

# *Daddy*

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**M**y father is seventy-six years old and he has lost at least 80% of his hearing. It has been difficult for him as it has been for us, who have had to live with his disability on a daily basis. There has been too much unnecessary shouting, and too many outbursts of emotion, especially on the part of my mother who had to stay home and put up with him practically twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. My mother, who had been so used to the idea of existing alone for more than three decades because my father had to work overseas, suddenly found herself living with a stranger. Though he was not completely an outsider, to my mom, he was like an alien.

My dad's father died during the war when he was five years old. Thus, when he became a teenager, he had to work in different construction sites in the city away from his mother in Bataan. My father was not much of a talker. His words were spare and his sentences economical. I think this was because he did not have many friends to hang out with and talk to when he was growing up, having been forced by circumstances to mature early and take on the daunting task of providing for his mother and himself. When I was a kid, I would always see a small group of his friends, not more than five of them, dutifully come to the house during important occasions like birthdays, wedding anniversaries, and fiestas.

Up to his retirement a decade ago, my dad was never remiss in providing for our needs, even if it meant working in harsh conditions away from his family. I think that being hard of hearing was the result of his

prolonged exposure to machines, big and noisy monsters, which he was to tame and subdue if he was to operate them in industrial facilities and offshore drilling stations here and abroad.

When I was a toddler, my father would come home at eight in the morning, after his night-shift duty as instrumentation electrician at the Elizalde Steel Corporation in Barrio Kapitolyo, Pasig. Tired from the back-breaking work, he would sleep the entire day in our room, on the second floor of my maternal grandmother's home in Tondo, during which time I would play with my two sisters and cousins in the lounging area just outside our bedroom. Before long, we would move downstairs and there would be a maelstrom in the living room. Our father would be rudely roused from sleep by our shrill voices as we got too excited in our children's games, by loud breaking sounds of things crashing and breaking apart, or by my siblings crying in unison if they got forsaken by our cousins and abandoned by their older playmates. Father's temper was short, his right hand swift—snatching or scooping anything that could unequivocally convey his wrathful dismay.

One time, in a fit of anger over what I can no longer remember now, he threw my mother's newly-bought dining table centerpiece: a wicker basket of tropical fruits cast in resin and painted beautifully in warm tropical colors. My sisters and I were stricken dumb. My mother, who was usually a banshee, was also stunned into silence. His muted rage was my earliest initiation to violence.

I did not have a good relationship with my father when I was growing up. He spoke a little and punished a lot. I remember always hiding underneath my grandmother's skirt, holding on tightly to that urine-drenched, long, printed saya every time he would run after me with a slipper or a belt. But, I was untouchable in my maternal grandmother's presence because I was a personal favorite. At those who challenged her, Lola lashed out, with her tongue—a double-bladed sword which cut deeply. Which was why father never crossed her path, more out of deference, I think, rather than out of fear.

My father was an absentee father during my formative years. Perhaps this was the reason why I had stronger bonds with my mother who was self-reliant, strong, and hard-working. I remember my mother would bring me, when I was four years old, to Aguinaldo Institute at Calle Azcarraga corner

Recto Avenue in Manila, where she took a course in dressmaking. I would run around the classroom enthusiastically picking up discarded pieces of Kraft pattern paper scattered on the floor with my two small hands, then raising them up like a supplicant to the goddess of fashion, a bejeweled mannequin standing majestically in front of the room, dressed in the latest student creation—a draped gown in gold chiffon with fully-beaded floral appliques on the bodice and on the edges of the heavily starched butterfly sleeves.

My father was an introvert, given to too much brooding and isolation. I very seldom heard him laugh, though sometimes, he would desperately crack jokes which pathetically never reached their proper punchlines. Always serious in demeanor, he enjoyed watching his favorite basketball games and boxing matches on television by himself. We never shared a common preference. I enjoyed watching “The Waltons,” “Paper Chase,” “Wonder Woman,” “The Bionic Woman,” and beauty contests; while his fascination had always been with action films, news programs, and sports broadcasts. In “Running Shoes,” a moving fictional account of an estranged relationship between a father and his son, written by the American gay writer Rick Barrett, the narrator underscores the distance between himself and his son based on dissimilarities in values and hobbies—the father preferring to watch contact sports on television, and enjoying numbers and computations, which his son, Todd, with his creative inclination and artistic temperament, could never completely comprehend, much less appreciate.

My dad was never enthusiastic when I would come home in the wee hours of the morning showing off my trophies from the different beauty contests I participated in. Unlike his mother, my Impo in Abucay, Bataan, who even recruited her antiquarian friends in their native kimona and saya as cheerleaders when I joined a local beauty pageant in her hometown. One time, she saw me fetching water from the neighbor’s water pump and reprimanded me because she was afraid that my biceps would become pronounced. “*Hindi bagay,*” she said, “*mukha ka pa namang babae.*” She got the two pails of water and carried them unceremoniously to the bathroom.

I never knew if my father was genuinely happy when I went to Japan to work as an entertainer. He never wrote to me when I was there and never discussed it after. As far as he was concerned, I was wasting my time with

frivolities because I did not pursue the career which my undergraduate education had adequately prepared me for. I never told him that my experience in the land of samurais, Hello Kitty, and bento boxes was crucial in my creative development as a person. My skills as a performer and entertainer were of great value when I started teaching in the late 80s, having realized the bleak future ahead of me as a showgirl.

I think that the only time my father became proud of me was when I started to teach in 1988. I got a full-time teaching job at Trinity College of Quezon City, which became my home for seven years, and where I spent some of my happiest and most fulfilling moments as a teacher of Literature. During the monsoon seasons with its heavy rains and frequent flooding, my father would carry me on his back until we reached dry land, like the reverse of Aeneas carrying his old father Anchises while fleeing the burning city of Troy.

After his retirement, my father would contemplate life and its vicissitudes far from the madding crowd—in the blue room, the farthest and most secluded part of the house, where he also went to sleep all by himself. This is his safe haven, an interior universe so unlike the hustle and bustle of the City's underside; so different from the industrial noise of power plants and drilling stations which he had known all his life; so distant from the familiar and the familial that inform him as a person. He would escape to that world he had created, very much like his mother in the province, who by deliberate choice, lived contentedly alone until the day she passed on her anting-anting to my cousin's wife so she could finally be reunited with her dead guerrilla husband, in the great beyond.

This was his strength, this ability to abscond to a parallel reality, which he created in order to accommodate his difficult existence. He endured years of working in the Middle East—Syria, Oman, Kuwait, U.A.E., and in Southeast Asia—Brunei, Malaysia, and Singapore. He endured because he had become so accustomed to the spatial and temporal distance separating himself from other people. My mother said that my father's social skills were not fully developed compared to ours, because he was never gregarious, feeling awkward and aloof in the presence of other people. My mother and I are cordial charmers, which, according to a transgender sexagenarian tarot card reader-cum-female impersonator, can allow us to tame wild beasts with our gentle words and soothing touch.

For my dad it must have been difficult raising me. Like other Filipino fathers with gay, *bakla*, or queer offspring, he must have been too afraid or too confused to find his only begotten son failing to develop according to his image and likeness. Since a son is a reflection of his father, what image of him do I behold in the mirror?

When my father sensed that I had taken over the onerous responsibility of bread winner of the family, he started building a bridge so we could finally have access to his world. He managed to talk to us more often, started going out with us on out-of-town recreation trips, and joining family reunions during homecoming visits and during holidays. He became more approachable and outgoing.

In January of this year, my Father had a stroke which impaired his movements and slurred his speech. I would see him often struggling to regain his old gait and his normal speech. He seemed so helpless, like a child who has to be assisted in walking, to be fed when hungry, and to be cared for constantly. My sisters became his legs and arms; my niece and nephew, his eyes and ears; my mom, his mouth; and I, his heart.

I believe that on days like these, when the world spins too fast, my quiet father hears every sound—listening attentively to every word and every heartbeat, spoken or not.