

Pour One Out: It's Not Too Late Dad  
June 10th, 2020

I want to thank Ada for this opportunity. We need art now more than ever, our collective soul searching for collection, reflection. What it's like to be seen, touched, heard. This was a particularly hard piece; I could've chosen millions of words to tell this story. Instead, here are the hundreds that chose me.

My Dad is more of an idea than a person to me. He always finds his way into my writing; endless poems, essays, letters, stories. It's as if he's evaporated into a million little pieces, little letters that form words that find their way onto the page. Onto the spaces inbetween. A faded polaroid that still calls me every so often for 7 to 11 minutes no longer, no less and has a voice like I imagine the quiet crevices of the Grand Canyon do. His echoing timbre: rough, sandy, arid, full.

My Dad and mine's relationship can be measured in restaurant booths and Barnes and Noble café tables.

When I was a kid, he'd order a coffee and I'd order a hot chocolate with caramel on the inside of the cup. I'd bring back full stacks of books, knowing I'd have to put them all back when we decided to head home. He'd sip from his paper cup and read books from the "Humor" section or the paper. I'd devour the latest YA novel or magazine. And we'd sit there together for what seemed like hours. I'd go to his house every Wednesday and every other weekend, this was our Saturday night ritual. Me, a quiet kid with glasses, always askew, with a round face, a round belly and a big heart. Him, I'm not sure. To me, he was like a Sequoia Tree with labored breathing. His hands, arthritic, rough and calloused. They held so much history like the rings on those trees. Big with love and offering everything he had. Being a Dad was the only thing he really KNEW how to do.

We'd frequent the AppleBee's on Jefferson Street or by the mall. And in 2012, at the Applebee's on Jefferson, that was the first time I saw my Dad cry. So much, he had to pull out his handkerchief to dab his eyes.

My Dad has a first wife. I didn't hear much about her growing up until Thanksgiving when I was in 4th grade. My parents had separated by then and my Dad and I were at my Aunt's. My sisters had come home from school. There was a knock on the door. It was her. It was Kathy. I didn't know who she was. I had never met her, but all of my family treated her like a long lost friend. They hugged and laughed and welcomed her in. When I found out who it was, I ran into my cousin's black lit room and hid under his desk and started sobbing.

I never saw her again. She, too, is only a snapshot in my memory. A vague recollection of ideas and stories my sisters have told me.

It was her that made my Dad cry at the Applebees in 2012. I had him asked about her.

It was Summer of 2012 and I was taking a creative writing class at Joliet Junior College, I wrote a poem about this moment. I wrote this sort of sonnet.

"Two Fools in a Booth at the Applebee's on Jefferson Street"

"Did she break your heart?" "It-." A catch in his  
breath, a gap in his words. A blank, delug-  
in sensations: the warmth of her as they  
slept, her curls wrapped around his fingers. The  
secret smile tossed freely, shortening days.  
His sturdy hand on her waist, embracing  
her petite frame. And in the same gasp of  
breath, rushes the memory of the door,  
swung away from him and the motion of  
her exit and the action of dismiss.  
The lingering moment it took her soul  
to catch up with her body. The catch in his  
breath and the removal of his kerchief,  
dabbing dampened, swollen eyes. "It still is."

"It's still broken," he said.

This was a rare glimpse of my Father as HUMAN. My father as FEELING. My father as as as  
earth, canyon, river, sky cathedral:

"His Knees"

Forgetfulness comes from the knees.  
Too much sun disorients, weakens.

The day my Dad wore salmon shorts,  
his knees gave out.

His ears did too.  
Not by choice, but by nature.  
They forgot how to listen,  
forgot that I've told him

this before.

I'm moving to Chicago, Dad.

The job didn't work out.

And he asked me again.

His fingers will twist in confusion,

too much sun,

too much loving.

His lungs will forget to survive

blasts of ash, hot air, cough.

His knees will forget,

kiss the ground,

and return to their natural state.

My Dad will crawl.

Like we did,

our childish weight, clinging.

He will wrap himself around our legs.

Like we did,

he will do.

We will teach his knees

to remember

how to love

the body they hold.

We will be his scaffold.

He will lean against us,

a chimney,

a cathedral,

exhausted

with heat.

It is known in my family that my Dad is an alcoholic. Whether he knows that or admits to it is beyond any of us. Most of my memories of him are saturated with the scent of Rolling Rock, Carlo Rossi Merlot, and cigarette smoke.

In 2016, Tru\*p morale was high. I was home for the weekend and my Dad and I were in a booth, eating breakfast. This was the morning I tried to tell him that I don't identify as a woman. "I'm non binary," I said. "I use they/them pronouns, not she/her." My Dad looked at me as if I'd slapped him. Confusion. Rage. Dismissal. "What do you mean?" He roared. "Of course you're a fucking woman." I'd never been met with such anger or invalidation about my identity before. So that was the beginning of my quiet. My mouth clenched and a tightness rose in my chest. "Okay, Dad." I said. "Nevermind."

I didn't speak to him for two months after that. I didn't want to.

Dad would post really insensitive and contradictory political content on social media; I mean, he was/is Tru\*p's ideal demographic. Blue collar, older, white, cis, het male without a degree, too much time on his hands and no idea what to do with it. His entitlement, anger quickly rising and needing an outlet.

The social media posts got so bad that my sister and I sat down with him at his kitchen table and had an intervention to try to explain to him that what he was aligning himself with was racist and sexist and hate filled and hurt filled and insulting to all three of his daughters.

We didn't recognize him anymore.

The man who'd always champion differences and people and empathy. He'd hear none of what we'd have to say.

Another few months went by. More and more time passed. Dad began to feel more like a memory than a person. I didn't want to talk to him. I didn't want to see him. Any phone calls we did have were repeating questions and complaints about the neighbors and their rooster. I just. Didn't want to hear it.

Then he fell.

My Dad fell off a ladder at 9am. I'd assumed he'd been drinking. And he was not allowed out of bed for weeks. He couldn't move. He had a turtle shell. He couldn't remember much of anything. He'd call me. And complain. At least he'd kept the calls brief.

He moved to Phoenix about a year ago. That was the last time I saw him. It was a last minute trip for me because he didn't clearly tell me the day he was leaving. There, I saw my aunt whom I hadn't seen in years and a few of my Dad's friends. They'd all gotten

older. Hair, thinner, grayer. All their eyes were a little bit cloudier. It's as if a dust had settled on their skin from aging and never moving. I was able to hug him goodbye and was so grateful for it. I know he was too.

I always think of my Dad in nature metaphors and restaurant booths. The worn out toe on his work boot were tree rings. His fingers and hands, rough and age lined like maps. I traced the rivers and rocks and canyons as a kid. And sometimes I think. There was a day where he picked me up, put me down, and never picked me up again. And will never pick me up again. He was a tree to me. He was cathedral. Smoke stack, coffee mug, jukebox, wisdom in words divine. He was soap box. He was hearing aid. He was endless hands of gin rummy on warm summer nights. Camcorders and boxes of Newport.

He tried so hard. And I know that.

But sometimes I find myself resentful of all he didn't give. Couldn't give. Didn't know to give. Didn't know to do. Didn't know how to help. Didn't have the words for. And then he finds a way back into my writing. As if my heart is relentlessly trying to make sense, trying to remember, trying to develop this polaroid of a man who smelled like cigarette smoke and read books with me and tells me "I love you baby. Please be careful." after every phone call.

I'm visiting him in the fall. It's not too late. It's never too late.