

Father

by Kendra Bearss

I don't know if addiction is a disease or a choice, but I know it gave me Christmases, birthdays, family vacations—all tainted with a stench of trauma, abuse and a desperation to be loved. I don't ever remember a time that my father wasn't an alcoholic—that's just who he is to me. Growing up on the Westside, you had two things—bars and churches. I often wondered if that was even a coincidence.

Five o'clock would come around, then six, soon ten. He still wasn't home. My thoughts began to woosh around in my head, hands trembling.

"He was just working late, right?" I lied to myself.

I got myself ready for bed, school was sharply at 7 am. Mom had put a lock on my door, to keep any number of my other four sisters out of my room. I was glad that I could lock my door, in case he did actually come home.

Two o'clock in the morning, I hear the loud smashing open of the front door. I am surprised that it even still has hinges. I jump awake, my pulse racing, sweat forming on my forehead, and quickly lock my bedroom door. My whole mind is confused. My body is relieved that my dad is alive, my soul breaks that he is home.

The next hour or two is a blur of insults, slurred speech, threats and my mother crying. I hide under my covers, wishing for a moment that I weren't in my own room, away from my sisters. Slowly, tears form in my eyes. I curl into the fetal position and cover my ears with my hands. I hear his clumsy footsteps, with my mother's shaky voice trailing behind him, begging him to leave us alone. I imagine it's difficult for my mom to run after him with her large pregnant belly pulling in front of her. Slowly, I can hear the creaking of each stair in cadence with incoherence and anger.

There's a twisting on my doorknob, that puts a wretch in my entire body. I curl deeper into a ball, smashing my hands heavier against my ears. I just want to sleep. My breath is silent.

Maybe if I don't move, he will give up?

Tears flood my pillow, I can feel the blood vessels in my face bursting, like they always do when I cry too hard. The twisting soon turns to a deafening pounding on my door. Then there's the screaming.

"Open the door, you little bitch," he sneers through the keyhole.

My whole body is frozen. I can't remember the last time I breathed, blinked, moved. I am sure that the wood on the frame will split in two, any moment now,

and I brace for it. For a moment, I am sure I can smell the pitchers of Bud Light straight through the walls.

“Ken, let’s go downstairs. Come on, lay down. You have work in a few hours,” my mother pleads. I imagine her pulling his arm, tears in her eyes. Suddenly, I hear a terrified scream emerge from her lips. I can feel her terror. I hear a thud down the stairs, and I cover my mouth to mute my cries, that seem to be in unison with my mom.

Eventually, the world calms down and my tear-soaked face dries and crusts, and I fall asleep. School travels by in slow-motion, my eyes heavy. It’s difficult to balance freshman year with home life, but I know tonight I’ll do it all over again, and I still have years until I can escape.

At seventeen, I finally broke free from the mediocre-sized town of Grand Rapids, with streets that were often filled with homeless drunks and the occasional used needle in the grass by the playground. I was guilt-ridden that I had left my five sisters—the youngest being only three years old—but I was so relieved to get a full night of sleep and not worry that a friend would come over to hang out, and have to witness my belligerent dad, hanging off the side of the couch, mumbling obscenities in his sleep.

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Years passed. I impulsively married my high school sweetheart, a doomed-from-the-start marriage that lasted a move to Germany, where I had my first daughter at 21, then South Carolina, where our marriage inevitably fell apart.

It was then that I really felt the full weight of addiction. I had known for years that children of alcoholics have up to a four times likelihood of becoming alcoholics themselves, but it never really affected me until my severe depression hit. I finally understood how something could take hold of your soul, take away your will to live, and even your ability to care for your babbling toddler. I drank heavily to avoid my depression and my depression flourished with every drink I took. I slept all day, self-harmed at night. My wrists were full of carved slits and demeaning words. I was in an endless, uncontrollable spiral, and I didn’t care at all.

At some point after my divorce, I woke up. The dark fog that I had been swimming—drowning in—finally lifted. I also decided I greatly missed my family and the support I could gain from having actual friends, instead of living in an emotionally empty city, of work-and-sleep in repetition. I packed up my crappy apartment, I packed up my daughter (then four), and I made the thirteen-hour drive back to Grand Rapids. A smile reached my lips at the thought of once again having family nearby, but tears filled my eyes at the thought of removing my daughter from her father’s reach.

Eventually I remarried, and when it came time to buy a house, I insisted on moving back to the West Side. It was, after all still a place of nostalgia, even if some of

the memories made me cringe. Now, when I get to my Leonard Street exit, I see the battered, darkened inebriated eyes on the corner of Scribner Avenue, asking for money, begging for warmth—of the tangible and emotional kind—and I see what I saw in my father's eyes. The man on the corner asks for change. I assume realistically that some of it is to feed his addiction—a disease, or a choice that literally kills thousands of Americans every single year, and alters millions of lives, much like mine—and I gently smile at him. I can't offer much else but understanding, heartbreak, and a yearning for healing in a community so close to my heart.

I think of their families, possibly even their children, and I wonder how much damage this has caused them? Were they like me? Perhaps it was even worse for them. My father never laid a hand on us, and even though that didn't stop my breath from quaking, at least I had that to hold onto.

I pull up to the red light, waiting in the left turn lane. He's there, with his sign, a cracked smile on his lips. I make it a point to meet his eyes, even though it feels uncomfortable. My hands are shaking, my heart races a bit. I'm not sure if I'm feeling social anxiety, or fear. Maybe a mix.

It's January and it's twenty-two degrees outside. There's a shit-show of a global pandemic going on that I'm sure will never end. The frost has barely melted on my windshield, even after the nearly half hour drive home from the airport. I'm still in my uniform, and I always wonder if they think I'm some kind of police officer. My job isn't nearly that important, but my federal badge often makes strangers believe otherwise. Timidly, I roll down my window and reach for a couple packages of hand warmers. I smile and wave them out of my window. He takes them, thanks me profusely, and I see a certain brokenness that's indescribable. Most people don't grow up wanting to be on the street corner, forgotten and disregarded by the world around them, and I suspect he never intended his life to go this way. The light turns to a green arrow, and we both go about our very different lives. If only he understood the similarities we share.