

Prodigal Son

My wife and I moved to Sin City about a year and a half ago to escape the sprawling mass of writhing humanity that keeps spreading like a malignant cancer from the City of Angels—fifteen million strong and growing.

Strangely enough—from this vantage—we actually moved there to escape the strangulation of life in a small city where every street corner seemed to hold memories, some good, but mostly bad, from the banal lives we lived before our marriage. The Lilac City's once sweet fragrance had been dispersed by the breeze of time, and in the same fickle wind the bright lavender blossoms fugaciously waned to a dark rust hue; too many exes, too few opportunities, and the bright lights of the big city beckoned us like the siren call of the sea nymphs.

And despite our harried exodus from the Pacific, the time we'd dwelt on the sunny coast was well spent. We'd advanced our careers far beyond our expectations, and even more importantly to me, managed to erect a bridge that spanned a paternal chasm created more than twenty years previous by a rebellious son.

My father lived a mere three-hour drive from our new home in Los Angeles, and he welcomed me—the quintessential prodigal son—back into his life with open arms. The rough husk of unfamiliarity created by decades of separation fell away effortlessly, and we soon forged a steel bond from the iron of his patriarchal love and tempered by the heat of shared blood. I came to treasure his perspective on problems I faced, and wondered how I survived more than twenty years without his sage counsel—I still regret all those lost years.

Our move across the Mojave Desert lengthened considerably the geographical distance between father and son, and I recently started to feel guilty about the amount of time that had transpired since my last visit with dad.

I travel a lot in my quest for sustenance and filthy lucre, but not often to his quaint corner of the San Joaquin Valley. My guilt finally got the best of me, and I decided to schedule a road trip that included a stop in the little Norman Rockwellian farming town where he's resided for many years now.

The nice thing about small towns is that stereotypical men like myself can eventually find our way to our intended destination without stopping to ask for directions—even a blind hog occasionally finds an acorn. I made a quick stop at the floral department of a local grocery store—the perfect opportunity to humbly seek the most expeditious path to my destination—and then ignorantly continued upon my journey, egotistically confident that I'd soon find my way. I could have called dad to ask for help, but I didn't think he'd answer, and truth be told, I didn't have his new number.

After a couple more wrong turns I finally blundered onto the street he'd moved to a little over three years ago, and then parked in front of his residence.

I turned off the ignition, and listened to the pinging of the cooling engine for a few moments before I left the emotional sanctuary of my car. I've never considered myself a masochist and usually flee—quickly—any scene sure to bring me pain. With forty years under my lengthening belt, I've found it's much easier to obtusely deny the existence of an agonizing situation rather than to confront it directly.

After a few moments of quiet reflection, the heavy yoke of guilt finally forced me to make my way through the many rows of carefully tended flowers to his granite porch.

Not wanting to disturb dad's close neighbors by calling out for him, I sat down on the trimmed grass alongside his porch and watched the late afternoon sun start to drop from the sky.

The sultry breeze felt good on my face and I aimlessly plucked the few errant weeds that had started to creep up the stone step. I felt rather than heard dad come out to sit with me, and I didn't bother looking back at him before speaking.

"I've missed you, dad."

Over the past few years our relationship had deepened to the point where his words could be unspoken, but felt nonetheless.

And me, I'm a talker. In my more introspective moments I can look back and realize that while I've always had time to talk, I've rarely taken—let alone made—time to listen.

"You know dad, I wonder sometimes. I've been chasing this dream of being a writer; I guess that's what I've always wanted to be. But if you think about it, writing has got to be the most arrogant of aspirations, the most conceited of vocations; putting pen to paper with the audacity to think that someone—anyone—really cares about our opinion or viewpoint, let alone a story we dream up."

I could feel his understanding smile.

"Is it just a pipedream dad? Should I let go and give it up? I mean, maybe I can eke out a meager living as an apprentice wordsmith, but I'm no Hemingway or Steinbeck."

Words unspoken hung heavy in the late August evening air, but it seemed I could almost smell autumn on the breeze, and my mind quickly shifted gears.

"Can you believe it's been four years since we hunted antelope in Montana dad? I put in for their drawing again, but didn't get a tag. I did get lucky in Wyoming though—I drew both deer and antelope tags—and believe it or not, Donna wants to come along as an observer. Damn, I wish you could come too."

He didn't need to tell me that he wished for the same thing—I already knew—but dad doesn't get out anymore.

I remember watching him reluctantly move into his current residence three short springs ago. He wasn't ready to leave the large house he'd lived in for many years, but the seasons on the calendar don't always match those of our lives, and it was time. I watched the movers with a heavy heart and tears in my eyes that chilly spring day, and I made sure they handled his beautiful new oak bed with extra care.

"I'm going up to Spokane next week; it's Amanda and Kayci's first day of school you know. I haven't missed a first day of school yet, and I'm not about to start now, even if I can't talk to them. I'll never know how you dealt with the pain of being pushed out of my life dad—not being able to be a part of my daughters' lives hurts like hell."

I stopped to swallow the lump in my throat, and wiped the wetness from my eyes before continuing my emotional monolog.

"Dad, I'm sorry it's taken me so long to come see you. I hope you know I think about you all the time, but life just seems to get in the way."

I felt a cool touch on my shoulder and knew it was dad's way of telling me he understood. Hanging my head, I let the dark clouds of pain and remorse rain from my eyes.

“All those wasted years, dad. Why did it take me so long to see the light? And will it take my daughters as long—or will they ever see?”

As usual, I was talking without listening, and it wasn't until I paused to catch my breath that I heard dad's gentle voice.

“I love you, son.”

The sound of his voice startled me, but the profundity of those four words washed away my grief, and replaced it with the comfort of a father's love. Those four small words told me that he would always be there for me, and always be in my corner.

I realized that my father's love transcended time and space, as did my love for my daughters. I was struck with the epiphany that life isn't about how much we get, be it money, accolades, or even love, but by how much we give—how much we love others.

We have the capacity to forgive, but being human, we can never truly forget; so it's likely that I'll always carry the ponderous burden of regret for not returning to my father sooner—but now, it seems lighter somehow.

I stood up filled with vain hope, and looked around to see if my dad would make a physical appearance to accompany his voice, but I was still alone amongst the field of stones.

The warm breeze rustled the dry, brittle leaves of a nearby oak, and then whispered in my ear again.

I leaned down and brushed the dust from the etched inscription before carefully placing fresh flowers onto dad's granite marker, and then I paused for a moment before walking to my car.

“I love you too, dad.”