

Lunch with my old dad – part one

“A happy childhood is the worst possible preparation for life.” –
Kinky Friedman

one.

When I was nine years old, on a day very near Christmas, my father loaded the last of his belongings into the car and gathered his children to say goodbye. I don't recall if we stood staircase in age order but most likely we did as pictures from that time often showed us oldest to youngest, sister, sister, brother, sister, brother in the order of our birth. I was the oldest. The youngest barely six weeks. Did he say goodbye to the baby? I can't remember. Most likely he didn't as my mother at the time clung to my brother as if he were the giver of life and not the other way around. My father was moving out. My mother had had enough of his drunken antics and cruel insults. After he spent his Christmas bonus on drink and who knows what else, (it wasn't gifts for his children) she gave him an ultimatum. If you don't stop drinking you should leave. It's not what she wanted. She wanted him to choose us. He didn't.

There were probably tears, his or ours I can't exactly say but most likely his. My mother says in the weeks after he left she had to stop taking us to visit our paternal grandfather because the old man would sob the entire time, grieving over his son leaving these five grandchildren fatherless. My grandfather would eventually die from complications of alcoholism. Like my grandfather, my father was overly emotional, given to easy crying, and periods of melancholy and depression. My mother remembers he would sit in a darkened room, play his guitar and sing along to the Neil Diamond song “I Am I Said” with

tears running down his face. You should listen to the lyrics sometime. They are gut wrenching. He was born at the tail end of 13 children. By the time he came along the love and money were in short supply and he suffered from lack of both. He fulfilled his Irish catholic duty by marrying a nice catholic girl and having four children in quick succession. My mother was more German than Irish but that could be forgiven. It was 1964 when they married and having a family was a good way to keep yourself from getting sent to Vietnam. My mother was young and beautiful. She was solidly upper middle class and was out of his league. He was handsome, charming and he needed her desperately. For a young woman, with her own self esteem issues he was irresistible. Her parents had reservations. He seemed a bit aimless with no solid plan for the future, but they paid for a wedding were tried to be supportive. I was born exactly nine months later.

My grandparents were right to worry. He was often unemployed, and he was often drunk. Fueled by deeply rooted generational alcoholism and feeling stuck in the wrong life, he convinced himself that we would be better off without him. His affair broke my mother's heart and eventually he left us. The loss nearly broke my poor mother in half. Her sadness was so wide and deep that had it not been for the neediness of a newborn she might possibly have never gotten up. If my memory is correct, there were a few attempts at weekend fathering. I have a blurry memory of an awkward visit to the apartment he shared with his girlfriend. My sister saw a red high heel pump on the floor of his bedroom and thought to herself "That is so weird. Why would that be there?" There was a breakfast at IHOP which I remembered because we were much too poor to ever eat in restaurants. I was fascinated by all the syrup choices, finally settling on blueberry. There was a trip to an arcade, a movie and ice cream, all the typical divorced dad weekend activities. But time with us was time away from his new girlfriend and probably more difficult, it was time he had to be sober, which in those days was not easy for him. Eventually but not unexpectedly the visits, calls and contact dwindled into nothingness and he was gone. Through the years I would sometimes hear a Neil Diamond song or see some other random thing that would remind me of

him, and a memory would surface. I'd push it back down, return it to the place in my mind for things too painful to think about. When I try to conjure childhood memories now it's images from pictures that I see. Familiar photographs have replaced my actual memories of him. I cannot find anything three dimensional no matter how hard I try. He had become a face in old pictures and a song I once knew.

For my family, my mother, her four stunned children and newborn baby, his leaving thrust us into immediate poverty, homelessness, food insecurity, and trauma. Unbeknownst to my mother we were months behind on rent and there was very little food in the cabinets or money in the bank. One day a letter arrived from my father. It contained a partial child support payment with the promise to send more when he could. My sister says "I remember this very clearly because I sat at the kitchen table and watched our mother fall apart. It was the most traumatizing moment of my childhood. She sobbed over the phone to multiple people that her children would starve." She was twenty nine years old and had never written a check or driven a car.

For me, his leaving forced me into premature adulthood and responsibilities beyond my years. By the time I was ten or eleven I was babysitting my siblings and cooking meals. By age fourteen I was working at an Italian Beef sandwich shop to help feed the family. If you have never eaten an authentic Chicago Italian Beef sandwich, well, I feel sorry for you. I was in a program where I only took core subjects and then left school to go to work. I worked the legal maximum number of hours I was allowed to work for my age and I signed my check over to my mother to buy groceries and whatever else we needed. I illegally worked extra hours on a second time card and was paid in cash. My mother didn't take the cash, either because she wanted me to have something for myself or because she didn't know about it, I don't remember. Sometimes I bought myself a record, at the shop across the street, but more often than not I would spend it on shoes or a toy for one of my siblings. A year later my fourteen year old sister also started working. With both of us girls contributing,

my mother's minimum wage job, housing assistance, help from family and friends and the literal kindness of strangers we survived. There were times we ate day old bread for dinner or didn't eat dinner at all, but we got by. I think we all had a touch of PTSD from the abandonment but I do have happy memories from that time. We did the things children do. We played, we fought, we cried, we laughed. My mother made sure we still had a childhood rich in the things that mattered, family, friends and plenty of love.

Once our struggles for food, shelter and stability were over I became a rebellious, moody, promiscuous teenager. I craved the attention of boys. I liked the confidence drinking beer gave me. I stayed out past curfew. I cared more about my job than school. My mother and I often butted heads about things and when my step father came in to the picture when I was almost seventeen, I couldn't wait to graduate and get out of the house. Mom still carries a lot of guilt about how fast we had to grow up and how rough we had it. We tell her it wasn't her fault but I don't think she believes that. Mothers have masters degrees in feeling guilty about something. Sometimes I think it would have been less traumatic in the long run if he had died. I know that sounds horrible but at least I could have told myself he didn't leave on purpose. I remember my fourth grade teacher approaching me right after he left and telling me she knew that things were "tough at home and I could talk to her anytime. " I was mortified and ashamed. Who told her? "No they aren't. Things are fine." I replied, "Everything is fine." then I buried my face in a Laura Ingalls Wilder book and did my best to hide my tears.

Over the years there were huge, long chunks of time we heard nothing from him. He didn't pay child support; he stayed under the radar and kept his exact whereabouts mostly unknown. Occasionally I would get a card signed "Love, Dad" if he happened to have our address. Often, he did not and we rarely had his. That "Love, Dad" really irritated us. It irritates us still. The cards never said anything more, never asked about our lives, and they certainly never included any birthday cash. I think he assumed that by calling himself "Dad" he remained tethered

to us by some paternal thread. When in fact, the tether he did create is between his five children, each of us unsure of how to process our feelings for him or understand why he still called himself our Dad. I may not talk to my brothers and my sisters as much as I should, we are all busy adults with full lives, but I love them. The shared experience of our childhood bonded us. We are trench buddies.

Our sweet mother never talked trash about my father which so often happens in divorces these days. She would answer our questions honestly, but we were in survival mode. Dwelling on the past was a luxury we couldn't afford and what was the point anyway? He wasn't coming back. He moved to Seattle for a job. It felt like he moved as far away from us as he could get without falling off the map. He was a thing that had existed in our life and then he didn't. For him, I am sure we were frozen in time as the children we once were, never growing any older, never having any problems, just joyful happy children. We did grow up though, we had families and careers, we became fully formed humans and rarely gave him much thought.

When my youngest sister was seventeen, she told my mother and stepfather that for graduation she wanted a trip to see our father. Several years before, we had moved from the Midwest to the suburbs of Washington DC. We missed having our grandmother, our aunts, uncles and cousins nearby. She was curious about our father. She was only six when he left. Who among us can remember much from being six. My stepfather paid for her plane ticket and hotel room. God bless his soul he was a good man. The trip was a disaster. Our father was aloof and distant. He treated my sister like a tourist, wanting to show her around but was unwilling to engage in any meaningful conversation. He refused to let her meet his wife. He had married his girlfriend, the secretary from work who offered him an escape from a life that overwhelmed him. My sister came home from Seattle feeling defeated and wishing she had just gone back to Chicago to visit people she knew already loved her. Her hope for a relationship with him ended in disappointment. He had rejected her once more often than the rest of

us, and two times too many.

The year I graduated from high school the family took a multi week, cross country car trip out west to attend a family reunion in Montana, visit friends in Utah and Colorado and see all the sites on the way there and back. We were seven people, driving across the country in a station wagon in June and July. I am quite certain that I had a bad attitude before we had even pulled out of our suburban Virginia driveway. In some families, they would still not be talking to one another as a consequence of a trip like this. My mother, ever kind hearted, thought how sad it would be to be that close to my father and not give him the chance to see his children. She got his contact information from one of his many siblings and reached out to him. They arranged a meet up. We were to wait for him at the main lodge in Yellowstone National Park on an arranged day and time. When the appointed day and time arrived, our parents dropped us off at the Lodge and then parked in the vicinity to keep a distant eye on things. The five of us sat on the front porch of that lodge for hours. He never showed. When we arrived home from the trip there was a post card from him mailed from within the park. He claimed to have not been able to find us. We believe he drove past, saw us sitting there and lost his courage. Who knows what happened. My mother's heart broke. She believed that she had let him hurt us again. She vowed to never let that happen again. After that fiasco, the trip felt like it would never end. I was eighteen, I missed my boyfriend and friends. I was anxious to start my post graduation life. I had had enough of "family togetherness." I wanted to go home. I look unhappy in a lot of the pictures taken on this trip. Being stood up for a date with good 'ole dad was just the icing on the cake.

My life took a fast forward not long after our trek out west. I got married a year later, had a baby right away, another after just eleven months (Irish twins) and my third when I was just twenty six. I was in the thick of child rearing and trying to keep our heads above water. There was very little contact between my father and I going

both ways for many, many years. My marriage was as happy as it could be for having been just barely out of my teens and pregnant at the onset. We did our best despite growing apart over the years. Who knows what you're going to want in a partner when you're nineteen years old? We did raise three really great kids though and I'm proud of us for that. When our messy divorce finally came in 2002 I found myself in dire straights. I had a job I loved as an assistant in an elementary school library but the pay was terrible. My ex paid child support but it barely covered the mortgage. I needed money. I had pawned my wedding ring and borrowed to the point of embarrassment from my parents. I felt desperate. At my lowest, I wrote my father and demanded that he help me. I thickly smeared guilt and obligation all over the letter. A few weeks later I received a letter back with two cashier's checks totaling around \$1,000. I can't remember the exact amount but it certainly was not a drop in the bucket considering all the years of back child support he had never paid. The card included a note that pretty much said "Don't ask again. This is all there is." I thanked him and we easily resumed ignoring one another. Radio silence from him was comfortable and familiar. We went on this way for a very long time.

And then, a few years ago, his wife died. They were married for 40 plus years and then she died, and something changed. Blame it on loneliness, old age, remorse, or a sudden desire to get right with God...we don't really know but suddenly there he was. He started sending birthday flowers, Christmas cards, small checks, copies of life insurance policies with us as the beneficiaries. He made my sister the executor of his will. He moved to South Carolina to live near his sole remaining brother. We panicked. What did this mean? What does he want? What is our legal and moral responsibility towards him? Does he want us to take care of him when he gets old? Will he show up at my door? How is Mom going to feel about this? We joked about how short the distance is between South Carolina and Virginia and that he would show up at my house before he showed up at their houses further north. We didn't need a dad. Our stepfather had filled that role nicely. We didn't trust it. It felt suspicious. An escalating worry

started to form about why he was 'coming back around'. We might not have needed him but maybe there was some reason he needed us and that's what worried me. Then, as if right on cue, I got a text message from my sister. "He wants to meet." I wasn't surprised. We saw it coming from a mile away. We knew eventually that it would happen. What we had to figure out was what we wanted to do about it.

