

2016

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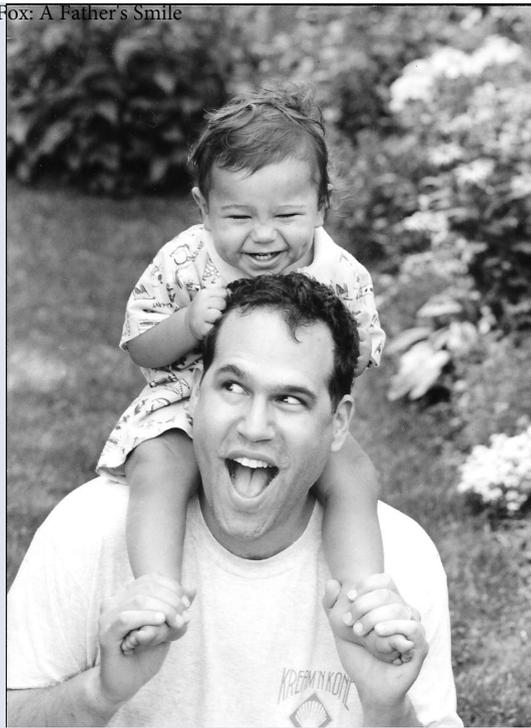
Recommended Citation

Fox, Benjamin (2016) "A Father's Smile," *Intertext*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 1 , Article 19.
Available at: <http://surface.syr.edu/intertext/vol24/iss1/19>

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A FATHER'S SMILE

BENJAMIN FOX



After my father left us over two years ago, my mother did her best to extinguish his fading presence from our home. His office was emptied, his side of the closet stripped down, the old shows he'd watched deleted from TiVo. If it weren't for the photos, one might not have known that I had a father at all.

Those photos were all that remained. One photo of my father and me always caught my attention in those infrequent weeks I spent home from college. It was placed above our unused fireplace, an old black-and-white remnant of the days when I still wore diapers and Dad still smiled with relative ease. I sat on my father's shoulders, hands gripping his dark black hair and my long white shirt covering me like a dress. I smiled with the kind of natural happiness only toddlers have, a big toothy grin that extended down from my face across the rest of my small, pudgy body.

Dad was smiling too. He hadn't changed

much since that photo was taken, at least not physically. He still had the same thick black hair, a gift from the gods that caused strangers to think he was fifteen years younger. His arms that gripped my legs were the same ones that shook my hand after graduation. His eyes were still brown, the same color as mine. The only difference was the smile, which over time grew so forced and hollow that it became a mockery of what it once was.

There was a period in my memory when Dad did not smile much at all. It was a time when he seemed to be out of the house more than he was in it. I never really understood why he was so distant until much later, but it was clear to me from an early age that he was incredibly unhappy, deep in a part of his soul that I would never be able to reach. The sadness was there even when he laughed, made jokes, and kissed my mother on the cheek.

The man whose shoulders I once rested on was a stranger growing up. He was a figure from

the distant past who I thought was to never return. Little did I know that this person was still in my father somewhere, forgotten but not completely gone. For this man to return, my father needed to go on a path, one that he knew would change my family permanently. Sometimes I wondered if it was worth the journey just to see that smile again.

My grandparents often fought during my childhood, and still do to this day. Their battles would begin with an innocuous comment, a slight criticism, or perhaps a repeated request. One would raise his or her voice and the other would reply with even greater frustration. The two would go on like this, sometimes for hours, until the argument fizzled out, usually with a bit of help from their daughter, my mother.

I used to hate their fights. I hated the idea that perhaps they didn't love each other. Perhaps they were going to separate, perhaps all the times I'd witnessed happiness were really just a lie.

My own parents never fought like that, at least not in public or in front of me. Fights between my parents usually involved subjects of great importance, or at least that was what I assumed since they happened so rarely. Not so with my grandparents.

Eventually, I'd had enough. During one such shouting match, I stood between them, a hand on each of their stomachs, my childish, high-pitched voice raised high.

"Please stop fighting!" I yelled.

And for a moment there was silence.

That day my mother explained to me that how my grandparents acted did not signify a broken relationship, but instead a powerful one. My grandparents' love for each other outlasted arguments each day, every day, for more than sixty years. They survived raising three

kids, growing old, as my grandmother's sisters went through broken marriages and inevitable divorces. The constant teasing by my grandfather. The reluctant smiles by my grandmother. The contagious laughter and nostalgic stories which came only moments after another voice-raising row.

That was love.

As I grew older, it became more obvious how mistaken I was about my grandparents' relationship. What I once thought were hurtful words I came to recognize as playful teasing. Though they didn't have the type of relationship I wanted when I was older, for them it worked. I was a junior in high school when I finally recounted this revelation to my father. The two of us often had our deepest conversations while driving in the car. The insulation of glass and metal allowed me to feel a greater level of comfort with my father than I normally did. Though I had no real proof of it, I always assumed that our drives went by Vegas rules.

What was said in the car, stayed in the car.

"You know what I've realized?" I told him as he weaved through suburban traffic.

"Let's hear it," he replied, slightly distracted.

"Grandma and Grandpa are always fighting," I began. "I used to think it was because they hated each other, but then I realized they were just so in love that the arguments didn't really matter."

I waited for my father to make some sort of response but was only met with silence. After a few painful moments, he spoke.

"Do you think that your mother and I don't fight enough?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's just..." he paused. "Sometimes I feel that we don't talk about things in the open as much as we should. That we don't talk enough

about how we feel.”

For reasons I could not comprehend, I suddenly felt very afraid. My father seemed to imply much more by that statement than its simple meaning suggested. I began to tear up.

“What do you mean?” I asked, voice cracking. “Are you and Mom alright?”

He looked over at me, surprised. He didn't seem to realize the effect his words would have on me and quickly began to backtrack.

“Of course everything is alright,” he said. “Look, forget what I said. I didn't mean anything by it. Your mother and I are doing okay.”

Though I knew he was holding back, I managed to calm myself down. We spent the rest of the day picking up presents and ignoring that lingering, uncomfortable moment.

My father left for a business trip soon after we arrived home. I spent the rest of the day going through the motions of my normal weekend routine. I surfed the Internet in the old guest room that we had converted into my makeshift “office” a few years earlier. Funny pictures and blaring hip hop distracted me, but the conversation still lingered in the back of my mind.

Later, my mother knocked on the door and entered in silence before I had a chance to answer. She sat on the couch on the other side of the room.

“Dad told me about the conversation you two had earlier,” she said. “Do you want to talk about it?”

At first, I didn't. All I wanted was for the memory to delete itself like an embarrassing photograph, and for him to never bring it up again. But curiosity got the better of me. I knew that something important was happening behind the scenes of my parents' lives, and I told myself I was finally ready to throw the curtain away.

I sat next to my mom and repeated the question I had asked my father earlier that day.

“Are you and Dad alright?”

Mom hesitated, thinking how exactly to put the words, before answering me.

“We're trying, Ben,” she said. “But we're going through a very difficult situation right now.”

In that moment, something clicked in my head. I recalled the many awkward silences during family dinners and the growing lack of affection my parents seemed to have for one another. I spat out the first accusation that came to mind.

“Is he cheating on you?”

“No,” she said, stalling. It was clear she had something she wanted to say, but couldn't quite figure out the words. “It's something more complicated than that.”

“Is he gay?”

The words came out before I realized what they meant. The look on my mother's face said it all. I immediately began to cry and soon she was crying, too. We cried together for a very long time, holding each other, not speaking.

“How did you...” she eventually stammered. “How did you know?”

How did I know? I thought back to all the times I had questioned him, all the times he did things that just didn't add up. The time that I borrowed my father's phone and discovered a picture of a shirtless man he had searched on the Internet. Or when I first became stuck in the midst of teenage sexuality and my father sat me down and told me, “it's alright to look at men the same way you look at women. You'll figure out what you like eventually.”

Maybe it was the way he conformed to certain gay stereotypes. My father loved fashion, hated sports, loved art, loved Broadway.

But in the end, those details were only the



backdrop to a simple truth I had always known about my father. For a long time, he wasn't happy. For a long time, he didn't smile. For a long time, I didn't know why. And now, for the first time, I did.

Two and a half years previously, I learned my father was gay. Two years previously, he moved out of the house. One year and four months previously, I told my closest friends.

It's a process.

My father had made offers before. There was a service for the Jewish holiday of Passover targeted at gay men. There was a speaker at the local college who was a major figure in gay rights. There was a performance of the play *Kinky Boots*, a story involving transgender women, at a nearby theater. Each time I said no.

When my father asked me to join him and his company in marching with the DC Gay Pride parade, I was prepared to respond as I always did. But this time, something stopped me. In a sudden realization, I knew I was ready to see that part of my father's world for the first time.

I made my way through crowds of people covering the blocked-off city streets. It seemed

like the entire city was shut down for today: a bubble of pride smack in the middle of our nation's politically-charged capital. Men in drag flaunted their newfound femininity for various admirers, their sparkling dresses glinting in the summer sun. A large group of men walked by with eyes hidden behind large sunglasses and bodies covered only by bright red speedos. Their heads were held high, calculatedly oblivious to the attention their presence commanded. I recognized one of them as my freshman year ceramics teacher. It was awkward to say the least.

I walked toward where my father and his coworkers were stationed near the back of the parade line. We all wore matching blue T-shirts, given out from a truck that also held beads, pens, cozies, and other merchandise emblazoned with the company logo. Dad was talking to Brian, a friend who he introduced me to a while earlier. It was obvious from the way they interacted that they were more than friends.

My father looked happy here among the rainbow flags and flying beads, and though I felt slight discomfort as an outsider, I pushed it to the back of my mind for him.

In the memories I have of that day, one thing stands out more than anything, more than the penis shaped balloons, the run-ins with old teachers, the men in bras, sparkling underwear, and the blazing summer sun.

As I took in the next stage of my father's life, I recognized that man in that old photo above the fireplace. The one my mother still kept there years after he left our home.

A man who still gets called forty-five as he creeps closer to sixty. A man with thick black hair, who finally is starting to show a little gray. A man who smiles. A man that I am proud to call my father.