

I was sixteen when my father began to lose the ability to move his hands. He was forty-five. His joints bloated beneath the surface of his skin, creating protruding bumps: tiny heads straining to kiss neighboring fingers. But the pain was still mild and the speed of his decline seemed gradual, so he flashed that “hardships don’t get me down” Irish smile and called Osteoarthritis an 80-year-old woman’s disease.

My father having a physical handicap would be like Marilyn Monroe sporting a mustache or Samuel L. Jackson developing a stutter. He was always the most impressively fit dad, infamous for three qualities in particular: his helmet-like hair mounded stiffly into place, an indestructible fortress. In the unlikely event of a level five tornado hitting Fairfield, Connecticut, my father’s hair would be the only thing remaining intact. His second infamy is his wardrobe. You can only find Kevin Dillon wearing three types of shirts: button-downs for church, turtlenecks if it is especially cold, or most commonly, muscle shirts. Whether he is grocery shopping, lounging around the house, or admiring the new technology at RadioShack, the man is constantly prepared to lift weights. I suppose it might come in handy if, God forbid, you are walking around town and a dumbbell comes careening towards you from the heavens. Kevin Dillon is your man, or at least he is always dressed for the occasion. The second, but equally important benefit of owning eighteen muscle shirts in a variety of colors and styles, is how effectively they showcase one’s biceps, or pythons, as my dad refers to them. And if you sculpt them as obsessively as he does, you would want the world to be aware of your assets as well. Therein lies his third notoriety: his body, the machine.

The man is physically impeccable. From his untouchable hair (umbrella-ing a conservative Republican mentality), to his pythons, to his calves, my dad is every inch American man. But he seized his kryptonite with a devastating grip until it seeped through his skin and strangled his joints stiff. And despite how I struggled to blind myself to his weaknesses, it seemed that with the unveiling of one handicap, so followed the rest.

When I was a little girl, each time the song “Butterfly Kisses” would play at a party, my dad extended his hand to me, misty-eyed, before

Bob Carlisle managed to sing his first syllable. My father towered nearly two feet above me and would contort our bodies so that he could stoop low enough to hide his tears in my hair. I would be embarrassed of my watery father and in significant pain due to my straining spine, but nevertheless, I danced silently because the tradition was important to him. To be honest, sometimes I wish I could squeeze myself back underneath the haven of those swaying shoulders, albeit cramped. But at some point, fathers no longer tower because daughters no longer stay silent.

“Would you still marry your boyfriend in five years if he still hasn’t accepted Jesus?”

“Yes.”

“I guess we didn’t raise you right. Alena, let me tell you this: if in five years, he comes to me and asks me for your hand in marriage, my question will be, ‘Do you believe in God?’ and if his answer is ‘no,’ so is mine.”

If baked at the right temperature while occasionally tossing in “because I said so,” little girl frustrations are sure to develop into big girl defiance.

Instead of acknowledging the big foot my dad constantly threw down, I began taste-testing other options while grappling with the concept that my Dad could be wrong. Now that I was aware of his possible faults, they revealed themselves more frequently.

- When I went on a trip, Kevin Dillon demanded that I tell him that I was, and would remain to be, a virgin. When my brother went on a trip, Kevin Dillon slipped a box of condoms in my brother’s luggage. I don’t remember the Bible recommending that... .
- When I described the theory of “survival of the fittest” to him, he agreed wholeheartedly that it made sense. But when I told him that he then believed in evolution, he began to rattle off his refusals as if somebody was repeatedly pulling a string from his back. He said I was brainwashed by liberal professors and the conspiracy enclosed within collegial life.
- For the first time, I decided to sleep over my boyfriend’s house without delivering an intricate alibi. Kevin Dillon called my cell phone six times to make sure I was coming home. I didn’t. I had “fallen asleep watching a movie by accident”.
- I stopped going to church.
- Despite the fact that my dad included a detailed list of each candidate I was to vote for along with my absentee ballot, I voted for a Democratic candidate.

These incidents of subtle defiance and quiet epiphanies began occurring periodically until my father's annual checkup of 2006.

Dr. Tran confessed that my dad's illness had progressed at an alarming pace and that options were severely limited. He could allow natural course to fuse his hands into contorted, modern art-like sculptures, extending from his smoothly functioning arms. Or, if this bright image was not pleasing, he could instead determine what finger position suited him the best and artificially solidify them there. The last, and not far more promising, option was to surgically replace all 30 joints, one by one. His 80-year-old woman's disease was no longer joke-worthy. In fact, according to my father, the diagnosis wasn't worth mentioning at all.

My mother pulled me into the family room, her face looking pained. "I realize your father has been a pain in the ass lately."

I wanted to snort a laugh but I was afraid it would worsen the hurt clouding her eyes, so I just listened.

"But you have to realize what a difficult time he is going through," she spoke in a hushed whisper to protect my father, who was sitting in the next room, from his own truths. "You know how much pride he takes in his strength. He was so happy to provide our family with enough income that I could stay home while you and your brothers were growing up. But within the past three years he's lost 70% of his customers; I have to work full time and I think he feels guilty..." The hurt in her eyes began to stream down her cheeks. "And now the doctor says he will lose the ability to move his hands within the next five years. Then he won't be able to work at all, or do anything else for that matter. Do you realize what a loss that is? You can't do anything without your hands. Never mind what a hit not lifting weights will be to his confidence, but by the time he is 53, I'll have to feed him his meals and dress him in the morning. He'll be so embarrassed!" And then the hurt came faster, currenting down her cheeks and dripping from her chin. In a wave of sorrow, she laid her immense sympathy for the man she loves, in my lap, and wrapped her arms around my waist.

"It won't be so bad Mom. Maybe the surgeries will work. And if they don't, we could always just fashion some sort of a strap to tie the dumbbells around his wrists so he could still work out." Thank God she laughed. Even hearing the faintest hint of her joy swimming beneath deep pain slightly alleviated my guilt for having additionally compromised my father's strength.

I began going to church again.