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Mule's Daughter

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By: Beth Shankle Anderson
Sitting next to my father’s deathbed at thirteen years old, I felt cold and alone. Only six months earlier, I had stood beside this same man, strong and handsome, after my first middle school dance. What happened to strike down this seemingly healthy forty-seven year old man? The answer is tragically simple – cancer. As I sat there by his bedside telling him about my day at school, he drifted in and out of consciousness, but fought to stay awake. After a while, he finally succumbed to his exhaustion and closed his eyes to rest. Not wanting to disturb him, I got up from my chair and slowly made my way around his bed. He must have sensed that I was leaving because he suddenly woke up and startled me by saying my name. It was then that he said the last words that he would ever say to me. My father said, “I love you.” I turned to face him and said, “I love you, Dad.” This would be my final exchange with my father and the last time that I would see him alive. I think that on some level he knew that would be the last time that we would see each other. That night he went into cardiac arrest and was in a coma for two days until he passed away on June 1, 1990.

I have never been able to comprehend the fact that my father had such little time on this Earth. How can such a great man be taken from his family at such a young age? As I turn thirty-seven this year, it is especially poignant because I am only ten years away from being the same age as my father when he passed. I think this is what is troubling me most about my birthday. I am afraid that I will meet the same demise as my father. He was given such little time, and I fear that I might have very little time, too.

My father came from a generation who affectionately gave each other nicknames. This was common in East Tennessee in the 1950s and his high school yearbook is full of fictitious monikers for ladies and gentlemen alike. My father’s nickname was “Mule” no doubt because of his hopeless stubbornness. I am proud to say that I have inherited many of my
father’s qualities and being somewhat obstinate is certainly one of them. My father’s brothers have even called me “Little Mule” on occasion. “Mule” is on my father’s headstone and it is an identifying marker because many people do not know him by his first name. That is why I, very proudly, go by the nickname “Mule’s Daughter.”

Around the time of my tenth birthday in the spring of 1987, I helped my father plant a maple sapling. My father loved our backyard and wanted to add another maple tree to our landscape. The sapling that my father brought home one Saturday appeared so delicate and fragile that I could not understand how it would one day grow as tall and strong as our other maple trees. My father promised me that one day I would be able to climb the tree just as I climbed our other maple trees, but that I would have to be patient with the sapling and show it love and attention before it would grow. To get to it grow properly, my father and I used ropes and sticks to hold the sapling upright and we watered it daily. Sometimes the wind would blow the sapling a bit too hard to one side, so my father would have to adjust the ropes and sticks to accommodate for the wind. It was a very tedious process, but after several months, the sapling showed signs that it was taking hold and standing on its own. The young sapling was well on its way to becoming a tree.

As I move toward my thirty-seventh year of life, for some reason, this birthday is especially hard on me. It is not that I look any older. That would be superficial and something that I could handle. It is that I feel older. I have lived without a father for twenty-four years. It is that type of reflection that makes me realize how many joys of life were taken from my father. The numerous birthdays, weddings, graduations, births, vacations, and other special days that my father has missed creates profound sadness within me. My father was a great man who deserved
to continue experiencing the warmth of life surrounded by his loving family. Instead, he lies in a cold grave marked only by a headstone.

My father’s great nature was obvious to the family that he adored and the friends he made throughout his life. I did not realize how much my father was loved until I stood beside his casket before his funeral and greeted all those who came through the receiving line to express their condolences. The receiving line was supposed to commence at six o’clock and end at eight o’clock; however, the line was so long that the funeral director actually had to shut the doors and turn away people so that the funeral could begin. I have always believed that my father’s funeral was a great testament to his abundant life. If people were willing to stand in a long line to pay their respects to my father, then he had to be truly special.

Almost thirteen years after his death, my wedding day came with mixed emotions. Many girls dream of a big wedding, but not me. The man who was supposed to walk me down the aisle and give me away to my husband was gone. Luckily, my younger brother was willing to step in and fulfill the duties. I wanted a small intimate wedding where no one would ask any questions or say things like, “It is too bad your father could not be here.” I met and married the man of my dreams and we married on the exact spot on the beach where I first told him that I loved him. It was a beautiful ceremony and I felt my father’s presence more strongly than I ever have on any other occasion. As part of the ceremony, everyone in our small wedding party carried a red rose in my father’s memory. Red roses were his favorite so I am sure that he was pleased. Halfway into the ceremony, the minister recited a poem as part of the Remembrance Ceremony in honor of my father. We all lifted our roses in honor of him. It was a beautiful way to honor him on a day where he was deeply missed. As a twenty-five-year-old woman starting
my new life with my husband, I felt as if most of my years were well ahead of me. However, my father’s presence was dearly missed.

Growing older without my father is nearly as painful as when I lost him as a child. On every birthday, his absence is obvious, even if it remains unspoken. His favorite holiday was Thanksgiving because he was born on that day, and it is certainly when I miss him the most. When he first died, it was a shock. My family and I had plenty of people around to support and comfort us, but now, twenty-four years later, we are on our own. That is why I believe that growing older without him is almost as painful as when we first lost him. I no longer have that same comfort and support, primarily because those around me do not know that I need it.

My father grew up very poor and never had the opportunity to attend college so his high school days were his glory days. He was a talented basketball player who adored his school and his community in a small rural area in Tennessee. Since his memory is ubiquitous in my life, I decided to start a scholarship foundation that honors my father’s memory at his high school. When I visited his high school to present the scholarship, I met the senior class during a basketball game and it was as though someone had turned back the clock fifty years. The boys’ basketball team looked just like my father’s team did in photos from 1960. The sights and sounds were all the same from when he used to take my brother and me to basketball games when we were children.

Because family was of the utmost importance in my father’s life, he put our well-being first. A key example of this was his employment. We lived in a small community with few jobs that paid enough to keep a family of four living comfortably. Rather than moving us to a distant city far away from our family and close friends, my father commuted to another city
every day for thirty years. It was especially important to him to live near his family and close friends in the small town where he was born and raised. I have the utmost respect for my father for this sacrifice because, in doing so, he gave my brother and me the most wonderful childhood. It was full of family, friends, and, most of all, stability.

The warm sunny days of summer are some of my strongest memories from my childhood and sometimes I think back to the summer when I was thirteen and my father passed away. The tree was going through the most significant changes of its life a few summers after it had been planted, and it had taken root and was beginning to find its way. Its bright green leaves glowed in the sunlight and it now had enough foliage to provide some shade. Its branches were showing strength and the bark of the tree looked healthy. The delicate sapling from a few years ago did not look so weak and vulnerable anymore. While it was not ready to be climbed, it was certainly on its way to becoming a strong member of our landscape. It was heartbreaking to realize that my father was not going to see the result of the great care and attention he took to ensure the tree would take root and grow.

I think back to what my father accomplished in his first thirty-seven years. Along with being a son, brother and friend, he was also a husband and father of two. He played sports. He worked in a factory out of town. He was in the prime of his life, but I wonder if he ever stopped to think about the reality that he only had ten years left in his life. Of course, he did not know of his impending diagnosis and subsequent demise. At thirty-seven, he seemed to have all the things that he wanted out of life. His cancer diagnosis and his death came so quickly at age forty-seven, I often wonder if he had time to ponder the meaning of his life. I believe that he did. I spent many hours with him when he was ill. I can remember him staring out the window of our den. He always looked sad, but deep in thought. On his better days, he would sit on our front
porch and wave at the neighbors. I often thought that he might be thinking, “Why me?” mostly because I was thinking the same thing.

This fall I will visit my home in Tennessee for Thanksgiving as a thirty-seven year old and I can already see the backyard and the strong, full-grown maple tree. I can see the sturdy branches protruding from the tree and majestically towering over the land beneath them. The roots spreading across the lawn have firmly taken hold in the ground. The maple tree has prominently established itself in our backyard. While beautiful and magnificent in the glory of its fall color, I will wonder how many storms it has weathered over the past twenty-five years. It was brought into this world a fragile sapling that could not stand up on its own and now it has become a splendid work of nature. In looking back over my life, I now know that I was the sapling that my father nurtured to life. When he said his final, “I love you,” he was imparting strength so that I would grow to be like the maple tree that took root and never faltered in the face of adversity.