of the lung caused by exposure to asbestos, usually many years before any symptoms appear. They also said that the prognosis for this type of cancer was not good.

During the six months of his illness, I found myself wanting to call him every day and visit him as often as I could. I flew from Florida up to West Virginia at least once a month. I wanted my heart to sing again like it had so long ago on that drive and his heart was more than ready for an encore performance.

We took risks in this new Meso Lifetime that we would never have taken before. I said, “I love you” on more than one occasion. He was a reserved man, but he said it to me, too. We forged ahead with our new relationship of discovery and rediscovery. Where once our conversations had sometimes seemed forced, now I’d call him and we’d talk about everyday things—how my son, Jonathan, was doing, West Virginia football, the weather. It didn’t really matter what the words were, just that we were talking.

“Daddy, how are you doing today?” I’d ask.

“Well, pretty good,” he’d say. “I’m dressed and have a free day, no doctor appointments.” His West Virginia drawl flowed like a gentle river through the phone lines and gave me hope. We moved from a relationship that was devoid of day-to-day details to one that addressed the most basic aspects of human life.

“Have you eaten anything today, Daddy?”

“Tried to eat some apple sauce and bacon.”

“How’s the pain today?”

He’d ask questions about Jonathan and me. He’d tell me he liked it when I visited. This was big, *real* big.

As I watched Dee, his wife of almost 40 years, take care of him during those difficult six months, I saw the fruits of that commitment and stability. I was amazed by his positive attitude as I watched him struggle in the morning just to find enough energy to get dressed and yet still be able to say, “It’s a pretty good day today.” If I were dying, would I be so positive? I was stunned by his persistence and dedication to living when, only a couple of weeks before he died, he insisted on driving to the airport to pick up my sister. Given the same circumstances, could I have been as strong?

I was discovering who my Daddy really was, and I liked what I saw. Others already knew what I had yet to learn. “Joe was a simple man,” Reverend Okey Harless was later to say at the funeral. “A simple man of faith.” I thought about that a lot. I knew that the preacher was referring to religious faith, something that I’d abandoned a long time ago.

Joe, my daddy, *was* a simple man. Now I suspect that only a “simple” man could keep a smile on his face despite the intense pain. Only a “simple” man could forego bitterness about the unfairness of life and graciously accept the cards he’s been dealt. Only a “simple” man could maneuver through his shortened lifetime with so much courage. In his simplicity, it appeared that Daddy had somehow figured out the meaning of his life.

Pleasure for Daddy and for the rest of our family increasingly became defined by his lack of pain and by little things, like sitting around on a Sunday afternoon reminiscing about old times. Routine was important as well. He still played the lottery every week, read the sports pages in the newspaper, watched the 11 o’clock news. Daddy chose to live his shortened lifetime just as he had before ... well, not quite.

My sister was visiting him one weekend when our mom called. It wasn’t planned, but my sister ended up putting Daddy on the phone with her. They had not spoken for many years. My mom told us later what a good conversation they’d had.

“Just wanted to say I’m thinking of you,” my mom said. “And if there’s anything I can do.”

“Thanks, Carole,” Daddy said. “It’s been a long time.”

“We were young back then,” she said. “Now we have grandchildren.”

“Yes, we’re lucky,” he said. “And I don’t have any hard feelings towards you.”

“Me neither,” she said. “We did our best. Take care of yourself.”

And, so, a much longer lifetime was condensed into a few minutes and became part of the shorter, more immediate one.

Later, I realized that a miracle had occurred: Daddy and I accomplished in six months what we hadn’t been able to do in almost forty years. We re-connected and acknowledged our love for one another. My rediscovered daddy inspired me to embrace fortitude, patience, and dignity, to seek a simple life, not to run from it. In these things, he found strength, and through those months of watching Daddy live his life to the end, they have become my goals as well.

He spent the last week of his life in Hubbard Hospice House in Charleston, West Virginia, a beautiful place on top of a mountain. He was coherent enough the day before he died to ask for each of his four daughters by name. We all arrived in time to say goodbye. Actually, he waited for us, his patience still evident.

As I drove away from Hubbard Hospice House one last time on that cold, November day, I hummed *Jack O’ Diamonds*. And then it occurred to me. Maybe the Jack of Diamonds isn’t an unlucky

card after all. Maybe it's just another card that we all draw at some point in our lives. It's how we play it that matters. Daddy played it brilliantly.

The author is Manager of Communications for the American Automobile Club's National Headquarters in Heathrow, Florida. She has published essays in the Orlando Sentinel and articles in AAA member publications. Her short story, "Blue Impala," was a finalist in Glimmer Train's "Short-Story Award for New Writers" 2004. The author has taught at the University of Central Florida and high-school English in New York. She lives in Winter Park, Florida.