

Spilt Milk

You will remember this. It's July. Summer has resurrected your neighborhood. The affluent families are barbecuing. The poor inhale the smoke, allowing their imaginations to buffet their agony beneath a lingering evening sun. It seems the entire universe is willfully held captive by summer's embrace, except us because we are three years old, and we must suffer an unjust seven o'clock bed-time. That was my bed-time in 1971 when I lived in Port Orchard, Washington with my dad. How deplorable. At 7:00, all you can do is stare at the shafts of sunlight banking off your brother's vacant pillow before any healthy circadian rhythm ever takes residence in your brain. Meanwhile, all the neighborhood kids played in our back yard, *under my window*. My two older brothers would laugh and laugh and laugh a mere three feet away from my head.

I lived with my dad for a sum of four years before he decided his little patch of green grass was fading. I can count the memories of living with him on one hand. When I was two, my mom sat me in our almost-new car, an off-white 1969 Chevy Impala station wagon, death-black vinyl interior, metal trap-door in the rear to hide a spare tire but mostly used to terrify a youngest brother with claustrophobia. But this day my two older brothers were at school. So, I got to ride in the front.

My mom and I were on our way to meet my dad at the First Methodist Church parking lot during his lunch-hour because he forgot to take the lunch she made for him. I began to cry when I realized he was returning to work. He knelt within inches of my face and began to laugh. "Ahhh, whatsamattah, you cryin'?" Then, he stood, frowned at my mom and said, "Huh, I guess you had a girl after all."

My dad hated crying. It reminded him of childhood, when his younger sister, Melanie, had to eat on the floor next to the dog because she was born with no thumbs. His oldest sister, Florence, was the first and only to protest. She was also the first to fly, all the way through the kitchen and out the back door. She landed in a convent near Idaho, but she was not made to be a nun. My dad's mom almost cried, but she was magic. She could drink from a bottle and make everything turn dry, everything except her husband. The more she swallowed, the dryer she became. Then, one day she fell, hit her chest on the back of a chair and crushed her heart into powder. At her funeral my dad wanted to cry. Maybe a gallon of tears would bring her home, but she was already underground before he had thought of it.

One day I got to see my dad at work, men's shoes at the Bremerton JC Penny. He was in a hurry and needed me to be in a hurry. He didn't hold hands, but he did offer his left index finger. It was massive, an oak tree branch, larger than my entire hand. I loved it.

My dad's favorite pastime was watching my brother, Jacob Joseph, seven years my senior. Everyone called him JJ. He was a kinesthetic Mozart, an athletic genius by age six. He could crush a baseball same as a receiver on a crossing route. He enjoyed basketball and wrestling too, but nothing compared to baseball. He was, as they say in baseball-speak, a Five-Tool-Guy: he could hit for power, hit for average, run, throw, and field. He was everything my dad wanted to be.

David is my other brother, three years my elder. Of my five fingered memories, only one places my dad and David in the same room. JJ was with my mom at piano lessons, the one extra-curricular activity my dad wanted no part of. Thus, the three of us

found ourselves in the rarest of circumstances, alone together. Dad *cooked* dinner. My mom could cook, probably the best gift she ever received from her mother. My dad selected the simplest meal in the world to prepare, hamburger. Then, he mutilated it with onions.

He did not speak while he burned the meat, but he made pained noises to make certain his two boys understood the magnitude of his effort. Loud clanks of the serving spoon upon our plates rang as a dinner bell. “Finish your plates,” he said flatly. My eyes fell upon the steaming blackened heap of massacred cow. The task of preparation could not compare to the task of completion. David and I froze, but time did not. “Eat!” dad commanded, his voice threatening and oppressive like November clouds. The first bite assaulted my taste-buds, then my esophagus. My innards were set upon a carnival ride, while tiny diamonds of sweat formed upon my brow. I glanced at David, always stoic, silent, determined to do his duty and be recognized by his father, recognized as worthy to be called *son*.

My young stomach had built no immunity. So, I devised a plan. Every time my dad’s attention strayed, I’d take a bite and chew thoroughly, making a meat paste with my over-produced saliva. I spit the mortar into my left hand and discretely discarded it beneath David’s chair until my plate was clean enough for the cupboard. Triumphant, I asked, “Can I go outside and play now?”

“You finish your milk?”

“Yes,” bolstered by the understanding that it was all I’d have in my stomach until breakfast. To make sure, dad walked over to inspect then offered the simple emotionless praise David dearly coveted, “well done.” At the moment I began to excuse myself,

thinking I had escaped my own personal Alcatraz, dad hollered, “what the hell is that?!?!” *I’m sunk*. “Goddammit David, you pick every crumb off the floor and eat it!” *David’s sunk!* Dad thought David had spit his “food” on the floor. My brother was psychologically paralyzed. “Now!” dad concluded, stirring David into semi-consciousness. Outside the kitchen window, a mere thirty-six inches away from my brother, I played noisily in the dirt, grinning.

When I was four, I got to spend an entire Saturday with my dad, my mom, and my two brothers. JJ didn’t have a game so it must have been early August. We went to Purdy Bay next to Burley Lagoon about half way between Port Orchard and Gig Harbor. I thought Purdy meant pretty, pretty sparkles, millions of them body surfing atop the ripples of Puget Sound. They swayed rhythmically, leaping at the wake of a boat. I ran along the tide-pressed sand, softer than most Washington beaches, warm between my toes. Near the highway, though, there were rocks, some big, some small, all dark, jagged, and menacing. They summoned me to their unique igneous and metamorphic worlds. I ran to them. Immediately, I unearthed the Goliath of green plastic army men holding an unexploded grenade. He was nearly three inches tall, twice as tall as all my other army men.

I ran to my dad to show him the once buried treasure. I held it up high, the same way I did two years later when I lost my first tooth. At first, he seemed startled, as though I had shaken him from a dream. Maybe that’s where he spent most of his days. He looked concerned until I stubbed my left big toe on a rock that I couldn’t see because I kept shifting from my dad to the three-inch army man and back again. It hurt. Blood oozed from my toe. My mom had the look and the *Oh* sound mom’s make when their offspring

are hurt. My dad began to smile. I began to cry. "Boys don't cry," he said. It was his smile that hurt.

When I was four and my brothers were staying the weekend with friends, while my mom was at work, I found myself in the kitchen. My mom was a bank teller, Kitsap County Savings and Loan. When she married my dad, she worked full-time to put him through business school at the University of Washington. His diploma says his real name is Dilbert Adoniram Padgett. He was proud, the only college graduate from his family: an alcoholic dad, deceased mom, five sisters, and a bastard half-brother he never told me about. Dad wanted boys. He wanted to go to college. He wanted to know his dad. He wanted to be smart. He wanted people to know he was smart. He didn't want people to know my mom put him through school. He didn't want *anyone* to know she beat him by exactly one point on an IQ test. He got her to agree to cheat at pinochle against my brothers when they were six and ten. He doesn't want you to know that.

Usually, dad was gone before I was up and home after I was in bed, unless he was watching JJ play baseball. Sometimes my dad watched JJ play football. Sometimes he alternated watching JJ play basketball with watching JJ wrestle.

On the day I was finding myself in the kitchen, I also found my dad in the rec-room. He had a day off, and I got to spend it with him. It was the greatest day ever.

I love bacon, the smell of it, the melodious sizzle, the texture of it when it's soft, the taste of it mixed with egg yolk or maple syrup. On the greatest day ever, my dad did not mutilate four hand-selected, thickly sliced pieces of bacon. He did not burn two mashed potato cakes in the remaining bacon grease, mashed potatoes left over from mom's roast beef the night before, my grandpa's favorite Friday night dinner after he

converted from Catholicism. Three eggs were turned over-medium with the care of a maternity nurse. Two pieces of richly buttered whole-wheat toast were top-dressed with my mom's wild-blackberry jam, *wild* blackberries, ripe in mid-July, not the giant parasitic weed blackberries ripe in August and September that can grow anywhere, amid cracks of concrete freeway walls, nearly impossible to remove, stems like branches with train spike thorns that impale you when you crash on your bike and fall into a web of thorny horror overhanging Allen's Creek when you are seven years-old.

The celebration of breakfast begins with twelve ounces of 34-degree freshly squeezed orange juice, and it's all washed down with a glacial glass of whole milk. It was the happiest, most perfectly matched family of breakfast food ever assembled, and it sat atop a plate on my dad's generous belly while he reclined, watching other people golf on TV.

I was met in the kitchen by an empty bowl, a box of Cheerios, and room temperature milk. I wish I hadn't spilt the milk.

Sometimes ideas fall out of the sky like a forgotten satellite. They orbit the earth for years stretched over decades. Their usefulness is usurped by technology, and eventually they are forgotten, until their orbit disintegrates. Sometimes they have to be destroyed. Other times they burn up during a blind date with the atmosphere. The particles are rendered harmless and microscopic. But some are like a virus, falling all the way to earth, landing in uninvited places, like my dad's brain. He captured one of those ideas the morning I spilt my milk.

"What did you do?!" he asked. No, he roared. He didn't get up from his chair. It was a blue overstuffed rocking chair with a matching blue ottoman. Gold paisley

stitching with flecks of pink made them to feel like they belonged in the new decade. We bought them at the Gonzales's garage sale for a dollar apiece. They were vomit-green until my mom reupholstered them. When I was seven, I sat on the top of the back of the chair, fell and landed on my head. I threw up all over the cushion in original green, my second concussion in a week.

"I'm sorry for spilling, dad. I'm really sorry!" I was telling the truth. I was really sorry, but I didn't cry. Then, he got up. To my immense relief, he did not grab the crib board. I never saw it, but David told me dad once spanked him with the crib board. David said it hurt, badly enough to tell me about it. Dad didn't spank me with the crib board though a few years later he called me the *luckiest shitty crib player ever*.

"Come outside," he said, both feet already on the patio. My tongue went as dry as a towel. Even so, I loved *outside*. My sandbox was there. It was sunny. Our back yard was immaculately cared for by my mom, her personal Eden, not yet corrupted. I followed my dad through the rec-room to the back yard patio, where he filled my purple plastic half-gallon bucket full of water with his dark green garden hose. I used to imagine that hose was a snake, neatly coiled, ready to spring. Snakes scare me, but I loved that bucket. I built entire empires of castles with it in my sandbox.

"Steve," he said, "I want to teach you about centrifugal force." It was the biggest word I had ever heard, and it immediately took root in my brain, growing like imagination. Its magnitude spread into another chamber giving birth to a notion I could not identify for several years, Intrigue. He topped off the bucket, grabbed the yellow plastic handle and said, "Watch." He swung the bucket vigorously with his right hand

below his hips then over his head, round and round like a miniature carnival ride half a dozen times. No water spilled. “Now you try.”

A firestorm ignited inside of me. My dad wanted me to join him in an experiment. I was going to experience centrifugal force! I lunged for the bucket. With both hands and all of my pride I gave it a heave. In super-slow motion the purple plastic bucket filled with water rose from the ground over my head, suspended in a picture, and promptly emptied itself atop my head.

ROARS of guttural laughter boomeranged off trees, down the neighborhood and back again, resting in the ears of a four year-old, crushed like my mother’s begonias. By fortune the hail of laughter and dripping water camouflaged my tears. And, just as suddenly, my dad was silent, probing me with his eyes. “Now,” he said, door to the rec-room open, “take off your shirt and use it to clean the milk off the kitchen floor.”

Two days later, he moved out. Two years after that he moved to California.

My mom told me between gasps and sobs that my dad was not coming home. He never did. I did not cry.