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READERS WRITE

Being Stubborn

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FOR MOST OF his life my dad lived on his family's farm outside a small town where everyone knew everyone, and everyone knew my dad was an alcoholic.

Some of my earliest memories are of going to bars and liquor stores with my dad. He'd pick me up from my mom's house for our weekend visit, and we'd stop at the liquor store on the way to the farm. In his house there were always bottles of whiskey stashed in the laundry hamper, the back-porch cupboard, or the deep freezer.

Despite his drinking habit, he was dedicated to being a good dad. During our weekends together I had his undivided attention. We went camping and built model rockets. He taught me to swim and how to shoot a bow and arrow. We did farm chores together, and he helped me with my school projects.

Over the years his addiction worsened. He wanted to stop drinking and tried rehab and AA several times. When I went away to college, he went back into rehab and was finally able to quit. For the next seven years of his life, until he died of cancer, he was sober. Still, at his funeral, a man I had never met approached me and said, “Jimmy really lost his way, didn’t he?” I felt my anger rising to the surface. Couldn’t this man see the strength it had taken for my dad to stay in recovery? Who was he to judge?

A day or two before he died, I asked my dad what his final wishes were. I was planning to scatter his ashes at the farm, but he wanted to be buried in the family plot at the local cemetery. I couldn’t deny him his request. If he was going to be buried, though, I was determined to give him a fitting gravestone. I ordered an elaborate marker, nearly waist high and custom designed to reflect his interests. My handwriting was engraved on the back, spelling out memories of good times we’d had together. It was flashy, but I wanted to make a statement: this man was more than his addiction.

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