

An Excerpt from...
Spit Like a Big Girl
By Clarinda Ross

For my father,

Who read me the great stories of history when I was too young to really understand them.
He taught me life is hard but not impossible. I'm teaching my daughter simpler things,
Like how to eat with a spoon, brush her teeth, and step up to the sink and spit like a big girl.

Lights up. (A circle of light, USC to reveal Clarinda)

Have you ever heard that saying? "Life is what happens on the way to where you're going." Well, I really believe it's true. Life is made up of those tiny moments in between the big plans and the dreams. Big things in life make us stop and notice the tiny moments. I think it takes a few births, deaths, car wrecks, or natural disasters, before we're even paying attention. Life will just sneak up behind you and sit down at your kitchen table while you're fixin' supper.

(Lights change, cross to bench)

It's 1988, it's August, it's Atlanta, and it's HOT. I'm pregnant. I'm really pregnant. I'd just closed the play STEEL MAGNOLIAS and it had been a big hit. The women in our cast became very close and we used to go out together after shows. And, sometimes people would recognize us (picks up rose, smiles at a patron) and send flowers or champagne to our table.

I was talking on the phone to my daddy telling him all about it(picks up the phone) "Daddy, I'm locally famous, but I'm not rich." He said, "Me too, Deb, me too." The one thing I can tell you about my daddy is he was just tickled to be him. As we hung up the phone, he said, "I never worry about you, Deb. You're gonna be all right."

I went to my last birthing class. (Lamaze breathing) HA-HA-HEE-HEE. I graduated with flying colors. My leader, an aging flower-child said, "You're certainly a great little breather!" "Thanks, I'm an actress."

I got home late. There was a message on the machine from daddy--(Sound: answering machine static, rewind, then dad's voice)"Just calling to check in. Call when you can."

(Light change)

The next morning, I slept late - or I tried to - the phone kept ringing. (Sound: phone rings)

I ignored it as long as I could. I was in that dreamy state between sleep and wake. I thought that's my old daddy calling me...I'll call him back. Finally, I picked up (Sound out) and it was my favorite director, David Thomas. He asked, "How are you doing?" and I launched into the perils of pregnancy; "It's so hot, I'm so fat, my feet are swollen. David, why did I cut my hair?" I'm prattling, and he's listening, but not really. Really, he's trying to keep me on the phone. Because he knew what I didn't - that my daddy had died suddenly in the middle of the night of a heart attack.

He was trying to keep me on the phone until he could get someone there to be with me when I heard

the news, because I was in my eighth month. Call waiting beeped and I said goodbye to him.

It was my friend Bill, a playwright from Los Angeles, by way of Alabama. We started talking about his play. He was writing the true story of his sisters. And, in real life, his daddy had died of cancer. Bill said, "Clarinda I've got to find a way to end this play." I said, "Well, Bill, it seems like you'll have to tell the truth in your play. You'll have to talk about your daddy dying."

My then husband and his mother pulled up in the driveway. What were they doing here in the middle of the day? Patrick walked into the house with his arms outstretched, "Your mom found your dad dead."

And I remember thinking in that moment, what a weird way for him to word it, creepy, like daddy had been murdered or something. I backed away from him. I wanted to put as much distance as possible between me and that news.

(Light change)

I stood for a long time and looked out the window. I didn't cry for two hours. And, you know I loved my daddy.

But there were people and things to take care of (picks up the phone) call my mama - which was awful, call my Mamaw, daddy's mama - which was worse. The funeral. The memorial. Pick the casket. What should he wear? Where will he be buried? I was on the phone all day. Everybody was worried about me, that I would miscarry, or go on a hunger strike. (Proud) I ate a steak that night! (Fearful) But Sherry never called me.

(Joyful) Sherry is my best friend in the whole world. We have been best friends since the second grade when she brought a bunny rabbit to school for "show and tell" and it went to the bathroom on my desk.

And I knew that she knew. Boone, North Carolina is a small town, and...Daddy really was locally famous. At 9 o'clock that night, I called Sherry. She answered, "Oh, God, oh, God, I was hoping you wouldn't call me."

"Why, not? Why, didn't you call me?"

"Because, I knew if you told me it would be true."

(Hangs up phone.)

Daddy used to comb his hair straight back when he got out of the shower. My mama didn't like it that way. She'd always, run her fingers through it and mess it up--making it not so "every hair in place".

(Cross center as if approaching casket)

The last thing Mama did, before they closed the casket, was reach in and mess up his hair.

Things were bad. They were really bad. But, to make matters worse, we couldn't find my father's will. I knew he had a will. He was a historian. He was detail-oriented. He was a department chair at the University. He had a will. I just had to find it.

Wasn't with his lawyer. Wasn't in the safety deposit box. I was turning the house upside down, running from room to room looking and while I was doing this, this friend of mine, from high school, who I never really liked anyway, came over to console me. Kiki. Uh. Don't you just hate that name? Kiki talks in this (goes falsetto) real high squeaky southern voice like this. And, in some weird effort to console me, she is telling me about this affair that she's having with a married man with two kids.

(Drops falsetto)

Now, this is a crisis, my dad is dead, my mother is going on and on about how she's going to become this homeless person, and Kiki is talking to me (falsetto) in her real high squeaky southern voice (drops falsetto) something snapped.

"Kiki, SHUT UP! You know that's not your real voice. Leave my house now!!!!!!!"

(Apologizing to the audience for the outburst) I just sort of cracked.

(cross to black cube)

But I found it. I found my father's will. There, in the bottom of a big dresser drawer, in my old room, (kneels) buried under forty or fifty "Fish and Game" magazines, shotgun shells, arrowheads, pocketknives, a pair of binoculars, and a camera that didn't work. There it was, tucked inside a college-ruled, spiral-bound notebook. (Picks up a stack of notebooks)

There were four of them. I gave the will to mother, which calmed her down considerably.

(Opens a notebook and reads a bit)

My father kept journals. I waddled myself heavy with child down onto the blue shag carpet of my old room. And I read these notebooks cover to cover for three days stopping only to pee. (Turns a page) My father kept journals for over twenty years and none of us knew. They dated back to the late sixties when we were kids. Mostly he talked about his hunting trips. He was a historian, so he was very scientific. He'd note; the date, the time, the temperature, who went with him, what caliber of gun they toted, what they had for lunch, the names of the dogs, and how each performed. Sometimes he'd wander. Just kind of wander off the topic. He'd talk about places he'd pass through and people he met on the way.

There were some years that were skipped altogether. And in the later notebooks, in the 80's, he talked more about traveling, and lecturing, and about us. Finding these notebooks was just like finding a part of him, a tangible piece that I could hold on to. I think that is the fear, when you lose someone you love - you think you're gonna forget. And, I didn't want to forget anything.

So, after my precious daddy died, I went out and I bought myself a college-ruled, spiral-bound notebook. I started writing down every thing I could remember. I don't know if it's scientific or historically accurate, and I'm quite certain that I wander. My is Clarinda. My daddy, used to call me Deb, and these are some things that happened to me, on the way to where I'm going.