

## **Daddy's Dress**

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It was white with cherries on it, and it was my favorite. I'm not quite sure what made that dress so special. Maybe it was the ruffles along the bottom trim, or the red shiny shoes I wore with it. Perhaps it was the lacy sleeves or the glittery red cherries that covered it. Ultimately, I think it was my favorite simply because it was from my father, and it's the only present I can remember getting from him.

It was a Saturday night when my dad came to visit me. I can remember this detail because I know I went to church the next morning. I remember hearing the hushed voices of my parents quietly bickering downstairs. My dad rarely came to visit, so whenever he did, I was ecstatic. He was supposed to come see me earlier that afternoon, but he had to work late. I was already in bed, and Mom argued that I needed my sleep for church in the morning. When I realized she was going to leave me in bed, I rushed downstairs before my dad could leave and ran into his arms.

It was just a few days before my birthday, and he had brought a special present with him. It wasn't wrapped, but rather thrown into a grocery bag and tied up. I ripped open the bag to pull out the most beautiful dress I had ever seen. My mother thought it was tacky, and looking back, I must admit that it was a bit gaudy. It was white and covered in big, red, glittery cherries. It had a big, ugly, lacy collar and there were bright red shiny shoes with cherry buckles to match it. I loved it.

I tried on the dress as soon as he gave it to me, strutting out of the bathroom like I was a super model. Mom and Dad applauded, and I remember feeling like a diva. I thought I owned the prettiest dress in the world and that I had the best dad ever.

I refused to put my pajamas back on, and slept in my dress that night. The next morning I wore my new dress to church. I felt like a princess walking in those doors, and of course, with my diva attitude, the adoration of the older ladies at church soon followed. I felt like every eye was on me and my new pretty dress. I wore my dress all day, not heeding the warnings from Grandma. She tried to tell me it would get dirty if I played outside, but I didn't care. Nothing could spoil such a lovely dress. After dinner, my mom had to bribe me to take it off with the promise of chocolate ice-cream.

A few weeks later my dad came to get me to take me on a fishing trip to Indian Lake. I can still remember how happy it made me when I saw the grin on his face. He noticed I was wearing the dress he bought me. Unfortunately I, like most children, was not very patient, and therefore didn't really like fishing. I decided I was going to catch a fish with my hands, like on the cartoons. I waded out into the shallow water and "caught" a dead fish, managing to get my new dress filthy in the process. After I realized what I'd done, I started crying and ran to my dad, showing him the fish and trying to explain between sobs what had happened. I was furious when he laughed at me, and threw the fish at him and stomped towards the car.

He took me to his house, where I had never been before, and gave me one of his t-shirts to wear while he washed my dress. This is probably the fondest memory I have of my dad. I remember sitting on the counter beside the kitchen sink, watching him washing my little dress. While my dress was drying, he made us each a glass of chocolate milk, and we sat on his couch and watched various Disney movies together. I fell asleep curled up under my Dad's arm and woke up the next morning at home in my bed. That was the last time I would see my dad alive.

Sometime later that month, my grandma was helping me get ready for church when I heard Mom crying. I walked downstairs with Grandma to find my mom sitting on the couch with her head in her hands. I can still remember the look of panic on my grandma's face as she silently urged me towards the stairs with her hands and walked over to my mom. I climbed to the top of the stairs and sat on the very top step, listening quietly. The sounds of my mother's cries were vividly burned into my mind. All I heard were broken fragments weakly escaping her mouth between sobs. Words stuck out like "dead", "John", and "suicide" At the time, I had no grasp on any of the words except for "John," so I knew she was crying about my dad, but I didn't know why.

We didn't go to church that morning, and later that night, my mother had to explain death to me in the best way that she could. I remember sitting on my mom's lap crying. I remember a few random parts of that day, like going to McDonald's with my grandma to get dinner because no one wanted to cook. My grandma was pretty old-fashioned and never let us eat out on Sundays. Regardless of what was going on, a big family dinner was always prepared. That was the only Sunday I can ever remember eating fast food for supper.

The next few days were spent with Grandma. I wore my dress every day, and Grandma didn't bother to make me take it off, except to wash it at night for me. It was as if it was part of my dad. It was his special dress, and I didn't quite understand the concept of "leaving forever." Mom stayed upstairs in her room for the most part, and the only time I saw her during those next few days was when she tucked me in at night and read to me, something she had always done every night. It's weird how in times of tragedy we tend to cling to insignificant rituals in a futile attempt to maintain normality in our lives.

The very last time I wore my daddy's dress was when Mom took me to his showing at the funeral home. It was warm outside, and I wore white sandals with my dress instead of the red shiny shoes that I ruined when we went fishing.

Mom held my hand tightly as we walked into the building filled with sad, crying people. I remember looking at my shoes, noticing the intricate patterns of the straps and individual tan threads that held it together, not wanting to look at all of the sad faces watching me. I can remember wrapping my arms around my mom, begging her to take me home. I didn't want to be with the crying strangers. I didn't understand why I was there.

I met Grandma Francis for the first time that day. She saw me and smiled lovingly through her tears. She handed me a stuffed rabbit that she said she had brought just for me. It was my daddy's when he was little, she told me. I sat on the floor and played with the rabbit while she talked to Mom above me. I can remember the rough scratchy carpet making my legs itch. After awhile, my new grandma gently pulled me off the floor and into her lap. She told me I looked like my dad, and I can remember laughing at her. It was such a silly thing to say, my dad was boy, not a girl. It didn't take me long to notice that my mom was gone, and I looked over to see her walking timidly towards the front of the room, where there was a big, brown, shiny wooden box half-opened.

I ran up to Mom and grabbed her hand before my grandma had time to stop me. I remember feeling her hand shake in mine as we walked up to my dad's casket and the overwhelming surge of happiness I felt when I saw my daddy sleeping inside. He wasn't gone forever. Mom was wrong. I reached out to touch him, and Mom pulled my hand back. I looked at her, and she was crying. I didn't understand. He was right there in front of me, and she wouldn't let me have him. She lied to me; she told me he was gone forever. I was so confused and upset with my mother.

My mom ended up carrying me out of the funeral home kicking and screaming, and for the first time ever, I didn't get in trouble for throwing a fit. When we got home, Mom told me to change out of my dress. I didn't want to make her cry anymore, even though I was really mad at her, so I did. After that, my dress disappeared. I searched everywhere for it, and was devastated for days when I couldn't find it. It would be many years later when I would find the dress folded up neatly in a shoebox with my dirty, mud-stained red shoes.