

## Good 'Ol Red-Eyes

My father is an alcoholic. He can drink upwards of a handle of vodka a day. He drinks as if the world is falling into apocalyptic mayhem and vodka was the first “loved one” to die from whatever is plaguing the Earth. Aged fifty-two, around thirty plus years of experience in a field he may never retire from. A job summary that must maintain fixed aggression, boredom, absentmindedness, manipulation; with a work ethic that most certainly is inhumane. Maybe he can retire from this, but it’s not going to be any sort of beach-front, luxury retirement community, more of a cold place alcoholics travel to when they don’t have the strength to admit they’re faults.

Memories of him come so easily to my mind. There’s few things I can get away with that were never marked by him. I try to forget racing down the skinny basement stairs, slipping around the tight corner to a sight that is so rehearsed in cinema, I thought I was walking onto a movie set, forgetting my lines and impatiently looking for the director. His body, sprawled out across the fold-out-bed, embarrassingly snoring slumbering. A tight grasp kept on a somewhat empty handle.

“Oh my God,” my mom says, led downstairs by the hand of my brother.

“Why’s dad asleep?” I ask, wondering why yet another promise of helping me with homework was broken.

“Kids, go upstairs now!” she orders. “Your father and I need to have a conversation.” He stirs upwards, grunting and smirking at my mom’s anger, forgetting the promise he made me, rolling over to stash the obvious bottle beneath that couch.

Memory reminds me of his truck. An eleventh edition Ford F-150. Blueish Green in color, almost like a dark emerald hue. Rusted above the tires, he constantly pushed the luck in recent years with its soundness. A ting-ting sound can be heard when it’s driven --- much like a ping pong ball that got lost in the engine somewhere. That truck occasionally picked my brother and I up from school or the babysitter, who lived only a few blocks away. It was never the truck’s fault it steered to one side of the road or sometimes accelerated too much towards the vehicle in front of it. It was never its fault it veered too quickly passed parked cars in our subdivision, or even that it let a four-year-old and nine-year-old steer it going thirty miles per hour. Sometimes when you got in the truck, you ignored what rolled out at your feet. Sometimes we couldn’t get in the truck until he made sure “nothing was at our feet.”

We hardly ever made the mistake again to get too happy to see him after work or school. It was nice when he was off traveling for work and my mom, brother, and I just had the evenings to ourselves for a week. If he was there, we waited until he roused from whatever land he had shipped himself off to before we even thought about what it was we were going to say to him.

Would we tell him the truth? No. That would make him too bitter. Even if I had a bad day at school, I never really told him much past that,

“My day was fine. Yours?”

“Work was tough. Loaded shipping containers and the guys...” his voice faded. Just the same answers floating away all bubbly. Sometimes I watched the words roll off his tongue and play with the “bubbles” I was left with.

The fighting was intense, never physical. Because it wasn't physical, doesn't mean the damage done was any less severe. The saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words would never hurt me,” is something I have mocked and laughed boldly at for years. The power of words can be so strong, despite all intentions, good or bad. Night after night, typically on the weekends when he was home from work, consisted of violent yelling. My mom always tried to conceal their arguments from my brother and I. It was the best she could do given the situation. He was always so stubborn, always thought he was in the right.

“Anything you need to say, say it in front of the kids. I have nothing to hide!” he would bellow out.

What child would ever want to witness their father, drunk, making a fool of himself and harassing their mother? We all would go to bed at night, shivering from the night's events. My mom and dad went to bed in separate rooms, separate floors all together. Occasionally my mom, brother, and I slept in the same room because we would all get too lonely to be in our own rooms. I recall a few times I felt guilty with where I was sleeping. Should I go downstairs because he's probably all alone down there? Should I stay with my mom because she's probably real upset and needs some company? There would be times I would have my mind made up, but then suddenly want to join the other parent because I needed to make sure I was giving them an equal amount of attention.

I always held everything together, the “middle-man” as my mom nicknamed it. When there were issues, I strived to be the first to fix it. I needed to do good because maybe that would make him realize he has lots in the world and he'll throw the bottles away for good. Silence in that realm is all I wanted to hear. I just wanted everything to be normal, a normal family. A family that doesn't have to hide shame, who doesn't have to play dress-up to pretend everything is going as expected. I became inclosed in a shy little world of people-pleasing --- maybe that's why I'm so good at reading people now. I always had to read him right or face getting torn down or starting World War 5001.

Different moods. Moods where it was hard to tell if he was drinking or if he wasn't. Moods where he would come crying after fights latching onto my brother and I telling us things would

be better soon, that he was trying. Moods where he ruled us with an iron fist, slugging around and passing out downstairs while my mom paid the bills, ran the house, ran the state, no, actually, ran our nation. I always knew when he had really been biting at the bottle. He would get really slap happy, a type of slap happy where everything he was laughing at was entirely embarrassing and devoid of humor. After that high, he would crash, come burning to a hard halt at a concrete wall on that couch in the basement. He'd wake up again so irritable and surly, searching for where he hid the closest bottle.

The word, father, has sixteen different synonyms: ancestor, dad, parent, predecessor, begetter, daddy, origin, pa, padre, papa, pop, progenitor, sire, source, forebearer, procreator.

The word, alcohol, has twenty-one different synonyms: booze, drink, ethanol, liquor, methanol, smoke, alky, cocktail, firewater, hootch, intoxicant, moonshine, palliative, rotgut, sauce, spirits, tippie, toddy, canned heat, hard stuff, red-eye.

The words that most stick out to me are predecessor, rotgut, and red-eye. As far as I'm concerned, everyone wants to do better than their predecessor or former selves. Some, however, try and fail and do significantly worse than their predecessor. This is my fear. I am four-more times likely to become an alcoholic than your average Joe. I don't want my eyes to be bloodshot and droopy like his. I don't want to rot my insides out to have my liver crawl out my mouth begging for some salvation. Watching someone's skin slowly turn yellow over the years is not a pleasant sight; you'd rather give anything to see a puffy, bloated, reddened face than the yellowing of the eyes, skin, and fingers.

Childhood innocence. Something I thought I had for the longest time. Memory brings the thoughts back to me. The thoughts about my father. I don't ever recall me admitting to myself he is an alcoholic. I knew he was, but also questioned why and what my parents were constantly fighting over. Divorce seemed like a terrible solution, in reality, it was more of treasure we had been on a quest for. Since I can remember, the portrayal(s) of drunks in films and what-have-you, have made me increasingly uneasy. Not many people can understand or take into consideration the effects a certain portrayal has on someone. It brings back memories children of alcoholics fight to keep subdued. All innocence was lost that first glimpse at Good 'Ol Red-Eyes.

This is my story. These are the events that shaped me, not him. He had his chance long ago to fix his wrongs and learn from other's mistakes --- like his father's.