My Father Who Art in Heaven

A story of magic, love and forgiveness

Ange de Lumiere

Preface

My purpose in life is to bring magic into everything I do. I wear kitsch accessories to make people smile. I remind everyone that the Universe is a benevolent place to be in, by spreading kindness. It's a choice. Life is about what you focus on. I am the antidote to the eight o'clock news, except now the eight o'clock news runs all day, every day. More work for people like me.

When my father was given a month to live, I asked myself 'How can I make this time as magical as possible for both him and me?'

I approached the journey of the last weeks of his life with an open mind and an open heart. I took each day as it came, never knowing what the next day would bring. This is the only way to survive crises. I surrendered to the experience. I faced the music with no expectations. All I wanted was to soothe my Dad's fears if I could, and create magical moments. I think I did. And I thought perhaps my journey could inspire others. Hopefully.

If my book has inspired you, I would love to hear from you. Please make your way to my author page in Facebook: FB/theangedelumiere and share your feedback.

Thank you for reading my book,

Ange de Lumiere

Spiritual lawyer

Chapter One

I pressed my face against the cold plane window and looked at the dark November clouds as we left the South West of England behind us. In three and a half weeks, it would be Christmas and on Sunday, my husband Ben would open the first window of the advent calendar without me. We had decided to cancel our family trip to my Mum and Dad's. I was alone. The official reason was that our children both had colds. The truth was that Ben and I didn't know how advanced my Dad's illness had become.

The stewardess pushed the trolley down the aisle and offered refreshments, but I wasn't hungry. I knew in my heart Dad only had a few months to live, even though Ben kept on saying Dad would live for another ten years, and Mum kept on about how strong Dad was.

Everyone wanted to keep upbeat and optimistic, but I wanted to be real. I needed the truth. I always had. It was no use lying to me. I was a walking lie detector. And I knew deep down that Dad had only months to live, maybe even only weeks.

My body felt raw and painful.

The flight touched down and finally, I was here; back in the city where I grew up. Paris, the city of lights. And with it, butterflies in my tummy.

My brother picked me up at the airport and zipped down the motorway in his expensive company car. I sneaked a look at his now almost completely grey hair. I used to love his auburn hair so much as a kid. My little brother. We had been so close as children, but not much of that was left. We got into a stupid argument and ended up not talking for two years. We had made up, but our relationship was never the same.

We drove in silence. Then Philippe started talking.

'I need to warn you Ange.'

My chest tightened and I struggled to breathe.

'Dad... is not the same.'

Then Philippe lost himself in silence again. I dared not prod him. I would know soon enough.

Philippe dropped me at the corner of Boulevard Raspail and Rue de Vaugirard, where my parents lived. He lived only a ten minutes drive from there.

'I need to shoot off' he said, kissing me on both cheeks, the engine still running. 'Claire has had a long day.'

He disappeared into the night, his tail lights turning into two small red eyes. I took a deep breath, then stepped into the elegant marble hall and made my way to the lift, my heels echoing loudly. Memories of my childhood flooded my mind; of how much I loved my Dad, and those special moments when he took me to Hospital with him to see his patients. How the nurses greeted him with a huge smile and then adored me. Tears welled up in my eyes as I paused in front of the lift, grateful for the extra time it allowed me to compose myself. It was out of the question to cry.

I don’t know how long I stood in front of their front door, but finally I gathered the courage to ring the doorbell. Mum opened the door in seconds and let me in. She pecked me on both cheeks in a much warmer way than usual, then, without a word, she led me into the living room where Dad sat in his wheelchair, his impeccable white shirt contrasting with his dark brown corduroy trousers.

I paused, despite myself.

‘Ange’ he said “At last, you are here.’

‘Of course’ I murmured, the words struggling to come out of my constricted throat.

He clasped my hand. I bent to kiss him. I could smell his cologne as his head approached mine, and I struggled to hold back the tears.

‘Oh Dad’ I said to myself ‘Don’t be afraid’. But the words wouldn’t come out.

When his eyes finally locked with mine, my heart skipped a beat. I had never seen fear in my Dad's eyes before. But in this moment, he looked at me like a passenger on the titanic, dignified but in no doubt about the end. Dad was always dignified.

Over supper, Dad ate in silence, listening to the small talk Mum and I were having, smiling occasionally. He could still feed himself, without making a mess. He just had to do it ever so slowly.

When we were finished, Mum put Dad on the mini lift to take him upstairs and put him to bed. It was late. I pretended Dad was boarding a flight and I was the attendant, and we all had a good laugh.

As I waited for Mum to come back down, I browsed the familiar antiques. A delicate clock from Napoleon III’s time, fragile china figures, marquetry boxes decorated with mother of pearl. There was old furniture handed down generation after generation, smelling of years of polish, and leather-bound classics from Shakespeare to Rabelais that smelled of centuries past. Dad had inherited them from his rich father. Mum came from a poor family. She didn’t have a brass farthing to put to her name. Their antiques contrasted with the modern style of the flat with its smoked mirrors, black book shelves, triple glaze automated windows and marble flooring. It was the clash of two eras.

I just had time to send a quick text to Ben to tell him I had arrived safely when Mum rushed down the stairs, making a bee line for the drinks cabinet and serving herself a whisky.

'What do you think, Ange?' she asked, slumping in the sofa next to me.

'I don't know.' I shrugged.

The last thing I wanted was to discuss feelings with her...especially my feeling of impending doom. Talking about emotions with her had always ended up in drama in the past. Mum and I had a difficult relationship.

'Your father is a strong man' she said, tucking in her upper lip. 'He will beat this thing' she added, sipping her whisky loudly, her knuckles whitening from holding the glass too tightly.

'Sure' I said, avoiding eye contact with her.

The truth was, that I had a bad feeling. Dad's brain tumour was inoperable and he had just been put on an aggressive course of chemotherapy; the same course my aunt Eve had been put on months before she died of lung cancer. My mum was a nurse by training. Surely she knew what was going on? Or was she still clinging to the fact that Dad's brain tumour was non-cancerous?

Earlier, when Dad helped set the table, he’d wheeled himself into the kitchen then stopped dead in his tracks. He couldn't remember what he had gone there for.

'It's ok, Dad.' I said. 'It happens to me all the time.'

Then during dinner, Dad had stopped in mid sentence. He opened his mouth several times to try to finish what he was saying, with the look of someone drowning on his face. After what seemed like an eternity, he laughed and said he couldn’t remember. We all laughed, but it had not stopped the awkward silence at the table. It was clear he wasn’t himself.

'He gets up in the middle of the night to go to the toilet' Mum hissed angrily, her eyes now cold and small. 'He knows I can't pick him up if he falls. I am not strong enough. He does it on purpose.' She added, her face now reddening with anger.

'How can you think such thing, Mum?' I asked, gasping.

'He’s always had a problem with authority.' She added, clenching her jaws. 'Especially with women.'

'Mum.' I said, repressing a laugh and resisting the urge to tell her how much I understood him, as Mum could be so castigating. 'He doesn't remember!'

'You think so?' She asked, her face relaxing and her eyes watering.

'Of course.'

I opened my arms and hugged her. She put her head on my shoulder and sobbed uncontrollably. I stroked her soft straight short hair, my hands shaking gently, and felt her tears against my shirt. I froze and breathed as quietly as I could so as not to disturb her. I could not remember the last time we had physically touched, let alone hugged. She had never been a cuddly mum; not with me, anyway. We were like cats and dogs. Always fighting. And yet here she was, abandoning herself in my arms. Vulnerable. Emotional. For the first time in her life, she had let down her armour. I didn't know if she would ever do it again and it didn't matter.

‘Good night Ange’ she said, as she hurried towards the stairs and started climbing them.

Quickly, she composed herself, wished me a good night again, and walked up the stairs. I remained sitting on the sofa for a while, taking everything in, then made my way to my bedroom.

Chapter two

Six a.m. No matter what time I went to bed, I always woke at the same time. I wasn’t a morning person before I had children, but four babies later and I’d become as regular as a clock. And that morning I was particularly looking forward to my run around my childhood neighbourhood. I fumbled in my parents’ lacquered Chinese cabinet to find the front door keys and walked out of the door. I needed to run off the drama of the night before. The flat was quiet as both my parents snored upstairs. I tiptoed to the lower floor and tied the laces of my running shoes. Taking my running gear for only a weekend seemed ridiculous, but I knew I would need a run to keep my sanity.

I took up running in 2009, at the age of forty-four, in the most extraordinary circumstances. I had been visiting Mum and Dad and had met a bunch of cousins I hadn’t seen in ages, being as I now lived in the UK. Three years after the birth of Ollie, I was still struggling with the baby weight, and had come back to England depressed, feeling overweight and podgy compared to my slim Parisian cousins.

I didn’t want to feel this way. After all, did body shape really matter? Why should it be a measure of my worth? But I couldn’t help it. Every time I looked in the mirror, I cringed.

One night, at my lowest, I dropped to my knees and I prayed. I didn’t know why. I never prayed. The next day, I woke up with an irresistible urge to run. That morning, I darted around the house looking for sports shoes, shorts and everything I needed. In the twenty-four years of my adult life I had had no inclination to run, and even Ben, a keen runner, hadn’t managed to inspire me to run in all the years we had been together. It was worse than that; I hated running with a passion. And yet here I was, begging Ben to go running.

Four years later and I still ran every week, religiously. And I had got my body back. It was a miracle.

So this morning, I was particularly looking forward to my run around my childhood neighbourhood. I pushed open the glass doors of the hall and headed down *Boulevard Raspail*, into the morning darkness. The garbage trucks had already come and gone, leaving the streets clean and wet. The boulangeries were not open yet, but still, the divine waft of warm baking bread tickled my nostrils. Market stall holders were starting to set up, carrying crates, hand rolled cigarettes hanging from their lips. Women with loud voices filled the air. Paris was waking up. I jogged past and smiled.

Jacques Dutronc’s famous song “Il est cinq heures Paris s’eveille” rang in my ears as I witnessed precisely what his song described. This used to be one of my favourite songs.

I missed that Paris.

I turned left into *Rue de Rennes* and ran up to the *Tour Montparnasse*, remembering how as a child, I observed its slow construction with curiosity mixed with dread. Would the building of this tower ever end? It was the tallest tower ever built since the Eiffel Tower and the whole arrondissement was up in arms about it. My deepest fear was that they would somehow not build it strong enough and that it would fall like a domino and squash me or other people. I could see it at the top of Rue de Rennes and I smiled at my childhood fears. It had never been dangerous, only ugly.

I jogged past *La FNAC*, half way up *Rue de Rennes*. An institution dedicated to culture. In my youth, I would hang out there with my friends, looking for good reads and cool music to listen to. It was our antidote to boredom. After my adventures abroad, *La FNAC* was supplanted by Amazon. Still, nothing beats leafing through a book and smelling it before buying it. As I jogged past, I smiled at the kitsch, dirty yellow square of its logo and made my way to the top of *Rue de Rennes*.

I thought of Ben and, oh, I wished he and the kids were here. Yes, it was for the best but the thought didn’t quite rid me of my guilt and sadness at not having them around, even though I knew I would never have had a chance to spend quality time with Dad with the kids around. Back home, I hardly even managed to go to the toilet alone. Besides, I would have panicked at the thought of them breaking my parents’ precious trinkets and would have spent the weekend on tenterhooks, trying to bridge the culture and language gap between my parents and Ben. We had tried it before and it was exhausting.

At the top of *Rue de Rennes*, I turned left into *Boulevard du Montparnasse*. Whereas *Rue de Rennes* was lined with fashion and accessories shops, *Boulevard du Montparnasse* was dedicated to cafes, restaurants and cinemas. It was like entering a different district. I pined suddenly at the memory of eating crepes from the multitude of Breton restaurants established in the area, then going to see a film with my friends. I hadn’t been to the cinema in years. And it was not the same in the comfortable popcorn American style cinemas I could find in England. They didn’t hold the same magic.

I ran past *Notre Dame des Champs*, the church where my first husband and I had got married in 1993. I had looked beautiful that day. The pigeons had turned up for the obligatory group photos outside the church as well as a few Japanese tourists who thought we looked cute.

There wasn’t an inch of that boulevard that didn’t carry memories for me.

On the other side of the street sat my old school. When I left the private school system at eleven years old, on the back of a huge row between my parents over money, I had landed in that establishment. At first, I had felt like a duck out of water, but I was lucky enough to be taken under the wing of one of the teachers, Monsieur Tannieres. He wore colourful hand knitted vests, boasted a huge moustache that he often twisted with his peasant like hands, and spoke with a singing southern accent. He was the grandfather I’d never had.

I had taken an instant liking to him and him to me, for reasons I will never understand. As a child, I looked like a princess turned frog. I’d developed a squint at two years old and my father, being the eye specialist that he was, had immediately prescribed glasses. My mother all too happily completed the picture by having my hair chopped off as short as possible, and buying the ugliest seventies clothes. I looked vile. Yet when I took my glasses off, Monseiur Tannieres said my face looked like an angel, with its porcelain blue eyes and its delicate features, and I was grateful to him for seeing past the ugly duckling costume I was forced to wear.

As I passed the *Cinema la Rotonde*, I was hit by the runner’s high and felt myself floating euphorically somewhere above my body. I glanced at the sublime seafood bar on the corner of *Boulevard Montparnasse* and *Boulevard Raspail*, where Dad invariably ordered the biggest *plateau de fruits de mer* on every New Year’s Eve. I gazed at the corner where the only Spanish speaking bookshop of Paris used to be. There, I had discovered Isabelle Allende and Gabriel Garcia Marquez in their original language. They had planted the seed of writing in me. Oh, how I would love to go there again.

I started the third leg of my run and was now nearing my parents’ flat. What a treat it had been. What a run down memory lane. I loved Paris. I adored every nook and cranny of it. In the thirty-six years I had lived there, I’d gathered a lot of memories. Some happy, some sad. And, at the breakdown of my first marriage, I had walked away from it all and moved abroad. London first, then the South West of England. I’d had to rebuild my life. These days, I only missed Paris when I was here. The rest of the time, I focused on my new life.

I opened the front door as quietly as I could, a bag of croissants in my hand. I missed croissants too, and cheese and good wine. I set the table for breakfast, placing the delicate china on my mother’s cashmere patterned table-cloth, with the antique sugar bowl and the delicately carved silver spoons. I ate breakfast right away, without waiting for Mum and Dad to wake up. They could be hours. I dug in, slicing the croissants carefully sideways with a serrated knife, spread some *Bonne Maman* strawberry jam inside. Everything tastes better after a run. The richness of the butter and the sweetness of the jam hit my taste buds and I let out a moan of pleasure. I had always loved my food. This was a running joke even in my family.

I was ready to face the day. I could take anything now.

When I finished my croissants, I grabbed a book and waited for Mum and Dad to emerge. An hour later, Mum came down the stairs, red eyed and ruffle-haired. But as soon as she had it made it downstairs, Dad’s voice echoed from upstairs, calling her, and without even pausing, she rushed back up.

‘Can I help?’ I asked, but she was already gone.

Shortly after, the invalid lift buzzed and Dad descended in his pyjamas and his beautiful red jumper. The one which made him look so handsome.

I announced that flight 2077 had just landed, pretending to be an air hostess again. He laughed, then slowly shifted himself out of the lift and carefully turned to slump into the wheelchair, looking relieved that he made it.

‘Bonjour Ange,’ Dad said, still smiling at my joke.

I kissed him four times and wheeled him to his place at the table. He started to peel his grapefruit with the kitchen knife he always used for that purpose, slowly and purposefully. I was glad to see that even though he could no longer hold a pen, he could still feed himself. He loved his food. I got it from him. Saucisson, wine, cheese and cake, which Mum still tried to stop him eating, worried about his diabetes. Dad was a big man now; some would say obese. His love of food had slowly crept up on him and he’d gone from a handsome slim man to a cheerful fat one, gradually, almost without noticing.

After watching him eat, and soaking in the memory of such a simple thing, I ran upstairs to have my shower. As the hot water poured over my head, I started to cry. How long would it be until Dad was gone and Mum sat at the table on her own? The thought tore me apart. I loved Dad so much it hurt all over my body right now. I sobbed in the shower and let the water soothe my eyes. It was a long shower, but I only emerged after I’d composed myself.

I got dressed and walked back down the steps with good cheer on my face. ‘So what are we going to do today?’

Chapter three

‘How about I take Dad for a short stroll whilst you take a break, Mum?’

Mum looked tired. She didn’t react right away. I could almost hear her thoughts. Was it reasonable? Would Dad be safe with me? Could she trust me?

‘The weather is really mild,’ I added. ‘Open the window and check it out for yourself.’

‘No, that’s OK.’ She turned to Dad. ‘Would you like that?’ she asked as she turned to look Dad in the eye.

‘How about I take you to the *Jardin du Luxembourg*?’ I asked him.

‘I would like that,’ he answered slowly.

I was still getting used to his lack of words. He had always been such a chatty man.

We wrapped Dad up. Two jumpers. Two scarves. Two hats. A leather jacket, and a blanket to cover his legs. He was dressed for a Finnish winter.

He beamed at us.

Despite it being November, the weather was mild and warm. We turned the corner and proceeded onto *Rue de Vaugirard*.

Dad was heavy and his wheelchair was hard to manoeuvre. Pushing him along the pavement, dotted with dog poo and black bins left like ungainly obstacles, wasn’t an easy job. Getting onto the road wasn’t an option, as the cars were parked bumper to bumper. Dad was far too heavy for us to tackle steps anyway. I had to go slowly, which didn’t sit well with the Parisians who darted past, busy and impatient, even on a Saturday morning.

Finally we arrived at the park. Going through the gates with him felt just as special as it had forty years ago, when my mother took us all for a run and a play. The *Jardin du Luxembourg* had been our sanctuary with its majestic trees, its manicured lawns, its exquisite flower borders and its elegant sculptures. It sat at the heart of the Latin Quarter and was home to mums, joggers and lovers, not to mention tourists. Dad loved people watching and as I bent down to take a look at his face, I saw a huge grin. He was beaming like a child in a sweet shop. And sure enough we passed a dark green sweet stall that seemed to belong in the past century. We could hear the children laughing and running in the play area down the lane. Even my favourite sweets, coconut balls, were still for sale.

I understood how Dad felt. When I was pregnant with my first son, Andy, I’d gone into premature labour and I had had to spend three weeks in hospital with my feet up, followed by eight weeks at home lying down all day. I’d felt like a lion in a cage. Even now, I can still remember the tedium of playing solitaire on my laptop all day long to kill time. I knew what it felt like to be housebound. I also knew the elated feeling that I felt when my baby was born and I was able to push his pram and go places. It felt like heaven. The sun and the wind on my face. Even the rain. Just being able to walk.

I could almost hear my father’s thoughts as we strolled down the tarmac lanes, observing the chess players under the ancient chestnut trees and the boules players with their iconic berets and cigarette butts hanging from their lips. A smile spread on his face like a wave of bliss. Then he became so overwhelmed with gratitude that tears ran down his face.

I looked up and sniffed. It was hard for me not to cry with him.

We walked all the way to the boating basin by the Senate, surrounded by the pale green metal chairs, where mothers sat watching their children poke miniature wooden sailing boats in the shallow water with long sticks. I could almost see what was passing through Dad’s mind. In his imagination, he was sketching a mother kneeling next to her chubby child, the one who was struggling with his boat. In just a few sharp lines he could capture the spirit of the moment. My father was a damned good artist, and his satchel used to go with him everywhere. Full of sketchpads, rubbers, stickers, post it notes and graphite pencils of various grades, I wondered what had happened to it. Now he was not able to hold a pen anymore and everything had to happen in his imagination. Somehow, I could tap into his mind and see it all.

I tried to make a move, but Dad grabbed my hand and begged me to stay longer, imploring me with his eyes. No one took him out anymore. Mum’s arthritis made it impossible and my brother was too busy with a full time job and two young kids. My sister lived in Spain. I was the only one. So we stayed until the air sharpened and it was time to go home.

By the time we arrived back at the apartment, Mum was worried sick. Despite my instructions, she hadn’t been able to relax and was nervously pacing the living room when we entered.

‘There you are!’ she exclaimed. ‘You’ve been gone ages.’

‘We’ve had fun, haven’t we?’ I touched Dad’s shoulder gently.

His cheeks had turned from a waxy yellow to a warm, rosy pink.

Mum was bemused. Not only did Dad seem transformed, he only slept half an hour that day. He was having far too much fun to miss out on anything.

‘Your Dad doesn’t make that sort of effort for me.’

I saw retaliation on the horizon and foresaw that the next time I visited, Mum would claim Dad was too tired to go for a walk with me. I closed my eyes and prayed. There was nothing else I could do. The sad truth was that Mum had always been jealous of my close relationship with Dad. But maybe this time, it would be different. Maybe given the circumstances, she could set aside her feelings and think of him instead. I paused for a moment and sent out an image of what I wanted to happen. More magical moments. Mum letting us have space.

Later that afternoon, my brother Philippe popped in with his children and brought with him a flurry of activity. There was no sign of my sister-in-law. She had a bad back. She always did. Dad sat in the background, happy to take it in quietly. The few times he tried to speak, his voice was not loud enough to be heard over the racket of the children, and even if it was, he struggled to finish his sentences. I admired how he just laughed it off. I didn’t think I would have coped as well. I am so impatient with myself. Like my mother.

After dinner, we played card games. My niece, Penelope, cheated, but I couldn’t be angry at her. She was so full of fun. Then it was time for them to go home.

The next day, Dad had a lie-in. I did some yoga in the wee hours before Mum got up, then offered to do a shop for her. By the time she got dressed and showered, it was nearly lunchtime. My brother would soon come to take me to the airport.

I had learned over the years that if I stayed at my parents longer than three days, my mother and I would start to argue, so I now kept my visits short and sweet. I guess that after three days, the novelty starts to wear off and you slip back into old habits, whereas in the first three days of any visit, she was too happy to see me to argue. Her negativity was put on hold. But now these days seemed so short.

Dad got up for lunch, then retreated back to bed almost immediately. I put my suitcase on the comfortable double bed of what used to be my father’s room, and threw my scattered belongings in, taking a last glance around. His old bedroom contained their entire collection of leather bound books and photo albums, an antique flap desk that my father never used, as Mum had always been in charge of running the household. I felt odd sleeping in Dad’s old bedroom, and yet I had slept like a baby. There was a good vibe in there. He had been moved to what used to be the guest room, into a hospital bed fitted with railings, to stop him falling out.

I had dreaded this moment all weekend. I hate goodbyes. And this time, I feared I might never see my father again; or if I did, that he might not even be able to say a single word. I had no idea when I would be able to come back. It didn’t depend on me. I had no money for the trip and Mum and Dad had kindly paid for this one. I heard Philippe ringing the bell downstairs and I swallowed my tears and picked my suitcase off the bed.

There was one last thing to do, and that was to say goodbye to my father, He was fast asleep and I stood a while, watching his peaceful face against the white pillow. I wished the moment could go on forever.

‘See you soon Dad,’ I whispered. ‘I love you.’

Philippe drove in silence all the way to the airport, whilst I sat too numb and raw to speak. The airport was buzzing with people, suitcases and trolleys. I didn’t feel I belonged anymore. My father was dying and I had no idea if I would ever see him again. And if I did, he might be a complete vegetable. I tried to think about something else, but I couldn’t.

My whole body ached as I sat in the aeroplane seat near the window and buckled up. I didn’t want to talk to anyone during that trip. I felt no-one could or would understand. I couldn’t stand small talk at the best of times, and now the thought of it became unbearable. No one wanted to talk about death. Everyone always tried to be so positive. They didn’t want to hear what I had to say. My throat ached with all those words trapped inside.

I watched as the plane tore through the thick and grey blanket of clouds, revealing a patchwork of small green fields stitched together with hedges and trees. Now that I was landing, back in the South of England, all the emotions from the weekend were tumbling inside of my body, echoed by the rough movement of the plane starting its descent. Time did not seem real anymore. Was it only two days since I had flown to Paris?

It felt like an eternity.

The plane bounced on the landing strip and everyone jerked in their skins as the deceleration sucked them forward. Then the plane ground to a standstill and people sprung to their feet to reach for their bags and coats. I waited in my seat, looking out of the window at the line of people walking like ants towards the terminal, until everyone had gone. I couldn’t face anyone touching me. When I finally stepped out, the cold wind hit my face and reminded me it was nearly winter.

My husband and youngest two children were waiting behind the sliding doors. I was home at last. Alice ran towards me and hugged me tight. Ollie followed suit. We had a group hug. Ben walked towards me and kissed me warmly on the lips. I wiped up a last tear as the children climbed into our battered seven-seater and chattered excitedly about what they had done over the weekend.

I had to get on with my life. My children needed me.

Christmas was coming.