Daddy’s Little Girls

Every time I hear the distinctly rhythmic click, click, click of a car’s turn signal against the silence of a short halt at a stop sign or traffic light I am twelve years old again. I am twelve years old and I am riding in the passenger’s seat of my dad’s station wagon, buckled into the weathered and stained cheap velvet seat cushions that used to resemble a burnt burgundy shade of color. Aromas of coffee and wet grass and sweat mingle in the air, orchestrating into an odor that remains unique to the drives home with my dad after a Saturday morning soccer game. With each brake or turn of the tires my water bottle slides around the floor and against my shin guards and muddy cleats, liquid sloshing and ice cubes colliding into its plastic walls.

Sometimes we stop at Dunkin Donuts afterwards to eat bacon egg and cheese sandwiches with extra ketchup or sometimes we decide to mock the idea of a balanced meal and indulge ourselves in a brunch of ice cream and waffle cones. Sometimes, after a loss or a poor performance, silence haunts our rides and my frustration hinders my desire to converse with my dad. Yet, more times than not, the drives home soak up the breath of our energy and reflections. We chat about one of my especially good corner kicks or laugh about how monstrous #19 was from the other team’s defense. These brief snapshots of father-daughter bonding will always identify the early fall weekend mornings of my childhood.

For six years my dad was my recreational league soccer coach. A recreational soccer coach equals six years of cones, bags of balls, and sketches of plays and positions taking over the trunk of a very brave man’s car. He was a pretty decent coach. Actually he was a pretty great one, despite the fact that he made us run about ten miles every practice. Realistically, it was more like two miles, but it felt like ten. During high school and college my dad was a cross country all-star. This probably explains the torture he put my team and I through. I truly believe
that my dad had a passion for coaching. It seemed to calm him and make him content. As a career my dad works as a dentist. However, a few times on long car rides to away games, he would often tell me that if he could do it all over again he would rather be a high school History or English teacher that coached cross country and track. Dentistry serves my dad well. Yet I believe that coaching runs through his veins.

All the girls on my team loved him. He liked to tease everyone and would constantly fish for smiles and laughter. In return, some of the girls would muster up enough guts to play practical jokes on him. On the very last practice in November of my eighth grade year two of my teammates made up excuses to leave practice early. I stealthily slipped the pranksters my dad’s keys before practice started. Later, while the rest of us were still partaking in suicide sprints and dribbling drills, the girls carefully waltzed away from the practice fields and over to my dad’s classy car with the ever so stylish fake wooden side paneling and stuffed the interior of it to the brim with soda bottles and milk cartons. Then, hiding behind the outdoor restrooms beside the parking lot, they waited patiently for the arrival of an unexpecting coach and the unveiling of a beautifully crafted plan of attack. The look on my dad’s face was priceless, as was the fiery crimson tone of his flushed complexion as the entire team stood around his car clapping and laughing. His expression resembled the stare of a young boy that had just witnessed the performance of a magic trick, both baffled and stunned. My dad took everyone out for Italian ice that night. That was his last night as my coach. It was the beginning of a lot of lasts.

January 5th, 1999 was the final day of my dad’s presence in our house. It was the final day because my parents were separating. They were separating so that they could one day divorce. They wanted to divorce because they no longer loved each other. Thinking about it now, it’s hard to remember if they ever did. I locked myself in the bathroom for over
three hours that night. This all happened right before my return to school from Christmas break and I remember, sitting there on the cold bathroom floor, feeling motionless. I remained stagnant in my somber surrender to this painfully sad situation. It felt similar to the state of mind right before a person is about to faint and his or her senses become manipulated; when one’s hearing gets lost and one’s vision becomes distorted. I often anticipated my parents’ divorce. I thought about it and feared it for years. Yet now, these were not mere thoughts or fears. This was reality. This was my new life.

My dad’s new life consisted of a pitiful little two bedroom apartment. I hated visiting him. I hated how every time I went over it felt like a rainy day even if it was eighty degrees out with a cool spring breeze. I hated it because it was such a lonely looking place and it hurt me deeply to picture it as his home. His home was a big backyard with a wooden swing set in it that he built for me when I was three years old. His home was covered in an endless palette of colored Christmas lights every December. His home was a round oak table with dinner on it every night at six o’clock. His home was with me. I only slept over at that apartment once. Only once. As I got up in the middle of that solitary night to relieve my bladder, I walked past my dad’s room and heard stifled movement and deep exhales. My dad was sobbing. As my body froze there, standing on the rough, thin orange carpet, I felt as though someone had taken a gigantic straw and sucked out all the oxygen in the environment. Feeling weightless my throat tightened up. I so desperately wanted to go in there and tell him that I loved him and that everything would work out. However, I could not bring myself to face my father with tears streaming down his cheeks and snot dripping from his nostrils. I would never be able to shake that image from the crevices of my mind. To this very day it remains one of the most
heartbreaking and unnatural feeling memories of my life. That is why it was the only time I slept over. It probably killed him, but I never wanted to hear my father sob again.

Once I started high school I ceased my participation in recreational soccer and played for my high school girls’ team in the spring. In the fall of my tenth grade year I ran cross country. It was my first experience with cross country and I fell in love with the painful races and ecstatic finishes. My dad came to most of my meets, often following me around to different spots on the course, away from the other parents, to encourage me when I felt like my throat was on fire and my legs were going to twist off. I felt like it made him proud because cross country had always been such a huge part of him. That following spring I entered into my second year on the girls’ soccer team. That following spring my dad also started dating a woman named Barb.

Good thing Barb entered my dad’s life. No longer was my dad lonely or lost. No longer did he call me every other day to discuss school or sports. No longer did he seem to miss me. He was supposed to miss me. Thank God for Barb. Barb was modern but not motherly; mature but too young. She was cute but not beautiful; smart but not interesting. She was all wrong. The absence of my dad was a common occurrence for my weekly soccer games. When he had the courtesy to peel himself away from the old ball and chain he wouldn’t even spend the two dollars to sit in the stadium. Instead he merely stood outside the fence surrounding the field. His hands, held above his head, would grab onto the green wire barrier as he observed me from a distance. Most of the time, he would leave before the second half ended. That was the last year I played soccer. We no longer had sports to share between the two of us.

Aruba and Antigua became second homes for the happy new couple. They started a wine collection. All of a sudden my dad discovered his long lost love for karaoke performance. Barb brought out an entirely different man in my father; a man who wore Ralph Lauren and drove an
SUV. Shortly after their relationship began they bought a house together. Even sooner after that they were married. When I turned eighteen my dad did not get me a present, not even a card. He forgot to call as well. The summer after my senior year I did not physically see my dad for over a year. He did not even accompany me to my move-in for my first semester of college. I started to convince myself that he was no longer my dad and that I did not need him anymore.

After a freshman year of college drenched in independence and possibility, my dad decided that he needed to reunite with me. We met at a restaurant, he refused to ever come to my house and pick me up. After ordering our meals and the seemingly never-ending banter of awkward catch up, my dad told me that he had something very important to tell me. I always get extremely nervous when someone tells me this, probably like any other normal human being. He told me that he and Barb decided about nine months ago that they wanted to adopt a baby from China and that she would be arriving in August. I had nothing to say. I grabbed my napkin and started to obsessively tear tiny pieces of it off, stacking them onto my plate. I could not look him in the eye. This man was a stranger to me; a stranger that used to be my dad. Now, he would be receiving a new daughter. Maybe he wouldn’t walk out on this one.

As selfish as it sounds and as much as I love and support the idea of adoption, I did not want my dad to adopt another daughter. I did not understand how he could just discard our entire relationship and then begin a new one with some random little girl. I refused to visit Stella, my dad and Barb’s new daughter, when she arrived in August before my sophomore year of college. She was not my sister. She was nothing.

Inevitably, I was forced to meet Stella. To my surprise it was hard not to fall in love with her. She had a beautiful olive complexion and shiny black hair that looked like a placid lake under the shaded curtain of the moon. Her eyes we small, but they sparkled. I ignored my dad
the first time I visited Stella. He took notice to my stubborn ways. Soon he and Barb were encouraging me to visit more often; and I did. I did, but in my head I imagined that Stella would act as another weapon to distort and destroy any sort of substance that was left dangling between the cracks of my relationship with my dad. Instead, she acted as more of a bridge to slowly bring us back together. When my dad would pick up Stella and swing her tiny legs over his shoulders I saw a man who used to cook me pancakes for dinner when I was sick. I remembered the man who I used to watch vintage horror flicks and eat popcorn with on the couch; the same man who would draw ridiculously, immature pictures of monsters with crayons on the placemats every time we went out to eat. My father is anything but perfect, and he knows this. He knows that he wasted four years of his life when he wasn’t present in mine; but he is in it now.

A few nights before my twenty-first birthday, my dad, Barb, and Stella decided to take me out to one of our favorite Tai restaurants. After I met them at their house we all piled into my dad’s SUV to head over. Over the course of the entire ride Stella invented the brilliant game of constantly throwing her pink stuffed mouse against the back window to make me pick it up and retrieve it for her. I would never succumb to such torment if it were not for her high level of adorableness. Her high pitched giggle echoed throughout the vehicle. Before we arrived at the entrance of the restaurant we hit a red light. I was trying to decide if I was going to order Pineapple rice or Pad Tai when I heard it amongst the silence. Click, click, click. It’s kind of crazy how that turn signal always takes me back to years ago. I turn and look at Stella, her chin jutting upward to display her sassy little smile. She is my sister and I love her. She is just like me. We’re our father’s daughters. Stella is why my dad is back in my life. She is our second chance.