

lunch with my old dad – part two

“Your past is just a story, and once you realize this it has no power over you.” – Chuck Palahniuk

two.

In late September I got a message from my sister. She had received an email from Senior. That's one of the names we called my father because some of us could not bring ourselves to call him Dad. We sometimes called him by his initials but since my brother also had those initials and was a Junior, we called the old man Senior, which is far superior to some of the many other names we have called him over the years.

In his email he said something along the lines of “If you are agreeable, I'd like to come North, to your town to have lunch with you at a place, date and time of your choosing. Please seriously consider it.” We weren't surprised. It's what we had been anticipating since his interest in us had ramped back up after his wife's death a few years ago. My sister said she was considering it but wanted to know my thoughts and wanted to know if I had any interest in going with her. What...are...my...thoughts. Hmmm. I really didn't know what I felt about it. Curiosity? Anger? Indifference? Seeing him was something I had never thought would happen in my lifetime. Even after he moved to South Carolina I didn't think it would really happen. I often told my siblings “well I hope someone tells us when he dies.” He has dozens of nieces and nephews. We just hoped when his time came one of them would think to notify his children

I called her the next day and we discussed it. We listed out the pros and cons. All but one of us hadn't seen him in over forty-five years. The potential for awkwardness was off the charts. We decided to ask our other siblings if they were interested. While we weren't sure yet what we wanted to do, one thing was certain, no one should do it alone. My youngest sister said she would come. If he bailed on us as he did in Yellowstone, we would at least have a nice lunch together.

We started a group chat making jokes that he wouldn't know who was who and maybe we should wear shirts with our childhood pictures on them to help him sort it out. Or name tags, or shirts with our names, or we could pretend to be each other. Those early conversations before things were set in stone were light and easy. It was fun to joke about what we would say or do because at that point it was still hypothetical.

My brothers declined. The youngest was just six weeks old when my father left. He has no memories and no desire to make any. Our father is a complete and total stranger to him. My stepfather was his dad and that was that. It's more complicated with my other brother. Two years younger than me, I am not sure what his memories are of our father. My mom claims my father didn't know how to raise a son. I always found this odd, as he himself was a boy and had a lot of brothers. It was known in the family that my paternal grandmother favored her daughters. She had lingering resentments towards men from abuse she had suffered when she was young. I believe she took it out on her boys, and there were plenty of them. I think my father may have grown up believing that girls were easier to love. Whether he realized it or not he distanced himself from his young son. There is no way at that age my brother could possibly have understood the complexity of what was going on with our very damaged father. He said thanks but no. It would be just us girls.

We decided to meet in the town where I live as it would take two hours off my father's drive. South Carolina to Virginia is a very long drive for an eighty-year-old man. A day, time and place were chosen, and a plan was set. The conversations with my sisters turned from light and easy to worried and nervous. We had no idea what to expect. Talking about it to my husband one day I said, "What should we talk about?" and my husband joked, "Well, you could ask 'So, what have you been up to?'" I laughed and said, "well that will take up a good chunk of time."

I called my Mom. It was important to know that she would be ok with this. She said she wanted us to do whatever our hearts led us to do. She hoped that we would get out of it whatever we needed but of course she would worry. I think her exact words were "I just don't want him to hurt you again" to which I replied, "we would have to have

expectations of him for that to happen." I reminded her we were not going to let him undo all the great work we had each done in our lifetimes to become the emotionally healthy, well adjusted, accomplished women we are today. We were not the vulnerable little girls he had walked away from so many years ago. I told her that he was the one who should be worried. We are three formidable ladies. Whatever happened or didn't happen was up to us. If anyone was vulnerable, it would be him.

The morning of our lunch I was very much on edge. My stomach was tied in knots. My heart was pounding. I said more than once "I don't know if I can do this." My husband and I got into a dust up about some small thing and I had a reaction that was gigantically out of proportion to the offense. I sat on the side of my bed and cried. Thankfully he knew it had nothing to do with him but rather a release of the stress I was feeling. I am a bit of a control freak (surprise!) and the fear of the unknown was rattling my cage. I am glad I had that minute to sit in my emotions and cry it out. I think it kept me from getting emotional later when we were dropping truth bombs everywhere. When the time came to leave the house, I felt as ready as I could be, which means, not at all.

We pulled into the restaurant parking lot and immediately noticed a slightly hunched elderly man entering ahead of us. He walked with a cane and had a life alert necklace around his neck. We watched as he was seated at a table near the window. I motioned to my sisters and waved my open palm towards him, making an "ahh ha, there he is" gesture. My youngest sister immediately said "That's not him. He is taller. We'll know him when we see him." I think on some subconscious level we must have expected a visceral response to seeing him. Maybe we longed for some gut feeling, a buried muscle memory that would tell us he was our daddy. That's not what happened. We didn't get the strong physical sense of connection we were subconsciously expecting. What we got was the hostess telling us "that older gentleman is expecting three ladies." The guy who didn't look anything like anyone any of us remembered was our dad.

I had prearranged with the restaurant for a semiprivate table and once we were seated, the server brought him over to us. I had picked one of our favorite places and they gave us our privacy and space, only

approaching if we waved them over to order food or refill drinks. The first few minutes were an awkward mix of hellos and figuring out seating. We easily slipped into casual small talk about his drive which took significantly longer than planned. He was not familiar with the vagaries of Interstate 95 and the drive had been rough on him. I kept looking at him trying to find a trace of... oh, I don't know...the past, myself, something I would recognize. My brother used to look so much like him, the younger him, and now he looked nothing like my brother. What kept going through my mind was "this is a nice old man to whom I feel no connection." He passed around pictures of his garden, his house, his cats. Through the years he had owned many cats (substitute children if you ask me) and spent a chunk of time telling us their names and peculiarities. He told us about his bowling trophies, missing the mountains of the Pacific Northwest and his other interests. He kept referring to his brother as our Uncle which felt strange because when he left, his family virtually disappeared from our lives. We didn't just lose him We lost aunts, uncles, cousins, our grandfather. Such was their shame at what he had done that they couldn't bear to see us, poor fatherless children. What a crock.

We spent a solid hour and a half making small talk and eating lunch. He shared a few memories of when we were children. Unfortunately, his memory wasn't great, and he got the details mixed up. He also kept calling my sister by the wrong nick name. I could tell each time he said it, it was making her uncomfortable. At one point he asked how my cat Poncho was doing. I said "I have never had a cat named Poncho" so he looked around the table and when my sisters, practically in unison both said "Nope, no cat named Poncho" he seemed confused. He clearly had us mixed up with someone else.

What stood out to me is that he didn't ask us much about ourselves. He only seemed slightly interested in our lives, our jobs, our families. He mostly seemed intent on telling us everything he could possibly tell us about his life. He brought copies of certificates, licenses, accomplishments. He brought large blurry pictures he had printed on a home printer, the ink smeared from not being allowed to fully dry. He passed around copies of a short story he had written about one of his...you guessed it...cats. He gave us a manuscript of a book he is writing about his father, titled somewhat ironically "Dad." Apparently

my grandfather was beloved in the neighborhood for being a father figure to everyone. My sister says regarding our own father "I guess that apple fell off the tree and rolled away."

He kept retrieving document after document, picture after picture from his bag and passed them around, each of us glancing at the item and passing it to the next sister. Forty five years of a life spent without us, condensed in to a briefcase and then spread out on the table as if to say "see me." There were no pictures of his wife, the stepmother we never knew and obviously no pictures of us. He could draw from his bag all day and would come up empty every time when it came to evidence of having us in his life. There was none.

We continued our conversation and he mentioned that he had been sober for 32 years. I quick did the math, realizing that he continued to be a drunk for a good fifteen years after leaving us. I guess he had a lot of things to drink away. He hinted at marriage problems caused by his drinking and said his wife "kicked him in the butt to get some help." His profession had been in corrections, working with juvenile offenders. It's what he had been doing when he left and apparently became his lifelong passion. For a time, he even worked as a drug and alcohol counselor to teenagers. It was bittersweet to hear him talk of helping other people's children while abdicating responsibility for his own. He said that twelve step programs saved his life. He told us he remembered the last words my mother said to him. "You need to leave." I wanted so badly to say, "I don't think she meant forever."

After a few minutes of uncomfortable silence, my sister said "Well part of the reason I wanted to meet today was so that we could ask you some medical history questions. We don't know any medical history on your side of the family." To his credit, he answered, fully listing off the various things that each of his siblings had died of. This one had a heart attack. That one had a stroke. He casually mentioned the number of prescription medications he takes, and my other sister said, "That's a lot of pills, what are they for?" We spent 10 minutes or so listening to him reciting "Well this pill is for that and that pill is for this, etc." He described a health concern that he and I share but I kept my mouth shut. My medical situation is none of his business, reminding myself that he is a literal stranger.

Once we had cracked open the door to asking real questions, my sister

kicked the door down and went all in. It was beautiful. "What I want to know is why after all this time did you want to meet us now?" Not going to lie, I don't remember exactly what he said...something about being lonely, getting older, wanting us to put our eyes on each other before he dies." I was just so proud of my sister opening herself up like that. She had many other tough questions and to his credit our father sat quietly, staring at his hands, occasionally nodding his head. He took it all in.

As if we were passing an imaginary talking stick, I took up where she left off. I told him I wasn't sure he exactly understood how tough it had been for us. I candidly shared some examples of our destitution. I was trying to figure out what to say next when a thought came to me. "I am familiar with twelve-step programs" I said. "Correct me if I'm wrong but one of the steps of the program is to make amends to those who have been harmed by your addiction. If you've been sober for 32 years, where are our amends?" "Why weren't we numbers one through five on that list?" He sat in stunned silence. My sisters, a little stunned themselves, made nods of their heads in silent agreement. The apologies and I'm sorry's should have come many, many years before. I told him we did realize that meeting with us took a great deal of courage. It had to have been hard to sit there and take it all in. My other sister picked up the thread and said probably the truest thing we shared with him that day. "I feel bad for you" she said. "We are really great people, fantastic people and you missed out on having us in your life."

A lot of questions were asked and answered. He tried to be open. We tried to be kind. There were a few tears, there was a lot of honesty. Looking back now, a week removed, I think the honesty was the most beautiful part. The exact details of what was said aren't necessary to share. Those of us who were there know what was said and how we felt, and that's all that matters.

After two and a half hours, I asked a server to take our picture and we wrapped things up. We had plans back at my house with my daughter, some grandkids and pizza. We were dying to leave so we could start talking about WHAT...JUST...HAPPENED. We said our goodbyes and he hugged us, saying "It was nice to see you" and "Stay in touch" to each one of us. I can't describe how I felt when it was over. It was surreal. We

had a lot to unpack.

It's been a week and I'm still unpacking it. I can't stop saying "he was a nice old man but I didn't feel a connection." I've done some reading in the past several weeks about the long term affects of parental abandonment. Typical reactions can include anxiety, PTSD, trust and relationship issues, disordered eating, and addiction. It's a lot. Several of those hit really close to home. Some experts consider parental abandonment a form of child abuse. I'd like to think at this point in my life I've moved past it. I try very hard not to let it define me which is somewhat ironic because by sharing my story I bring attention to it. I guess it's all part of the process. In January I start training to be a CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) I will be working with teenagers who have been removed from their homes or are placed under a protective order due to either abuse or neglect. I am not an expert on anything, but I hope that my experiences in life can help me relate to a teenager in trauma. I won't have to bullshit that I know what it's like to be let down by a parent. I know.

A few days after our lunch my sister got an email from Senior telling her he got home ok. The trip had exhausted him. He said our meeting went as he expected. He said, "It was all about emotions, you girls (ladies) had something to say, and I needed to listen whether I liked it or not." I found it condescending. I got the feeling that listening to our hurt feelings would be a one-time deal. In thinking about how I want to move forward, I realized that he would reap the greater benefit of me opening the door and letting him in to my life. I am still looking for the value add. I'm on the fence about it. I am also ok with whatever each of my siblings decides to do about him. We've all got to live our own lives and do what feels right to us. Right now, putting it on the back burner and seeing what happens is what feels right for me. My birthday is in three months, so maybe I'll get flowers with a card that says Love Dad. And if that happens, I'll write back and say thank you because my mother raised me to have manners, and I'll sign that card Love Felicia and Poncho, because, if he can't take a joke, we are definitely not related.

