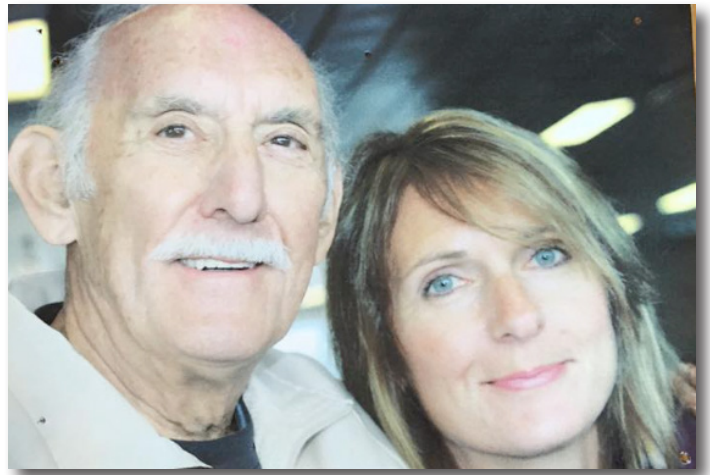


I WAS YOUR SUNSHINE, DAD. DO YOU REMEMBER?

I was always Daddy's girl. To this day I still can't cook very well because, instead of helping my mum in the kitchen like other girls did, I would follow my dad around. I would go into his workshop and ask what all the tools were used for. When he had to make a trip to cut wood or haul things to the garbage dump, I always went. To me, these were grand adventures; I loved to see new things and explore, even if the locations weren't the most picturesque.



My dad was my friend, and he was always the calm one. When I would fight with Mum, which happened more and more in my teenage years, I could go for a walk with Dad and he would give me peace and a calmer viewpoint on things. My dad and I walked many miles when I was growing up.

Dad was also a singer. No one really knew this outside of our home, but he was always singing, whistling or humming a tune. He loved country music and knew the words to many songs. I didn't realize how happy that made me feel until I went back through my memories and realized that the house was almost lit up with his singing. It was a happy time; we had a normal, happy home growing up. Middle class Canadian.

The years passed, and I grew up, got married and moved away. I didn't see Dad as much anymore because we lived several provinces away, but when we came to visit, I always joined him for his walks.

Tiny Little Flickers of Change

It was when he was in his late sixties that I noticed slight changes. His memory wasn't as good, and he would repeat things he said. My mum reported that he did odd things, like making cereal with water instead of milk, as he had done all his life. Tiny little flickers of change had begun. When my husband, Andrew, and I visited with our family, the patience Dad once had with our children seemed to be ebbing away, and his temper was becoming shorter.

My mum began to cover up for my dad. She was, I believe, embarrassed and scared. When we would direct questions at my dad, my mum would answer for him. He began to follow her around like a lost puppy, unsure of himself and lacking any confidence.

As things progressed, he started to treat me like a neighbour or a care worker. I realized why afterwards: he was already beginning to forget who I was in his life. Once, I told him I was his daughter. He said, no, his daughter was much younger than I was. He was going back in time. I adjusted to this fact slowly and painfully. I had tears along the way, but no regrets, as Dad and I had always shared a bond and I knew he truly loved me. Now I had to take care of him as best as I could.

At this point, Mum and Dad moved into assisted living – an apartment-style home with meals made for you and served in a general eating area. It's a good place to be if there are any health issues, as others are around to keep an eye out. Also, my parents found good company in other seniors who lived there. Within the year, Dad's Alzheimer's grew rapidly worse. I remember getting a call from my mum that Dad had been at the front desk of the building asking when the boat was coming to take him to his family. It now appeared that, in his mind, he was living at the 20-year-old stage.

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Around this time, my mum was hospitalized for dehydration. What I haven't told you yet is she was battling ovarian cancer. She was the kind of person who didn't let others know her feelings and fears. My mum was stoic and strong until the end.

When she was in the hospital, I said I would take my dad home. Well, we came in the door and, within minutes, he started asking me where Mum was. I told him, and he got very angry at me. He thought I was lying, and for the first time, I was scared of my dad. This gentle person, who had never hit me in my whole life, looked like he was going to hurt me. I kept the kitchen island between us until he calmed down, and then I took him straight back to the hospital. He did not take comfort in the love of his daughter; he didn't recognize me.

The Turning Point

Then one evening my mum asked my dad to drive to the corner to get a newspaper....my dad did not return. It was an evening in the middle of March in Manitoba. There is still snow on the ground and the temperatures can vary from quite cold to just plain cold. We drove around looking for my dad and calling him. I remember my brother and me driving country roads in the dark yelling his name out the car window. My husband was also driving and looking for him in the opposite direction.

I don't know what my mum was thinking at this time. I think she was tired and overwhelmed. She never told me if she broke down and cried, but I imagine the truth was beginning to set in with her.

We contacted the police, and then at 1 am we had no choice but to return home and wait for news. At 7 am it came! Dad had been found in a farmer's field about 40 minutes away. The farmer had been quite nervous about him, as my dad was found walking around and saying he had to get home for dinner with the family. The farmer had armed himself with an axe because my dad was displaying odd behaviour. Dad had somehow driven 25 kilometres in the wrong direction onto a dirt road, eventually ending up in the farmer's field in the grass. He had no coat – just the shirt he was wearing. It was lucky he was found alive and that he hadn't hit anyone with his car. It was clear to me at this point that I had to take over the decision-making for Dad, as Mum could not do it. I handed the RCMP his keys and called the emergency social worker.

Adjusting to a Care Environment

Dad was placed into temporary housing within the week. This was hard, but the funny thing was, he didn't seem to even understand. He adjusted very quickly and started helping to push other patients around in their wheelchairs. We would go and visit him; he seemed to enjoy the visits, but I don't think he really knew who we were. He began to whistle again, so I knew he was somewhat happy inside. I did feel guilty, but his safety and the safety of others became paramount. Dad lived the last year of his life in a nice, small nursing home near my house, so I could visit him often. These visits weren't for my dad anymore, as he did not recognize me at all. They were for me to love him and spend time with him, just as I knew he had done for me all those years when I was young.

Dad eventually passed away later that year from the natural progression of Alzheimer's disease. The battle was over, and it was time to let him go. I prefer to remember my dad as the vibrant, creative, happy, loving person he was before Alzheimer's affected his brain and personality.

He was my dad, and I was his sunshine.

- LisaJane

Many thanks to Lisa Maslyk for sharing her personal story about her family's journey with Alzheimer's disease.