

I divorced at 21. I've never been married.

My father and I don't talk anymore. Anymore? I don't recall a time where we've ever truly *talked*. Sure, we've spoken to each other about my honor roll grades, the family dogs, my grandparents' declining health.

We've held one-sided conversations while passing the maple syrup back and forth, our combined attempt to mask the charred taste of diner pancakes and his poor effort at being a dad. He was always good at escaping his familial responsibilities.

But he loves me, right?

He constantly reminded me what a misfortune it is that my mother is my mother. Over the years, he ingrained in me that I must not counter him in arguments, lest I want to go to bed with a throbbing cheek and bruised arms.

But he loves me, right? I mean, he *is* my dad.

He bought me a car at eighteen and did me the favor of paying for my phone bill for years. The only rules he had were that I always give him my phone's location, and I don't agree with my mom on anything, because she's just a woman, and they don't know anything.

But he loves me, right? Dads are meant to support you and make sure you're safe.

He was kind enough to pass on his unmedicated mental illness to me, so that must mean he loves me.

I struggle to come to terms with the stark difference in my relationship (or lack thereof) with my father versus my sister's with him. For as long as I can remember, my older sister has resided on a metaphorical golden pedestal hand-made by my father, protected by his good graces. Nothing could harm her while she remained on display, held captive by the ravenous beast that thought she was a delicate decoration rather than a damaged excuse of a daughter he thinks he helped raise.

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How can four years of an age difference warrant such glaring disparities in how our father views us? Is it because I house my mother's stubborn personality within me, while my sister relies on maintaining a passive stance in the family structure? Or is it simply because she is the firstborn, and I was a mere after-thought to him?

Like every story, there's always two sides to it. For all you know, I could be lying through my teeth, rather, my \*fingertips\*. However, this is my truth. Most of the finer details have been deserted by my memory via the trauma highway. You can thank my father for the missing puzzle pieces in my brain.

As a child, I was fascinated with Harry Houdini, the famous magician known (to me at least) for his Chinese water torture cell escape trick. The one where he was shackled to a box inside a water tank and meant to get out before something catastrophic were to happen.

I was captivated by his ability to escape that torture device because I thought I would never escape my own metaphorical torture cell. I spent years thinking if I would just be more compliant like my sister, if only I didn't challenge my father so often about his ability to parent, that I would find the way out of my torture cell before it was too late.

Luckily, I fought my last battle in April when I convinced my dad to sign over the title to my car to me, and I barely scrounged up enough money to buy my own cellphone and phone plan. Soon after, I petitioned the Pennsylvania courts to legally change my last name, thinking once I shed the last string attaching me to him, I would finally be free of the harm my dad caused.

Only, he *is* my dad. No amount of attempted escapes can erase that fact. Every morning when I look in the mirror, I see that man staring back at me. Over time, my reflection has started to look more like me, but a piece of him always lingers. There's always a constant reminder that

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I'm not good enough, and I never will be. My GPA will never climb higher than a 3.8, and my mom will always be my best friend. I'll speak loudly with my mouth full at the dinner table and I won't know a love that doesn't come with conditions.

*It will get easier with time.* A phrase tattooed into my forehead from the number of times I've heard it since I cut contact with my father. How do I tell them I don't want it to? That this sense of grief is the only time in over twenty years I've felt safe enough to feel any sense of a "healthy" relationship with him? Without this constant feeling of rage connecting me to him, I would lose my ability to control how he is meant to be viewed.

My father is a cruel man. He's mean, and he lies, and he punches, and he drinks too much until he is just a shell of what he could have been. But I am my father's daughter, so somewhere inside of me is a cruel man waiting to be unleashed on those I love the most. Only, unlike him, I've put in the work to not continue his legacy. I don't clench my fists in rage when I think about him anymore, instead I let my hands be held. But then I spend time with him in my mind or through pictures of us when I was younger and suddenly I'm an angry little girl again, mad at the man who was supposed to be my reference for what unconditional love is supposed to look like.

They say girls tend to choose husbands that resemble their fathers, be it in looks, personality, or character. To be cursed to marry a man that treats me as though I am a walking inconvenience is a fate I want no part of. My divorce from my father's toxic relationship is a testament to my refusal to allow my would-be underwater coffin to surface.