

October 12th

(c. 2019)

It was October 12th, 1960. Columbus Day. I was 8 years old.

We had the day off from school. My big sister Wendy who was 12, and her best friend, Carol Galgay were going shopping at Alexander's in White Plains, and as usual, I was tagging along. I always wanted to be with the big kids, even though I knew my brother and sister couldn't stand me at all. I was too little and much too stupid and couldn't do anything right. Besides, I was annoying. I'd do stuff like dance around the house, singing with the worst voice in the world --- and emoting, in character often, and in costume whenever possible. And I'd make up dumb songs. Even before I could write any words, I had Grandma Fan help me to spell them all, as I'd compose: (perhaps you're familiar with my early work?), "The angels and the stars and the Lord are watching over you, my love, my love, my love..."

And then there was my big number, "My True Brain". "My True Brain"!

I've forgotten the melody and lyrics, but the title made its mark, or rather marked me for life. My brother and sister never let me live that one down.

I liked to play football and baseball and everything with my brother Rob and his friends --- All those boys. Most of the early family snapshots show little Jana with a football and a black eye, Jana with a baseball hat and a black eye, Jana with a bloody hole in her head. I liked being with my sister's friends, especially Carol. They were fun, playing 45's and dancing, and they were nice to me. They'd tell her not to be so mean.

Anyway, Columbus Day: Wendy and Carol and I took the bus to White Plains. When we got back Mommy was home and our Aunt Helen Paradise was there, not saying much, just vacuuming the living room, which was really strange. No one besides our mother had ever vacuumed or cleaned anything in our house.

Mommy came with us into Wendy's and my bedroom. I started telling her my woes about having found a green corduroy skirt at Alexander's that I really wanted, but they didn't have my size. Then I went to the bathroom. When I came back everyone was very quiet. Mommy said, "I have something to tell you that's a little worse than not getting the green skirt. Your daddy died today." "No!" I shouted, holding out my hands to keep that reality away from me. I ran to Mommy's and Daddy's room thinking that Daddy would be there in bed, that she was just saying that so I'd (we'd) be so happy when we saw that he was home from the hospital.

They never talked about it, but I mean he was always sick — that was normal --- in and out of the hospital. No one ever said anything about dying. "No!"

It's so strange how in an instant the whole universe can turn all upside down and crazy and cease to make any more sense forever. Forever.

Wendy and Carol and I walked up the street to Carol's house crying. That was the first and last of anyone's crying. My mother never cried. She was trying to be strong for us I guess. Thanks Mom. I guess.

My big brother Rob was 10. He and Daddy were very close. I knew Daddy liked him best. He was the boy. Plus he was smart. Daddy could teach him to do simple calculus problems when Rob was 4 or 5 or some ridiculous age. They'd demonstrate for us at the dinner table. I couldn't do much of anything, let alone advanced mathematics.

When Rob got home Mommy told him Daddy died. He went in his room and blew his trumpet for a couple of hours until he could come out. He never cried. But even after many many years had passed, his lip would still start to quiver, trying its damndest to hold tight, if I ever brought up the subject of Daddy dying. And they all hated when I did. They didn't like to "harp on things." I did. I had to. I was morbid. The fact is, life had stopped dead, then and there. I was frozen in time. And a solemn vow had solidified inside me, way down deep beyond control. Like a holocaust victim's vow "never to forget," I'd never budge. Never forget. Never abandon him. Even if they did, go on living, laughing and stuff. Not me. I'd never stop loving him or aching for him. Never be happy without him. Not for a minute. I promise I'll never ever leave you, Daddy. I mean what if he's sick, or sad, or lonely? All alone. Poor Daddy. What can I do? Help! Don't worry I'm here, your "little nurse", remember? I won't forget about you. I'll stay here every minute, then maybe you'll be O.K. O.K.? Don't be afraid. I'm so worried about you. Where are you, Daddy? Don't be lonely. I'll never leave you. Not for a minute. Never. I promise.

From then on the rest of the family snapshots showed little Jana with a frozen, far-away look in her eyes and a hole in her head --- I mean her heart --- or some part of her she couldn't locate anymore.