



EXPERIENCING STROKE THROUGH THE EYES OF A DAUGHTER

by Kia Harris

Change is inevitable but I never imagined change would be so far yet so close. I was a sophomore in College and was eager to learn and grow as a person. I was living on my own in the dorms and I finally had the independence I always wanted. I was able to make friends, although I missed my family back home. I had noticed the world around me was changing and I was changing with it.

I visited my family back home on most weekends when I was free. I had my own room in a way and was able to spend time with my sister, father, and his garden. He had the 'green thumb'. He found joy in his various plants, vegetables and trees in his garden. He planted peach trees, collard greens, zucchini, tomatoes, onions, to name a few. He woke up early each day to water them and he took pride in every sprout that grew. We'd play pool all night long while Luther Vandross and "Return of the Mack" played in the background. He'd sway to the music saying "Y'all don't know nothing about that" to my sister and I. We'd laugh and exchange smiles.

My father was the life of the party and an endless giver. In spite of his contentment, he was a heavy smoker and had the occasional beer at night while enjoying the Food Network. My father, my sister and I would make dinner and enjoy a Lifetime movie until we each started to drift off into our dreams. At times, we would talk and he'd ask about my future and provide his wisdom here and there. He was the one of the few who knew and pushed my potential and I am grateful for that. He knew his daughters had the capability of doing anything.

College life was not what I expected; with the stress and constant studying I found myself alone and not able to visit my family as often as I desired. . . I received a phone call from my sister one afternoon; she said "You need to come see Daddy." I had not thought of the seriousness of the statement until I went to visit him the following weekend. I arrived at our house expecting to finally be able to spend time with my family again. The kitchen was lit and my sister was making dinner. Daddy was on the couch, I noticed a different air about him. It seemed his face had aged or something melancholy had taken over him. At one point he attempted to get up to go outside to his garden and while attempting to pull the sliding door open, he functioned in a repetitive motion trying to open the door; he was unable to. My sister helped him sit back down and served him his dinner. He was able to

grasp the spoon but was not able to locate his mouth to feed himself. I was in pure shock by what manifested in front of my eyes. My sister informed me that it had been going on for weeks now and it was wearing on her heart. Even a week earlier she had found him on the kitchen floor after returning home from work. My father had been laid off a couple of months ago and I could see the stress and agony all over his face. That weekend initiated the nightmare that lasted for almost four years.

That night my sister and I prepared for bed and I could hear a knocking sound against the wall, it echoed through our house like thunder. I asked my sister what it was and she stated "It's Daddy, he's trying to walk." The sounds began to become more frequent and louder and with every sound my heart sank a little more. Afraid of what I might see, picturing my father collapsing on the tile floor or knocking into a glass table, I decided to see what was going on. When I got to where he was, he had his hand on the edge of the glass table while attempting to stand to his feet. His knees were scarred and one could tell that he had made many attempts even before this day. He detected my presence and began to speak to me in slurred incomprehensible words. I was able to help him into a chair at the dining room table and he began to speak of Texas. Standing to his feet with shaking knees he made his way to the front door with my help. We sat outside on the white garden chairs and he pulled a cigarette from his basketball shorts in hopes of lighting it. He placed the cigarette to his lips and without lighting it, smoked his cigarette. The act of smoking had become so common to him that he hadn't noticed his cigarette was not lit. I was finally able to get him to bed with the help of my sister, and I lied in bed that night staring at the ceiling hoping I would be able to come up for air; I was drowning in anguish.

The weekend went by and each day made it harder for me to breathe. I knew something was wrong with my father but I was not sure what to do about it. He would sleep for long hours and barely ate. He was not as talkative anymore and at times he seemed to be gazing off to another place, possibly Texas. The weekend was over and that Monday morning I had to head back to school for class. I made him a bowl of apple cinnamon oatmeal and he looked up and smiled and said "This is really good baby", with a crooked smile.

The memories from the weekend haunted me throughout the week. The images played over and over again in my head and dreams. I could not escape it, this was my reality. I received a call from my sister during the next couple of weeks and she said that Daddy was in the hospital. She had been trying to take him for weeks now, but my father was too prideful to go. He was placed in a hospital in the next city and I went to visit him. By that time, his family in Texas and Louisiana had been informed and were all down to see him. I walked into the room and he was sitting up with his Lakers cap on yelling at the TV screen. It made me happy that he was doing well, but I could not help but stare at him, maybe because I knew things were not the same. The doctor informed us that he suffered from multiple strokes over the course of each week. Due to depression and his medical history, he had had a stroke every week since being brought to the hospital. I had never thought something like that would happen to my father, no one would ever think someone close to them would have to go through something so devastating.

The next week, unfortunately, his body began to shut down even more and he was moved to ICU. I would visit him frequently although a part of me made excuses to visit honestly because I

preferred not to see my father that way. I would sing to him and hold his hand and it seemed he could detect my presence because he would squeeze my hand as if to say "I'm here". He was eventually moved to a hospital closer to my school and apartment. I could feel a piece of me breaking every day, knowing that my father was so distant yet so close. He seemed to be a shell since the strokes but I still saw my father when I looked into his eyes and held his hand. I didn't want to see my father in that condition. I did not want my image and perception of him to be deterred. I would cry myself to sleep most nights asking God to take me instead of him. I was confused as to why God would let something like this happen to such a great man; it was then that I knew I had to put everything in God's hands.

My sister and I had high hopes of his recovery although the doctor stated that he did not have any brain activity nor were there signs of recovery. Months and eventually years passed and he still remained on life support. I recall my last visit; I sat with my diary in my lap, the hospital bed in front of me. Most days I would say a few things, but that day, I just wrote. My diary seemed to be encouraging me to write and my hands danced willingly along the pages. I felt a sense of calmness that I hadn't felt before and it felt good to just be there, with him.

He passed away that June; my phone rang that morning delaying my dream. My sister delivered the news slowly, although I knew this day would come. Tears welled up in my eyes as I realized it was over. I hung up my phone and began to crawl into an even darker hole than I had dwelled in before. This hole was much deeper and somehow I thought after that day, I would finally find my way out. All I desired to do is sleep and I slept through the day, numb to everything, forgetting everything and feeling everything. Funeral arrangements were made within the next couple of days and I remained in my hole for quite a while slowly coming to the surface. I sat in the pew of the church lifeless as my father's funeral persisted in the background. I could not seem to put myself there, at my father's funeral. I felt dead as I sat there unable to move, unable to hide my emotions. I felt exposed and I didn't care. It felt good to be free from hiding my feelings, crying myself to sleep every night. It felt good to feel, because for once I knew it was okay.

I was depressed and I hadn't known it until I came out of my dark hole. One cannot comprehend the true meaning of depression when it has become a way of life. I let it take over me, it was my nightmare and it sucked the life out of me.

By telling this story I have allowed myself to re-live my once nightmare but now I am able to say that it was an awakening. It has been almost two years since Daddy passed away and although I feel like something is missing, I feel complete again. I lost a father, a companion but I gained confidence and a new vision of life. I proud to say I am truly happy to be the daughter of such a profound man. Life is truly short even though the days and weeks seem to be infinite; there is always significance in every second. Embrace change and embrace your growth, it is those unperceived changes that spark wisdom and true happiness. It is your choices that make you who you are. You create the life you want to live. I was holding my true self back for so many years that I started to deny who I was. I am a friend, sister, daughter, optimistic, hipster, part-time comedian, photographer, artist, Christian, giver, environmentalist . . . Tell me, who will you be?