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My Dear Old Dad, Donald

Donald Peter Matinzi is an illustrious character, whose rounded, thick glasses and crinkled smile have become hallmarks of a face that I have seen every day of my life. He often wears his blue jeans and trademark red jacket, even inside the house because he is far more suited for the heat than cold. No matter how warm it might be it is always a rare occasion to find him without layers. His face is framed by short black hair and a “UMass Dad” baseball cap that sits atop his head at all times. He grew up on Summer Street in Plymouth, right next to where I would eventually go to preschool about 50 years later. He was always outdoors, typically on the basketball court down the street, and often getting himself into trouble. He had turned 70 this past July, which was much to his dismay as he often complained about having “old parts” in comparison to my “new” ones, but this did not dissuade him as much as he acted like it did.

His wide array of stories would dazzle even the most jaded audience, as he would confidently assert “Now this is a true story!” before delving into the fantastical tales of his past. Of course, I had heard many, but that hardly meant he was out of them. Once one began another would soon form, resulting in another appearance at my bedroom door after he had left just seconds before. He was far more than just a storyteller of course, no matter his skill at it. Thankfully, he was my dad. And I say thankfully because it was certainly a stroke of luck to have him as my father. He was always there for me no matter the cause, whether that be a difficult math problem (which he could also not solve but would attempt) or navigating me and my friend out of the Plympton Corn Maze. He may have been the only one of us with the map of the maze, and that may or may not have aided him in such but regardless he truly saved our souls.

The first memory that I can recall involving him was around Christmas time in 2005 or so. The Christmas tree was bedazzled with rainbow lights and filled with haphazardly placed ornaments by yours truly. The glorious smell filled the surrounding rooms while the sound of the Patriots game entered the air. All I remember was us watching with great intent as a wide receiver attempted to deceive the referee by putting the ball on the goal-line after the whistle had been blown, but we both let out a sigh after his efforts sadly failed and the ball was moved backwards. Hardly a core memory by any stretch but that marked the beginning of countless memories of watching various Massachusetts sports teams with my dad, every week, always one of us on the couch and one in the chair, and with my pirate toys Halfbeard, Blackbeard, and Skully the Lego skeleton looking on from the coffee table (they were for luck). Sadly, these toys could not work their magic every week, and he would gladly voice his displeasure if any of our teams were not performing up to standards. He had seen infinitely more basketball and football than I had so I took his word for it when he began to explain all the things that had gone wrong. I was typically confused and lost but I listened all the same. His childhood, however, is where things get interesting.

Throughout his youth he had been quite the music man, blasting it through the largest speakers he could find in the basement of his house, while also playing it with his friends. He grew fond of guitars, collecting a vast array of Fender Stratocasters, most of which he still possesses and will take out of their cases for the occasional solo session (he insists that they are mine now, but I think he makes better use of them...). However, he was drawn to the organ, specifically the B3 organ. It is a massive wooden instrument that required specially designed carrying cases that he was forced to lug around throughout his youth, before painstakingly setting up the behemoth. Despite that, it would be his main instrument at any concert or band

practice. While many bands came and went, he repeatedly asserted the prominence of “Basic Black,” which was by far his most popular one. Him and “the guys” had been generating a lot of buzz, getting articles written about them, “the whole nine yards.” “We were bad, Cole” he would say, with it being important to note that bad means good in this case. But ultimately egos drove them apart as members of the band began to leave with misguided confidence in their own solo ability. Sadly, that was that for Basic Black, but that will never stop him from reminiscing about how far they could have gone. There are still remnants of this past, particularly his continued love for guitars of all shapes and sizes. Serious hearing loss is another thing his passion brought on but that is beside the point...

His primary fascination had always been cars however, classic cars of course. Him and his buddy Ricky would work for hours together building supercars and tinkering around on whatever they wanted. I have heard many tales of his past creations, all of which already sold away long ago. Of course, they did far more than just build these vehicles; always had to test them out... They did not, in fact, stay within the speed limit during such test drives the majority of the time, a surprise to be sure for two teenagers with massively powerful supercars. This brought upon quite the reputation with the local police, particularly one Officer James who would typically bust him for drag-racing his new toys. The ultimate threat of this was not whatever standard warning this would bring along though. At one point he had been caught yet again, received the usual spiel and ticket except the last time he had been caught, he’d been told that if his behavior repeated, they would inform his mother (my grandmother, Teddy Matinzi). A terrifying threat. Protests arose and his heart sank further and further as he was unable to convince the officer that he had not been racing, as he was forced to sulkingly drive home and wait for the other shoe to drop. Nothing immediate occurred. However, right around dinner time

a knock at the door came, which his mom went to investigate. “Oh Officer, what a lovely surprise! Please come in. We were just about to get started with dinner.” This was torturous of course, death was imminent. Continuous pleasantries were exchanged, and dinner was served, my father unable to enjoy his meal for obvious reasons. Officer James only eyed him but continued to be quiet about their encounter. As his visit came to a close and they all went to the door, silence engrossed them. Panic ensued as my dad was sure this was it, but Officer James simply turned his head and said, “Have a nice night Donny,” with a smile, before leaving the house. He did not drag race anymore after that.

His fascination with cars still remains of course, a passion that has never left, but it has certainly mellowed it. Though he still points to cars in movies or shows that we watch, proudly proclaiming that he used to own one or just listing off its name and year alongside an assortment of facts. Ricky, however, is far more engrossed in the hobby still. At the age of 72 he lives in Florida and calls my dad every day, excited about the latest roadster he has just bought and is planning to fix up, or absolutely spamming his phone with a few dozen pictures late at night. It is a common occurrence for us to be eating dinner, and hear a ding, followed by another, and then once more, before... DING-DING-DING-DING-DING- click - silenced. He acts slightly annoyed by it each time, but I can tell he enjoys checking out whatever project Ricky’s undergone and what new restoration he has had done for them to admire. The phone will ring, and I will hear him say “Ricky!” followed by “Donnyyyyyy” coming through the phone as he gets up and heads over to the bedroom for whatever their latest (often loud) discussion might entail.

Recounting the numerous interests he possessed I am beginning to wonder how he ever managed to balance them all, because physical activities also consumed his childhood and early adulthood. The list of sports I knew that he played grew longer and longer as I got older, and I

am sure there were some he participated in that I have not even been told about yet. He was proficient in volleyball, soccer, basketball, cycling and a number of others that currently slip my mind. He played basketball tournaments with one of his friends who just so happened to be a player in the ABA (prominent basketball league that eventually merged with the NBA), regaling me with his analytical advice to the team of “Just get the damn ball to Johnny!” This did in fact work and they won the championship. While he could not dunk due to his 5’7 stature, he confidently asserted that he was able to touch the rim, recalling others on the court exclaiming “that white boy can jump!” whenever he played on open courts.

I did initially share the same enjoyment for playing sports as a kid, participating in baseball, basketball, soccer, and archery, but that did not last in the slightest. Archery and soccer were mostly terrible, and I retired from baseball at the age of 5 to pursue other interests; “hanging up the cleats” one might say (I did not wear cleats, I wore sneakers but that is beside the point). I would eventually play organized basketball, a few years of which my dad was the coach. “Defense and free throws” became his motto. I would hear him repeat this same catchphrase years later if the Celtics were struggling with either during a game, but thankfully they have happened to improve greatly in these phases over time.

Regardless, he and I had been playing basketball together constantly prior to this. We had a hoop in our driveway that we (him) would set up at the end of every winter, often playing all the way up until the bus came, and then I would sprint up the driveway to it, backpack jumping up and down as I made the quick ascent. Once we got our dog Blaze, he would do whatever was necessary to join us. This often constituted peeking out the window that looks over the hoop and staring at us with sorrowful eyes until we allowed him to come out. My dad’s coaching and pointers about shooting form would be interrupted by pure chaos. Once Blaze arrived, he would

ferociously attack the ball, trying to bite into it and pick it up, however he mostly just managed to roll the ball around and steal it away from us much to his glee. It got to the point where we would bring out a second basketball that we would not use, just so we could give it to him as a distraction. My dad and I would roll it up our driveway for him, to where he would go barreling after it. He would soon conquer the beast, keeping it still in the grass while he lay next to it, far too self-absorbed to roll it back to us, oh no, he wanted us to come to him to roll it again so this process could repeat.

While this took place, we would be locked in an intense one on one game. We would play to varying scores, typically around 10-11 or so. Oftentimes it would go something like as follows. Sweat collecting on my forehead, I would eye the basket, as I began to move forward, dribbling the ball out of his reach. He would move his hands at the ball to no avail, as I made my way inside the three-point line. Back to the basket I would back him down, and then swiftly turn around, raise the ball above my eyes and fade from the basket, shooting it over his outstretched hands. Swish. An overwhelming sense of victory would fill my mind, witnessing such a difficult shot pay off with my dad not standing a chance against my skills. I was gaining ground, my comeback starts now, he does not want to play me when I am on fire like this. I could taste imminent victory; I had never been closer. Score: 2-9.

Varying levels of success did not dissuade me from playing further, however that was not the case in organized basketball. While my dad was certainly an enthusiastic and fun coach, I was quite simply, bad, and not in the good way. Hearing him tell my grandfather over and over that I was not scoring too much because the game plan for me was “defense oriented” (my defense was awful) was not exactly a high note of my basketball career, and thus I finally stopped in 8th grade, which I was relieved to do at that point. He of course, was entirely

supportive and was not bothered by me doing so, we would still play games outside and watch the Celtics together. Looking back at that now I am quite appreciative of his being so open to my stopping, as my no longer wanting to partake in a part of one of his passions was something I worried would bother him.

Football was another sport that we played between ourselves, just throwing the ball back and forth for hours in the yard together. I would run all over, looking to make one handed catches or perfect spiral throws. My mom would join us at times, and we would form a triangle, passing it to the person to our left continuously. As the years went by, I would have to move a little closer to him so his throws could reach me, but it was always just as fun. There was nothing better than going out in the fall with my dad, throwing the ball to each other, and then coming in to watch football for the day's entirety together. It did not even matter who was on most of the time, as long as football was on, we would be watching it. While these throwing sessions began to dwindle over the years, I still treasured our times in the living room, cheering for whichever team we had decided to root for, while Blaze lay in his bed right below the television, blissfully laying on his back with his paws in the air, probably thinking that we were cheering for him and all his glory.

Cycling however, brought along my favorite stories. His racing days were rather grand, where he would always be training and on teams alongside even some professional riders. He loved telling one story in particular. It had been a fall day many decades ago, he had taken out his mountain bike in New Hampshire to try to climb the steepest hills in the state. Eventually he came across one that was as vertical as legally allowed, and his ascent began. The power he had to put into each turn of the pedals was enormous, however he pushed on all the same, cars and buses whistling past him as condensation polluted his glasses and his hair grew matted with

sweat under his helmet. As he progressed further and further, he began to draw observers, waving to him from passing cars. The aches in his thighs seemed to dissipate after each acknowledgement but came back quicker each time. Eventually an entire bus full of students became parallel to him, who swiftly pulled all their windows down and started cheering him on altogether. There were no longer any other riders anywhere in sight, and clearly his new fans understood why as the roars loudened. His legs continued pumping, a slight smile overtook the grimace that had held rigid on his face, and he pushed himself further and further over the cusp of the hill, promptly pulling to the field on the side and collapsing in a pool of sweat. The hill happens to get a little bit steeper every time he tells this, but I still find it impressive, nonetheless.

Unfortunately, his dedication to sports and activities also resulted in some less than ideal occurrences. The riding of his bike led to a number of different incidents, some that were well before me. However, one in particular stuck out. It was late morning on a Spring Thursday a few years ago. I had taken the time to sleep in extensively, but the sun was making its presence felt and I could not have lain in bed any longer. I began walking around the house before my mom approached me looking anxious and distressed, which she practically never was. In a quiet voice she described how dad had been in a bike accident and that she was going up just now to see him in the hospital. Only one visitor was allowed because of COVID, but she said once he was released, we both could pick him up. Another rider had crashed into the back of his bicycle, pushing him off of it, giving him a concussion and a number of other injuries. He had tried to reach back and help her keep control of the bike, but he had ultimately paid the price for it. I was mostly unable to react, stuck, frozen, trying to comprehend what she was saying. We said goodbye to each other and hugged and once I saw her car finally turn onto the main road I

shattered. Tears began to stream, and I had to force myself to get into the shower while violently shaking. My biggest fear in life was losing my father. I would never tell him this, but his age always filled me with anxiety, knowing he had been older than the other dads of my friends, knowing that every time I mentioned his age someone would be surprised. And this instance came across as a materialization of my greatest fears. His helmet had cracked cleanly in half at the impact, which was information I wish I had never learned because as far as I was concerned that moment had left him a few inches of plastic from almost certain death. Thankfully, she took her time at the hospital because I remained a crying wreck for at least two full hours before barely pulling myself together and getting out to the back steps to try to sit in the sunlight and calm down as much as possible. Needless to say, he has not been much of a cyclist since that point, which my anxiety appreciates...

Despite this passion for sports, he originally went to art school for college, fully intent on becoming an art teacher. His hair was significantly longer than it is now (he would describe himself as a hippy back then) and he alluded to the fact that that was the style many fellow students chose. He attended Bridgewater State University, which was a tumultuous experience as far as I could tell. Throughout my application process and the search for colleges, he was relatively certain that I would not have liked it there, which I also suspect. I can attest to his artistic talent though, as not only is he proficient in drawing, but he thoroughly enjoys photography, possessing an array of fancy cameras and telephoto lenses that I could never even begin to understand. Despite only attending for two years, he did seem to enjoy his time there, particularly his professors who seemed to push him extensively to improve and better his work. While the career ended up not being his calling, that is not out of a lack of enjoyment for the subject.

Over time he managed to find himself a solid job at DCR (Department of Conservation and Recreation) at the Myles Standish State Forest, where he worked for many years.

Unfortunately, as he worked his way up the ladder he became often swamped in paperwork and phone calls, bogged down by being on call essentially all of the time, he was clearly exhausted, but he pushed on. He had been promoted, but instead of getting help from an array of assistants like the person previously in the position, he was forced to fend for himself and figure everything out on the fly. Quite the draining challenge that he worked to overcome, while still having to worry about his 10-year-old son at home. However, I do believe something broke inside of him when my mom told him how I had asked her “Why is Dad never home?” He retired the following week. At the time I was not used to him being home very much. My mom and I had used to go to the window and wave goodbye as he drove alllll the way up the winding driveway and off to work, mentally preparing for 9-10 hours of him being away (and the rest of the night where he would have to take phone call after phone call). But that time had passed, and he was actually home, which seemed to be just as much of an adjustment for him as it was for us.

However, it was a grand change indeed, and I would like to think that my face brightened when I saw him sleepily walking out of the bedroom every morning (at a now reasonable hour), his black hair curling upwards and outwards, as he put on his glasses and swiftly turned towards the coffee maker. This, of course, allowed for infinitely more story times, through which I learned an extensive amount about his past and what he had done at work. It seemed that he would constantly one up whatever his last tale was, at one point casually saying how he had met the Emperor of Japan and helped organize his visit to Plymouth. I sat there stunned as he described the most terrifying person he had ever met, the emperor’s main bodyguard who towered over anyone in the vicinity.

“He was in a massive suit, Cole, fully customized and pure black. When the Emperor finally arrived there was an uproar of excitement from all the people who had gathered, but I kept an eye on the bodyguard... He unbuttoned his jacket in a way that everyone could see, moving it to the side so that two twin Uzis were visible! I started walking away from him then. But that was just the beginning, there were divers everywhere in the water, constantly scanning for any potential threat. It was a spectacle; I'll tell you that! I only spoke with the emperor himself for a few moments, exchanging pleasantries, but he came across as far more reserved than I had expected! A nice man overall though.”

He had initially begun by saying that he had met the emperor but that it was “a story for another time,” but you better believe I had pressed him, eager for more tales that quite frankly seemed unbelievable. The offhandedness with which he uttered it threw me through a loop, but I would like to think that my enthusiasm over it made him begin to realize how big of a deal it was as he began to research and investigate who the emperor had been, seemingly very excited. Ultimately, he oversaw much of Plymouth's waterfront as a part of his job, which was quite the popular place for important people to attend. As he was often expected to help organize such events, hundreds upon hundreds of stories to fascinate a young Cole Matinzi (and the current one too) were the result. Unfortunately, not all work stories included major celebrities...

One day a young Cole had accompanied my dad to work, this had been long ago, and he was working at one of the desks, helping get people onto their campsites. However, a woman and her family arrived, passionately exclaiming just how far they had driven to get here, and how horrible it had all been. Of course, there were no more campsites left, which my dad unfortunately had to inform her of. She was understanding and asked if there were other opt- no I am just kidding she got pissed and started yelling. My dad managed the situation to the best of

his ability, mentioning the hotels in the area that they could use in the meantime, but I was more than prepared to step in and let her have it if my services were indeed needed. For whatever reason that memory has stuck with me, perhaps to ensure I stay away from any job opportunities that involve interacting with customers, but I do think it epitomizes my dad's old job (following his promotion) rather well; being expected to fill in at whatever random role they needed, and generally being unfun. However, there were some more enjoyable parts of his job that I got to attend. There was a large festival that was sponsored by DCR in a neighboring town, and thus both my parents, my friend Isaiah and I all attended. Basically, everything had some kind of branding on it and there was not an abundance of activities, but there was Plinko which automatically made it an incredible experience. I was quite pleased with myself, winning a blue ribbon for my Plinko expertise, while my friend tried his hand at the Potato Sack Race. He came in last, but still received a ribbon which displeased me greatly. Despite this, we all got to play disc golf together in the woods that bordered the park, which was certainly an experience. We all hit the surrounding trees many times and had to spend a decent while trying to actually find every target, but it was fun all the same. There was another instance that I hardly remember, where for whatever reason we went to Cape Cod and parked near the beach but did not actually go on it (a cruel tease). Everyone gathered in a nearby field where there was a food truck giving out hot dogs, and my dad gave a speech on something that I cannot remember... sorry Dad. I was the only child there, which resulted in me not so stealthily pestering my parents with questions of when we will finally go home.

While that was the main job my dad held during my childhood, he had worked some remarkably interesting ones before that too. He was a pilgrim at the Plimoth Plantation, which is about 50 feet from our current backyard. Recently renamed Plimoth Patuxet, the area has a

museum, wedding ceremony location, and numerous trails. But most notably it boasts a recreation of the original Plimoth Colony, filled with actors dressed in 17th century attire. My dad dressed up just as they would have, with a fully memorized script to recite (of which he still remembers the majority of). They had multiple different lines that they would use depending on what the group going through the area seemed to want, but he would essentially go on autopilot because of how many times he had said these words. Even if he messed something up, nobody would actually know if what he said was wrong anyway. Ultimately, he worked at many different places throughout Plymouth, even manning the deck of the Mayflower II (reproduction of the original) which is a seaworthy museum of sorts in Plymouth harbor. This was before his fear of heights set in; thus, he was more than fine with summitting the crow's nest on occasion to keep lookout if ever necessary.

Such a fear of heights brings us to what I believe to be its unfortunate roots. I do not know much of the story except that it was before I was born. However, he had been working on a tree in the yard, before falling all the way onto the grass below, breaking both of his legs. Understandably, he grew less fond of high places following this, but would still endure them on occasion depending on what my mom wanted to do. One instance in particular was during our annual trip to New Hampshire, where for whatever reason we had all decided to do a ropes course. Now, my father and I are deathly afraid of heights (I lacked any traumatic event to bring on this), while they mean literally nothing to my mom. So, while we were all instructed and taught what to do/how to put on our vests, she was all ready to go while we were suffering with anxiety. She sped ahead while my dad and I shakily walked along the lowest possible obstacles, slowly but surely going higher before we were both completely resigned to stopping. There were ziplines that led down to the ground every so often that I am sure were for people like us who

just could not handle it anymore, which we made sure to take advantage of. Of course, the stress did not end as we could only watch my mom make her way through the highest possible section of the course, which most certainly worried us more than it did her. This was not the end of our suffering, as the next year we hiked up a mountain close by, and while the most popular part of the summit had fences around the edge, that did not stop me from being absolutely terrified and refusing to move anywhere from the center (it was the furthest possible spot from any of the edges). My dad was a bit more open to walking around but once again, not on the level of my mom... We were not sure where she had gone until we looked over and found her in the distance at an area lacking any barriers, standing about a foot away from a gigantic drop off, happily looking at the scenery. We were displeased. We called out to her and told her to get away to the edge, and thus she returned to us excited to recount what she had seen. This attitude is certainly nothing new of course. Before I was born, she was insistent on going skydiving together but my dad (and her father as well) shot that down pretty fast...

Recently, my mom has been visiting Florida to see her mother, thus my dad has had more time to himself, not counting Blaze of course who constantly runs around. My grandmother initially left for Florida for the winter as she typically did, right before the pandemic started. But once that began, she understandably did not want to fly home, and upon its conclusion doctors' appointments and events have kept her out of Massachusetts. There has never been any suitable time for her to return, thus visits are the only option while my dad stays home with Blaze (who would most certainly be terrified of flying). He had begun going on walks again for the first time in as long as I could remember as a result of this. While he asserted that he was quite the runner back in the day, he had moved away from those kinds of activities with age. This new development though was largely because of Blaze who had been absolutely spoiled with at least

2 walks a day with my mom, resulting in extreme pouting if he missed one. He would typically go to the other side of his house, get up onto “his” big green chair, and stare outside, ignoring anyone who dared to call his name during one of these moods. Either that or he would lay down on the carpet right outside the door, staring woefully up at anyone who passed by him. However, this time things were different, as during this week my dad and Blaze had walked all over together, heading to the beach, walking around the neighborhood, or even Cape Cod Canal. He would often text from Blaze’s perspective, accompanying these messages with many pictures. At one point he described how “Dad was getting tired, but I just wanted to keep on chasing seagulls!” with an accompanying photo of Blaze running rampant on the sand after a fleeing flock. This is one of his favorite pastimes; running up and down the sandy beach while trying to get affection from any person in his path. Evening would bring along screenshots of my dad’s “Pacer” app, boasting totals around 14-15 thousand steps, which added to my excitement over seeing him happy in his pictures so much. I however, had a new record of 18 thousand steps so I still was victorious.

The holidays bring around a grand time in the Matinzi household, which was often filled with crafted surprises from my dad throughout childhood. Easter entailed colorful plastic eggs that my parents would hide throughout the living room, while my dad would draw miniature rabbit footprints and place them on the ground, leading me towards whatever Easter basket they had put together for the year. I never seemed to pick up on the fact that they were colored in by marker as I was too excited to see what the Easter Bunny had left behind this year. As a kid I was very much into dinosaurs, and thus I would sometimes find “dinosaur footprints” throughout the house, leading to a drawing or tiny treasure for me to collect. For Christmas he would write as

fancily as possible on a piece of paper with bright red ink, creating a letter from Santa Claus for me to read on Christmas morning. And for other holidays I would often receive a card from both of my parents, with some drawing from my dad on the inside to spruce up the single tone construction paper (and of course a signature from Blaze as well). And as all dads do, he would seemingly spawn with a trash bag in his hand on any day that involved the opening of gifts, more than ready to collect the askew wrapping paper that would soon decorate the floors. This applied to Christmas at our household, and the trip up to my Grandparents where the whole family would gather to celebrate and eat dinner together.

My father has lived quite the full life, but that will not stop me (and my whole family) from wanting to hold onto him as long as possible. 70 years old is a significant milestone, clearly filled with a vast array of experiences, but I always hope that it will not be the last of such milestones. There will always be new memories that I wish to make, or activities to do together. And most of all I deeply hope that he will be out in the crowd for my graduation, easy to pick out of course with his red UMass Dad cap. What could I do without my fellow Boston sports fan who is asleep in his chair more than he is watching the games? Or the man who proudly proclaims how early he awoke, only for him to take 2-3 naps every day (perhaps those two points coincide...). Despite this unfortunate byproduct of his early rises, I love him dearly, which we have begun to tell each other significantly more often ever since I moved to college in the family group chat. In the grand scheme of things, a hundred-mile gap is not overly significant, but it can feel like an uncrossable chasm depending on the day, where phone calls and texts are not nearly enough to overcome it. Return trips home are rare, but at least it makes reuniting feel just that extra bit of special, which thankfully is only a few days away because of Thanksgiving break. Perhaps I will give this to him to read, perhaps I will not, I have yet to make that decision. And if

I do, I may have to make a specialized Matinzi cut where I take out some portions of this...

However, if I do decide to let him read it, he has to know that he never has to worry about what I think of him. Or especially if he is doing a good enough job. Because he always has, always.