

*Alone with Reality: A Memoir*  
*By Debra Secrist*

It was a cold, raw November day, the kind of cold that chills a person's body all the way through. Uncle Alley and my cousin Walker arrived around 9:30 that morning and joined the other members of my family that had gathered at my parent's home in Lilburn, Georgia. Greetings flew from person to person, hugs and kisses were exchanged. Pockets of people formed in the living room and den, and conversations drifted in the air with the occasional sound of laughter rising above the buzz of voices. All too soon the conversations drifted away and there rested a silence that was indescribable. Within an hour my family and I would be traveling to what seemed a foreign land, the cemetery. This was the day of my father's funeral. As we traveled the five miles to this land, the cold outside only seemed to mock the raw feeling of pain I felt at the moment.

My family and I arrived and laboriously began to unload our weary bodies from the cars. We proceeded to walk to the burial site of my father. Friends were there to greet us, embrace us and offer words of sympathy; we smiled through our tears.

Todd, the funeral director, began to guide everyone inward to the

canopy. Mama, frail and seemingly lost, my sister, Rochelle, being strong for my mother, and I sat down in the front row of chairs covered with green cloth. My daughter, Hannah, sat beside my mother, my son, Paul, sat beside me. My dear husband, Tim, stepped behind the small podium to start the service, looked tenderly down at us and began to cry. Regaining his composure, he began to pour forth words of comfort, embracing the character of my daddy, to share with all who listened. Even though I heard the words my husband spoke, the thought consumed me, while looking upon the casket, that my dear, sweet daddy was going to be placed in that cold, hard, dark ground. He had suffered so much sickness already. It was almost too much to bear; then I felt the strong arm of my son come around my shoulders. The warmth of his embrace strengthened me, and my mind resurfaced to the message my husband spoke. The service came quickly to an end, and the entire group of people joined my husband in saying the Lord's Prayer as a fitting closure to my daddy's life.

People rushed to our side as we rose, some spilling out words of comfort, others giving a hug and remaining silent not knowing what to say. Uncle Alley took my mother's arm; quickly and quietly he escorted her to the car - away from the coldness of the weather and the burial site.

The remaining family members and friends began to leave one by one, except for Paul. He stood off at a slight distance waiting for me, patiently and reverently, until I was ready to go.

I had purposely waited for everyone to leave so I could spend one more moment alone with Daddy. Todd allowed me that precious time. With my last words spoken, he thoughtfully approached, handed me a zippered white envelope filled with papers and the four corner inserts from daddy's casket; then he departed quietly. As I turned to walk away, my son met me again with his strong embrace, and we walked to the car. Overwhelmed by all that had just occurred in this foreign land, silence was my only word.

Returning to my childhood home, I found the driveway filled with cars. Uncle Alley and Walker were outside and everyone else was piled into the kitchen and living room. Again the air was filled with conversation and laughter; such a sharp contrast to the scene from which we had just come. The smell of food lingered heavily in the air, the heat from the oven warmed the kitchen, and Rochelle was propped in front of the sink looking at a newspaper article about our daddy, which had been published that morning in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, as I entered the kitchen through

the back door. I had to pause a few minutes and let my eyes survey what was going on around me, but everything seemed to be out of focus, and my ability to concentrate on details evaded me. As I walked on through the kitchen, I noticed desserts piled on the table and rounding the corner into the dining room I discovered that table laden with food. Faceless people were bustling about, women in dresses and stocking feet and men with loosened ties. Sounds of dishes clinking, silverware tinkling, and ice being scooped out of a cooler bombarded my ears. Frantically I searched for Mama and was relieved to see her seated among friends with a full plate of food before her. I wanted to run, to hide; my senses were overloaded, and I thought my head would explode.

I finally waded through the sea of people to fix myself a plate of food. Hunger was not what I was feeling at the moment and eating was a mechanical action for me right then, just something to do while trying to make sense of the scene that laid before me. I remember putting tasteless items of food into my mouth, trying to be polite and smile as I was pulled into what seemed to me as meaningless conversation.

The hustle and bustle of the afternoon finally started to diminish. Little by little the table was cleared and the food was covered and put away.

The dishwasher was loaded, and soon the sound of water was splashing inside as it washed away the remnants of dinner. With the kitchen now tidy, people started gathering their possessions to leave. One by one each came to my mother to lovingly embrace her, followed by embraces for my sister and me. Tim, Paul and Hannah bade me farewell, because I was going to remain with Mama for a few days longer. With one last kiss from Tim they were gone. Rochelle stayed for a short while longer with Mama and me, but finally exhausted, she left wearily to go to her home. My mother and I were now alone at day's end. We were both sitting in the den, Mama was sitting in her favorite chair, and I was sitting in daddy's recliner and silence surrounded us. Thoughts started to fill my mind of her being alone, alone after almost 50 years of marriage to this man, and fear gripped me hard. Reality was suddenly upon me - my daddy was gone.