

# Visit from Daddy pulls writer through dark night

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Special to the News Sentinel  
Jan. 13, 2017



The Gardner family in 1957, just before leaving the U.S. for three years in Berlin, Germany, where Mack Gardner was an Air Force navigator. He was killed in a peace-time mission just a few months after the family returned from Berlin and were stationed in Charleston, S.C. He was 35, daughter Sherri was 6.(Photo: submitted photo)

*(Note to readers: This is my first column not only of the New Year, but the first since early November. It will explain why I have been gone so long, but I also wanted to say thank you to all of you who emailed and worried about me. I could feel your good wishes and prayers, and they helped!)*

I saw my daddy.

At what was the lowest point in my life so far, the very point where I thought my time here with family and friends was slipping away, I opened my eyes, and there he was, standing in front of me.

It was the early hours of Day Four of what would stretch to a 12-day hospital stay, and things did not look good. I had come into the hospital in full renal failure and was in surgery to open the left kidney before I could even call the kids. Kidney stones were the primary culprit, and a series of outside happenings had convinced me that the pain and sickness I was feeling was due to something else -- broken ribs (I had three) and a stomach bug, for example.

So I waited too long to go to the doctor. By the time I did, one look at me was all it took to get me straight to the emergency room.

Dr. Ramsey's surgery had gone fine. He put in a stent to open everything up. Post-surgery, however, was bringing its own set of problems, including a blood infection, problems breathing and a heart arrhythmia.

On that Thursday, both my sons, my husband and my best friend were camped out in the critical care waiting room. My kidney doctor, Dr. Newman, was watching me so closely, encouraging me and guiding my care. But, early that evening, I began to feel my life slipping away.

Time has its own schedule in a dark hospital room. The monitors tell you things you either don't really want to know, like how shallow your breathing is, or things you don't have the training to understand. Beeping is bad and brings nurses.

It was just after midnight when I started crying. The belief that I just might not make it through this was weighing heavily. I was so tired, and when I closed my eyes to sleep, I would open them to find not hours, but only five minutes had passed.

I started believing that if I could just make it through the night, things would be better. My Seattle-based daughter-in-law Olivia was bringing my oldest and youngest grandsons on Friday. Trey and Kinsey would bring grandson King back to the hospital. I would pull every string I could find to get to see my whole family, and I am a pretty good string-puller.

But the night just seemed too long.

Then I opened my eyes and saw my father.

He was standing against the wall, just to my left of the digital clock. He was dressed in his Air Force uniform, the khakis, not the dress blues. I always liked him best in the khakis, probably

because it usually meant he was home.



Capt. Mack Gardner at his desk on the U.S. airbase in 1959 in Berlin, Germany. (Photo: submitted photo)

“Daddy?” I asked, and he nodded.

I was aware of him being in the room, but yet not being there. The wall was behind him, but there was more than a solid wall there, too. I found myself trying to look around him, behind him, for others I thought I might see.

Truthfully, I was looking for my mother. After all, my mother died in 1990, while my father was killed in a plane crash in 1960, when I was only 6 years old. My mother was my rock, the biggest influence in my life and the person I miss the most.

If it was time to go, where was Mother?

“Daddy?” I asked again, and he nodded. My questions to him were spoken out loud, but I remember thinking silently, “Should I call him ‘daddy?’ I’m 62 years old. If he were here, I doubt I would be calling him ‘daddy.’” Still, “daddy” was what came, and what I called him.

I remember thinking how handsome he looked; his blue eyes so clear even in the distance. “I’m so tired,” I told him, and he shook his head. “Not yet,” he said.

I closed my eyes for what seemed to be a long time, opened them to find five minutes had passed, and my father was still standing there. That was when the realization hit me.

“I’m not ready to go,” I told him. “I have a new grandson, and two others who are still so young. My husband is so worried, so distraught. He’s not ready. No one is ready for this. I’m just not ready to go.”

And my father – my father who had to leave his young family and devoted wife when he was 35 years old – smiled at me, nodded his head and said in his crystal clear voice with that coastal North Carolina accent I have always loved, “Don’t. Hang on tonight, and everything will be okay.”

“You know,” I said to him. “You know what it’s like to leave too soon. I’m not ready to die, daddy. Help me.”

And he did. Through most of the long night, he stayed. We played games with the fates. “Can’t die at 3 a.m. Three is our family’s lucky number. Watch the clock for 3:33 to pass because to die at 3:33 would be horrible. Thanksgiving and grandson Cohen’s birthday are in a few days. We don’t want a funeral ruining happy days.”

Sometime just before daylight, I dozed off and actually slept for almost an hour. When I opened my eyes, my daddy was gone.

It was a new morning, and I was feeling better. Eight days later, I was home.

The recovery has been slow, but I think I’m almost back to “normal.” I have thought a lot about my father, and especially about why he came to help me. He has always been with me – someone whose values I always considered when making choices, someone whose respect and approval I always wanted, even when I wasn’t quite sure what he might think.

But on that dark day, when seeing my mother might have sent me running straight into the comfort of her arms and out of this world, it was my father who came. My father – who has known the joys of heaven for a long time, but also the reality of separation, of leaving too soon. He was the person I needed.

I am so thankful. I want to see him again, but not just yet.

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