Choose to Live

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay’s first paragraph.

"The sky was a dark and gloomy gray; I expected the rain to start falling at any moment. I stared at my father’s unmoving body, draped in his best suit. His face bore the same unhappy look that I had always been accustomed to. I had always felt that my father would rather be dead, because he never really seemed to enjoy life."

Cover Page Footnote
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This prose is available in The Angle: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/angle/vol1999/iss2/22
Response to Bastard:

She protects you, consoles you,
  takes a quick Haaard Smash
Again
   and
   Again
Seeming like an eternity
While you wait outside the door,
  Foolish,
    Perhaps helpless,
Confused, but tolerating
And allowing,
  the blood to fall while the screams are ignored.

When they all found out,
   That's what family is for,
They beat him up, mirrored his habits,

   YOU
curled into a silent ball, once again,
  Foolish,
    Perhaps helpless
Confused, but tolerating
And allowing
  a daughter to protect her mother
  From a simple but complicated word,

   LOVE
An emotion neither generation understood.

--Jennifer Jonaitis

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The sky was a dark and gloomy gray; I expected the rain to start falling at any moment. I stared at my father's unmoving body, draped in his best suit. His face bore the same unhappy look that I had always been accustomed to. I had always felt that my father would rather be dead, because he never really seemed to enjoy life.

I glanced down at my five-year-old son, Ryan, who had been amusing himself by flinging his little clip-on tie back and forth. His face glowed with the enthusiasm of a child, seemingly unaffected by his dreary surroundings. I attributed this to his age, and to the fact that he had never really known his grandpa. My father had only seen Ryan two or three times in his first five years. Although this had bothered me, it wasn't unexpected. After all, my father had never even taken the time with me, his own son.

My father had always provided our family with everything we needed, except his attention. He made his first million by the age of twenty-three through a risky, but in the end profitable, investment on the stock market. From there, he went from a relatively obscure and unknown stockbroker to owning his own firm.

For as far back as my memory allows, I can never picture a time when my father seemed truly happy. Honestly, I never really saw my father a whole lot, period. He was always somewhere, but that somewhere was rarely with his family. He was constantly working; even when he was home he would bury himself in the little office that was off of our living room. He made it clear to me that when he was in that room, he was not to be disturbed under any circumstances. One time I stood by the door, peering in to see what my father did in there, but I only went unnoticed for a couple of seconds. Upon seeing me, my father put whoever he was talking to on hold just long enough to yell at me, and when he was done, he slammed the door shut and went back to his work. That was the only time that I ever took precedence over his business.

This never bothered me until I was old enough to start realizing that everyone else my age had a father that was not only willing to spend time with his child, but also enjoyed being with his child. When I got into second grade, the kids used to tease me and say that I didn't really have a father. It got to the point where I would lie about him, saying he was an astronaut who was on a mission out in space, or something else cool that every seven-year-old boy wanted their father to be. I don't even think that my dad ever told me that he loved me, it was a feeling that he had always seemed incapable of. Never a comforting word, never the understanding and support that a
parent is supposed to provide. He never sat in the bleachers with all of the other dads at a little league game to cheer me on. When I was in Boy Scouts, I was the only kid who went on the father and son retreats without his dad. Every year, while all of the other fathers and sons bonded, I was left with our Troop Leader, Mr. Galyen. He even missed my high school graduation, so it came as no surprise when he didn’t show for my college graduation, either.

By the time that I had married and started my own life, I had learned to deal with my absentee father. We talked once a month, but our conversations rarely lasted longer than ten minutes. After all, what was there to talk about? He knew close to nothing about me, and I knew very little about him. I only knew what he did, but I never really knew him as a person, as a father. He had never let me know him that way, what he was feeling, what he liked, whether or not he loved me. So many feelings gone unexpressed, so many words left unsaid, so much of my life lived without him.

As time passed, I began to feel that my father was beginning to realize the faults in his ways, but he still seemed unwilling to change. It was as if he were already counting our relationship as a total loss, and he figured that any attempt now would be a waste of his precious time. That’s the perfect way to describe the way I felt about our relationship, like I had always been a waste of time.

I had gone to see him in the hospital the week before he died. I brought Ryan with me so that he could say good-bye to his grandpa before he was dead, even though he mostly knew him in the hospital the week before he died. I brought Ryan with me so that he could say good-bye to his grandpa before he was dead, even though he mostly knew him through the cards and presents he received on birthdays and holidays. When we walked into the room, my father didn’t even turn to say hello. His first words were, “Surprised to see you here, especially with the boy.”

“Good to see you too, Dad,” I replied in a disgusted tone. “How are you feeling?”

“How do you think I’m feeling,” he answered bluntly, “I’m lying here in this Godforsaken hospital.”

I wondered to myself where exactly he would rather be, seeing as how he seemed to despise living. “I brought Ryan here so that he could see you, maybe get to know his grandfather a little better.”

“I’m sure the boy isn’t really interested in getting to know me.”

“His name is Ryan, Dad.”

“Well, I’m sure that Ryan really isn’t interested in getting to know me.”

We had only been there for two minutes, and he had already started to make me resent him for all of the times that he wasn’t there for me, and now for Ryan.

Leaning closer to the bed so that Ryan wouldn’t hear me, I said firmly, “You are going to spend some time with him, you owe him that much.”

My father started to come up with an excuse, but I cut him off. “You owe me that much.”

I turned around and motioned for Ryan to come closer to his grandpa. “Say hi to your grandpa, Ryan.”

“Hi grandpa,” he said quietly, staring at the hospital floor.

There was a short pause before my father sighed deeply and replied, “Hello, Ryan.”

He didn’t say anything else, so after a couple of minutes, I asked Ryan to leave the room.

“Thanks a lot, Dad.” I blurted out angrily. “All I wanted you to do is spend a couple of minutes with your grandson, but even that was too much to ask.” Before he had a chance to reply, I turned around and walked out of the room.

Ryan began tugging on my suit pants. “How much longer, Daddy,” he asked.

The priest was just starting to thank everyone for coming. “Not much longer, buddy,” I replied.

Sinking back into thought, I realized that there were so many things in Ryan’s short life that I had already missed. I was at work when he said his first word. I was out of town when he took his first step. I stared into his bright, blue eyes, and took his hand in mine, as if to apologize for not being there before, and to promise that I would always be there from now on.

The priest ended the funeral ceremony, and we slowly walked away from the casket that would be my father’s final resting place. I pictured what my life would be like without Ryan in it, what it would be like if I were like my father. I didn’t want to be like my father, I wanted to be there for my son, I wanted to enjoy life. I wanted Ryan to enjoy his life, to enjoy having me as a father. The tears began to stream down my cheeks, some landing in Ryan’s bushy blonde hair. He looked up at me, and in an inquisitive voice that only a child was capable of, he asked, “What’s wrong, Daddy?” I looked down at him, unsure of what to say. I replied, “I’m sad because grandpa was never happy, and I don’t want to be like him.” I didn’t expect Ryan to understand, but he looked up at me with knowing eyes. “Daddy,” Ryan said, “I know what you can do to not end up like grandpa.” As I looked into his face, he said honestly, “You can choose to live.”

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