

Family Secrets or Lies

by
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Introduction

We all have family secrets. Some secrets are much more profound than others. I never expected our family to have so many life-changing secrets.

After reading my father's journal, which covered his life from age eighteen until his death, I realized there were actually more lies than truths that made up the total sum of who we really were as a family.

Do we really know the whole truth about any family? Our history is just someone's version of what they think transpired behind the closed doors of our life. Sometimes it is hard to look at the actual truth of any family.

Now place that family in the sleepy little town of Pine Bluff, Arkansas. For a moment in time, let's go back to the 1960s, a time when everyday life was much simpler. We all just functioned in our own ordinary ways.

Generations of my family all lived in the same community for most of their lives. The stories we watched on daytime soaps could never have happened in small-town America—or could they?

Chapter One

I would like to introduce myself, my name is David Dover, and I am the eldest son of Bradley and Carol Dover.

I am a loan officer, for a well-known bank in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I am married to my lovely wife, Lynne. Lynne is a domestic-engineer, but she is also our resident, starving artist. Lynne paints beautiful landscapes and is compiling a collection of her work, which she hopes to display at a local art gallery someday.

Today is Tuesday, June 10, 2003 and I am on my way home from work. I thought I would surprise Lynne by coming home a bit early.

As I turned up our street, I saw Lynne sitting on our front-porch steps. I couldn't help but notice that she was wiping her eyes. She looked like she had been crying. I got out of my car, walked over to the porch, gave her a hug.

“Hi honey, is something the matter?”

“David, you're home early.”

“Yeah, I thought I would surprise you and we could go look at that litter of pups that you found in the Sunday newspaper.”

“Oh David, that is so sweet of you, but I am afraid I have some bad news.”

“What do you mean bad news?”

“Your grandma called; she just got home from the hospital. I am afraid your dad had a massive heart attack around noon today. He was down by the pond fishing and your grandma was bringing him some lunch, when she noticed that he was slumped over his fishing stool.

“She couldn't get him to answer her so she ran back to the house and called for an ambulance. When they arrived, they stabilized him and then rushed him to the hospital. His heart damage was too extensive and he died about two hours ago.”

I grabbed my stomach and sat down on the front steps while I listened to the rest of Lynne's conversation about my grandma.

“I just got off of the phone with her, as you were driving up the driveway. She was going to call Jack and Lori next. I told her you would call her as soon as you got home from work.”

“I am so sorry, David. I can’t imagine how you must be feeling. You just lost your mother after her lengthy illness, and now you have lost your father as well.”

I was numb. We just sat together on the porch while I collected my thoughts.

“I guess I better call Jack and then I will call Grandma as well.”

Lynne handed me the phone and I called my brother, Jack. He had just finished talking to our grandma. Since he lived the farthest from Pine Bluff, he and Grandma had decided that, if it was all right with me, we would have Dad’s funeral on Friday. That would give both of us all day tomorrow to drive to Pine Bluff. We would finalize the funeral arrangements on Wednesday.

I told Jack those plans were fine with me. After talking with him, I called my grandma. She was trying so hard to be brave for me. Dad was her only child, and Grandpa passed away several years ago. She must have felt very alone all afternoon.

After I talked to Grandma and Jack, I called my boss, who was very understanding of my situation. He told me to take as much time off as I needed. I told him the funeral would be this coming Friday, June 13, and I would be back sometime next week.

Lynne and I worked all evening to get everything packed and loaded into the car, and then we set our alarm clock for 5:00 a.m., so we would be on the road by around 6:00 a.m.

I don’t think I slept a wink all night. It was so hard for me to grasp that Dad was really gone. I had just talked to him last weekend. Dad and I had talked about Lynne and me going down to his place and having Jack and Lori meet us there. He said we would do a little fishing, and while we were there we would pick out our mother’s headstone. Now Jack and I would be doing that for both of them.

When I thought about it, Dad was really a loner. He didn't have any close friends. He fished with Jack or me, when we would go home to visit him, but mostly he just fished by himself. He never had a lot to say. He would just sit and listen to Jack and me ramble on about what was going on in our lives. He would just listen and smile.

Lynne and I have our fair share of friends, and Lynne comes from a fairly large family. She has two sisters and one brother, and they are all pretty close.

I never gave the distance in my family much thought. When my family got together, we all got along just fine. Our mother hadn't been a part of our family since Jack and I were little boys, but Dad always made us feel like a close family. I really thought we were perfectly normal, as families go. I grew up in a small town in Arkansas. I lived there until I went away to college. I just remember being a happy kid.

Family history has its way of surfacing on special occasions, such as weddings and funerals. It had only been about three months since we buried our mother. There were moments at my mother's funeral when I would sense that Dad wanted to share something with us, but he just never got around to it. It was obvious by the pain on his face that he wanted to tell us something.

I hope I won't forget all the good memories I have growing up with Dad and my little brother.

In the 1960s, when Jack and I were small boys, our father had moved us into our grandparents' home. We made that move so our grandmother could take care of us while our father was at work. Our mother had taken ill and had to go live in a hospital for the mentally ill, so she was unable to take care of us.

We lived in a community where everybody looked out for one another. It was a time when my brother and I felt safe and carefree. Just the way you're supposed to be when you're a kid. No one ever locked their doors or windows, and neighbors watched out for each other.

It was safe enough for Grandma to send Jack and me to the corner grocery store. It was just a few blocks from my grandparents' house, and she would give us a list of items that she needed, along with her coin purse, which usually contained a five-dollar bill and some change.

My brother and I shared an old beat-up wagon. We took that wagon everywhere we went, just in case we found empty pop bottles along the way. We would collect the pop bottles and put them in the wagon. About once a week, we would haul them down to the grocery store, where we would sell them for a penny apiece. Then we would split the money between us buy candy that would have to last us until we found some more pop bottles.

We would stare into the glass case filled with so many kinds of candy that you couldn't count them all. We would make sure that we didn't touch the glass case with our fingers because that would make Mrs. Gorman, the store owner, very angry. She always complained about all the little fingerprints that she had to clean off her nice glass candy case. It seemed like we would stare at all that candy for a long time, but it was a big decision to make, and that candy would have to last a very long time. Meanwhile, Mrs. Gorman would take the list and gather up all the items that Grandma needed. She would set them on the counter beside the cash register until we were ready to select our candy.

When we were ready to buy our candy, Mrs. Gorman would come over to the candy case with two small brown paper sacks. We would carefully point out what we wanted, and then show her how many pennies we had in our hands. She would count out one penny candy for each of our pennies and place the candy in the sacks for us. We would pay for Grandma's groceries and put everything in our wagon. Then we'd be on our way back home.

Once in a while, Mrs. Gorman would slip an extra piece or two of candy into our sacks, but she always made sure that each of our sacks contained the same amount of candy. She was a real nice lady. She knew that our candy would have to

last us awhile and that we didn't have much money to spend at any given time. All that seemed like a lifetime ago.

Those memories of Jack and me growing up came flooding back to me while we were sitting in the chapel on Wednesday June 14, making preparations for Dad's funeral, which would be the following Friday.

Making the funeral arrangements was one thing, but I had no idea how sad I would feel on Friday, the actual day of Dad's funeral. Sending a parent to their final resting place was an emotional and draining event in my life, and our family had done that twice in the past three months.

After the service, several of Grandma's well-meaning friends came over to the house to pay their respects. After everyone left, I went upstairs to my old room to lie down for a few minutes. I was staring at the ceiling when Grandma appeared in the doorway.

"David would you and Jack please come downstairs for a minute? I have something I need to talk to you about. Actually it is something that your father wanted me to tell you."

"All right Grandma, I'll get Jack and we will be right down."

I wonder what Dad wanted Grandma to tell us.

Grandma went downstairs while I went across the hallway to Jack's old room and told him that Grandma needed to speak to us in the kitchen. We couldn't imagine what was so important, but we were both willing to listen.

In the meantime, Lynne and Lori were going through Dad's closet when they found some old photo albums. They also found his favorite straw hat, which smelled like aftershave. I loved my dad's straw hat, with that hint of Old Spice on the brim. It was as if he was actually sitting in the room with us.

I started walking down the hallway when Jack went flying by me laughing and telling me he was going to beat me downstairs and get one of Grandma's sticky buns before I would make it to the kitchen. I couldn't help but laugh. Jack won't ever change. He's just a big kid at heart.

As I walked into the kitchen, Grandma was helping Jack get a sticky bun out of the pan. Jack held out the pan and asked if I wanted one. I shook my head. What I really wanted was a cup of her special sweet Irish brew. It had a shot of Irish whiskey, a shot of cream, and a tablespoon of sugar, all poured into a fresh cup of coffee.

“Hey Grandma, how about one of your special Irish brews?”

“Coming right up, David”

Without skipping a beat, Grandma got up and put a pot of coffee on to brew. Then she pulled out the Irish whiskey, sugar, and cream. As she placed the coffee on the table, I noticed she wasn't smiling anymore. She slowly walked over to her desk by the window that overlooked the pond. She sat in her chair and took a key out of the center desk drawer. She unlocked and opened the bottom left drawer and reached in and pulled out an old faded black journal. It had definitely seen better days.

She carefully brought it over to the kitchen table where Jack and I were sitting, and she placed it on the table as she opened the cover to the first page. Inside the cover was a plain white business-size envelope. The front of the envelope read, “To David and Jack.” It was in Dad's handwriting.

Grandma put her hand on top of the envelope as she sadly stated.

“Boys, before I give you this letter, I must share with you how difficult this is for me to do. I thought I would die long before my son, but I gave him my word that if he should die first, then I would pass this journal on to both of you. This is your father's journal, but before you look at the journal, you need to read the letter your father has written to both of you.”

She handed me the letter and again she placed her hand on top of mine.

“I must tell both of you that your father loved you more than life itself. He had a hard life, but he always put you boys

and your needs first, above everything else. Please don't judge him or ever forget how much love he had in his heart for both of you."

Grandma had tears welling up in her eyes. I gave her a hug, and then she left the kitchen and went to her bedroom. By now, both Jack and I were soberly staring at each other.

Jack stopped eating his sticky bun, licked his fingers, and sat quietly waiting for me to open the letter. I picked up the envelope and a butter knife that was lying on the table. I used the knife to open the envelope. The letter had been written on ordinary white stationery. The first thing that caught my eye was the date on it. Dad had written this letter nine days before he died. I began to read.

∴ Sunday, June 1, 2003 ∴

Dear David and Jack,

Since you are reading my letter, I must have passed on to be with your mother. Please share with your grandmother my sincere gratitude for following my request. The decision to give you my journal was mine alone.

I started writing in my journal the very same day that I graduated from high school. I wrote down all the thoughts that I couldn't seem to share with anyone else. I don't write in my journal every day, but as time passed, it became my best friend. For most of my life, it had been my only friend.

I hope when you have finished reading my journal you both will still love me as much as I love you. I blessed the day the good Lord brought both of you into my life.

When you have finished reading it, I would like David to keep it in a safe place for future generations to read.

Again, please know how much I love you both.

Forever in Peace,

Dad

Jack and I were at a loss for words. I took a sip of coffee and a deep breath. I opened the journal and began reading the first page.

The pages were yellowed with age. It was Dad's handwriting all right. I would have recognized it anywhere. His style of handwriting consisted of strong but bold, detached strokes. Dad had written to me many times over the years since I left Pine Bluff. His words had always been so comforting to me. Now I wondered, because of his letter, if all that was about to change.

He wasn't much for talking on the telephone; he'd rather drop me a note now and then. How I wished that I had kept all of those notes. I had an urgent need to read them all again, and maybe I would appreciate what he was trying to tell me in his letters.

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