

## **My Father's Soliloquy**

My dad returned just when I needed him most. The first fiery red bumps were announcing their presence on my face and arms the day he came home, the day he came home to say goodbye. Sitting there in his battered old red pickup truck, I furiously scratched my skin, waiting for him to come out of the bar, where he had stopped in for “just a quick one” an hour before. My father, it seemed, had more than one home to come back to.

He had been gone for three months, to a place I could neither understand nor visit. He had left in mid-July, the first day of our small town's county fair, certainly the most important event in the life of every nine-year-old within a hundred miles. He left because the doctors in Shelby couldn't explain why his skin had turned yellow and why he was so tired all the time. What was supposed to have been a quick visit to the doctor in Helena at the VA Hospital soon turned into an extended stay. While he kept touch on the phone as often as he could, he wasn't there for any of my baseball games that summer, and hadn't been there to drive me to school for the first day, as he had every day since kindergarten.

It had been five months since I had seen my father, and now, seeing him walk out of the Oil City Bar, I could see how much his illness had changed him. My dad had always seemed older than other kids' fathers, but now he looked ancient. Though his gait retained its penguin's waddle, his steps were taken more gingerly, and certainly more slowly. But he was still my Dad, and he was walking out to take me home, and I couldn't have felt happier. No one else could make me feel better when I was sick, and I knew he would do it again.

He had always been the one to care for my sister and me when we were sick, making us his secret recipe for tomato soup and slipping us the occasional soda to lift our spirits, if not break our fevers. My mother was just unsuited to the task. Just eighteen when she married my father, a mother one year later, she had neither the inclination nor the ability to be a caretaker. The requisite skills and tenderness just weren't there.

"Sorry, little man." His voice and breath had the old vodka-infused warmth as he hoisted himself up into the pickup. "I had to say hi to some of the guys. I hope you didn't get too cold out here."

I just shook my head and pulled my sleeves down, hoping to hide the bumps. "No, I was just listening to the game on the radio." The mighty

Shelby High Coyotes had made the playoffs, but the game was not going well and the hopes for the season were fading as I listened.

“I listened a bit inside. Looks like we’ll have to get ‘em next time. Sorry we couldn’t make it to the game. Definitely next year.”

I nodded. I knew there wasn’t going to be a next year, and so did he, but the shared promise was comforting. Two weeks earlier, right before Halloween, I had been told that I was going to lose my dad. My mother had taken me over to my aunt and uncle’s house, which was inexplicably fully decorated for Christmas, in October, to break the news.

My aunt Deb was one of those people with a different job every few months, usually one that offered a limited clientele in a town as small as Shelby.

When she wasn’t selling overpriced makeup or teaching women what their clothing season was (I was a winter), she was involved in decorating. The Christmas tree and presents were for another one of her schemes, teaching women how to prepare their homes for the kind of holidays you’d find in magazines that certainly weren’t carried at the local library.

My sister, who was only eight at the time, was understandably excited, if more than a bit confused. I’m not sure that the concept of a calendar made a lot of sense to her then and it’s possible it still doesn’t today, so she was

sure that we were going to get presents. In her defense, there they were, under the tinsel tree, with nametags and bows on each. I was only nine; it's possible that I imagined that I would be getting a present too.

My uncle started. He was a kind man, but one who managed to turn almost every situation into an ironic joke that made you feel just a little bit like it was directed at you. He and my aunt had no children, and while everyone wanted to blame her, I'm sure now that it was Tim who didn't want kids. He'd had just enough experience with poor parenting to know that it wasn't worth the risk.

"Guys, we need to talk," he began. "We need to talk about your dad."

"Is he coming home?" My sister cut him off, looking around the room excitedly. A year earlier, our uncle Riley had unexpectedly arrived from Alaska in this very basement, surprising the whole family during Christmas. I think she expected our dad to make the same kind of dramatic appearance.

"No, Jim Bob. That's not it." My sister, Jamie Roberta, named for her grandfathers, had endured "Jim Bob" from the uncles her whole life. "Your daddy is really sick, and we need to talk about what's going to happen."

My mother was looking away from us, and Tim and Deb were looking at us with the kind of look that adults hope children will never see and that children never imagine they will. My sister, as always, though, was fearless. She was always so fearless. “I know what’s going to happen. He’s going to come home and we are going to open presents together.”

Uncle Tim tried, but couldn’t respond. The three adults looked at one another, each expecting someone else to speak.

“Isn’t my dad coming home?” I finally asked, worried that the constant fights of our home had finally driven him away. I fixed my mother with a stare. “You made him leave.”

“That’s not it, Donnie.” Tim’s voice was strained; he didn’t seem like the uncle who made everything a joke anymore. “Your daddy is coming home, but you need to know that he is very sick. He’s . . .he...”

“He’s dying.” My mother had found her voice, something she too rarely lost. “He has a terrible disease, and only has a few months left. You and Jamie need to get ready to say goodbye to him.”

I didn’t understand. My dad was finally coming home, but leaving me.

There were a lot of tears, some awkward explanations about cancer, something called the pancreas, and even a fair amount of screaming that night. When my mother and aunt went out for a smoke, Tim even let us open a couple of the presents, hoping, I think, to give us something else to think about. We each selected the largest present we could find, and ripped into the wrapping paper. Both boxes were empty.

As Jamie and I drifted off to sleep, I remember hearing the adults talking in the living room about my father's visit. When Deb asked if it was really the best thing to have my dad come back home, given how sick he was, my mother was typically succinct.

"He won't get any sicker."

As the truck eased into our driveway, I couldn't contain the itching any more, and began to furiously scratch my arms. Inside the house, my father took one look at the offensive little red spots on my arms, and immediately threw me into a bath. "It looks like we've got a couple of sick people here," was all he said. In the bath, I desperately tried to scrub away the spots, because I was afraid that my father would have to leave, or wouldn't want to be around me, since he had just gotten out of the hospital himself. He must have been so tired of sick people, and I didn't want to be another one.

Once the diagnosis of chicken pox was confirmed, something magical happened: I got to be alone with my father. Neither my mother nor my sister had contracted it, and it was decided that they would stay with my grandparents as long as I was contagious. I couldn't believe my luck. A week at least, alone with my father, and no school to worry about.

Over the next few days, my father was an excellent nurse, blending a sense of humor with his care. One night, when the scratching had become unbearable, he laced an ancient pair of musty, leather boxing gloves on my hands to keep me from scratching, saying "You can punch yourself all you want, but no more scratching." The gloves were almost as effective as his threats that I would be "permanently maimed, if not positively disfigured" if I didn't keep my hands away from myself.

Boxing gloves were only part of his treatment regimen. My dad was certain that Calamine lotion was a critical component of chicken pox treatment. Each morning and night, he would lather the foul-smelling pinkish brown lotion all over my body, a treatment only slightly preferable to scratching myself to the point of drawing blood. While he applied the gooey mess, his soft hands, the hands that had always seemed perfectly at home mixing a morning vodka and Squirt or throwing a baseball, trembled. We both felt his hands were shaking, but neither of us could make them stop.

As tender as he was, my father's caretaking had its limits. He was sleeping as much as I was, and constantly looking to the bottle of pain pills for comfort. We spent a lot of quiet time, talking about baseball, girls, and school, but his responses were terse, with little of the teasing that I remembered and loved.

Each night, as I drifted off to sleep, he would read to me. Some nights it was a children's book that we had shared when I was younger, others it was just the newspaper. He even read from the Bible and his battered copy of Shakespeare. I had learned to read, much to the chagrin of my first grade teacher, sitting on his lap as he read the newspaper aloud to me, and having the opportunity to hear that familiar voice, even reading unfamiliar words, made me believe that my mother had been wrong, and that my dad would be home to stay.

Over the next few days, as my symptoms began to ease, his became worse. Once seemingly a constant by my side in the living room, he disappeared for long hours now and his sleep was fitful, broken by low, animal moans that I heard him try, but fail to stifle. The bottle of medicine was never far out of reach and he returned to it more often as the days passed.

The night before he was going to leave, back for the hospital in Helena, we watched football together on our tiny black and white television, perched precariously on our broken, huge color console TV.

After the game and a last meal of tomato soup and ginger ale, I settled in for my Dad to read another story. He didn't have a powerful, commanding voice or bring any of the characters to life with vivid accents, but my father was an excellent storyteller. A life spent in bars—on both sides of the counter—had given him both a rich, tobacco stained voice and unmatched ability to make a story out of anything. I can still hear his voice in my ear when I read aloud now.

For most of my life, I've wished I could remember what he read that night. I'd like for it to have been a richly symbolic farewell from a father to a beloved son or a lesson that he hoped to impart to me before he left. The English teacher I became because of him wants to believe that it was words from Falstaff advising the young Hal or even the kind of wisdom that Atticus passed on to Jem, but life is rarely that full of that kind of easy symbolism. Most of all, I just wish I could remember it, so I'd know the last words he said to me. I wish that that absence hadn't haunted me for so many years.

But I fell asleep while he was reading.

When I woke up, my father was still sitting beside me, no longer holding a book, but his head in his hands. I was about to ask him to start reading again, apologize for sleeping through his story, but paused, listening. My father was crying. Weeping. I wanted to reach out to him, to say anything to make that terrible sound stop.

I wanted to turn my eyes away, but couldn't help looking at him. He finally saw my eyes, but instead of turning away, he just held me in his gaze, as if he was trying to store every detail. I'm sure he just saw a sick little boy, wrapped in blankets and the remnants of a fever, but I saw something I had never seen before. In that moment, and perhaps just for that instant, my father, with his comical build, thinning hair, and halo of broken dreams--certainly not all his own--the father that I would never see again, was beautiful.

The next morning he was gone, back to the hospital in Helena. A month later we buried him, on the morning after Christmas.

As I aged, I grew to understand that my father was far from a perfect man. He drank too much, and sometimes his ego was more than a match for his ambition, but I always felt that my sister and I were the center of his life.

His huge heart certainly overmatched his reason more than was wise, but even his worst mistakes were well-intentioned, never selfish. He taught me how to fish, to read, to score a baseball game, and to defend what I believe; he taught me everything I've needed to survive. More than anything, he taught me about loving with your whole heart, fiercely. For my dad, it wasn't worth it to love any other way.