Fathers, Be Good to Your Daughters

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by Megan Mulligan

My friend Michelle used to drive me so crazy. She lived in the apartment above me and had a great head of long, shiny, straight brown hair. With a head of crazy curls, I was jealous. She was also the ultimate daddy's girl and I wasn't. To have straight hair was one thing. To have straight hair and a dad wrapped around your finger? That was cause for complaint. Her dad Frank, a bald, short and stocky man with a naked lady tattooed on his left arm was close to her. He also stole cable from my mom, but I didn't care. As we barreled up the stairs after school, Frank was always sitting at their formica kitchen table, hands folded, waiting to listen. If she had a bad day or was upset or even excited about some boy in our class, Frank listened. But he was Michelle's father, not mine. So I walked back down the stairs and into my own apartment and wondered why my dad wasn't like Frank. I wanted to know why my father wouldn't be sitting at my kitchen table, waiting to hear me spill the day's events, my bad days and boy dramas. But my dad was my boy drama. I just didn't know it.

It's important to mention that my dad would never be sitting at a formica table, at least not his own. He's a wood man all the way. It's the only thing he could stand.
being around for more than an hour. Dad’s a carpenter. I never saw him in anything but a pair of old Levi’s with a measuring tape and pencil in the back pocket and a pair of dusty work boots. He’s built schools, office buildings, stores. Every time we drove past it, he pointed out the Grist Mill Restaurant in Seekonk as if he’s waving to his younger self. His tools are like extensions of his hands, each bang of the hammer a graceful tap. Over the years he’s refined his skill, attention to detail had become second nature, “you see that, the slot on the screw is vertical, that’s the sign of a real pro.” He could spot hair line cracks in a wall and other flaws in a building from a few feet away, without his glasses, and he could tell you how to do the repairs with the ease of someone who had the directions in front of them. He enjoys this, telling people how to fix things as if he had all the answers.

But for all of his skill and talent, the one structure my father’s had trouble building is his family. In his defense (and it’s not often I defend him), my father didn’t plan on being a father. I was, as they say, a happy accident. My mom was twenty-two, a junior at Southeastern Massachusetts University (UMass Dartmouth) and working at CVS. My father, twenty-six, was doing some construction work to the store. He was also just separated from his first wife and dating my mom’s manager. He asked my mom out, and she said yes, although when asked, she couldn’t tell me why. Maybe there was something about that mischievous little grin of his that hid underneath a thick black mustache and later hid underneath a salt and pepper one. Maybe not. But she said yes, an hour later they were having pizza, and two months later they were pregnant. A month after I was born, they married at the Fall River City Hall. If I hadn’t come along, they wouldn’t have married. My dad wasn’t the man of my mom’s dreams, but she loved him anyway, in that comfortable way people love each other. There were no fireworks, just familiarity.

The day I was born he brought my mother eight red roses and three white roses for the eight pound three ounce girl she delivered. He rubbed my feet every single night while he watched John Wayne or some other Western and then he picked me up and put me in bed. His hands were rough like sandpaper from working and the calluses on his hands tickled my feet. We were as normal a family as we could be. But my father was an alcoholic. An alcoholic in denial.

He was able to keep the drinking under control for three years. But after my sister was born, he started to drink heavily, fueling himself with alcohol like he was our Ford Escort and the little orange gas light was on. His alcoholism was so powerful that it was like a fifth member of the family, taking up all of the space in a room. One night we got one of those late night phone calls that send chills down your spine. The East Providence Police Department had stopped my father for drunk driving, and “could we please pick him up?”

He apologized the next morning, smiling through the splitting headache and alcohol induced nausea. But it wasn’t like he had broken a toy or yelled at me a little too loudly. He had committed a crime. Luckily he never had to go to jail. But to me the crime he committed was much worse. This man sitting at the table in my dad’s white undershirt, black sweatpants and tan boat shoes had stolen my father and was trying to pass off a second-rate version of the dad I knew. His head was in his hands and he wouldn’t look any of us in the eye. I was four and the man couldn’t look me in the eye.

My grandmother once said that her son could only hold it (his sobriety) together for so long before everything came crashing down around him.
She could’ve warned us a little earlier.

He never even saw my little body behind the door, craning my neck to see my mother in her white bathrobe, on the floor. She was slumped up against the cabinet, holding her mouth. It was the one and only time he hit her. It didn’t seem like it then, but life would have been entirely different if we had stayed. My mother, sister, and I would have acted out perfectly those roles health teachers talk about in class – the jokester, the over-achiever, the quiet and obedient one.

We left him that night but I became the quiet and obedient one anyway, the effects of his alcoholism so pervasive I could feel it breathing down my neck. I tried to please everyone, especially my father. If I told him what he wanted to hear he would stop drinking.

Wouldn’t he?

Maybe what I should have asked was why he was drinking in the first place. If I knew the answer to that then I’d be able to understand why my dad couldn’t be the dad I needed him to be. Did he feel like he needed to escape us? Was family life suffocating him or was it something else and we just got caught in the middle? My father’s never been one to unload his problems on someone else, instead choosing to deal with them on his own, “the only person you can depend on is yourself.” He’d say this with a hint of disappointment in his voice and sadness clouding his hazel eyes as if he were replaying a memory soaked in betrayal.

My Father was already in too deep long before he met my mother, long before he became my father. We weren’t suffocating him, he didn’t need to escape from us. I think he was scared. He didn’t let people in because he was scared of what may have come out of him. If he opened up and started being honest with us he’d have to be honest with himself. He’d have to face himself, his thoughts, his emotions, his demons and he wasn’t ready to do this. My father drank to escape this. He drank to escape from himself.

I visited my dad in rehab once. He was wearing this navy blue terry cloth robe that hid his shrinking frame. Alcohol had always made him look bloated and he had flattened out. His last drink was ten years ago. I was eleven years old. He would show my sister and me the chips he earned in Alcoholics Anonymous when we visited him at my grandmother’s hot, cramped apartment. He’d let me cook scrambled eggs, showing me how to crack the egg without getting bits of shell into the bowl. We’d sit down to eat, and he’d pull out his keys. He kept the chip on his key chain so he’d always know where it was. He’d rub it with his thumb and his index finger, making sure it was real, making sure his sobriety was real. He wasn’t drinking anymore but he was still trapped by the disease. But he always was. It shadowed his childhood because of his father and later when he became an alcoholic. When he wasn’t drinking he was thinking about it. “I can’t promise you or anyone that I’ll never drink again,” the thought of drinking—the comfort and destruction just one sip could give him—was like a constant whisper in his ear.

Alcoholism was his disease, his prison. But it was my prison too. There’s a John Mayer song, “Daughters,” that said “Fathers, be good to your daughters, daughters will love like you do.” And I did love like him. I forgave my father a long time ago for what I saw as a child but when it came to love I had taken on his bad habits. He pushed me away. But I pushed him away too. I watched as he put up walls to protect himself, and I did the same thing. I remained the quiet one so I wouldn’t have to let people in, remaining on guard all the
time. I was too cautious with my heart when it came to boys and then men, especially my father, only giving it to him in pieces so he couldn’t trample the whole thing at once.

I had a photo of us in my bedroom, on top of my bookshelf. I put it in a small silver frame that had turquoise and black beads on it so the photo would stand out around my things. It was a black and white photo. I’d always been drawn in by black and white photos because there was no color to distract my eye. all that popped out was the expression and emotion behind the picture. My mom had gotten a black and white disposable camera for my sister’s prom and needed to use up the film so I asked her to take a picture of my dad and me. We were in the living room, talking about my sister and her date when my mother walked in, ready to take our picture. We stood next to each other, posing for the camera when my dad said “smile.” In the picture my dad had on his Levi’s, his work boots, and his mischievous smile. His arm was around my shoulders, and he was looking down at me. I was looking up at him and I had this real smile on my face, not one of those plastered on smiles that the people inside frames waiting to be sold had. My mother felt that this was the picture that needed to be taken, not the posed, planned shot. She told me she could see the expressions on our faces, those smiles, and knew they were real. When the photo was developed I could see it too, that’s what stood out. We weren’t Frank and Michelle but we didn’t have to be because in that photo, a 4x6 square, we both wore our hearts on our sleeves.

In that photo, it was just a girl and her dad, nothing in between.