When the doctor pushed open the swinging double doors, I caught a glimpse of my father on the gurney. Minutes earlier the emergency management team had rushed him inside there, out of my view. They turned to me and instructed, “Wait over there.” I still hadn’t fully grasped what was going on. My eyes were focused on those doors.

Earlier, in the first morning light of May 22, 1967, I woke up to the sound of my mother screaming. I jumped up and ran to my parents’ bedroom. Mom was standing at the foot of the bed with her hands cupping her ears as if blocking out a horribly loud sound. “There’s something wrong with Dad,” she said frantically.

He was lying in bed, on his back. Silent, staring. Suddenly these sounds came from him that I’d later learn were death rales. “He’s okay, see?” I said, not really believing it myself. *There was* *something wrong*. I was afraid to call his name because if he didn’t answer it would mean he was dead. He made more sounds. My mother screamed again. It was deafening. I realized I was screaming, too.

Barefoot, I sprinted through the house and out the back door to my aunt’s house next door. She was a registered nurse. I banged on the bedroom window, yelling, “Hurry, please, there’s something wrong with my dad.” She came in a nanosecond.

My mother was still standing there, now eerily quiet, unsure if any of this was really happening.

The night before, my parents had gone to a dance. My brother was away at college. I opted to stay home, watch some television of my choice, and bask in the glory of having the entire house to myself. I was 18. Around ten that night I went to bed since I had to go to work in the morning. I vaguely remember hearing my parents come home but was too sleepy to have any conversation. I didn’t want to break that stage of restfulness before falling deep asleep.

During the night, I heard my Dad get up a few times. I could hear him vomiting and felt bad for him. *Must be flu or something he ate when they went out*. Then I drifted back to sleep, sleeping peacefully until my mother’s screams broke that trance.

My aunt the nurse was levelheaded in this crisis, my mother nearly hysterical. I was frozen in time. Somebody called the ambulance, probably me. My aunt was working on her patient.

“Where are they, where are they?” my mother repeated until the ambulance came. It was probably only minutes between the phone call and their arrival.

My aunt told my mother she could not go with him. “You have to take your shot and eat first.” My mother was a Type 1 Diabetic. She was always diligent in teaching us to be independent and responsible, just in case. Our father was always by her side, checking on her. He scheduled everything around the times she needed to take her shots and eat, balancing the insulin and meals to help her lead as normal a life as possible.

There were no microfine disposable needles back then. She had a little ceramic sterilizer gadget about the size of two bars of soap stacked on top of each other. It had a metal tray inside that would lift out of the boiling water when you opened the lid. It took about five minutes for the water to heat up and sterilize the syringe. Often we would sit down to dinner and my mother would realize she forgot to plug in her “thing” to take her evening shot. She’d urge us to go ahead and start eating, but Dad would wait. Following his example, so would we.

Dinnertime was the single most important time we spent together as a family. No matter what, we saw each other at dinner. We would exchange news of the day, share things. Other times of the day were occupied with necessary separation. Dad would go to work, we would go to school, Mom would walk to the store to buy things for dinner. Dinner together was almost a requirement. So, we would wait until Mom could get that sterilizer cooking and take her shot.

My aunt taught me how to give an injection. Because my mother’s condition had to be controlled with two injections a day, areas of her body were getting a little tender from the frequency. I’d often give her a shot in the arm to give her legs a chance to rest. She always told me I did a great job, but I don’t think I did. I’d see her squint and flinch.

Being practical in an impractical situation, my aunt the nurse gave her a shot and made her eat something. She knew my father was dead. My mother was still praying he wasn’t. I had to go.

I found myself sitting in the passenger seat of an ambulance with my father in the back. I don’t know how that was permitted. Maybe my aunt knew the drivers. We were making our way north on Cline Avenue to St. Catherine’s Hospital.

My Dad hated Cline Avenue. He said they put too many curves in the road when they “improved” it. Whenever we went to Indiana Harbor from our Highland home we almost always took Kennedy Avenue, straight as an arrow though you might catch a train. I was thinking my Dad wouldn’t be happy to be on Cline.

When that doctor finally pushed those doors open, he simply walked right toward me and asked, “How old was your father?”

“Forty-nine,” I answered, without emotion, still processing the past tense of his question. *Was?* What do you mean *Was?* Before I could wrap my head around the doctor’s question and all the cold, hard truth that it represented, I heard my mother. She had arrived. An uncle brought her. Then another uncle walked into the emergency room. I never knew who told him we were there. He hugged my mother, then went to a payphone and called my brother.

My poor brother. It was early in the morning, and I was sure the phone woke him. My uncle, who was likely in shock himself, said something such as, “Come home. Your father died.” My brother borrowed a car and drove 200+ miles directly home from Bloomington, alone, probably fighting back tears. It had to be a long and lonely ride.

I don’t remember how I got back home from the hospital. Several hours later our house was filled with sympathetic friends and neighbors whose presence were at once comforting and sad. I was watching my mother. She was quiet, in stunned disbelief, then crying.

 I heard an engine idle and stop in front of our house. I looked out and saw my brother. He ran in the door, almost oblivious of the other people in our house. He locked eyes with our mother. Their embrace was painful to watch, heartbreaking.

That was 1967. I hated that year for a long time, I hated the number 22 as my father died on May 22nd. My parents were married for 22-1/2 years, that’s all. Death stole the rest of their plans. I look back now and realize what a short time they had together. And my brother and I had such a limited time with our father.

I wonder if he sees us. Did he see us get married and have children? Did he see what we’ve become? Did they reunite in Heaven when our mother died in 1995? What would he have thought of our choices in life? I don’t know any of those answers any more than I understand why his heart simply stopped at such a young age. I am now older than either of my parents got to be.

Memories of Dad’s last day are still painful after all these decades. They still leave questions that will never be answered for me, at least not in this lifetime. Now I seize the day, embrace life, and look forward to my own final departure when I believe will see them both again, waiting together to welcome me.