

Fathers and Sons

That Saturday morning Reuben Abbot and his wife, Hope, were strolling hand in hand in the neighborhood park—in spite of the dark, heavy clouds that threatened rain. They were not the only ones to defy the weather forecast and to venture out with no umbrella.

“Oh, look at that precious little girl playing with her dog,” Hope said, pointing.

“Remember when I told you about the toy sheltie my daddy brought home for me on my fifth birthday? How I loved to play with it, take it for walks, and brush its long, sable coat. I have such happy memories of that time.”

“Can’t say I know what that’s like,” Reuben said, slowly shaking his head.

“To have a sheltie?”

“A happy childhood memory.”

Hope squeezed his hand as they walked on the pea-gravel path, crunching the freshly fallen autumn leaves beneath their steps. Suddenly they heard shrieks of laughter. They both turned their heads to the right and saw four children swinging and bailing out from the swings,

two others climbing on a jungle gym, and another sliding down the slide, with three more mounting the ladder behind him.

“I just love to see children playing and having fun,” Hope said. “Speaking of children, I’ve been thinking. I’m thirty-six now, almost thirty-seven. If we’re going to have a child, this would be a good time.”

“You know how uncomfortable that subject makes me.” Reuben took his hand from hers.

“But, Reuben, when we first got married, you said we couldn’t afford a child yet. So I waited while we both worked hard and saved money. Then you said you wanted to focus on your career. So I waited some more. But now you have your book on the American Revolution published, you have tenure at the university, and you’ve been promoted to full professor, with a salary increase to boot. What are we still waiting for?”

Reuben stopped. “I’ve never said this before, though I’ve thought about it for years: I don’t think I could be a good father; I think there’s something wrong with me.”

“Just your ulcers, honey, but the doctor’s treating them.”

“I don’t mean my health. I mean the way I am.”

“But you’re fine. You’ve accomplished so much already.”

“That’s just it.” Reuben took a deep breath. “I work compulsively because I’m terrified of failure. Nothing I do is ever good enough. Everything has to be perfect. I crave recognition, but I’m deathly afraid of criticism. As soon as I finish one project, I can’t stop to enjoy it; I have to start the next one.”

He paused. From the way Hope looked at him, he knew she wasn’t convinced.

“I don’t know how to relax and have fun. I’m uncomfortable being around other people, even you sometimes. I can give a lecture, but I can’t carry on a conversation. I spend too much

time alone because it's safer that way, yet I'm terribly lonely. I'm a mess. How could I possibly be a father?"

Hope took his hand again and started walking, gently pulling Reuben alongside her.

"Why, I think you'd be a great father. You're so smart and talented."

He could see she didn't get it.

"They say history repeats itself. I don't know whether that's true of nations, but I think it is of families. My dad was not a very good father, so I didn't get to learn from him what a good father is, and I don't know how to be one . . . We were never close. Everything was cold and distant in my family. I've suffered horribly from it, and I'm afraid of doing the same thing to my child. I don't want him or her to go through what I did."

"But, Reuben, you know how important this is to me."

He did, and he felt terrible about it. "I'm sorry. Maybe I just need a little more time."

"Reuben, I don't have much more time. It's now or—" Right then deafening thunder drowned out her words, and a downpour drenched them in a matter of seconds. They went running for their car.

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As Reuben turned the key to the kitchen door from the garage, he heard the phone ringing inside. He hurried to pick it up while Hope went to get a towel from the bathroom.

"Hello."

"Reuben, it's about your father."

"Oh, hi, Mom," he said, dripping wet and making a puddle on the linoleum. "What's the problem?"

"He's not well."

“He hasn’t been for a long time, Mom, with the emphysema and cirrhosis, I mean.”

“I think he’s dying.”

“Oh.”

“You haven’t seen him in so long. You should come see him.”

Reuben cleared his throat. “Gee, I don’t know, Mom . . .” See his father face-to-face? He had been dreading this moment for years.

“He may not have long, Reuben. Don’t let him die with things the way they are between you two. Please. Do it for me.”

Everything in him recoiled at the idea, but how could he refuse his mother at a time like this?

“Well, let me think about it, okay?”

“Okay, honey. I hope you can make it. Goodbye.”

Hope came back into the kitchen, drying her hair with a towel.

“Reuben, we have to finish our talk.”

Reuben didn’t want to disappoint his wife or his mother, but he didn’t want to stay and finish the talk or go to see his father either.

“That was my mom on the phone. My father’s dying. She wants me to come.”

“Oh. Then you have to go. We’ll talk as soon as you get back.”

Reuben didn’t want to do either, and now he had to do both.

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After a shower Reuben stuffed a change of clothes, a toothbrush, and a book into a backpack, not knowing exactly when he would return, and kissed Hope goodbye. Now that he was on the road to his parents’ house—a road he hadn’t traveled in twenty years—he had two

hours and fifteen minutes to think about what he was doing. He had kept in touch with his mother by letter and by phone, and even met her for lunch once or twice a year, but he hadn't seen or spoken to his father in all that time. What would he say?

The grade-schooler in him remembered how he once hit a baseball and broke the next-door neighbor's window and how his father whipped him with a belt for it. "Tanning his hide" his father called it. A more or less frequent occurrence. But now the tables were turned. Now he was the strong one and his father the weak one, and, truth be told, part of him wanted to take that baseball bat and smash his father's skull in.

Thump. A pothole in the road? Thump-a-thump. A rough patch? Thump-a-thump-a-thump. No, a flat tire.

Reuben pulled over to the shoulder and coasted to a stop. "Just my luck," he would have said under other circumstances. Instead, his lips stretched into a grin of relief. If he arrived too late to talk with his father, neither his mother nor his wife could reproach him. The flat tire wasn't his fault. Wasn't he doing the best he could?

Reuben found the AAA card in his wallet, called the number on his cell, and got out his book to read while he waited for the roadside-assistance truck to arrive. Ah, nothing like a good book, now all the more enjoyable because with each turn of the page the chances of having to confront his father decreased. He settled into a good read.

After an hour Reuben found himself waiting more than reading. Where was that truck? He hated nothing more than wasting time. Granted, he might not have to see his father. But what if he didn't? His questions would never be answered, and his father would take the incomprehensible reasons for his behavior to his grave. Suddenly, he had a realization. Without the answers he sought, he would never resolve his own ambivalence about being a father. As

much as he wanted to let his father slip away without having to face him, Reuben had to get to him while he was still alive. His marriage depended on it.

The roadside assistance truck could not arrive soon enough, and Reuben's eyes now checked the rearview mirror more often than they lit on the page. At last he saw the hulking truck come lumbering up, as though its driver had all the time in the world. Once the spare tire was aired up and the flat tire switched out, Reuben went speeding down the highway. To hell with the highway patrol.

As he raced ahead, the grade-schooler in him began to give way to the historian. He knew that every event of the past, no matter how horrific, has its cause and wanted to understand why his father acted the way he did. What unique combination of circumstances and events made his father the kind of man he was? If historians could attempt to understand a monster like Hitler, certainly he could try to understand a poor father like his dad.

Besides, his dad was dying. What would be the point of making him suffer now? Yes, Reuben was still angry at his dad after all these years, but he didn't want to be cruel. He didn't want to cause his dad pain just to watch him suffer. No, study his father's history to avoid repeating his mistakes—that was what he really wanted. He could not afford to make the same mistakes with his own child, if he ever had one. As though looking at a stopwatch, Reuben could almost see the seconds flying by. He had to get there before it was too late.

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When Reuben rounded the corner onto his parents street, he saw an ambulance parked in the driveway. Oh, no, he didn't make it in time. He floored the gas pedal for the short distance to his parents' house, then slammed on the brakes in front of it, screeching to a halt. Leaving his

backpack in the car, he bolted to the front door, threw it open, and burst in to see his mother standing there, wringing her hands.

“Mom?” he said, not daring to ask the question burning in his mind.

Just then two paramedics came out of his parents’ bedroom.

“Is he . . .” Reuben’s mother couldn’t finish her sentence.

“We’ve got him stabilized now,” one of the paramedics said. “It’s a good thing you called nine-one-one as soon as he started having trouble breathing. If we had gotten here later, he may not have made it.”

She gave a sigh of relief. “Can we see him?”

“Yes, but keep it short. He needs to rest.”

When the paramedics left, Reuben gave his mom a hug. After just a second, she pulled away and said, “Why don’t you go in and see him, dear?”

“Okay.”

For the first time Reuben took cognizance of his surroundings. Everything was just as he remembered it. Had nothing changed in twenty years? Reuben could almost see his father sitting in the rocker, smoking his pipe, and reading the paper, his drink by his side.

When he entered his parents’ bedroom, though, he stopped dead, shocked at what he saw. His father’s body looked like a corpse already: his skin ashen, his eyes sunken, his cheeks hollow. Was this shriveled frame really all that remained of his father’s former brawn? He had a nasal cannula attached to his nostrils and an oxygen tank beside his bed, with only the slightest rise and fall of his chest to distinguish sleep from death.

“Dad?”

“Huh?” His father opened his eyes.

“It’s me. Reuben. I’ve come to see you.”

“Oh, Reuben. Come in.”

“How are you, Dad?”

“Pretty good.” Still in denial as much as ever. “How about you?”

Reuben pulled a chair up to his father’s bedside.

“Dad, I’ve come to make peace with you.”

“I never knew we were at war.” The old man tried to sit up a little.

“We haven’t spoken to each other in twenty years.”

“I just figured you were busy with work and all.”

“Well, I have been busy. That’s true. I guess you could say it’s been a cold war, but now it’s time for the iron curtain to come down.”

“I’m not following you, son.”

No use to explain. He wouldn’t get it. “Dad, Hope and I are thinking about having a baby.”

“You mean I’m gonna be a grandpa?”

“Maybe. But before I have my own child, I wanted to ask you some things about when I was a kid.”

“Okay.” He sat up a little more.

“Well, first of all, I was wondering why you were always so aloof and distant.”

“Distant? Well, you know I worked . . . in the oil fields.” His speech was slow and labored.” I had to be away . . . for weeks at a time.”

“That’s not what I mean. Even when you were home, you were aloof. You never showed any feelings.”

“A man’s got to be . . . strong, boy.” He wheezed. “His family depends on it.”

“But you never hugged me when I was little.”

“Why, that’s a woman’s business . . . I didn’t want you to grow up to be . . . a sissy.”

“And you never once told me you loved me.”

“I don’t tell your mother that either,” he said with a raspy voice, short of breath. “But she knows I do . . . ‘I love you’ is just . . . empty words. Real love isn’t . . . talk, it’s action. I put a roof over your head . . . food on the table . . . and clothes on your back. That’s a father’s love.”

“You never praised me, not even when I got straight A’s or won an award.”

“I didn’t want you to get . . . cocky.” He was winded already. “Nuthin’ worse than a cocky . . . kid who thinks he knows it all.”

“And no matter how well I did, you always found something to criticize about it.”

“Because I wanted you to . . . do your best.” He coughed a couple of times.

“And you beat me with a belt.”

“Beat you? Why, I didn’t . . . beat you. I just gave you a good, old-fashioned . . . whoopin’ when you deserved one . . . And you got off easy.”

“Dad, it was child abuse. The authorities could have removed me from the home, and you could have gone to prison for that.”

“Child abuse? Hell, when I was a kid, my old man . . . stripped me down to my underwear . . . tied my hands with a rope . . . and hooked the rope to the back of the pickup.” He gasped for air. “Then he dragged me through . . . the briar patch.”

Appalled, Reuben remained silent. He had no idea of the abuse his father had suffered. If something like that had happened, what else had as well? He couldn’t imagine.

“But I turned out . . . all right, didn’t I?” Even after a bit of silence, his father was still taking short, shallow breaths.

“Well, you’ve nearly smoked and drunk yourself to death. Your lungs have had it, and your liver’s shot. I know that everyone smoked back in your day—they didn’t know about the health risks yet—but why did you drink so much?”

“I had my own . . . sorrows to drown.” His voice was husky, scarcely more than a whisper.

“You never talked about them.”

“Of course not. I didn’t want to . . . burden your mother or you.” He coughed again and struggled to catch his breath.

Reuben’s father was not doing well. Should he stop there? Reuben decided to continue.

“What were you sad about?”

“Oh, that’s ancient . . . history.”

“No, tell me. I want to know.”

“Well, my whole life . . . I wanted to be an Air Force pilot. I enlisted in the service . . . at the very end of World War Two, ’cause I was . . . too young earlier. But they wouldn’t take me into pilots school . . . on account of I was a little color blind. When the war was over, I met your mother, we had you, and . . . I had to go to work to support a family. My dream . . . died right then and there. I never got to do . . . the only thing I really wanted to do.”

His eyes moistened, then he coughed. Once. Twice. Three times. And then nonstop. A coughing fit. Reuben handed him a glass of water from the bedside table. After he had taken a swallow, the coughing subsided, though he was still wheezing and gasping.

“I’m pretty tired, son . . . I think I need to rest.” He lay back down.

“Okay, Dad. It was good to talk to you.”

His father closed his eyes, and Reuben went back out to his mother.

“Would you like me to stay the night, Mom?”

“No, no, no. That’s not necessary. You get along home to that lovely wife of yours.”

“Will you be okay, Mom?”

“Oh, you know me. I’ll be fine.”

That was his mom. Whatever her fear, whatever her grief, she had spent a lifetime pretending everything was fine when it wasn’t. Reuben had just had something resembling a real conversation with his dad. Maybe he would someday with his mother too.

He gave her a hug goodbye, a hug just like the one that said hello. A hug in no way lacking in love on her part, but one devoid of closeness and warmth. She didn’t know how to express those feelings any more than his dad did, though they were certainly there.

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On the way back Reuben thought about what had just happened. Perhaps for the first time he had seen his father not as his dad but as a person in his own right. Now he understood: his dad had not been a better father to him because he didn’t know how, and he didn’t know how because his grandfather had not shown him. Reuben wondered for just a second how his grandfather could have been so bad, but then he realized it was because his grandfather had not learned from his great-grandfather how to be a good father. And so on back through the generations. “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

Nevertheless, Reuben’s dad had been a better father to him than his grandfather had been to his father. His father had done the best he could, and Reuben would do the same. If his father had done better than his grandfather, he would surely do better than his father. Tonight he would

tell Hope that he was finally ready to have a child. It felt good to give her what she wanted. Deep down, he wanted it too.

* * *

The next morning the phone rang just after 9:00.

“Reuben . . .” Her voice choked.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Your father died last night in his sleep.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be. He died a happy man. He said you had a good talk, and he so appreciated your coming to see him. I can’t thank you enough. It means the world to me that you two were on good terms when he died. I’ll call you later with the funeral details. I just wanted to let you know.”

“Okay, Mom. Bye for now.”

Reuben hung up the phone. His father was at peace now, and so was he.

Glossary of Names

Reuben: from the Hebrew meaning “Behold, a son.”

Abbot: father (Greek). Reuben is a son who has to confront his father before he becomes a father himself.

Hope: the meaning is obvious. She is hoping to have a child.