

# Pictures of a Father

When I was a baby, a man lived in our house with us. I know this was so, not only because I have been told about him, but also because I have dim pictures of him in my brain. If I close my eyes and propel my heart back far enough, I can almost feel his warm arms encircle me while he coos and tickles me with his giant fingers. I can almost smell his pungent spicy breath and the cigarette smoke on his flannel shirt. When I gaze up into his face, I see it is lit up, and he is smiling proudly. But that is the final gentle smile I ever see from him; my next memory of him, five years later, is of the last time I saw him.

I was slogging a slow path through the deep snow to 2nd grade in my new town of Wishek, my head down, when a light blue station wagon started dogging me. Finally the man inside rolled down his frosted window and eyed me. He whispered "Billy?"

I stopped dead in my tracks. Slow as an hour hand I turned toward the car. The timbre of that voice

stirred a stinging molasses of emotions inside me. "Daddy?" I said hoarsely. His smile was tight, and he seemed pained.

While he talked I averted my eyes, and swished my overshoe back and forth in the snow. Finally I blurted, "Daddy, where...where...?" He coughed and his eyes darted away. For the first time I noticed a strange woman sitting in the front seat with him. She peered at me with eyes filled with pity, whispered to my dad, and after a silence he asked what I wanted for Christmas.

I gazed up at the sun that burst through the lowering sky and felt words swelling inside me. I wanted to say "You, Daddy. You! I want you for Christmas!" But instead I told him I wanted a two-gun holster set like the Lone Ranger's. "Put it in the basement," I said. "In the white cabinet." He seemed relieved and nodded vigorously. "Sure," he said. "A two-gun holster." Then the sky closed up,

the snow began to dribble out, and the light blue station wagon sped off.

Every day for a long time afterwards I stole down into the basement, searching for the two-gun holster set. Many times, as the cabinet remained empty through

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January and even April, I flopped down on the cold cement floor and sobbed. Later that year, Miss Clayton asked each of us what kind of work our daddy did. A headache suddenly flared behind my eyes, and when Miss Clayton prodded me, I blurted, "He makes two-gun holster sets, and he's making one for me right now." My

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classmates smiled behind their palms, and several snickered. From then on, when someone talked about their daddy, a frigid wind blew through me, and I sat rigidly in my desk, like an icicle, afraid that if I moved I might crack in half.

Except for these pictures, the musty room in my brain where the memories of my father are stored is empty, with space enough so regretful thoughts about him can bounce off the walls unimpeded, again and again, echoing hollowly in my ears: "Why did you leave? Why didn't you come back? What did I do wrong? Why don't I have a father?" Only in the past few years have I also owned a real picture of my father, normally taped to the back of my computer hutch door.

### The Picture

When I take it out, I clutch "The Picture" in both hands, as though it is very heavy. My father, Julius. My father, "The Stranger." I am always startled by his visage. The picture was taken twenty years ago in front of a fake oak door at a meeting of his World War II buddies. His face is my face. He gazes uncomprehendingly into the camera, into my life, with his brown eyes mirroring my brown ones. His face is ravaged by memories of a World War II prison camp, eight wives, a dozen kids, too much partying, time and the knowledge of his soon-coming death. When my father died in Seattle, I felt nothing.

Which is not to say that I am not affected. For such is the power of fatherhood, even after a 45-year absence. Once set in motion, fatherhood moves mysteriously like the tides, exerting pressure even from

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across the country and through the years. Even beyond the grave, in ebbs and flows, sometimes powerful currents, sometimes gentle eddies.

None of which we can ever escape.

Oh, we can erect ramparts, barriers, walls—we can run—but we can't hide, for fathers have leased rooms in our memories rent-free, and there is no way to ever evict them. Which is as it should be. For we are the children of our fathers. And whether a father is absent like mine, or present, we must come to grips with him. We must discover that a father is, like you and me, wise and witty, weak and fearful, sad and happy. Fathers are human.

A couple of years ago I got a second picture of my father. In it he crouches on one knee beside three-year-old me, smiling into the camera, his hair combed like mine is today, wearing a gray pin-striped suit exactly like one I bought 25 years ago, long before I ever saw the picture. He looks happy; he doesn't look like a man who would run away from his sons and cause them pain—sometimes untold pain.

But which father among us has not caused his child pain in the most mundane exchanges of daily living? To be a father is to cause pain, just as to be a mother, child, sibling or friend, is to cause pain. We are all fallible; we are all human. The story of my father is different from most, but yet not so different. It is the story of betrayal—but it is also the story of forgiveness and new understanding, because now I am a father myself, and walking in those moccasins has given me an entirely different view of fatherhood.

We must celebrate our fathers. But we must also forgive our fathers for falling short of the perfection we once thought they possessed. We must choose to embrace and celebrate the good that is found within fathers, instead of the bad. No matter what has happened, we have that choice.

I own two pictures of my father. Every now and then, I take out that picture of a sad-looking, defeated man, and I study it. I wonder, where did things go wrong? But then I put it away again. The other picture, with him kneeling beside me, that's the one I prop on my work desk where, every day, I can see his happy face. □

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