

My Fragile Family Tree

Stories of Fathers & Sons

By

Matt Fotis

“A father is a man who fails everyday.” – Michael Chabon

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What makes a good father? What makes a good son? How did I end up in bed with my wife and father-in-law? I guess the question that I'm really asking is – what is it that makes someone a man? And I don't know. I don't think any of us know. We idolize the idea of Don Draper despite the fact he's pretty much the worst husband and father on the face of the earth and of course despite the fact that he's not even real. But fuck me if he isn't masculine. We're caught in a strange moment in time – in many ways still clinging to the traditional role of the father as breadwinner and decision maker, the parent you fear, home for twenty minutes a day and emotionally distant. Yet that great American fallacy of masculinity that has haunted generations of men is starting to become a dinosaur...yet we still cling to those values because however flawed, at least the Draper model gave us something to go on. So I guess the question I'm asking you is, what does it mean to be a man in the post-feminism-but-we're-really-still-in-that-movement-so-don't-get-all-up-in-arms-because-that's-not-what-this-show-is-about generation?

I am for all intents and purposes a stay-at-home dad, who just so happens to be getting his PhD in-between play dates and diaper changes. This was not the life I expected. I thought I'd be a successful something by now and that my wife would be at home with the kids. Instead, she's out working and I'm at home...reading about feminism. I have no problem with the fact that she makes more money than me, I just wish I made more money than her because she doesn't make that much money. I have no problem that when I go to the park the other mom's assume its "divorced daddy's turn to play with the kids" and keep their children away from me. On the flip side, since the bar for fathers is set so unbelievably low most moms praise me for essentially keeping my children alive. I'm not sure what moms have to do to receive the "you're such a good mom" comment, but I get the "you're such a good dad" comment even while my children are eating rocks and playing with knives. Jeanette does everything mothers have done for

centuries, she is by any account a much better parent than I am, but nobody stops her at the supermarket and tells her “you’re such a good mom” because she’s buying baby food. And that’s not fair. There is an obvious and giant double standard. But I don’t want to be “such a good dad” because I take my kids to the park, I want to be a good dad in the way that a woman is a good mom, not in the way that I’m not Don Draper...even though I want to be Don Draper – god those are nice suits! You know what, I’m not sure if I’m man enough to be a woman. I do have a problem being labeled less of a man because I take care of my kids, less of a parent because I have a penis, but I’m not sure that it makes me more of a man or more of a parent. I’m Mr. Mom thirty years later, but I can’t really tell you how I got here or what I’m doing.

Well, that’s not totally true. Nearly four years ago my father got cancer and that set off a chain reaction of events that took me from a temporary accountant in Chicago to a stay at home dad working on his PhD in the middle of Missouri. I had only just realized what it meant to be a son when I became a father. And just as I assumed the role of primary bread winner I became the primary care giver. I went from Don to Betty Draper, well more like whoever their black nanny is. And I have no idea what I’m doing. So we had another kid. So I’ve put together this series of stories about fathers and sons to try and figure out what it means to be a father, what it means to be a son, and how to mix the two. What *does it* mean to be a man? You can leave now, but I’m not giving you your money back.

The Day the Music Died: The story of a boy and a lamp

For many people the transition from childhood to adulthood is a gradual transformation. One day you're a little boy playing baseball in the sun and the next you're a grown man with a wife and kids. Your life passes you by in a blur and it's hard to fathom how you got from one point to the next. Let me be the four millionth person to quote David Byrne "How did I get here?" I have no such problem. For me the transition to adulthood was cold, harsh, and quick. How do I know this? How did I become enlightened? By a lamp. In no small way my life has been defined by a blue halogen floor lamp. The way I view the world is pre-lamp and post-lamp. The day I turned it on was the day I became a man.

I should have seen it coming. My family has a long and proud tradition of bad gifting. My brother once bought a wicker box for a girlfriend on Valentine's Day. That's right, he bought a box made out of wicker to show a woman how much he loves her. They are no longer dating. I thought it was such a good idea that I then bought my girlfriend a wicker box for her birthday. Somehow we got married. The fact that Jeanette is an excellent gifter is actually the worst gift of all. Gifting is a horrible test that I fail several times a year. On Christmas my wife opens up a pack of strawberry coffee and a sweater that looks an awful lot like the sweater I gave her last year, and I open up a laptop, camera and Cubs tickets. Jeanette will come downstairs and ask "Did Santa come?" "For one of us" I think. If we get divorced it will undoubtedly be because of the popcorn maker I'm getting her this year for our anniversary. Where did I get the idea for a popcorn maker? From my father. Who got a popcorn maker for my mother that caused a rift in their marriage that's never fully healed. And yet I'm still going to buy her a popcorn maker.

Growing up Christmas Eve featured a rousing fight between my parents over our presents. My father usually left most of the shopping to my mother. Based on his gifts for her my

brother and I probably lucked out. After the popcorn maker he just stopped trying. One year he got her a calendar, which she liked, by which I mean she put it on the wall in the kitchen. So for the next twenty years my mother received not one calendar but upwards of six calendars a year. My father is somewhat of a genius, yet what one does with six calendars apparently never crossed his mind. Around four o'clock on Christmas Eve as my mother gathered our presents for wrapping, which would be done with paper from every Christmas past and with boxes that have the present inside written on the box (and consequently a running log of each previous Christmas "red sweater" "Lego set" "shirt with odd geometric shapes clearly made for a Russian immigrant"), my father would come downstairs and ask "You think that's enough?" He would pause, and I have to believe fully aware of his contribution to the gifts on the table, and say "I think we should get a few more things. I want the boys to enjoy Christmas this year." Already barely holding it together this would push my mother over the edge into full-out no-holds-barred nervous breakdown that always somehow ended up with her taking off her pants and cleaning the entire house. My father rather than apologize or attempt to soothe my mother at all would slip out the front door and head over to Venture to save Christmas. He'd usually come back three hours later armed with two pairs of sweatpants. Apparently in his mind a pair of plain gray sweatpants is a scale tipping gift, moving Christmas 1986 from just okay to the Christmas where his boys got Russian immigrant shirts *AND* sweatpants. Hey what was that noise? Is that Santa we hear or our naked mother vacuuming the kitchen?

I've always been a fan of my birthday. Some people don't seem to care and I just don't understand. There's only one day a year where it's all about you. I guess if you were born on Christmas, or like the day The Challenger exploded or something I could see not getting too excited about your birthday. But even then it's not like The Challenger explodes every January

26th. Then came the fateful September day that changed the world. For the past several birthdays we had gone to Wrigley Field to see the Cubs play. Sure they were usually out of it, which worked out perfectly for my mother since tickets were available on the cheap, but I was a little kid and I didn't care because I was at the Cubs game and all of my friends were learning about geometry. But 1992, 1992 was different. The Cubs were out of town. My family had moved to a new neighborhood and I was suddenly the new kid in a junior high three times the size of my old elementary school. It wasn't cool to be excited about your birthday, especially when you're "that new tall buck-toothed kid." And even though I couldn't wait to open my presents and revel in all things Matty I tried to pretend like it was no big deal. Heck, I was a teenager now, I had to practice not caring about anything. But I did care.

After school I rushed home. Presents were waiting for me. On the way home I tried to temper my enthusiasm. I didn't want to get too excited about the awesome new Lego set that was waiting for me underneath my new mountain bike. Maybe the bike wouldn't be the Trek that I wanted, but that would be okay. And maybe Lego's are for little kids, but you know what, I fucking love Lego's and today is my day so go to hell. But little did I know that there was no bike waiting for me, no Lego's to be built.

When the time finally came to open my presents I was beside myself. I love the possibility of wrapped presents. Anything could be inside. Sure once the paper is gone and the writing is on the box it's not quite so idealistic, but when they're sitting there neatly piled together the world is your oyster. It's not likely but there could be a lion inside. You know that there isn't, but while that strange rectangular present is sitting there waiting to be unwrapped there *could* be.

There was no lion.

There was a lamp.

As I unwrapped the box I thought that my mother was trying to trick me. Surely there was something other than a lamp inside of the lamp box. “Clever mother, but you’re not fooling me! There’s probably a lion, or a bike or...it’s really a lamp? Seriously?” I pulled out the halogen bulb and it was all I could do to keep from crying. I didn’t hide my disdain very well as my mother left the room sobbing. It’s not like I meant to say “I can’t believe you got me a lamp for my birthday. What the hell is wrong with you?” it just sort of came out. Actually I didn’t say that, but it was pretty clear from the look on my face, which also had a trace of “my puppy was just killed and eaten like a cheap steak by a fat tourist right in front of me by a rabid hyena.”

I actually needed a lamp. I had been living in a semi-cave that was dimly lit by an old Mickey Mouse lamp that threw off about as much light as a Venetian alley. Really the lamp was the perfect gift. It’s still in my bedroom to this day. It’s without a doubt the longest lasting gift I’ve ever gotten. I’ve used it more than any Lego set, bike, basketball or anything else I ever got. But I wasn’t ready for it. I wasn’t ready to get a gift that I needed. I wasn’t ready for something so practical, so adult. I wasn’t ready to grow up. I got quite a few other really great things that year, but I don’t remember any of them. I only remember that things changed. Expectations were different now. I wasn’t a little kid anymore. I wanted to grow up and be taken seriously. I wanted my opinions to matter. I wanted to think and act for myself. And I got it.

So the lamp marked my passage into manhood. There were a lot of really awkward years in between that I'll spare you because it wasn't until I was an adult and my father got sick that I realized what it meant to be a son.

The Medical Simulator

A father. A son. A family dog. An imaginary meat cutter. What to say?

Swallowing my pride

Last week I finally admitted I'm poor. Two weeks ago I finally admitted I'm a bad actor. So this week I swallowed my dwindling pride, put the two together and became a test patient for a medical school. I pretend to be sick so that first year med students can practice interacting with patients. These students apparently assume that I am semi-retarded and either addicted to meth or have herpes, or a meth addict with herpes since no normal person would willingly pretend to be a sterile meat cutter with carpal tunnel syndrome for twenty bucks.

As I'm sitting in the simulated doctor's office ready to act the shit out of carpal-tunnel syndrome I'm suddenly struck by the familiarity of it all. For someone who for the better part of his adult life has been without medical insurance I sure have spent a disproportionate amount of time in hospitals. Luckily it hasn't all been "Mr. Fotis you have cancer," as it was one Christmas morn. Sometimes it's "Mr. Fotis you have high blood pressure." Or "Mr. Fotis you have sciatica. Congratulations you'll never again sit down without pain." Or "Mr. Fotis I'm not sure what that lump is...but your check bounced...and your insurance was denied...So..." It hasn't even necessarily been all bad. I walked into Northwestern Memorial Hospital on a Wednesday night in 2008 with heartburn and left Saturday afternoon with a baby, so I can't totally complain.

Christmas Eve

Before they moved to Florida and before my father's trips to Venture we visited my father's side of the family on Christmas Eve. "Maybe they don't like getting up early," I thought

to myself. I didn't care. I got to open presents early. And for a long time, longer than I care to admit, I used to look for Santa's sleigh on the ride home. Any red light made my heart skip a beat. Airplane wings, radio towers, the obligatory car with a broken taillight doing 105mph on the Dan Ryan. Once I saw a flashing light out of the window of the family Impala on the ride home. I followed the blinking and flashing light for miles, to make sure that it wasn't an illusion, to make sure I had the right one. "Do you see?" I meekly asked from the cavernous back seat.

For the past few years I've spent Christmas Eve with my in-laws. Having more family and seeing less of them is one of the perks of married life. In one of those strange coincidences my wife's family celebrates the birth of our Lord the night before as well. Instead of presents or Jesus, the real draw of the evening is the food. My father-in-law is an ex-chef, and he uses the nominal birth of our Lord as an excuse to make three-hundred appetizers and four ducks...for seven people. For the past couple of years my parents have joined the party; they hit the in-law jackpot – chefs who like to entertain. Even if they hadn't been invited my father would have found a way to grab a seat at the table. My dad would walk the Oregon Trail if there was roast duck at the end. Too bad he always fords the river, just take the ferry dad, take the ferry!

Copper Tries to Kill my Mom

Nobody likes my parents' dog. Let me rephrase that: Nobody likes my father's dog. He is my mother's in dog tag identification purposes only. The dog responds to no one but my father. And to Spanish – as my father loves to remind us, "Copper was abused. (By people who spoke Spanish.)" My father and Copper have an unbreakable and sometimes disturbingly uncomfortable "Why is the dog licking dad's thighs?" bond. And this is partly why nobody likes him. We're jealous. Not of the thigh licking so much, but of the intimacy. Plus the dog smells. He's bad. His left eye is falling out of its socket. He's missing half his tongue. He is the most

petrifyingly horrifyingly terrible thing my oldest son has ever seen. And the main reason we don't like him is that he's tried to kill each member of my family at least once. Except my father of course, who insists it is not the dog that is responsible for his murderous streak, but us, for not reading the dog obedience book. A book apparently chock full of information and advice to keep you from getting killed by a twelve pound beagle.

I don't remember being alone with him.

I don't remember saying 'cancer' to him.

I don't remember thinking he was going to die.

I don't remember the situation sinking in.

Don Sterling

Today I'm Don Sterling, a thirty-nine year old meat cutter suffering from carpal-tunnel syndrome. This guy's just like me and all the meat cutters I hang out with on a daily basis so this'll be no sweat. They leave you in the simulation chamber for about ten minutes before the first of several "doctors" comes. I'm using this time to get into character, an exercise I've never really been all that good at. I say exercise, but it's kind of the core of acting. You know, pretending you're someone else blah blah blah. If the "doctors" ask I also have jaw pain and heartburn. I like to drink socially, but I don't have a drinking problem. I smoke sometimes. My sex life is okay, but not at the level I'd like. I'm not sure why Don has to be sterile. And I'm not supposed to tell them about my carpal-tunnel symptoms – the whole reason good old Don is at the doctor – unless they ask.

Flashing Red Lights

Despite a plate of roast duck, sausage, sweet potatoes, asparagus, green beans, more roast duck and some roast duck atop roasted potatoes, my father is looking a little sallow. Since this is

his second plate it could be indigestion (or dysentery – he always buys ammo instead of food at the general store!). Naturally I tease him about it, making some joke rather than actually asking him if something's wrong. I don't know what to say – this is my problem in life, the problem of my generation – we have so much to say and so many outlets to say them in that we don't know what to say. Pop culture has ruined my ability to express emotion. I feel like everything is a cliché or a movie quote. That I'm only saying what Sterling Cooper has instructed me to say. I'm like the anti-Lady Gaga...or am I Lady Gaga? I'm not really sure who Lady Gaga is actually. My father is the same way. We are the same man. Silently staring at the other trying to think of something non-sports related to say.

Sometime around midnight we all part ways full of duck and Christmas cheer. While my parents stumble into their suburban home later than they have in years, I'm in bed in the city soundly asleep. For the first time in weeks I am actually able to sleep for more than five hours. I should have known then. As I drift off my father is taking a turn for the worse. His heart begins racing, he gets out of bed (checks on the dog) and he tells my mother that they should probably go to the emergency room. I can't confirm this but it is my wholehearted belief that my mother then took off her pants and cleaned the entire house before getting in the car and haphazardly driving to the hospital. There is absolutely nothing in the world that she will do without first taking off her pants and cleaning the entire house. Why this needs to be done at all, especially without pants, especially considering my mother pretty much exclusively wears sweat pants, I cannot say.

I don't know why, but I feel guilty for being asleep.

When they get to the hospital my father's heart rate is finally regulated. It had been racing at nearly two-hundred beats a minute – anything over 150 usually results in a heart-attack

– and he undergoes a series of tests. When my father’s tests come back, there is a suspicious spot on his lungs. The suburban hospital tells my father “It’s either a viral infection or lymphoma.” You know one or the other, no big deal and recommend he goes downtown to Northwestern Memorial for further tests. A little cough medicine or chemotherapy. A few days under the weather or a life threatening illness. So he spends the early hours of Christmas morning in an ambulance speeding to Northwestern Memorial Hospital under a flashing red light.

My New Brother

Copper is the brother I never wanted. He was our second dog, forever in the shadow of Snoopy, my dog sister. I’m sure that I remember Snoopy fondly because she was my childhood dog, and Copper less so because I was already in college when they got him...then again Snoopy also never tried to murder me. I remember the day we got Copper. Snoopy had only died a few months before. I was out of town visiting a girlfriend and when I came home I heard the jangle of a dog’s collar. Could it be? Did she...cross over? No. It was Copper, and from that moment he and I have had our issues. It’s not fair, I mean he’s a dog, but he’s always been a replacement in my eyes. A replacement that tries to murder the original members of the family so that he can start his own replacement family. He’s very much like an evil step mother, only my mother is still there – maybe that’s why he’s so fond of trying to murder my mother, so that he can take her place. Or maybe he just doesn’t like her cooking.

The Student Doctor

Going into it I didn’t realize what I was in for. I thought I’d tell a few wanna be doctors about my jaw pain and be on my way with a big fat Andrew Jackson in my pocket. But that didn’t happen.

One of three scenarios seemed to play out over and over again.

One: We both know the other is a fraud. They know I'm not really sick. I know that even if I was sick they can't actually help me. So they solve this problem by being as "professional" as they can. They make no eye contact with me and ask the questions written on their pad regardless of my answer. These are the folks that I try to lead with my brilliant acting. I rub my wrists endlessly. Click my jaw. Make incredibly leading statements in a vague southern accent that lead nowhere.

Doctor: Have you been experiencing headaches.

Don: Yeah, I do experience headaches. Probably because my jaw hurts so bad.

Doctor: Having trouble urinating?

Don: Only because my wrists hurt so bad. Probably from all of the years of repetitive motion that comes with being a meat cutter.

Matt: Copper tried to kill mom today.

Dad: She's fine.

Matt. Yeah. He could really hurt her. Maybe—

Dad: —she should read the dog book.

Doctor: Do you drink?

Don: If someone else opens the bottle and I can open my mouth wide enough. AHHHH!

Doctor: Well I'm not sure what the problem is. Maybe diabetes.

The second scenario involves the suddenly moral doctor. They instantly go for the questions about drinking and smoking. I could be bleeding to death but as long as I know that smoking causes cancer they're satisfied. Poor old Don came in for jaw pain and left with seven pamphlets about gonorrhea.

Dad: You're not going to Montreal.

Matt: It's just an ingrown toenail.

Doctor: Smoking is really unhealthy. It's going to kill you.

Don: I—

Doctor: Drinking is just as bad. Let me give you some literature. Don't worry Dan, there's lots of pictures.

Dad: If that gets to the bone you could lose your foot. Or die.

Matt: Dad.

Doctor: Do you practice safe sex? You need to wear a condom. You could give someone a disease.

Don: Couldn't I get one—

Doctor: We both know you're givin'.

The third group is the one that I hadn't anticipated. These were the people who were clearly overwhelmed by med school. They seemed genuinely terrified that if they didn't properly diagnose me that I was going to die. And worse yet, I was going to tell everyone that they killed me. And then they would be kicked out of school and fail for the first time in their lives.

Doctor: Arthritis? Cystic fibrosis? Emphysema? Allergies? Just tell me what it is!

“Cancer?”

Christmas at the Hospital

For some reason I'm not surprised at all by the call from the hospital. I don't mean to imply that I knew something was wrong the night before or anything like that, but it seemed like a perfectly natural thing. Strange, but natural – kind of like seeing your third grade teacher at the supermarket wearing elastic waist jeans and shaking fruit. At some point I was going to get this call. It just happened to be Christmas morning.

So we pack up our stuff and head to the hospital. When we get there we go to my father's room and find it empty. Instantly I attribute this to my mother, who undoubtedly gave us the wrong information because she doesn't really listen to what people say. We decide to wait around the room to see if anyone shows up. After a few minutes my father is ushered through the door dressed in his hospital gown. I'm both relieved that we are in the right room and transported to a totally different world. "Why is my father half naked? Why are there so many tubes? Why are we here?"

Picture if you will, a three year old little boy in tattered clothes with applesauce all matted in his thinning hair, and this is what my father looks like. He is a James Taylor song – two parts sentimental, one part sap, and three parts sad. The nurse brings him in, and adorably, for there is no other word, takes his temperature. Adorable. And feeble. Vulnerable. And sick. Helpless. This is not what my father looks like. He is big and strong. Smart and loving. Sure he can't match his clothes or tie a tie that hangs straight, but he's smarter than me, better than me – he's what I want to be. He takes care of me.

Once we are alone my dad fills me in on the situation (my mother tried earlier but putting things in sequence is not a strength). After another half-hour my mother finally arrives – she had to go check on the dog and take him to the vet (this is about three hours later than she had planned – most likely due to the fact that she took off her pants and cleaned the entire house before coming to the hospital...or was cornered by the dog). She hugs my father, he asks about Copper. After a bit of awkward small talk, Jeanette and I hand out our Christmas presents. If you've never given a present to somebody in the hospital on Christmas you are missing out. And it's not the fact that you are in the hospital on Christmas; it's the fact that nobody will really say

what we're all thinking – that he might be dying. That this might be our last Christmas together. That he's sick. That he needs our help. That he needs my help. Instead we hand out presents.

I (Almost) Murder a Dog

I was home from college for spring break when it happened. For some reason my mother decided that she was going to try and take down the apple tree in our back yard. By take down I mean she was attempting to rip the tree out of the ground. I'm not sure what her method was going to be, or why she decided to do this; what I do know is that Copper did not like it. He was tethered in the yard, coming about five feet short of my mother. When the first apple hit the ground he lost it. Even though he couldn't get to her, he had her trapped. She couldn't get back to the house without entering his radius. I remember hearing her desperately calling for me, and I was certain that she had either thrown out her back or somehow managed to tear down a tree with her bare hands and needed someone to share it with.

I'm not a violent person. I've never even been in a fist fight. Like a good Midwesterner I tend to avoid confrontation. But at this moment, as Copper's rage reached its climax I knew what I had to do. I had to murder him before he murdered her. Kill or be killed. Our backyard had been transformed into the Thunderdome. Copper saw me, we locked eyes – two men enter, one man leaves – I was just hoping that I got to play pre-racist Mel Gibson. For show he let out a vicious cacophony of howls and growls. We paused. His show worked. I was terrified. My mother began throwing apples in the general direction of our house which didn't really help anyone. I'd like to say I used the fact that Copper was tied up to my advantage. Instead I blindly ran. Perhaps it was the element of surprise, perhaps just dumb luck but I got to his leash before his teeth got to my wrist. Angered by his failure to kill me, he then began wildly flailing. My only choice was to pick him up in the air. And hold him there until he either stopped, blacked out

or died. As I held him precariously close to my genitals I yelled to my mother “Get inside! Now! This is your window! This is your window!” I knew that if I put him down it was over. That he’d jump me and then eat me. But I also knew I didn’t want to kill him.

Eventually I took a chance. I figured if I sort of tossed him in the opposite direction and then ran I could get out of his zone. I didn’t care what happened after that. I just didn’t want to play by the Thunderdome’s rules anymore – “Fuck you Tina Turner! We don’t need another hero!” I let go of the leash and ran. I was almost out of reach when I nearly sprained my ankle on an apple. I fell to the ground and rolled a few feet. I could hear Copper charging. I covered my neck with one hand and my testicles with the other and braced for impact when I heard him yelp. He’d been yanked back. The leash spun him backward into the air. He hit the ground with a thud and threw up. I turned and half his tongue was lying next to my face. Then he just collapsed next to me on the lawn.

My Father Can’t Curse

Over the next few days Jeanette and I visit the hospital on a regular basis. It’s funny how quickly something can become normal. With each passing test it is becoming more and more likely that my father has lymphoma. And after a few days the diagnosis is confirmed: turns out that this time it is “Mr. Fotis you have cancer.” Everyone is buoyed though when the doctors outline their plan of action and give my father an 80% chance at a full recovery. He of course, Mr. I’ve Seen Fire and I’ve Seen Rain, still reserves the right to throw out such winners as, “I guess my real survival rate is either 100%...or 0%.”

After a week in the hospital, my father is set to begin chemo. It’s New Year’s Eve, the night before his first session. I’m not loving the party but I’m glad to be out. Jeanette and I are sitting with my father in one of those little niche gathering rooms at the hospital that’s supposed to

remind you of home but really just reminds you that you are in a hospital, a Gino's East pizza on a table between us. My mother has gone to buy a few drinks from the cafeteria, which ultimately takes her nearly an hour to accomplish, probably because she took off her pants and tried to clean the entire place. My dad is tired and a bit worn down after a week of tests and worry, but he seems to be perking up now that he finally knows what he's battling.

As we watch the cheese congealing on the pizza, he says, "I can't wait to start chemo so that I can kick this tumor's ass." On the surface this is a very *Rudy* statement. A moment of triumph in the face of tragedy; his Oscar moment if you will. However, my father is one of those people who are incapable of swearing. He's like an ESL student. He stresses all the wrong words and messes up the rhythm. Basically, what I'm saying is that when he swears it's hysterical. Now I tried not to laugh. I wanted to be the supportive but tough black janitor that Rudy had – "you're gonna play for Notre Dame God-dammit! I don't care if you're three feet tall!" I didn't *want* to laugh in his face. You know, everyone would be like "he would have made it, but something broke his spirit. I guess he won't make it to Oregon after all." But I couldn't help it. It was really funny. Miscommunication – a basic tenet of comedy. And just as I was convinced that I'd killed my father he smiled. Then Jeanette smiled. Then we all laughed.

It would be awfully sweet to say that in the laughter I knew he'd be okay. But I didn't. I made fun of him and laughed in his face. I didn't say anything to him. I made fun of him. I hoped he'd be okay and he was. And that let me off the hook. I never really acknowledged what happened. Not that we pretended he wasn't sick, we didn't call it his vacation or "the incident," but we never actually talked. It was like the simulator. After four hours Don Sterling's medical problems disappeared. He disappeared. He ceased to exist. I got to just walk away.

We didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to say.

The Fighting Illini

And I remembered the previous year, watching the Illini's improbable comeback with a trip to the Final Four on the line.

I remember Jack Ingram stealing the ball.

I remember Deron Williams making that shot.

I remember my pants around my ankles.

I remember the tears in my eyes.

I remember not knowing how my pants got around my ankles or why I didn't pull them up.

I remember the look on my father's face.

I remember the connection.

I remember not wanting to lose it.

Copper Cures Cancer

I'm glad I didn't kill Copper. I would have felt pretty bad about it. He also spent day and night with my father when he was sick. And I know that's why he won't get rid of the dog even though Copper will kill my mother some day. I know that's why he won't put the dog to sleep even though Copper's left eye is falling out of its socket and he needs eye drops that cost five-hundred dollars. I know that Copper did what I should have done. He was there when I couldn't be. Perhaps it was his way of thanking me for sparing his life. So that me and my dad could sit in Busch Stadium three years later and watch a Cubs-Cards game and try to think of what to say.

What I've Learned from TV & Movies about Being a Man

- 1) Being a terrible dad actually is the cleverest way to be a good dad, because then when you exert any effort you get rewarded for it.
- 2) Raising a teenage daughter that falls in love with and travels the world with a vampire – and you don't notice any of it – doesn't automatically earn you the worst father of the year award.
- 3) Being clueless and overweight is my God earned right, as is a disproportionately attractive and sympathetic wife.
- 4) It's never a bad idea to have a failed stand-up comic and a failed musician move in to help me raise my children. Cut – it – out.
- 5) Misogyny set to rap music entitles me to a cadre of disproportionately attractive and sympathetic bitches.
- 6) All I need to do to be a good husband is to remember that “every kiss begins with Kay.”
- 7) A real man can blow up anything using anything, defeat any number of highly trained ninjas in any number of back alleys or abandoned warehouses, and win back any number of his ex-wives' and/or estranged daughters' love simply by thwarting a terrorist attack.
- 8) I need to drink light beer and be a giant douche-bag while doing it, and this behavior entitles me to a disproportionately attractive and sympathetic girlfriend.
- 9) I can be a dad whenever it is convenient for me or the writers of my show, like when they need to replace the weird monkey that I always had with me for some reason. Don't pretend like you didn't watch *Friends*!
- 10) Accidentally killing another man, stealing his identity, cheating on your wife and being an absent dad is fine so long as you look good doing it, drink lots of whisky and can make a Kodak picture carousel sound cool...and then when she leaves you everyone feels bad for you.

Despite what pop culture tells men getting married for all intents and purposes is great. And the tax breaks are phenomenal. The one thing you can't really anticipate though is the new family that you get. This new sprawling web of people who are investing in you – making you a central part of their lives. Suddenly my father-in-law finally had a son, and suddenly I had a dad that was unlike any father I had known. They say that women marry someone like their father. So why did Jeanette marry me?

The Road to Siggy

He's not my father. I'm not his son. But thanks to the ring I put on his daughter's finger I can call him Dad.

I don't.

Like any good father and son-in-law story this one starts in Venice. My girlfriend who would later become my wife was studying abroad. I was out of school and working as an admin for a children's theatre company. She was touring Europe and living in London. I was being asked if I knew the alphabet well enough to do filing – living the administrative assistant dream. After six months of emails, letters and eleven minute phone calls – this was in the days of calling cards before cell phones, Facebook and Skype revolutionized, among other things, long distance dating – we were finally back together. We had been travelling for a few weeks, meeting in London, stopping in Paris and Florence. We were just finishing up an incredibly creepy and enchanting weekend in Venice – let's just say that you have to walk through some alley-ways that seem designed for murder – and were headed to Hamburg to meet up with Siggy. Because who doesn't go to Europe to spend time with their future father-in-law? We were taking a train from Venice

to Hamburg and then heading to Copenhagen before a few days in rural Denmark visiting my father-in-law's hometown and my soon to be distant relatives.

Seven years after we board the train to Hamburg it's my son's first birthday. I'm standing on my apartment's five foot balcony in Columbia, MO listening to my father-in-law tell me a dirty joke that I'm pretty sure is an email forward making its way through the senior circuit, of which Siggy is an honorary member. The Greatest Generation and email, what a combination – if it's not a sand sculpture of Jesus or an eagle with guns in its talons taking a shit on Osama Bin Laden while flying in front of a billowing American flag, it's a bikini clad woman standing next to a crocodile. The joke hinges on a nude beach, anal sex, and farting. Suffice it to say, I'm terribly uncomfortable.

It's four in the morning. I'm trying to sleep on a train cutting through the European night. Our "sleeping" car was apparently made four hundred years ago when people were only four feet tall. I'm six foot five. I haven't slept all night. By eight o'clock we are in Munich, waiting to change trains to Hamburg where we will be meeting Siggy.

While the German train is made for solid Aryan stock (who apparently are under the impression it is simultaneously 1985 and 1996 – hence the odd combination of Wham t-shirts and Dennis Rodman Bulls jerseys), we still can't get a comfortable seat...well, any seat. The train was full, well at least each seat was to be occupied at some point during the trip. See, a seat is reserved if at any point en-route someone is going to be sitting there. It is common then for someone to sit in said seat at any other point in the trip. Well, unless you are me. The German conductor, complete with a frizz perm and hat pinned to the back of her head so as not to mess

with her fluffed curled bangs reminiscent of a 1987 high school graduate, approached and I knew it couldn't be good.

“Yeah, those seats are un reserved.” She seemed to be laughing at me with every word that came out of her mouth. Probably because she was laughing at me with every word that came out of her mouth.

“Un-reserved, I know.”

“No, un reserved.”

“Un-” “Un.” “Un-” “Un. Ha ha ha ha.”

“Oh, well, the sign says they are un reserved from Hamburg to Amsterdam.”

“Yeah. They are un reserved.”

I look around the train. There are four other people in our car. “Oh, I thought we could sit here until Hamburg.”

“But then where will they sit?”

“They can sit in these seats.”

“Yeah, because they are un reserved.”

“Where can we sit?”

“No English.”

“What?”

“No English.” She turns, laughs “Ha ha ha ha” and leaves the car.

Now I don't want to cast aspersions, but I'm pretty sure that conductor spoke English. And if I had to bet, I'd say that she didn't want us sitting there because we were American and at the time Germany really didn't like America thanks to Bush and Iraq (and because my father-in-law probably forwarded her an email with an incredibly ripped eagle flying with machine guns in

its talons simultaneously shitting bombs on Baghdad and Berlin and then returning home to make love to a bikini clad woman and her crocodile). So we gathered our things and sat in two completely un reserved seats when Cyndi Lauper came back. “Jew cannot sit there.”

“What?”

“You sit on the floor.”

“Did you say—”

“That you can’t sit there? Yeah, I did.”

“Where can we sit?”

“Between cars. On the floor. Jew sit there.”

“Jew?”

“Not me. Jew.”

“But I thought—”

“No English.” With this Susanna Hoffs Himmler began laughing “Ha ha ha ha,” quickly followed by the other four passengers “Ha ha” “Ha ha” “Ha ha” “Ha ha,” until we were shamed by German laughter.

Now I don’t want to cast aspersions, but I’m pretty sure that conductor called me a Jew, and I’m almost certain she speaks English. And I’m positive she told us we had to sit on the floor, with our bags in our laps, between cars...for six hours. By the time we finally get to Hamburg I officially hadn’t slept in about thirty hours. Meanwhile my father-in-law was driving from Amsterdam to Hamburg, fresh with a plan to stash marijuana seeds in between his gums and his dentures on the flight home.

We got off the train and began searching for Siggy.

The very first time I met Sigfred he was building a hardwood floor. He wasn't installing prefabricated boards – he was literally building a floor. He might as well have been ripping down trees with his bare hands and then willing them into a floor. I was a twenty-year-old theatre major. He was a carpenter and a chef. A Danish Canadian immigrant with a penchant for chain smoking and racial slurs. He's from a different generation, raised by parents who thought school was a waste of time so he turned down scholarships to start working. He was in a gang – the Palmer Boys – not out of teenage angst, but out of a need for safety. An investor stole thousands of dollars from him when he was going to open a restaurant crushing his life-long dream. His sister died when she was a teenager. His oldest daughter – who bore a striking resemblance to his sister – died in her early twenties of a freak asthma attack. Life didn't always work out for him, yet he's always optimistic about his next big plan. He's actually a lot like Hagrid, endearing and sweet, an implausible and giant project always in the works, but sometimes he just misses the point...but you love him all the more for it. He's the father that always knows what he's doing, always knows what's best; even when he clearly does not – you know “flooding everyone around him in the great radiant arc of bullshit.”¹ A lot like Don Draper's ad pitches really.

“I knew this would happen.”

We had no way of contacting him. We were a few years too early for international cell phones. It was like every episode of *Seinfeld*, literally everything could have easily and simply been solved by a cell phone. But alas, we were without. We decided to camp out at the main entrance. I usually stick out in a crowd, like literally my head is above everyone else's, which is why so many homeless people track me down – we make eye contact a block away and I know that I'm

¹ This is from Michael Chabon. I want to claim it as my own but it's too good and everyone will know.

buying a *Streetwise*. My father-in-law sticks out too because he's a fan of white pants and loud shirts – it's Miami 24/7 for Sigfred. We were bound to run into each other.

So we waited. It's a long drive from Amsterdam. So he's a little late.

Now I don't know if you've ever been stranded in a German train station, but it's kind of creepy. Look, I know that it isn't 1939, but there is something terrifying about a German voice shouting German orders over a German public address system in a German train station... in German when you have been awake for two days and you are pretty sure that a German train conductor, who apparently only speaks German, just called you a Jew. In English.

We both have had our lives shaped and totally altered by the state of Missouri, a place neither of us had really given a second thought until we arrived – no offense Missouri, don't be like that, look I just said that you helped each one of us discover our passions in life, God, you're so touchy...but I guess I would be too if St. Louis was my major city. Kidding. Kidding. Geez. We both know that Kansas City is Missouri's major city, which is even more depressing. Again, kidding. Let's go to the Ozarks! My Missouri moment involved my life as a semi-stay-at-home-dad. Siggy's as a soldier and a chef – about an hour away from the balcony that nearly half a century later we'd so awkwardly share.

I wanted to sign up for Nike missile, you know. Anything but bein' in da Marines. But dey found out I wasn't a citizen. Thought I was a spy. Danish baron. So what do dey do? Dey make me a cook. I can poison twenty thousand men in one night. Take out da whole Army without anyone knowin'. How do you like that? Some intelligence.

It's been six hours. Six hours sitting on bags in front of a train station in Hamburg. I'm afraid to fall asleep in case Pat Benatar Goebbels comes back. And I know that the second I close my eyes Siggy will walk right past me. Jeanette is alternately sleeping on our bags and patrolling the perimeter of the station in case he shows up. We know that we have to find him because he'll never find us, he's just not wired that way. My eyes are heavy. My eyes are angry. My eyes are afraid. The sun is going down. We are alone.

In two days we will be driving through Denmark listening to the same four songs on each and every side of each and every mix tape that Siggy has made for the trip, and he will be pointing out each and every store that we pass. For instance, as "Red Red Wine" plays for the fourth time in an hour and we pass a store with shoes in the window he will inform me that this store is in fact a shoe store. In one week we will be at a family party and the entire dinner will stop halfway through and every Danish eye in the room will be focused on me. I will have no idea what to say or why everyone is staring at me. I will know that the Danish store with pastry in the window is a bakery. And I will know the lyrics to Blondie's "The Tide is High." And even though "I'm not the kind of girl who gives up just like that, oh no," I won't know what to do. I will look to my father in law for help, but he simply stares back at me, another set of curious and disappointed Danish eyes. It will be three weeks later, back in America that I will find out that the Danish relatives were told by Siggy that I spoke Danish and that they were waiting for me to make my Danish toast. In Danish.

We finally decide to get a room at a hotel. We stop at an internet café and send Siggy an email telling him where we are on the off chance that he checks his email to see what eagle related forwards he might have missed. We go to our room. We can't afford it, but we don't care. We

are tired, filthy and exhausted from being angry. We knew he wouldn't be there. He never follows directions. He always goes his own way. Give him a remote control to turn on the TV and he'll get up and do it manually. Put a clean baby bottle on the counter and he'll grind meat and make home-made sausage right next to it. So we shouldn't have been surprised that as our heads hit the pillow the phone rang – "Guess who?"

It's been over two days since I last slept. I'm sitting in a hotel bar with my future wife and father in law in Hamburg. We are the only three people in the bar. But rather than talk to us, rather than catch up with the daughter he hasn't seen for six months or talk sports with the son he never had he's at the bar chatting up the barkeep. He blames us for the mix-up because we got a hotel room instead of waiting at the station, never mind the fact that he was eight hours late. We are exhausted, but we can't sleep because he wanted to have a drink and for some reason he has the key. So we wait. As he talks to a German hotel barkeep about soccer. In Danish. He doesn't want to be mistaken for an American.

Eventually we go up to the room. There is a full sized bed. Actually it really looks more like a twin bed. There are three of us. I'm too tired. I don't care. I don't care that I'm about to share a bed with my future wife and father-in-law. I don't care that there isn't really enough room for one of us, let alone all three. I don't care. I climb into bed.

I have spent the past eight years trying to figure out the three people in that bed – endlessly searching for Siggy. They say that women marry someone like their father. I am on one side of the bed. He is on the other. We are miles apart. We are seven inches apart. Jeanette is stuck in the middle. And yet we are the same man. He will tell me how he became a chef. He will teach me how to bet on horses. He will put a ring on my finger, a pinky ring with horseshoes

that is both the most awesome thing I own and something that I won't ever be able to pull off. My oldest son sort of bears his name;² both of my sons bear his face. He has inspired me to follow my dreams even though his didn't always pan out. We are both fiercely independent. Neither of us can express ourselves normally – he uses food and I use jokes. We are linked by the woman kind enough to sleep between us. Who is he? Who am I? Who is she? I can't say that I know the answers, but I think I understand why we are in the bed together.

He's not my father. I'm not his son. But thanks to the children that I've had with his daughter they can call him Grand-Dad.

They don't.

They call him Pop.

² Sort of. Nobody wants to name their kid Sigfred. So we named our son after his surname, which Siggy didn't realize until about the fortieth time we told him we were naming our son Nielsen...and then explained it to him.

My kids love Pop and GJ more than they love me and Jeanette. Mainly because of the 24 hours of undivided attention my mother-in-law bestows on the boys. And the endless flow of cookies doesn't hurt either. And it was through a cookie that I realized why I was "such a good dad."

Cookies

"Cookie? Cookie? I wanna cookie."

I don't remember what I was doing, but whatever it was it was very important to me in that moment. "It's lunch time in twenty minutes. You can have a cookie after lunch."

"Cookie. Please."

"Nils, what did I just say?" Sometimes I forget that he's two. He does not care about logic or reason. He cares about cookies.

"Cookie. I want a cookie."

"Nils."

"Cookie. Cookie. Cookie. Cookie. Cookie."

"Stop whining." I just want to get back to whatever it was that was so important to me. "You want a cookie, here's your fucking cookie!"

Nils eats his cookie. I go back to playing FreeCell or whatever it was I had to get back to. A minute passes and then there is a tug on my shirt.

"More fucking cookies please."

Who wants some fucking cookies!?!

And of course, before I became “such a good dad” I had to become a dad. And what kind of father would I be if I didn’t remember the day I actually became a father.

Baby Sotis

Here’s the thing, at first I felt bad about eating. I mean my wife is going into labor and I’m standing next to the microwave waiting for a Michelina’s four cheese lasagna to heat up. I’m actually eating a little earlier than usual since Jeanette had just given me a ride home from work – I can tell you want to gasp right now, but she wasn’t in labor labor, she was just in I’m starting to go into labor labor. Look traffic was clear so it’s not like she was driving on The 405 in rush hour, it was just Lake Shore Drive at rush hour...which is pretty bad so just shut up and cut me some slack. I needed to time her contractions and we all know that you can’t accurately time contractions while driving.

By the time we get home the contractions are six minutes apart – and I can vouch for the accuracy of that – and it’s clear that it’s going to happen tonight. Talk about your weird feelings. I mean I turn on the television and *Seinfeld* is on and I think “this is the last episode of *Seinfeld* I’m ever going to watch as a non-dad.” I’m not sure if this is a happy, sad or just weirdly sentimental moment, but I wish I’d turned on a new show since I had technically already seen this particular episode of *Seinfeld* like seven times, which took a bit of the shine off the moment. Anyway, I’m watching *Seinfeld*, timing contractions and waiting for the microwave to beep.

Obviously my mind’s racing a million miles a minute. I flash back to July when we first found out we were pregnant, which by the way is a phrase that doesn’t get any less awkward the more you say it. We aren’t pregnant, Jeanette is; I guess I just want to be included. What can I say? I’m perpetually twelve years old with giant buck teeth praying someone will sit next to me on the bus. We had just returned from a family Fourth of July non-barbeque exclusively

featuring ham sandwiches that sent my Yia Yia into an etiquette tizzy and sparked heated debate well into the new year. “I mean ham sandwiches. Oh! I’m so embarrassed. At least put out two kinds of meat.” I can’t remember when we got the tests, although I do remember that they are obnoxiously expensive, and that you feel really bad and super cheap if you buy a generic brand “‘cause that means you’re going to be a bad father” – when in reality you’re just saving money because how could there possibly be a twenty dollar difference between two sticks that test for a particular enzyme or hormone or whatever in piss? I’m not ready for this. Do I possess any father-skills? Is father-skills even a word? I just make fun of people and tell jokes. I don’t even have a job, well I have a temp job and get a paycheck, but don’t fathers have jobs like career-jobs not make two hundred copies of this and stay off the internet jobs?

Jeanette took the test, saw the result and came into the living room, where if I remember correctly I was sprawled across the couch in my underwear trying to convince myself that we didn’t need to put in an air conditioner. “I took the test,” she said. I’d like to say I had a clever reply, but I’m pretty sure that I just sat there. There are only about two or three possible responses in that moment and none of them came to me so I decided it was better to say nothing than to tell her that my thighs and testicles were permanently stuck together from the heat – “but that doesn’t mean we need an air conditioner!” She said, “Go and take a look.” Her voice was calm, with an underlying giddiness that was tempered by overwhelming what-the-fuck fear. She was clearly pregnant, but I still wanted to take a look. I mean she was pregnant according to a generic test which probably meant that she had eaten red meat at some point in the last seven days. I strolled into the bathroom and there it was on the windowsill. Just a little stick that kind of looks like one of those pens that you use at your doctor’s office that has that really big end that’s almost so big that you can’t actually use the pen. Only it wasn’t a pen. I already knew what

it said, but there was still that tiny sliver of doubt in the back of my mind. It was like every game the Cubs have played for the past century and you know that they are going to lose in the most cripplingly depressing fashion imaginable, and you wouldn't be surprised if one of their players died in the process, but in the back of your head that little buck-toothed twelve year old is saying "Maybe dey'll bin." "What? I can't understand you." "I'm forry, I have buck-teef." "They'll get slightly better. But you're going to grow another three feet in the next two years." "Oh my Gob, I'mma a momnster." "Go play with your lamp." "Not coowl, not coowl."

I picked up the doctor's pen that wasn't really a doctor's pen, and I'm not going to lie I tried to make as little contact with it as possible. I'm fully aware that my wife is usually in complete control of her bladder but all I could picture was her wildly urinating all over the entire bathroom. I don't know why, but I was convinced that this thing was going to be dripping wet. And even if it was, I mean what the hell is wrong with me? Anyway, I looked down and there was a bold blue stripe. She was pregnant...but I read the box just to make sure. Then I looked again. Then I held it up against the white walls of the bathroom to check again. Still blue. I set the test back on the windowsill, what would you have done? I didn't want to walk around with the thing for the rest of the day looking for someplace to put it like I was at a party with an empty plastic cup. Not like I could hide it behind a house plant. Seriously, have you ever seen anybody actually put a drink behind a house plant? Me neither. Why does that always happen in movies with a college party? Let alone the fact that absolutely zero percent of the college population has a house plant. But I digress. Parties and movies are a thing of the past. I say that like I go to parties all the time. But at least the option was open if I happened to be around when somebody accidentally told the person I was standing next to about a party and they felt obligated to invite me.

I walked back into the living room and sat down on the couch next to my wife. “Yup.” That’s what I said, yup. She said “Yup” back, so it turns out “yup” wasn’t such a stupid thing to say after all. We just sort of sat in silence for a second or two. We were excited, scared, and really really hot. Let me clarify here that while I wasn’t jumping for joy I was excited by the proceedings. I feel like you’re getting the wrong impression. It’s just that we were broke, had no insurance and I was pretty sure that my parents were going to literally explode when we told them. I had woken up that day dreading a family party and complaining about ham sandwiches and I was going to bed an expectant father. What did you do on the 4th?

On the way to the hospital, and yes, thank you, I drove – all I kept thinking was “don’t get in an accident.” So I’m driving 8mph. All I can think about is the empty car-seat in the back. Did I put it in right? What if the nurse makes me re-install it in front of the entire city of Chicago? When do we take it out? Am I ready to be in the driver’s seat? Is that guy in the Taurus eating ribs? Delicious. Meanwhile Jeanette is starting to have some serious contractions. The kind that start with “Oh God oh GOD OH GOD!” Here’s a tip for you, turning up the radio won’t soothe your wife. And you know this going into it but there isn’t really that much you can do in the car, so you push that little plus sign in hopes that Bono’s voice at level 8 will be *that much* more soothing than at level 7, but mostly so you can at least claim some sort of action, however in vain it may be.

Once we get to the hospital we are herded into the triage waiting room. This is something I didn’t expect. My wife is going into labor and we’re sitting in a waiting room. I tell the receptionist our name and hand her our bundle of paperwork. Bear in mind Jeanette’s name is on

each of the fifty forms that I just handed over, in most cases several times per page. Also bear in mind that I just said “Jeanette Fotis.”

“Janet Sotis...yeah she’s not in our system.”

“Jeanette Fotis.”

“I’m not showing a Sotis on file. Did you pre-register?”

“Yes. It’s under Fotis. With an F, like Frank.”

At this point another receptionist enters as though she’s on an episode of *24* and begins rifling through the S file cabinet. “It’s not here! It’s not here! I can’t find Sotis – there’s no Sotis! We’re all gonna die. This is my 9-11!”

“I’m sorry. It’s Fotis. F-O-T-I-S. No S.”

“You just said S,” says receptionist one.

“It ends in S. It starts with—”

“Look it’s just not here. We’ll have to manually register you since you didn’t pre-register.” SIGH! “Have a seat. We’ll call you.”

So we take a seat. Jeanette seems slightly calmer now that we are actually in the hospital. I’m worried that my baby’s last name is going to be Sotis.

After about an hour and a half we get sent up to the labor and delivery room where we meet our new nurse Susie. If you haven’t been to Northwestern Memorial, it’s in downtown Chicago right on Lake Michigan in some pretty prime real estate. “Hey look honey!” I shout with glee, “You can see Water Tower and the lake.” Immediately I know I have committed a strategic blunder. “Shut up! Where is my epidural?” I should point out that by this point my wife is saying everything in a sing-song voice that ends with a question mark but is laced with venom. “Where is my epidural?” “It’s hot in here?” “Sit down?” By now it’s been about two

plus hours of nurses telling us that the epidural “Will be here in a jiff.” Susie gets back on the walkie talkie to placate Jeanette by reordering the epidural for the seven hundredth time.

Meanwhile Jeanette is progressing at the rate of an Irish mother of seventeen. She’s gone from two to seven centimeters in about forty-five minutes. I’m doing my best to soothe her with ice chips and small talk, one of my strong suits. I’m so bad that Jeanette orders me to sit down, shut up, and keep a five foot barrier between us. Wow. I know that I’m socially awkward and Jeanette’s giving birth and all, but I have to admit that kind of hurt my feelings.

Don’t Google it. Jeanette got a call from her doctor after our second ultrasound. Cleft lip. That’s all I remember. Look, I’m not going to sit here and act like I don’t know where cleft lip falls on the range of bad shit you don’t want to hear from your doctor about your baby. I’m fully aware that as far as things go a possible cleft lip/cleft palate is about as good as it gets. It did suck all of our energy though. We went from elated to depressed. We started to worry about the surgeries Baby Sotis would have to go through, the risk, the therapy, the social consequences, the combination of buck teeth and cleft lip, the school bullies, the looks on everyone’s faces when they first saw him, all of that stupid shit. And then I Googled it. The first thing that pops up is this hideously deformed kid with a “please kill me” look on his face. Article after article about the surgery schedule, the mental and psychological challenges, the social pressure – look this kid is going to be at enough of a social disadvantage if my genes are in there, so Lil’ Sotis doesn’t need any help being socially awkward. Page after page of these pictures, stories and articles, and after you get over the shock of it the really depressing thing is the overwhelming sadness that is splashed across these kids’ faces. I don’t want my kid to look like that.

We had to wait a week before we could get a 3-D ultrasound to confirm the diagnosis. To this point in my life, that was the longest week of my life. Following a close second is the previous Christmas when we found out that my dad had lymphoma, which in a weird round about way led to this ultrasound. He's doing just fine now; although he's even more sentimental and sappy if that's humanly possible. Don't believe me, ask him any question and he will respond with "I'm just happy to be alive." While this might seem sweet, it gets really annoying really fast. "Do you know what time dinner is?" "I'm just happy to be alive." "Did you see the Cubs game last night?" "I'm just happy to be alive." "I think my leg is broken." "I'm just happy to be alive." After we got over the initial shock, and my Dad got over his cancer, Jeanette and I began to talk about starting our own family. While we aren't exactly old, we took the lymphoma as a sign that while we have no money, no insurance, and no business having a baby, maybe we should stop putting off a family before there's nobody left to baby-sit.

Our appointment was Monday morning at 8AM. I don't think we said more than ten words on the ride over, both hoping that the buck toothed kid in the back of our heads was right this time, maybe everything would be okay – however the test turned out. The good thing about 8AM appointments is that you don't have to wait. We were whisked in and before I knew it Jeanette's stomach was covered in that goo that clearly has an actual name but I prefer to call it that goo. As she spread that goo Olga, our Hungarian tech, assured us that she'd be able to tell us one way or another. Hey, she's Eastern European she doesn't have time for bullshit. "I will find that lip for you." She went to work whooshing around trying to get a good shot of the lip, and being a sucker for the camera Baby Sotis gave her one. "There it is." she said. We both took a deep breath. This was it. Not to be too dramatic but two different life paths were hanging in the balance: socially awkward with a cleft lip; or just plain socially awkward. "It's fine. Full lip. I

don't know what that other tech saw." "You're sure?" "Of course I'm sure it's right there on the screen!" she said with a slight twinge of anger that we dare doubt her. A wave passed over us, and we both started to cry. I didn't want to cry too much because I didn't want to admit to myself that I would have been disappointed had he had a cleft lip. I wanted to pretend like I was this great person that would have had no problem with it, but I would have, and I think part of my tears were about that.

"Do you want sex?" Olga asks. "Most of the time," although this hardly seems like the appropriate time or place Olga. "Hmm, sex of baby?" "Ah, yes, I see." We had planned on being surprised, but at the moment we were done with surprises. "Sure." She positioned the viewer and there it was on the screen. "Okay." I said, completely unsure if I was seeing a penis or just a shaft of light. There was a long pause. I looked at Jeanette. She looked at me. "Can you tell?" we silently asked each other. We both pretended like we could but didn't want to tell the other one, so we resigned ourselves to the fact that we thought we saw a boy but were too embarrassed to confirm it out loud in front of our new Soviet Bloc friend and were willing to leave without truly knowing. We continued to sit in silence. Eventually Olga disgustedly blurted out "It is boy."

"Susie?!? Where's my epidural?!?" "It's coming. You're next on the list." I know she's lying. Jeanette knows she's lying. Even Susie knows she's lying but we're all still somehow comforted. Susie's set up the delivery table and has paged Jeanette's doctor. Labor is imminent. I've called the parents and they are on their way. Well except for my father. I guess "I'm just happy to be alive" is only valid between 7AM and 7PM. He's like an old school reverse cell phone plan. After 7PM he's "too tired to go all the way downtown." With my dad on the couch sleeping and midnight rapidly approaching the only question is if Baby Sotis will be born on the 5th or the 6th.

I'm still banished to a chair when the most handsome doctor in the world bursts into the room. "I'm here for the epidural. Should I take off my shirt?" Jesus has arrived...and I have to leave the room. I hope that's not a sign. So Susie escorts me to the hallway, banished to purgatory while Jeanette is sent to the Kingdom. It's eerily quiet. On the other side of the door my wife is getting ready to give birth to our son. I'm glad that I can stand now, but I have no idea what to do. So I call work. I figure I can't just not show up the next day...actually I'm a temp, so I probably can just not show up the next day. I start thinking about how different my life is going to be the next time I walk out of that door. I mean this is the last time I'm ever going to awkwardly stand in a hallway as a non-dad. There's going to be a little man in our life that I only know now as the baby that punches and kicks the crap out of my wife's stomach. What's he going to be like? What am I going to be like? What's he going to do? What am I going to do? How much is he going to cost? How much is this going to cost? Because if he thinks we are going to have the air conditioner running in the summer he's got another thing coming. This is it, this is the last time I'm ever going to be alone.

While I'm computing the added heating and cooling costs Baby Sotis will bring, the door bursts open and Jesus hovers by. I try to touch him but he mystically vanishes. I let myself back into the room. If it weren't for the view I would have thought I entered a different world. Susie and Jeanette are gossiping, the monitors are all leveling off, heck I'm even allowed to stand. "Oh hey Matt." "Hey, feeling better?" "I got the epidural."

At the time we found out she was pregnant we still didn't have insurance – although rest assured it would eventually come – and doubly rest assured that more than two years later we are still paying off some of those bills to remind us that we didn't have insurance. We were in

Minnesota for a theatre festival, and visiting my brother; one of those two birds with one stone things. My parents were set to arrive and we were meeting them at Pizza Luce. My parents are wonderful people, but I was terrified to tell them about the baby. This is partly due to money issues, but it also stems from my mother's incessant comments such as "You had better not be pregnant." These little nuggets of wisdom had been passed down to us from the day we got married. It's almost as if we would have had an easier time telling them we were having a baby out of wedlock. My ace in the hole was a picture from the first ultrasound. All of my faith was in that picture even though I couldn't really tell what was what.

We had a few hours to kill while my brother was at work, so we sat in the parking lot of Pizza Luce trying to figure out the best way to tell them, and of course trying to prepare ourselves for their reaction. A complete collapsing "Ohhh nnnooooo your life is over!" was the consensus for my mother, while my father was a favorite of "how are you going to afford a baby? But hey, not my problem, I'm just happy to be alive." Either that or he wasn't going to say anything. Probably just start humming a little *Cats in the Cradle* to avoid telling me how worried he is: "He said I'm going to be like you Dad, you know I'm going to be like you – hit it! – And the Cats in the Cradle and the silver spoon, Little Boy Blue and the Man in the Moon." Seriously, as if Cat Stevens (okay, Harry Chapin if you insist on accuracy but we both know that it's funnier if it's a Cat Stevens song) songs aren't nostalgic and sad enough just image my father singing them with his chemo-peach fuzz hair cut all the while knowing that all he's thinking is "I'm just happy to be alive Son, you know I'm just happy to be alive...How are you going to afford a baby?"

We eventually went inside, got a table and waited. My brother was the first to arrive, and I'm pretty sure he already knew. Jeanette's not the best secret keeper, and chances are her

randomly blurting out “I can’t eat sushi!” earlier in the week gave us away. After about ten minutes I could see my parents walking past the restaurant. I’m not trying to make the story more dramatic, but it took them another five minutes to walk inside the restaurant. They have this habit of doing everything painstakingly slowly. It can take my father upwards of two hours to eat a grapefruit, while my mother holds the record for slowest possible fall. It’s like you’re watching her on freeze frame. One slide at a time and it’s so slow that you tend to forget she’s falling, it’s like she’s a street performer and her whole gig is moving without letting the audience see her move. And just as you are about to drop a dollar at her feet you remember that she’s falling, “Mom, just stop. Just stop yourself. Just straighten your back. Mom.” But it doesn’t work. From the moment she starts to fall you can read *The Brothers Karamazov* – in Russian – by the time she actually hits the ground. Once she’s on the ground, she pauses for a second, and then like rainwater she begins rolling toward the Mississippi River. It’s uncanny. Wherever we are she will orient herself to the river (and this is not a woman at one with a map) and then begin slowly rolling. She’ll go uphill, downhill, sidehill, she’ll roll on a perfectly flat surface until my father disgustedly puts his foot out to stop her.

They sat down and we all exchanged hellos. We had decided to tell them after we ordered so as to avoid the waiter walking in just as we were breaking the news. Plus my mom is a notorious wine pusher and we would have ended up getting in a fight about Jeanette not drinking wine and everything would have been ruined. After we ordered it was go time. My heart was racing, my head was throbbing and sweat was pouring down my face. “Why isn’t the air on in here?” Meanwhile my mother was telling my brother that tomatoes are very good for his prostate, so he should eat more of them. Why she was telling him this I don’t know. I pulled the picture out of my pocket. My mother took a sip of her wine. “Here goes.” I started to talk when

my mother blurted out “Oh this wine is so good. Here Jeanette have some wine. You know we should take a trip to Italy and go wine tasting before you have kids.” She continued on for five minutes about all the things we should do before having kids, the whole time pushing wine on Jeanette “oh honey why don’t you have some wine – oh that’s good Mikey, cherry tomatoes are especially healthy for your prostate –

Matt: “Listen, Mom-”

Mom: How is your prostate dear—”

Matt: “It’s fine, Mom. Listen, we have something—”

Mom: “Jeanette this wine hits the spot, here let me pour you some –”

Jeanette: “No thanks Vickie, I—”

Mom: “Just a little.”

Jeanette: “I shouldn’t.”

Mom: “Okay, I’ll pour you a little.”

(My father’s thought bubble): “My child arrived just the other day. He came to the world in the usual way.”

Matt: “Um. Mom. Dad. We—”

Mom: “We should really make it a point to take a hayride before you have kids.”

Matt: “We should, but before—”

Mom: “—before you have kids—”

(Thought bubble) “But there were planes to catch and bills to pay, he learned to walk while I was away.”

Mom: “Here honey let me pour you a glass of wine.”

Matt: “Mom. (Mom starts to fall.) We’re in a booth. How are you falling?”

Mom: "Take my tomatoes. Take my wine. Tell my story!"

(TB) "And he was talkin' 'fore I knew, and as he grew he'd say 'I'm gonna be like you dad. You know I'm gonna be like you.'"

The whole time Jeanette is punching me in the leg every time my mom offers her wine or starts a sentence with "before you have kids." By the time the pizza comes I'm pretty sure I won't be able to walk and I am worried about my brother's prostate. The plan was ruined. I tried to regroup. I had to tell them. They would figure it out eventually. Just rip off the band-aid. After everyone had their pizza dished out I figured it was now or never.

Matt: "So. Mom, mom."

Mom: "Jeanette dear, have some wine. It goes so well with pizza."

Matt: "Stop hitting me."

Mom: "What's that dear? Before you have kids you two should really think about going to the mall."

Matt: "We go to the mall now."

Mom: "Right. You should go again before you have kids. It's impossible to shop with children."

Matt: "Stop talking. Mom! Mom!"

(TB): "When you comin' home son? I don't know when, but we'll get together then, son—"

Matt: "Dad! Stop thinking about nostalgic songs."

(TB): "You know we'll have a good time then."

Matt: "Dad."

(TB): (He starts playing the air sitar...in his head.)

Matt: “Stop playing the air sitar.”

Silence. I had no idea what to say. I don’t think I can remember a time when our whole family was sitting in complete silence that wasn’t one of my father’s mandatory ‘stop enjoying life and think about sad things moment’ like when we were at the beach as kids having a glorious time until somebody broke out “Just imagine how long it took for all of the blood to get washed out of the sands of Normandy.” Guess whose sandcastle didn’t seem quite so awesome anymore? Should I preface this? Or just come right out and say it? Is she talking about my brother’s prostate again? “It can swell to the size of a volleyball—” “Speaking of swelling to the size of a volleyball Jeanette and I are having a child.” Silence.

Silence.

Did they hear me?

Silence.

My mother flings her head back. Oh shit, this is going to be worse than I thought. “Ohhhhhhh nnnnoooooooooo! I’m so embarrassed! Here I am going on and on. Oh that’s wonderful!” Wonderful? Oh thank God. What about my dad? He could still bring down the house. Is he going to say anything? Is he thinking about *Peace Train*? Oh shit, he’s judging me. I hate when he judges. Tell me something sad about Harry Truman. Or about lymphoma. Tell me that we can’t afford it. Tell me that you are worried. Tell me that you’re excited. Tell me anything. Then it came, with a smile on his face and sweat pouring from his brow: “Can I have another slice of pizza? Sausage please.”

“Okay Jeanette, I need you to push on three. Ready one, two, three push!” Jeanette’s foot is piercing my chest. Shouldn’t there be another nurse in here? I’m not qualified to do this.

But it's go time. She's in the stirrups...well metaphorically. Suck it up Matt. "Good job Jeanette. One more push and I think the head will crown." This is it. This is the last time I'll ever hold my wife's leg while she's giving birth as a non-dad. It's time to see how many father skills I actually possess. It's time to start putting diapers on something other than a stuffed monkey. It's time. Another set of pushes and the head is starting to come out. I turn toward the door and "why in the hell is my mother-in-law standing there?" She does a quick double take and turns around...and "now she's coming back what is going on? Oh my God here comes the head – Please leave – how is that going to fit – seriously? – one more push – ahhh – we're all gonna die – this is my 9-11!"

By the time I reconnected with what was happening the baby was halfway out. There was this frozen in time moment where Baby Sotis was sort of suspended between worlds when everything sunk in. I was quitting my job as an accountant that wasn't really a job but was giving me high blood pressure and stripping my soul. Fuck Don Draper. I was going back to school to chase my dreams. I was going to be a role model for this kid. I wanted him to see his father as someone that didn't settle. I wanted to show him that he could do or be anything he wanted. I wanted to be the father my father was and more – "he'd say, 'I'm gonna be like you dad. You know I'm gonna be like you.'"

Once everything went back to normal speed the doctor turned the baby as he was coming out and I saw his face for the first time...and he looked just like my father-in-law. I tell you if there's one thing that I hope you don't ever have to witness, it is your father-in-law being pushed out of your wife's body while your mother-in-law walks in and out of the room. He was out. Baby Sotis was a part of this world, coming in two minutes past midnight...although my mother insists that this is incorrect and that he was actually born on the 5th instead of the 6th. I'm not

sure why she's so adamant about it, but I think somebody is going to have two birthday parties – extra sweatpants and Russian immigrant shirts for everyone!

The next few hours, days and weeks were a whirlwind. Simply keeping the baby alive turned into a major accomplishment. Basic tasks like eating or burping or shitting his pants turned into magnificent triumphs. So far along the way Jeanette lost control of her bladder (only temporarily – guess I was right about the pregnancy test) and I lost control of the sciatic nerve in my back. Here we are over two years later (with Baby Fortis in tow) and it's hard to imagine life without Baby Sotis. It's hard to imagine not being a dad. It's hard to imagine sleep. It's hard to remember what money felt like. It's hard to imagine all of the things I don't know, but I'm convinced that telling jokes is a great father skill. It's hard to imagine the Matt that was afraid to have a baby. What sort of man have I become? What sort of man will I become? What does that even mean? What sort of men will my sons be? What will they see in me? What will I teach them? I don't know. But I guess the best thing to say is that I was completely prepared for how totally unprepared I am...

I am a father. I am a son. I am a man. And I have no idea what that means.