Dad

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Xandra French

Dad

My dad’s not allowed to dance when I’m around. There’s a strict rule that’s militantly enforced whenever we’re in the same room together that his hips cannot move vertically and his head cannot bob up and down under any circumstance, under pain of much groaning and eye rolling on my part and some sarcastic quip that he’s probably heard a thousand times before. It never really bothered me until I saw him in his classroom and realized that his antics weren’t just confined to our kitchen, but that he felt the need to share them with all of his students too! Middle school me was shocked to see my old man being his quirky self in front of other people. Somehow I thought that when he got into the classroom, all his charm and creativity was left at our front door. I’m baffled as to why I would have thought such a thing, he’s more in his element in his classroom than almost anywhere else, and naive little me somehow assumed that he got all professional from seven to two every day.

Needless to say, for a long time, I didn’t know my dad very well. I liked to think I was daddy’s little girl, but gazing into the past now I’m not sure that was ever the case. I admired his work as an art teacher first and foremost. And only now I realize that his talents don’t stop there. On days when I was sick or feeling particularly down, Dad would saunter into my room to sit and play guitar, mesmerizing me with the speed of his fingers, like spider legs delicately picking their way across the neck of his guitar. As he’d play, he’d tell stories of when his college band travelled in
Europe during the summers. I would close my eyes and lay in bed as my room transformed into a cobblestone street with vendors and tourists talking and laughing. Castle spires rose in the distance and music wafted through the air. I only wanted to hear those same stories over and over again, never wanting to dig deeply into who those stories made him into.

Just recently at the dinner table, in the middle of a conversation that he had nothing to do with, he loudly proclaimed “Spiffotorpedo!” and sat with great satisfaction as the rest of us burst into tear jerking laughter at his oddity. He would call us “liar liar pumpkin-eater” and complain about how the artists of songs we were listening to kept changing the words on him! I used to think he was too weird. But everyone I knew seemed to absolutely adore him and his strange sense of humor. So much so that we always had high school boys over at our house, guys he would mentor and work out with, boys who looked to him as an example of how to be a man, father and husband. One year he would go out for a run every Saturday morning with his padawan for the year, and then we’d all make pancakes together and sit and talk for what seemed like the whole morning.

I caught so many different angles of who my dad was when I was a kid, but generally was too far gone into me-land that I didn’t slow down to notice. My bedroom when I was 5 had a little blue table that sat in the corner piled high with markers and paper, glitter, paint, and whatever other assortment of “art materials” I could find. It was my mom’s desk before I was born. But once it got moved into the nursery, my dad lopped it’s legs off at the knee so it was standing height for a toddler. It was a boring shade of blue that
couldn’t decide if it was trying to be subtle or pastel, and when it
couldn’t make up it’s mind, decided to peel layers of paint off
instead. The desk became everything from a grocery store checkout
to an operating table, depending on whatever mood a certain fickle
youngster was in. And more often than not, it was relegated to a
trash heap in the midst of the whirlwind that was my bedroom. But
one instance sticks out in my mind more vividly than most. A
patient artist sat far too close to the floor for anyone over the age of
8, his usual greige attire stood in stark contrast to the cacophony of
colors in my playspace. He sat quietly creating with his eyes
slivered in focus while I prattled on around that table about some
inconsequential matter. What seemed like only moments later, a
masterpiece emerged from beneath his fingers, crafted simply with
markers and an eye for color honed over almost 20 years of
schooling. I crawled into his lap, mesmerized by the lines and
shapes that were woven together to spell out my name in what I
thought was the most beautiful form I’d ever seen. Naturally I then
snatched it right up, assuming it to be mine, and paraded around
the house with it for a while till I tired of it and moved on to the
next surgical operation to be performed. But by the end of the day
my notebook was cluttered with scratched out attempts to replicate
the magic he had created so effortlessly on a single sheet of paper.

Unlike me, he never praised himself. He never showed off.
He sang with me while he worked and let me babble incessantly.
And he continues to blow my mind in all areas of life. At 60 years
old he runs farther every week than a lot of high school athletes. He
benches double my current body weight and has the patience to
work with immature high school freshman. They’ll waltz into the
weight room thinking they’re pretty snazzy, and he’ll immediately set down his weights and ask them if they’d like to join him. He’ll celebrate their small victories and over time, their big ones too, with a steak dinner for the first time they bench 250 pounds.

I never saw this side of my dad until I got to high school and I made the varsity soccer team as a sophomore. Like any other foolish newbie, I walked around campus thinking I was pretty hot stuff. We were worked hard in every practice, and every day I would come home saturated in sweat and completely wiped out. Dad would come home drenched and crimson too, but instead of melting onto the cool tile floor and bemoaning how exhausted he was, he would clean up as quick as possible and begin helping get dinner on the table.

Two years and two injuries later, I would come home from a peaceful afternoon and sit at the table and blab about the day to my mom. Dad would walk in looking bedraggled from his workout and wisely tell me “if you never get your running shoes back on you’ll never get back on the field.” The next thing I knew, I was gasping for air with a knife in my side, trying to keep my old man in view as he, for the second time that day, was on a run. His gait is not pretty; he’s not particularly fast. He’ll be the first to tell you that his breaths are too shallow and he “shlogs” across the pavement slower than he’d like. But there I was, supposedly an athlete, on two varsity sports teams, bested by one that some would consider a senior citizen. The man can’t shoot a basketball to save his life and would most definitely end up in pieces all over the field if he ever tried to play soccer. I looked up at him, a hundred yards ahead of me, and as he turned around to say “just keep going, I won’t leave
you,” I realized he worked harder than I ever had at doing something for which he never got any recognition.

He works hard at everything, despite criticism. After 8 faithful weeks of ballroom dance lessons, my mom said to him, “Dave, I so appreciate you trying this with me, but I think we’ll call it quits before my toes get stepped on any more.” He told me he didn’t know which was worse, eight weeks of ballroom or being told he still wasn’t any good at it. Evidently, however, he wasn’t too crushed because just a few months later I was groaning and rolling my eyes all over again at my 14th birthday party as he sang and danced all over the kitchen. Everyone else laughed. I wanted to jump out the window.

After two years of high school art classes with my dad, our rule about dancing was pretty well established and rarely broken. I had learned that he was a typical artist, quirky and lovable, and no sarcastic comment or attempt at apologizing for his behavior was going to change that. We were looking at my senior year, AP Studio art looming ahead of me and I knew that that class would either obliterate or solidify our relationship. Dad had taught that class for longer than I’d been alive, and for just about that long, I’d been looking forward to it as the culmination of my time at school and the pinnacle of my artistic success. He’d never had his child in such a demanding class before and so needless to say, we were both a little nervous going into the year. I fought him on his opinions of where to add more shading or pull back, and I questioned all his critiques of my work. I thought he was too hard on me one day and not helpful enough the next. We both danced circles with our words and tiptoed by each other for weeks. At times all I wanted
was for him to just hand me a color-by-number so that I wouldn’t have to worry about messing it up.

But one afternoon I found myself at the edge of the pool next to my dad. The sun was trying to melt the clouds as they ran all over the sky to escape the inferno. The trees were doing their best to provide a respite from the heat, but had been working for far too long and looked as if they were about to collapse into the tantalizing blue water just out of their reach. And we talked. And we talked. And the sun decided to chase the horizon instead of the clouds that had long since given up their flight. And suddenly I realized we were still there and never once had we disagreed or gotten frustrated with each other.

And I said thank you.
And he said thank you.
And my artwork began to relax with my hand as my head realized what my heart had always known; there was no reason to be at odds with the man who colored on the floor with me and who laughed at my awkward attempts to draw trees and my less than flattering portraits of him. I love that man to Saturn and back times ten thousand million and seventy three.

There was no reason to apologize for his dancing every once in a while and his creativity showing itself through something other than a paintbrush. He dances in the dining room and sings everywhere else in the house. He can’t take a selfie at all and social media sends him into fits. He gets me off my lazy behind and makes me run with him, then proceeds to outrun me every single time.
But that day at the pool I discovered a special place in my heart, that unknowingly had always existed, for the guy who was at every dance recital I ever performed, and I realized that I didn’t mind anymore when he joined in too.