

Takeoffs and Landings

By Lezley Diaz

As a young girl, I remember lying next to my father and lightly pushing my ears against his chest so that I could listen to the swift breaths move in and out of his lungs. In a moment, he would wake as I know he felt the soft ripples of my ear gently touch his skin. By this time, my father thought I was fast asleep as my eyes remained motionless and my long brown hair spread across the body of the bed, beaming in the shadows of the darkness. In the corner of my half-opened eye, I spotted the reflection of a stout man silently creeping into the depths of my slumber. As I lay dormant, my father leaned in, kissed my cheek and whispered, "I love you." Inside, I felt tingles rush through my body almost as if butterflies had flown through my veins and somersaulted in the crevices of my stomach, although I dared not to open my eyes. This was perhaps one of the only moments in my life where I truly felt loved by my father. Since then, my relationship with my father has changed dramatically as it continually surges up and down the hills of life, yet I keep that memory of my father burned in the chambers of my heart. In the depths of this memory, love remains boundless, magical, and precious; and perhaps even better than to love or to be loved is to feel a sense of security, a feeling that is irreplaceable and more than anything, indestructible.

For a long time, I let my youthful ignorance block reality. Like most children, I was naïve as I nearly accepted and believed all things that adults told me. My mother acted solely as my caregiver and was primarily responsible for my upbringing as my father was rarely home. In fact, I cannot remember many occasions where my father was home. Some days, I stood by the corner of the windowsill wait for hours gazing out the window while thinking of all of the

opportunities that existed outside of my house. I waited for my father. I waited because I yearned for a loving and affectionate father. More than anything, I wanted that. My thoughts contained every conceivable subject I could think of at the moment. At times, I would imagine that I was sailing on a boat. Lightning thunderbolted through the sky and ancient sea creatures erupted from the deep waters of the sea, but nothing ever touched me. I wondered if someone had a better life than I did. I thought of all of the great things I could be doing in the outside world as I half-heartedly wished for my childhood to end. I wanted to break free from my house. Upon envisioning such illusions, I would continually shift my weight back and forth between my left and right foot as I was never strong enough to withhold the long duration of standing. I saw liberty within the birds. I watched curiously as they soared through the sky without a worry in the world as their freedom and jubilation spoke in the gestures of their wings. For a second, I wondered if my father was like those birds, free and willing to catch any opportunity at hand. They could do anything, go anywhere and that may be the sole reason why my father never chose to be home.

The only time I ever did see my father was in the night as he almost always woke me from slumber as he bumped into the furniture upon making his way into the door. I heard his many keys jingle in the door as his footsteps forcefully vibrated the house almost as if he was an elephant marching in a parade. Eventually, I would hear him snoring and I knew that that would be the only glimpse of my father I would get for the day. Days like these went by for what seemed like forever. It was inconceivable to me how two human beings could live with one another and yet still have little contact. The concept was obliterating and even a little nonsensical. I felt this way because for every hour I was not with my father, I was further and further away from knowing my true self. My father was a piece of my puzzle yet I never felt that

that puzzle would be solved. Oftentimes, I waited for him to come home just so that I could know that I had a father and that he cared about me yet the majority of my long waited hours resulted in disappointment as either I fell asleep or my father failed to come home.

I spent many of my days indolently waiting for my father, but he never did come around much. I waited because I was hopeful. I was hopeful in the fact that I truly believed he had the potential to be the soccer dad or that one dad that would stay up with his child all night when they were sick. Sooner or later, I knew this would never happen. I suppose all fathers are not meant to be great dads just as humans are meant to all be great painters, singers, athletes and doctors. Birthdays passed, and he wasn't there. My basketball games passed, and he wasn't there. My childhood passed, and he wasn't there. He was never there, and I couldn't help but feel resentment and anger towards the man who was responsible for giving me life. Eventually I became accustomed to his absence as I tried to move on with my life without him. He was merely a person I shared a living space with: no more, no less. Although I adjusted, it was never easy especially as I watched the paternal loving characteristics of my friends' fathers. Envy amplified over the years as I wished for the perfect father and in extension, the perfect family. There were many days when I felt like sharing my thoughts about my father. At times, I yearned for karma to direct itself towards my father. I wanted him to feel the pain and negligence that he inflicted on me for remaining distant in my life. I wanted to yell at him for not being there when I needed him the most. All of these built up emotions and negative thoughts about my father infested my heart and fumigated my soul almost to the point of explosion, but I never did come up with the words to tell him. In a sense, I created a wall between my father and me, a steel wall that was nevertheless too stubborn to break down.

A large part of my father's absence in my life was due to the complicated relationship that existed between him and my mother. Often when I think of my home, I compare it to a battlefield. Of course, instead of plastic toy soldiers, there were real people. It was real and nothing similar to playing with plastic Barbie dolls. I decided to be neutral yet I ended up always having to decide what warring side I wanted to be on. Bullets fired and injuries formed; irreparable injuries that I would learn later would scar me for the rest of my life. Among the many broken bones, cuts and bruises that I acquired, few of them mended. Of course this war between my parents was merely a metaphor built up in my head, but it felt real and no less a figment of my imagination. When my father was home, my parents were continuously at war. Mostly, their fights were ludicrous, as they were mostly based on money which as a child seemed ludicrous to me. For several nights, I anxiously awaited the arrival of my father, as there was always a chance that there would be a huge fight that night. Two-thirds of the time there was chaos, leaving only a little fraction of my time at home for peace.

My father was abusive, and occasionally his anger was too much to handle let alone grasp. It was difficult for everyone, especially my mother. Sometimes, he hit my mother but it was rare. He was mostly a verbal fighter. As the abuse continued throughout the years, I felt a massive amount of guilt grow within my conscience mostly because I had not done anything to prevent further abuse. Life at this point was abominable and plain unfair. Late, one night, my mom and dad began to argue. In the end, my father told my mother to pack her stuff and leave. He said that she could leave my brother and sister, but I had to go with her. Never in my life has any phrase hurt me as much as what my father said that night. Right then, he confirmed his unloving tendencies that he had towards me for the majority of my young life. My heart was

father was living with another woman. Of course the possibility of him being with another woman rose in my mind again and again but I always pushed it in the back of my mind not wanting to believe that my father would hurt my mother that much after being with her since the age of 16. At first, I was fine with the situation as I knew little about what was truly going on. I was happy because for the first time, things were good at home. There was no fighting and no tension. My father had told me that the woman he was living with was just a friend. I wanted to believe him more so because I did not want to believe the truth. But, deep down, I knew what was really going on.

After a while, I had to accept the situation for what it was. My father had left my mother for another woman. Nothing could sugarcoat that fact. My mom's family repeatedly gossiped about my father as they assumed that he abandoned my mother and his three children. I sat at the table and listened to the negative comments that were being thrown back and forth in front of me. I was appalled and even more than that, I was angry. I had no idea why I felt this way. Most of what they did say was true. He left my mother with three children whom she was forced to care for by herself. After reflecting, I reached a type of epiphany, one of those AHA moments and I realized the real reason why my father left my family: He loved us.

Choosing to let someone go is a courageous act. I never fully understood what love was and what it meant to let go of a loved one. My father let my mother go. I like to think that he did not give up on their marriage but that he accepted reality as it was. In simple terms, he and my mother were not destined for each other. In this aspect, he let her go but he did not let his love for her or his children go. After several years of hardship, my father knew that he would not change. More importantly, he knew that he could not change unless he left and independently invested in his interior self. This was the boldest and wisest decision my father has ever made

and maybe even the best decision he will ever make. I have never known my father as someone who was a good decision maker therefore I was proud. On Christmas some time after my father moved out, my father cried. This was a frightening moment as I never saw my father cry before. He had felt like he lost something, something that one could not replace. I think he felt like no one was on his side. He knew that his family was gone and things would never be the same again. I knew his intentions were sincere and loving but I was angry and at that moment, I was not willing to forgive. I was not in the place to forgive. I knew he felt remorse though and all I could do was feel a little bit of sympathy. I can't say much has changed between me and my father after that, but we have grown to some level of understanding. I guess that was all I could ask for.

Now, life is hard and sometimes extremely difficult especially because my parents are divorced. Despite the fact that my father has moved out of my home, I still have contact with him as we occasionally call each other on the phone although we spend little time together. I think we are at a good place at this point. A loving relationship is potential although it is not quite there yet. We are on talking terms and have made some progress. I talk and he listens. I think that was all I really ever wanted was for him to hear me out. By this time, I was preparing to go away to college. Although we have tried to repair whatever damage has accumulated in our family over the past years, the holidays are difficult, birthdays are difficult and every day in between those days are difficult but I am grateful to my father for having given me a better life. Even more, I am grateful to him for giving my brother and sister a chance to have a happy and healthy home. This is love.

Coming to college was a life changing event in my life as I believe that it helped me develop a stronger relationship with my father. My father was there helping me on move-in day

when I first came to Valparaiso University. That was the only occasion I remember him attending and it meant a lot to me. Of course, the day was full of disorder and for most of the day, my mother, grandmother, aunt, and father tried to help me fix my room. The day seemed too long and I was eager to begin my own life without the aid of my parents. My father was the first one to leave. I had not intended on having a nostalgic goodbye, although I somewhat expected to be sad. I walked my father out to his car and he turned to me and asked me if I needed anything. I answered no and my father started to look deep into my eyes. I thought he was going to give me a long lecture about the responsibility of growing up, instead I heard his voice quivering and his eyes were filled with tears. He told me that he loved me and he was proud of my accomplishments. He knew that I would tackle every obstacle that came my way not only in school but in my future successes. He embraced me, and in that one hug, I knew what love meant- a type of love and bond that only exists between a father and his daughter. I knew that he was sorry for all of the mistakes that he had made in his life and my short life. Right then, I forgot about all of the disappointment I had suffered. I forgot about revenge and envy and doubt. If perfect could be defined in a moment, that moment would be it.

Even today, I get annoyed with my father's childish quirks and his inability to accept responsibility, but I have realized one thing. I may not always like my father, but I will always love him. This type of love is contagious to the point of an epidemic. It is the type of love that has the energy to send massive rocket ships flying into the depths of outer space. It is the type of love that only happens once. It is the prickly sensation of accumulated fears and excitement in one's stomach when a plane takes off, not knowing when and if there will be a landing. It is this type of love. In definition, love is...me and my daddy.