
Unconventional Means to Life

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by Jacqueline Druga-Marchetti

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I sat behind the steering wheel of a moving car for the first time when I was four years old. Perched upon my father's lap holding tight to the wheel. So proud, feeling so big'. Of course I have to ask myself now, why was my father letting a four year help drive his car?' A little insane perhaps. But then again, that was my father. Maybe he had a keen foresight thinking,

if he taught me young, I'd be a good driver when I became old enough. I think he yelled at me less controlling the wheel as a four year old then when I was sixteen. A man of many words, not all of them true. There wasn't a story he didn't tell. A practical joke he didn't play. Or a thing he wouldn't do for his family. As a child he was the man who yelled a lot. As a teenager he became the man who gave me money and drove me around. But as an adult, he became to me my father. I realized that on the most disastrous day of my life. My wedding day . . . sort of.

I was so young. Barely twenty. I can still smell his cologne, see that irritated look on his face as he fiddle with his bow tie, and feel his hand that kept obsessively fixing that strand of hair that kept falling in my face. Coming back into the bride's room prior to the wedding, he'd do the same thing. Fix my hair, cringe at the giddy bridesmaids, complain about the organist and say something rude about my Aunt Jane who tried her best to sing for the guests. And with every pass of my father in and out of that room, I waited and dreaded that final emotional 'goodbye' talk. My make up was perfect and I knew it would make me cry. I just knew it.

"Clear out girls." My father ordered my bridesmaids when he made his last entrance into the bride's room. They were frightened in their purple dresses as they scurried to make an escape. My heart pounded. I felt the tears well as he shut that door. He face was so serious as he laid that father's hand on my cheek. "Jake."

The way he said my stupid nickname made my heart flutter. It was that one talk that would stay with me a lifetime.

So calm he was, like it was nothing. My father kissed my cheek, tossed his hands up and cleared his throat. "Mark's not coming. He just called."

I don't think I said anything at that moment. My mouth opened, words failed to emerge. I was stuck somewhere between the shock of being stood up at the altar and the 'oh well' attitude my father delivered the news to me.

"Are you all right?" He asked me.

"No." I told him. "I'm not."

"Stay back here. I have to tell the guests."

I put things into perspective when my father left that room with no more words. I figured, this had to be one of his stupid practical jokes. Bad timing and so typical of him. I started to get furious. And I was certainly not going to fall for it. So I sat down and waited. He'd come back, so would the bridesmaids. They'd laugh, I'd yell, the music would start and I'd get married. I think I waited over an hour in that back room. When I walked out, the church was empty. And it was at that moment I realized it was either the most elaborate practical joke or the worst day of my life. It as the latter.

Where was the pity? Where was my father? My mother. All that was left in the church were the flowers we ordered and the priest preparing for evening services. He merely smiled a sad smile at me and spoke no words of comfort. I guess what can you say to someone on a day like that. I walked up the aisle, but alone, and I plopped down on the altar in my despair whether the priest liked it or not.

I never heard my father walk into the church. I was too engrossed with my tears. I heard the drop of clothing at my feet, felt him sitting down next to me and saw the flask appear under my nose.

"Take a drink."

"Dad, we're in church."

"Oh who cares." he uncapped that flask and handed it to me. He also at that moment looked over to the priest who watched us. I guess my father didn't like the intrusion. He could have had more tact with the man of the cloth. "Father, do you mind?"

I swear my head dropped to the pits of embarrassment when the priest left the church. I needed that drink and I took one. Then I took another. "You left me."

"I thought you'd want to be alone. I figured the last thing you'd need was a bunch of people coming up to you and telling you they were sorry. You don't need that. "

"Everyone went home?"

"No they're at the hall."

"Dad!" I was shocked.

"What Jake? I took out a loan, you think I'm wasting that money? We're having a party."

"On the worst day of my life?"

"Nah, it's the best day of your life. Think of all the lawyer fees you saved down the line."

If my father had any compassion I was wishing at that moment he would show it instead of passing the flask back to me like we were two drunks. "You know, I know you didn't like Mark, but you haven't a clue how I'm feeling. My world is over."

"Oh quit being so melodramatic." I know I gasped at that moment and my father didn't hear it. Why else would he keep going? "You think you won't wake up tomorrow? You think your car payment won't still be there? Your job, your mother? Your world will not end tomorrow and you'd be a fool to let it over some jerk who decided he just wasn't ready for a commitment." He grabbed my hand. "And don't think I don't know what you're going through. I've been here, sitting on the altar waiting for someone that was supposed to marry me. It uh . . . happened before your mother."

I remember how surprised I was. "Really?"

"Nah." He chuckled. "But it was a good addition. Anyway . . . in all serious I understand. How can I not know what your going through. You're my kid. When you hurt I hurt. And if I could go through this for you, I would. But I can't. I can only get you drunk." He stood up and held out his hand to me. "Not let's get you out of this dress, put on the clothes I brought you and enjoy that dinner I paid way too much for."

I know I must have held on to my father right there for the longest time. Stealing some of that strength he always projected. Some might have found him unconventional in his ways. But I wouldn't want him to be any other way. He got his points across in ways that stayed with me. He got his point across in life. And I'm probably the only human being who can think back to their father's funeral and smile. He never wanted us to cry and he ensured that.

We stood in the funeral home, my mother and I, and I felt my insides drop when about twenty cab drivers from where my father worked lined up. I expected the usual so sorry to here about you father' or my deepest sympathies' from them. And I knew that would not be the case when Moe walked up to me. So upset, he grabbed my hands and said. "Your father . . . He once super glued my shoes to the floor." and he moved on. Every single cab driver repeated Moe's actions. Sharing with us a practical joke my father pulled or a funny story.

My father was only given forty_eight years on this earth. But he lived them to the fullest. He filled them for us with dreams, strength, and laughter. And when anyone walks up to me and tells me I'm my farther's daughter. I smile. Because they had just paid me the biggest compliment imaginable.