

The Man With the Lopsided Birthday Cake

The Aetna Undergraduate Creative Nonfiction Award, 2nd Prize

As a child, the last words my dad remembers his father screaming at him were, “Your mother musta’ fucked a white guy; you’re too light to be my son. You’re not mine.”

And that was it. I’ve lived with the aftermath as the result of a home-wrecking ghost that I can’t even bring myself to call Grandpa.

Imagine it as a domino effect. My dad didn’t deal with the skeletons in his closet. Well, unless you count the broken doors, smashed plates, screaming fights, black-and-blue eyes, and swollen lips. Such is the aftermath of a man who lives by one code: “I don’t give sympathy and I sure as hell don’t ask for it.”

But he sure wanted it. He may not have asked to be held but I knew what he meant every time he told me that he wouldn’t live to see my graduation, my wedding, or the birth of my children. He knew though, despite how mad and rebellious any of my siblings or I got, his wife would be the one person who would give him the pity he desperately wanted but never asked for. Every day, she would try to prove her loyalty to a man who knew no such word or devotion, a man who turned to Southern Comfort and Heineken instead of a psychologist. Even if he tore her soul from her body, my mother would never leave. Her self-degradation became the chip on my shoulder.

In any domino effect, there is always a last to fall. Maybe by the grace of God that last domino doesn’t fall. Then what? Well, that last domino becomes a cold stone, a witness to the fallen bricks behind her. The lone brick left to support her mother when she needs to cry, as she asks her 21-year-old daughter what she did to make God hate her; she was always such a law abiding Christian. One that supports her sister when she cries on the phone at 4 a.m., asking why she married a man who ended up being the mirror image of her father. A man who got just as violent and brutish when he drank. But she thought she could change him. One that supports her brother as he enlists in the Army because he believes he is out of options.

That last domino may not have fallen. Maybe it should have.

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He tries to hold my hand sitting on the bleachers of a basketball game. He is an avid hand-holder—a true fan of PDA.

I pull away. Always the persistent one, he tries again. I turn to him, look him dead in the eyes and tell him to man up. He doesn't try again.

This is how it always ends, with me always feeling like the victor. On the way back from the game, he tries holding my hand again. Once again, I pull away, claiming that I just have my own stride. I like to walk at my own pace.

"I'll slow down, then, to walk with you," he says.

"I'm the one walking in front of you," I shoot back.

The reality of that statement doesn't sink in. I think about it briefly, for a second or two, only to cast it aside with indifference.

I expect him to be perfect one hundred percent of the time. This may seem like it's too much to ask, but does he get sad? No.

I don't drag him along when I go shopping. I don't expect him to hug me in the hallway between classes. All that I ask of him is to fall asleep next to me a few nights a week. It seems reasonable. He knows not to back me into a corner. When you back any animal into a corner, the only option it has left is to fight like to hell to find a way out. He does not want to risk us.

Until he does. Until one night he cannot take it any longer.

"Baby, sometimes I just need to be held, and I don't think you have that sensitivity in you," he says with sad eyes.

He's right. The words bounce off of me, landing on the floor of my truck. I stare at him, rigid and unchanged, wondering how he expects me to respond. I tell him to get out of the truck, and he does. I drive away back to my apartment and sit in my truck, wondering why I'm not crying. He finally called me out on being a cold, insensitive bitch, and all I could do was look at him and tell him to get out of my truck.

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A week later, I walk into my house on my father's 54th birthday, and I see what he has become. In the past, he has been called out on multiple occasions by his children. I have told him that in order to have respect, he needed to earn it. I have told him that he ruined my mother and turned her into a timid housewife. I have called him a selfish, narcissistic brute. And he is. Or was.

Laid off from the same job he did for fifteen years, my father now sits slumped over on the couch with a thick black and gray beard speckled with flakes of dead skin from his psoriasis. My mother is not home, working another sixteen-hour shift at the hospital. His son has left too, probably gone to his umpteenth girlfriend's house.

His eyes are sunken and watery.

It is easy to hate a monster. I try to remind myself of the past, of my childhood, but I am still overwhelmed with sadness as I watch him pick at his lopsided birthday cake and talk to the dogs at his

feet. I don't classify this as having daddy issues. Hell, every woman in the world has daddy issues. I am *the* baby of the family, but I do not have to *be* a baby. I tell myself over and over to man up.

I try once more to compose myself as I hand him his present: a cheap DVD from the Co-Op and a universal card. I lean in for a required hug; it feels foreign and strange.

He tells me that Dennis called to wish him a happy birthday. I get butterflies in my stomach when I think of how much I appreciate Dennis doing that. I am not surprised though. Dennis is always the first one to bring my mom flowers when she is upset, because he knows that seeing her happy is the equivalent of if he gave me flowers. My dad interrupts my thoughts and tells me how much it means to him that I drove in to see him on his birthday.

Seeing him like this forces the thought into my head whether or not he really will make it to my wedding. I feel the tears well up behind my eyes when it occurs to me that he might not. His liver is shot due to years of self-medicated booze. Maybe he was just another fallen domino, just like my mom, my brother, and my sister.

On the drive back to UConn I scream at myself with the windows up and the music blaring.

"I am supposed to hate him. I am allowed to hate him. I fucking deserve it!"

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That night, as I sit on my bed with Dennis flipping through a book, I tell him that my dad didn't look so good when I drove in. Dennis tells me that he sounded sad when he called him on the phone. I tell him that I don't know how I am supposed to feel.

As we fall asleep that night, Dennis tells me not to let my guard down. I hold his hand and look him in the eyes as I feel a tear slide down my cheek. He seems confused by the unprompted act of affection.

"No babe," I whisper. "Maybe I *do* need to let my guard down."