

## Watching the Slideshow

*Justine Johnson*

It's funny how your perspective of things can change. When you were five, you made a mad dash for the legs of your father in the church foyer, only seconds later to lift your eyes and discover that you were actually clinging to the limbs of a kindly older man with the same style of shoes. When you were eleven, you stood next to a hospital bed bearing the sleeping body of your father, whose legs were now weak and temporarily useless—although you didn't know that at the time. All you could see hours later was traffic behind the family mini-van, but even that was blurred by the tears that flooded your eyes like the melting snow on the roadside.

Then suddenly you were seventeen and your eyes stared down the chemistry problem that you simply could not comprehend. Your father's shoulder pressed against the back of the couch as he leaned to his left to give you yet another "helpful" example. Your eyes rolled toward the ceiling. What seemed like seconds later, you embraced your father in church again, but this time, it was actually him . . . and this time, your eyes were buried in his shoulder, drenching it in salt water.

You didn't see much of your father during freshman year. There wasn't much time for parents, and certainly not for farm life. You turned nineteen and your heart broke as a friend failed you.

The next fall, you went back to college and tried to push away the image of your father choking up as he embraced you that August afternoon. People broke you again, this time piercing you so deeply that you became homesick for the first time since beginning college.

And these were some of the things that led you to where you are now: sitting on your futon, pressing a cell phone to your ear. Your twenty year-old eyes stare at the paper clip on the carpeted floor as you listen to your father's voice on the other end of the line. "Let me pray for you," he says and you unexpectedly remember those times when you rolled your eyes to the ceiling behind his back. You listen to his voice gently rumble through the phone line. He had always been your father, but he hadn't always been Daddy.

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As your mind begins to create slideshows of memories, some flash by in still pictures. Others slide before your eyes in real time with a carefully-crafted soundtrack humming in one of the many layers of video. You select and drag these memories into files and drop those files into a folder for safekeeping. For times such as these.

*Click.*

“Daddyyyy!” You were five when you ran to embrace those unfamiliar legs. Daddy had the same shoes as Gordy Thomas, so of course it was him. As soon as you wrapped your arms around the grey dress pants, a chuckle arose from the body belonging to the legs. You raised your eyes to see Gordy’s laughing face looking down at you. It didn’t take you longer than five seconds to dash away, your tiny face probably redder than your favorite color. Which, even at that age, *was* red.

Those were the days when your family lived in the crowded trailer house located approximately twenty feet in front of the run-down two-story building in the backyard. Daddy was working on renovating it at the time. Inside the kitchen of your tiny home, Daddy frequently sat at the head of the table with you snuggled close to him, seated on his lap. No humiliations there.

*Click.*

Daddy finished renovating the big house when you were nearly six. Suddenly, you had a humongous bedroom on the second floor and your very first big kid bed. When you walked downstairs to the kitchen the next morning, Daddy had set up a temporary dining area next to the window. He made his customary pancakes the size of dinner plates. Seated at the table, you stared outside in wonder at your old home, which still rested in the front yard.

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Sometimes you pulled on mud-covered boots and a puffy coat and snuck outside at seven in the morning to walk across the road to the barn, hoping to find Daddy milking. He raised his head from its former resting place on the cow’s warm, fuzzy belly and smiled at you through his big glasses. “Hi, baby cakes. What are you doing up?”

“I just wanted to come chore with you,” you replied through small, numb lips. “Have you fed the cats yet?”

Daddy grinned knowingly and shook his head, his breath making funny little clouds when he spoke. "You wanna help me later?" You found a wooden post to lean against and waited eagerly for him to finish milking.

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You didn't help Daddy chore very often, though. Typically, your first interaction with Daddy was at about eight when the smell of fresh pancakes and hot syrup began to waft up the stairs through your open door.

"Good morning . . ." Daddy called in his typical you-should-be-up-by-now tone.

You clambered downstairs and asked the typical eight-year-old's question, "What's for breakfast?"

"Pickle pops," Daddy responded, as usual.

You plopped down in your chair. "Daaaaaad. I mean for real!"

"Well, I made some pancakes if you want some."

"Yes, please!" you cried eagerly.

So Daddy picked up a knife from beside his plate stacked with four pancakes and asked, "Three strips or four?" He slid the butter knife through the cakes in a methodic *tick, tick, tick, tiiiiick* on the plate. It was always three short ticks followed by a long one when he scraped the knife against the edge of the glass plate. The scent of warm wheat flour mixed with the sweet aroma of homemade syrup.

Then there were the mornings when Daddy made more pancake mix. You sat in your chair at the kitchen table, bare feet resting on the rung of your wooden chair that Grandpa had so carefully refurbished years before. Your bare legs, only partly covered by your nightgown, wiggled back and forth as you watched Daddy scoop shortening out of the container and scrape it off the spoon into the mixing tub with his calloused finger. You listened to Daddy's stories about when he was a little boy as he tapped the side of the mixing tub and rotated it, stirring with a fork.

*Click.*

One of Daddy's favorite things to do was sing in public using the silliest voice possible. When you were in the Hy-Vee parking lot, he grabbed your hand and the hand of whichever sibling walked on the other side of him and began singing, "I wanna hold your

haaaaand.” His normally smooth and soothing voice varied in pitch and quality with each syllable.

“Daaaaaad!” you cried, as usual.

He grinned down at you innocently and swung your hand back and forth. “What? Don’t you like my lovely singing?”

A groan arose from you and your siblings. “You’re *embarrassing* us!”

Daddy pretended to look genuinely surprised and hurt. “Oh! I’m sorry. Maybe this is better.” His voice switched back to its previous quality. “Hooooow dry I aaaaaaam, hooooow wet I’ll beeeee, when I—”

“DAAAAAD!”

*Click.*

Some days, you spent the day in the tractor with Daddy. It was a little crowded with all three siblings smashed inside the small space with him, but he loved the company and he told you stories for hours. During the warmer days, you would sit in the window of the tractor, which no longer had any glass in it, with one tiny arm wrapped around the frame and the other clutching the armrest. When the weather got chillier, you took a place on the armrest and clung to his arm instead. Occasionally, you moved to his lap and let his legs absorb most of the bumps the tractor hit in the field or driveway.

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Your feelings about embarrassment and crowded tractors changed for a short time during that Christmas when you were eleven. Daddy’s legs started buckling under him when he walked. The extended family bustled around your house, getting ready for the Saturday meal, but Daddy shuffled. You didn’t notice anything different at the time. It wasn’t until your older cousins walked outside to where you were playing and said that Mama was taking Daddy to the hospital that you knew something was wrong. When he was transferred to a city hospital later that day, you didn’t understand why he had to be there.

You spent New Year’s Eve with your cousins in a hotel room that year, just a few blocks from where Daddy slept in a sterilized room. He could hardly walk. The right side of his face drooped with palsy, and you were told he would have to stay for a while.

Daddy had Guillain-Barre syndrome. When you lay in bed at night, you cried because you were afraid. Maybe you should have cuddled with him more. No one told you that he almost died. Looking back, you might not have been able to handle it.

He came home after nine days and rested. The facial palsy healed, but Daddy could not walk at full speed for weeks. When he finally returned to work-till-you-drop pace, your family savored the time you had with Daddy every night, made more precious by the heightened awareness of life's fragility.

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On the days when he stayed home and worked on projects, you could always hear sermons or Rush Limbaugh crackling through the speakers of an old portable radio. You spent many afternoons in the nearby corncrib clubhouse conquering the invisible enemies that threatened your family's security with Calvary Chapel theology or political rants serving as your soundtrack. Occasionally, an especially ridiculous Limbaugh tirade caused an "Oh, shut up," to drift from inside the machine shed.

Daddy didn't always agree with the words broadcast, but he enjoyed the thought-provoking conversations that came out of them. Even at that time in your life—*especially* at that time in your life—the two of you talked about theology and politics often. Daddy never believed in waiting for you to grow up for deep thinking. Beginning with a foundation of Old Testament history and knowledge of basic ethics, he built an awareness of the world into your often-stubborn brain. When your passion for what you believed matched Rush Limbaugh's, Daddy looked at you and said, "Someday that's going to get you in trouble."

You rolled your eyes and continued to feed your self-righteous, sheltered fire.

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Your stubbornness built a false callous over your soft skin. Daddy kept telling you that you needed to grow a thicker skin, but you ignored him and pulled farther and farther away with every day that passed.

Arguments became more frequent in the next six years. Your heart ached to stop hurting him every time you left a conversation with terrible words, but there was something inside of you that continued to do it anyway. Daddy was really good about not fighting back. The hurt in his eyes was fight enough to effectively shake your tiny world. And still, you hurt him again and again.

*Click.*

When you were seventeen, you inched through chemistry. Every time you failed a test, Daddy's disappointment was nearly too much to handle. He never said he was disappointed. He merely pushed harder to study together. That was far worse than disapproval.

At times, you sat slumped on the couch, head aching with stress and eyes burning with frustration. Daddy leaned closer to look at your hefty textbook that always cut off the circulation in your legs. "Now, let me give you an example," he said. Your eyes rolled up to examine the ceiling when you were positive he wasn't looking. You didn't get it, and you never would. It was pointless to try.

*Click.*

Year eighteen came far too quickly for both of you. Daddy wasn't ready to let go of his first little girl, although he did a good job of not talking about that too much. You wanted to be a writer, but you didn't know what that would look like. After picking up information on a few schools at a college fair, you found one with a writing major. It didn't take long for you to throw out the rest of the packets.

*Click.*

By the time you hugged Daddy goodbye during fall orientation, you had stopped hiding how eager you were to be independent. It didn't matter that he had once been a student himself; you were sick of hearing life advice when you were so close to experiencing it yourself. For the first time in your life, you had your own social life and you didn't have to ask for permission to go somewhere on a weekend. You knew that Daddy missed you and wanted to know how you were doing, but phone calls were one of your least favorite things. So you would go a month without talking to him. The fewer questions you had to answer, the less advice you would receive.

Then, a friendship fell apart. You were completely devastated. Depression ate you from the inside out, and a bitterness formed in your heart.

May arrived and you went home, aching from the broken friendship that had nearly destroyed you. You didn't really want to help Daddy with planting, but he needed an extra hand. So you learned how to drive the tractor one beautiful morning with Daddy perching precariously on the armrest beside you, his tan arm resting on the back of the seat.

Daddy left the tractor after a couple of hours. For the rest of the day, you sat and listened to sermons on the radio station he had preset years before. Unlike years ago, however, you weren't talking to Daddy about the theology presented. You finally realized the wisdom you had been ignoring. It was time for you to think for yourself.

*Click.*

Summer camp turned out to be the best stitching for your torn heart. You learned how to be a friend by loving people without smothering them. You found joy in a work-till-you-drop pace. Daddy called you every couple of weeks, and you talked to him about the animals you were caring for. It was through those talks that you realized talking to Daddy could be more enjoyable than life advice or chemistry problem solving.

You had a little more trouble saying goodbye the next fall. With only five days at home after returning from camp, you had barely talked to Daddy since May. You hugged him and watched him leave; it hurt a little more this time. You realized just how much you missed being seven. You were nineteen, now. Old enough to be independent, but not even close to being mature enough.

You still didn't call home as much as you should have, but when you did, the talks were better. Daddy always asked questions that you thought were a little bit silly, but now you knew it was just because he wanted to understand your life. He talked about the crops and which cow he had chased and whether or not it had rained too much that week.

Daddy was always excited to hear about how much you loved the people you were living with that year. Sometimes he would get emotional about it, and you would just sigh and roll your eyes, but not because you were annoyed. When those people hurt you deeply at the end of the school year, you went home and had a long talk with Daddy about it. That helped.

*Click.*

Then came year two of camp. Sometimes phone calls home led to long conversations with Daddy about farm animals, but more often, the discussion eventually turned to loneliness and pain that cut through you. You couldn't stop thinking about the friends who had broken your trust back at school. You knew you had to face them when camp ended.

You spent late nights thinking about how your relationship with Daddy could have been better, and about how much you wanted to make it new. All of those years spent

arguing and avoiding looked so foolish upon reflection. You had plenty of time to process the extensive file full of picture memories during those hot summer nights. There were too many images that made you wince. Something had to improve. Somehow, you had to finish growing up.

*Click.*

Junior year. November. It's nearly 11:30 p.m. and you are sitting on your futon, cell phone pressed to your ear. You are living the memory that could bring healing. It hasn't been documented because it isn't finished yet.

Tears are slowly rolling down your face. You'd like to think that things don't hurt as much as they do, but that would be a lie. You hear the phone ringing, then a click. Someone inhales and a soft, soothing voice speaks sleepily on the other end of the phone line.

"Hello?"

Your voice cracks as you say, "Hi, Daddy."

His voice, still heavy with sleep, responds, "Hey, baby. How are you?"

You take a shaky breath. Years of barricades you had built to protect yourself crash down as you say, "Ummm, not so great."

Daddy listens so well, just as he always has in the past. But this time, you listen well, too. You receive Daddy's life advice with trembling hands and an aching heart. He speaks with compassion and concern. This is not a lecture. This is your father speaking to you with all of the love in the world. You find a sense of security in that baritone voice for the first time in so, so long.

"Let me pray for you."

It's funny how your perspective of things can change.

As an aspiring filmmaker and writer, Justine spends most of her time telling stories. She is most content when telling true stories for others who cannot speak for themselves. Justine is a junior Writing and Rhetoric major at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa.