

My Father's Love Language

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The first time my father proposed, my mother turned him down.

When Dad tells me the failed proposal story, he claims to illustrate the persistence of men and their willingness to pursue and endure for a girl who lights up their world. "I can't speak for every man," he says, "but I think usually, when it comes to the woman you want to marry, you just know."

While driving me back to school after fall break freshman year, Dad told me about the first time he ever saw my mother. "She had been crying," he said. "I don't know about what, but her eyes were red. She was sitting on the floor of our friend's living room, playing with their cat. And I just remember thinking: 'I could marry her.'"

At the time, my takeaway from the story was: *"Of course she was playing with a cat. Classic Mom."* More recently, I've wondered if anyone will ever look at me and just *know*.

During another car ride – one of the only times our schedules sync up, and thus the perfect time for intense conversations – Dad explained to me that he doesn't believe he needs my mother. "And I see that as a good thing. Of course, that was harder to explain to her." His eyes, framed by surprisingly few creases for his age – sixty, at the time – remained fixed on the road. His calloused fingers combed through a long, Santa-like beard before returning to the steering wheel. "But the way I see things, it's better for me to want her without needing her. Because if I'm only with her because I need her, what happens on the day I decide I'm not dependent on her anymore?"

He frequently speaks that way, as an overtly rational force. His reasoning is highly utilitarian. The best answer is the right answer. As I went through adolescence, for example, my mother and I clashed fiercely and frequently. Dad stepped in to intervene on multiple occasions, and in those moments, as he glared down at me over crossed arms, and his 5'6" frame became imposing. "I chose your mother," he said to me, on multiple occasions, "I did not choose you. I love you, but your mother is the woman I chose to spend my life with. She is the most important thing to me, and when you get an attitude, when you talk to her as if she's stupid, you are talking down to the woman I love and chose to marry." I stood in silence, staring at the floor, glancing up whenever he choked on his words. "And I will keep choosing her. I will have her back every single time."

My cheeks flushed with shame. Being told I wasn't first choice wounded my teenage pride, no matter how straightforward the ranking system was. Now, my mind is blown by Dad's devotion to my mother. He possesses an unrelenting loyalty and adoration for her, and occasionally I resent her for undervaluing his devotion. But the resentment stems from fear, fear that I will one day love someone without reserve and have that love go unappreciated.

Dad constantly makes sacrifices for my mom, for his family. When I was seven years old, Dad quit his lucrative job in Atlanta and took a job near the South Carolina border. The commute wasn't reasonable, so we moved. I was distraught. But he said he was tired of traveling so much, of being away for weeks at a time just to be home for a weekend – a week at most. I didn't realize until high school that the job he'd taken in order to be home more paid half as much as the one in Atlanta. After another year or two, I realized how much humility that choice required.

His humility became critical ten years ago, when the company he worked for closed the Elberton branch and he lost his job. He quickly found work at a local factory, and his political science degree from the University of Alabama fell to disuse in an assembly line. Never mind that he started out at Georgia Tech studying aerospace engineering. He is now working with heavy metal and machines that slice through the tendons of ill-placed fingers.

Failing out of Georgia Tech, I think, is one of the reasons he's relentlessly supportive of my dreams. I know he thinks creative writing is a waste of time. I know he wishes I'd studied chemistry or biology – or at least political science and economics. I know if I'd chosen to join the military, he'd be proud beyond belief. But he does not say these things to me. Instead, he buys me gifts for maintaining my GPA, for getting the grades he could not commit himself to during the Georgia Tech years. He looks up information about writing conferences, about local workshops, anything he thinks I might be remotely interested in during the months that I'm home for the summer. When I told him I wanted to move to L.A., he uttered no fears about the instability of that future, but instead beamed about what an adventure that would be, about how the world is full of fascinating people and experiences: "You have to be bold enough to find them."

His interest in my life extends beyond my professional ambitions. He used to let me ramble endlessly about middle school crushes and high school heartbreaks. A month before my senior year of college, he asked me about my thoughts on marriage. I told him I didn't know, that marriage is something I want, but I'm unsure how to balance looking for – hoping for – a soul mate and pursuing a career. "I can't just sit around waiting for him, ya know?"

He nodded, and then something prompted me to voice one of my bigger insecurities to him. "The sarcasm," I said. "I know I can be a bitch sometimes...I dunno – do you think it's completely off-putting?" As he sat crisscross-applesauce on the top level of the tree house I'd watched him build ten years before, he explained to me that he thinks the sarcasm is intimidating, "In my opinion, at least – and I know I'm your father, but I like to think I'm reasonably objective. In my opinion, you're pretty close to a complete package, so that's intimidating. Now throw in the wit, the banter, and that's a whole other level." I think he meant the words to be comforting.

Comforting and verbalizing sympathy aren't exactly his strengths. When my brother went through his first major breakup, also just before I left for my senior year of college, my father stood by silently. Gabe cried openly as I told our parents – through tears of my own – that his girlfriend of over a year (over five percent of your life when you're in high school) had broken up with him. Our father stroked his arm, clearly unsure if the same hugs you use to comfort daughters could be used to comfort sons, and offered a quiet "I'm sorry." Later, when I asked Gabe if he would rather

talk to Dad about the breakup, because I was too much of a sympathy crier, my brother rolled his eyes at me. He said Dad was too pragmatic to be helpful.

The practicality does become a barrier at times. Dad tenses up when he can't fix things, like his son's breakup or his mother's dementia. He gets frustrated, hyper-logical, willing himself to force the situation to resolution. My ninety-five-year-old grandmother sits at the dinner table, unable to understand the conversation swirling around her, and suddenly my dad is trying to build a linguistic bridge, dragging her toward comprehension. Sometimes she catches the gist, and she laughs. Sometimes she stares blankly at him, and he works himself up into a series of exasperated sighs. I think that when he looks at her confusion, he's terrified that he's looking into his future.

The sigh is a trademark, his sign that he's at a total loss for how to proceed. He is a helper, attentive to the distresses and needs of others. He consistently goes out of his way to better the lives of those he cares about most. But what is there to be done when your son refuses to talk about his breakup? What can you do when your daughter cries over anxieties about her future? With no perfect fix, my dad goes and buys 5 Gum. My two addictions are caffeine and chewing gum, and the number of empty packs of gum in my trash directly correlates to my level of stress. Over the summer, I frequently worked 12-hour days waitressing at a local marina. Many times, when I got home from work, I walked into my room to find multiple packs of 5 Gum laying neatly on my pillow.

I feel my father's love in these little gestures. In many ways, my father taught me how to love and how to be loved. And so now I hope that one day, I will find someone who appreciates me leaving peppermint gum on their pillowcase.