

# Slivers of Him

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It's 5:11 a.m. He's lying here peacefully, his chest rising and falling with every bit of air the machine forces into his lungs. I've been here for an hour, watching him, willing him to move, to get up, but the only thing moving in this way-too-white hospital ward is the line on the ECG monitor, going up in spikes and down in dips. If it weren't for this screen, monitoring the heart of who once was the man I loved most, for the high-pitched beeps sounding in this soulless room, the scene would've been too static for my mind to comprehend the passing of time.

Every thud the device makes echoes in my head, bringing back the slivers of memories I share with this man, my dad. I close my eyes and imagine placing my ear on his chest like I'd do as a kid when he'd let me nap next to him in the afternoon. He used to tell me tons of stories about faraway kingdoms, about magic gardens and enchanted towers, about dragons and phoenixes. The thuds take over my mind again, pushing this memory away, and making space for another: my hands gripping his shoulders, my legs around his waist, my cheek on his shoulder blade, I was able to hear his heart's every single beat as he carried me around the house piggyback style, the sound of it joined only by the sound of our laughs. These laughs blend into the chuckles I'd let out when I'd have him pinned to the ground, my toy gun pointed at his head. He loved roleplaying. I'd follow him all around the house, while my mother would shout after me to be careful. I was always the cop—I'd throw a tantrum if he didn't let me be the cop. The beeping of the machine invades the quiet of my mind, digging a whole box of memories that I forgot existed: the evenings spent on the couch, cuddling under a blanket while watching some lame medical drama. My mom used to drag me to bed after I'd stayed up past midnight, huddled next to my sound-asleep father.

Mom was always the strict one. Dad was much more fun. While Mom would yell at me for a bad grade, Dad helped me hide these from her. While Mom would force me to eat my veggies, Dad took me out for ice cream or pizza after dinner. While Mom would ground me for my messy room, Dad was the main reason for the mess. We used to do runways, taking turns being model and designer. He used to lose a few pieces of clothes in my room, and end up wearing shorts to work or faded blue jeans with the jacket of his black suit to a wedding. He once lost his belly bag in my room. It had his house keys, the car keys and a load of money. Mom was furious. We found it after a week of non-stop looking. It was inside one of the suitcases I had in the back of my closet. To this day, I still have no idea how it got there. Dad kept saying: "It must've wanted to go on a vacation". He loved vacations. He loved buying souvenirs (AKA toys for the two of us) from the places we visited. His favorites were the water guns we bought from France when we visited my aunt there. He thought Paris was boring till he saw these two very expensive water guns on display in some shop. He fell in love with the city then. Later on, we used these guns to water our houseplants, spraying each other whenever Mom looked away. For my eighth birthday, he arranged the Grand Water Gun Siege, where we basically had to surround the house, taking everyone inside, all my party guests, hostage. We drenched anyone who wanted to leave with water. Then, the fire-spitting dragon (Mom) came, and the real battle started. We fought bravely, but we had to back down the moment she mentioned I'd have

no dessert for three months if I didn't stop. I ended up grounded for a month, and I got to see Dad cooking because she said she wouldn't cook for him for a month. He, surprisingly, turned out to be a good cook—better than Mom, but I never had the courage to say that out loud. When I got a bit older, he thought we must start doing some less crazy activities. We did puzzles, built card houses, and played chess. The thing is, we needed a new puzzle, a new deck of cards, and new chess pieces every few days, as we'd lose them in a heartbeat. We then got into video games, which Mom appreciated since it was the least chaotic thing we did. I always won, and he said he was going easy on me, but I didn't believe him. My head clears for a moment, and I look at him. He's different, so different, but he's what's left of this phenomenon of a man that is my father, the man in the best memories of my life.

I feel my mind getting crowded again, everything going blurry, the sound of the machine getting more and more distant. I was at this same hospital, in the psychiatric ward. Dad and Mom were in the room. I was asked to wait outside. My head had stopped working, but my ears were as sharp as ever. The sound of an ECG machine echoed in the distance, and I could clearly hear the doctor say "Schizophrenia". Dad was diagnosed with acute schizophrenia. I was twelve.

He was different after that. He'd spend most of his time in his office, avoiding both Mom and me. I tried time after time to talk to him. "It's snowing outside. Wanna build a snowman?" I'd say. I was left unanswered. I knew he was afraid. Afraid of hurting me, hurting Mom. Afraid of himself, of his mind.

I was thirteen when Mom found out he'd stopped taking his meds. She tried to reason with him. She was gentle. She was warm. She'd been that way towards both of us since *The Diagnosis*<sup>1</sup>. He didn't listen. He yelled at her to get out of his office, and my dad never raised his voice at anyone. I lost my father that night, cause I believe schizophrenia devoured him. It deteriorated him to his worst parts. Whenever I saw this man from that moment on, he was a puppet having its strings pulled by the disorder he had.

He started screaming. He'd stay up all night in his office, making noises, moving things around the room. In the morning, he'd be gone. Mom said he acted normal at work. She said he managed to control himself in front of other people. She said to forgive him, that he wasn't a bad man. And I knew. He was not. He was an amazing human being before this disorder had planted its claws in him, before it had injected him with its venom, before it had nested in his mind, consuming the man he used to be.

Dad was there somewhere, so deeply buried in his own head, imprisoned by the monsters in the too-colorful, too-bright, too-loud, too-crowded place his thoughts became. He'd managed to break free many times. He'd smile at me. He'd crack a joke. He'd make us breakfast. He'd put on songs and invite me to dance with him. Then, he was captured again, yanked back, and chained in his cell. This happened over and over to the point where he seemed to have lost hope.

I was fourteen when he hit me for the first time. He slapped me when I asked him to play video games with me. My cheek was aching with the phantom of his hand, my eyes were stinging with unshed tears, my mind was screaming to yell, to run, to fight, but I just stood there, looking up at the man who was more terrified of himself than I was. His face was pale, his eyes wide and bloodshot, his cheeks hollow and sunken. He was covering his mouth with his hands in shock. I wanted to hug him, but when I stepped

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<sup>1</sup> I treated 'The Diagnosis' as a proper name to show that the narrator views it as a historical event.

closer, he took a step back and ran back to his office. Since then, his aggression only got worse, towards both Mom and me.

I can hear the beeping of the machine becoming more rapid, but I've lost all touch with reality. All I can think of is my own heart. I was sixteen, hiding in my closet. He was in my room, tearing up my books. He threw my chair out the window. He was calling out my name, telling me to stop screaming. I wasn't screaming. I couldn't even if I wanted to. As if my vocal cords had ceased to work, I was unable to make a single sound. I could only hear his curses, the sound of tearing paper, my own heart going full speed. "Run!" it screamed when I couldn't. My heart halted when the closet door opened. He looked at me and was scared again. His face softened, and I could see him mouth: "Forgive me." He stared at me for a second. He looked around, taking in my torn-down room. He took a deep breath, shook his head, then left. I waited for a minute or two, afraid he might come back. When he didn't, I got up to estimate the damages. In the middle of my room, there were plastic shards: the water guns. He'd shattered them.

I was seventeen when he tried to strangle me. By then, he had no traces of my father. He was a body occupied by this parasite that had harmed us all, a parasite that had him rotting from the inside out. We filed a report against him, and the court ruled in our favor. He was placed on involuntary hospitalization. We said our goodbyes. He apologized over and over, and I couldn't blink my tears away. I couldn't swallow my sobs. I couldn't overlook the resemblance he had to the man he used to be five years ago, and I felt as if I was being ripped apart while we drove off, back to the house where we once lived as a family, where we'd made popsicles, and where we'd built forts of cushions and blankets. I got home, I buried myself under my sheets, and I cried. I wept till I no longer could shed a single tear. I wept till I no longer could make a sound. I wept about it for years.

Life without Dad was not easy, but by then, and after the many years of living with the scrapes of him, the shell of him filled with nothing but rage and fury, I was used to it. I still missed him when I watered what remained of our houseplants—the ones he hadn't broken. I missed him when I passed by his office, and when I walked past the TV. I missed him on my eighteenth birthday—the tenth anniversary of the Grand Water Gun Siege. I wanted him to be there, for us to rekindle our rebellion. "You can't ground me anymore," I would've said when the fire-spitting dragon would've come. Dad would've laughed as he soaked the dragon.

I packed my things: the controllers, a belly bag that matched nothing I own with some shards of plastic in it, and some other things that didn't matter much; I left home. I was grateful I got to move away for college. It allowed me to abandon that haunted place behind. It allowed me to go out and walk the streets without reliving thousands of memories. In a few months, I was as over it as humanly possible. I missed Dad, but he was gone, and what was left of him was better away from me. I was over it. But as I stood over him for the past hour, I doubted that.

Mom still believed she could get through to him. She visited him every weekend and talked to him for hours. I couldn't. He wasn't Dad. Dad was now long gone. Mom would come home glad when he'd say something about their old stories. She'd be eager to tell me how he asked about me, or remembered the time he tried to teach me how to ride a bike. I was twenty-two when Mom passed away in a car accident. She was on her way to visit my father.

In the cramped hospital room, I snap out of my head when I realize: the beeping stopped.

I am twenty-six, and today I got a call at 4 a.m. informing me that my father had a heart attack. I rushed into the hospital, and sat there, next to his unmoving body. Now, they're filling out his death certificate. I was handed his will. It read:

*Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me.  
Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me.  
Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me.  
Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me.  
Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me.  
Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me.*

It goes on for three pages. I didn't have to forgive him. I was never upset with him in the first place. I was upset with the sick humor of this world that stripped me of my father and gave me a parasite in his stead. I can hear the doctor and nurses whispering a few meters away from me as they write down Dad's name. I want to scream at them, to tell them that Dad has been dead for thirteen years, but I hold my tongue. They put the time of death, and it's 5:12 a.m.