A father’s love (Corben’s Version)

I could have killed my father if I’d wanted to. I guess it’s lucky that nearly all my memories with him were pleasant ones. I had no desires for his life to end, I loved the time and energy that we shared. I loved visiting his mother and having a silently agreed upon competition to see who could say the most provocative thing and get Grammy all razzed up. I loved hiking with him in that Arizona summer sun. It had been a hot day then, and I’m sure we all felt like popsicles, very eager to melt as if it was our one true calling in life. His single-mindedness towards finding arrowheads on that trail and his hesitance towards calling it quits is possibly what led to the heat exhaustion of my brothers and I, but he’d probably tell you it was the sun’s fault not his. This was a man that had raised me well, with morals taught such as diligence, hard work, and always being willing to serve especially if you didn’t want to.

The day my father put his life in my hands wasn’t an unforgettable day, still, I definitely wished I could forget it at the time. I had looked into lobotomies and other procedures to hopefully bring about some blunt force amnesia, but carrying the weight of his words and actions seemed like a much more pleasurable choice to an emotional masochist like me. I would be leaving for an evangelical mission to Argentina in a few months, but what transpired that day set the tone for my whole mission. The midday glow of the summer sun peeping through the windows like an unwelcome neighbor invoked a primordial desire to take a nap. I had just finished the gourmet process of making a pb&j sandwich, the crumbs coating the countertop were wiped off swiftly in one fell swoop. I would sweep them up later, I just needed to finish eating, and then sleep, and my mind held the singular thought of doing so. It was Sunday, and after laboring so diligently in the creation of my sandwich I would follow suit to the example set by God. It was supposed to be the day of rest, my day of rest, I was eager to become one with my covers, and lose all concept of self. It was then that my daze was dispersed by my father, stopping me before I could head down the hallway towards salvation. He called me over to him, with the subtle hints of a more serious tone in his voice. One he reserved for the rare demands when he wanted to be sure that you didn’t just hear him, but that he was heard. I lugged my sandwich towards the man, who once towered over me with his might and glory like a monolith erected in ancient days. These days his height was slightly lesser than mine, I had an inch or so on him, so as I approached, we were just shy of standing eye to eye.

“Liam… listen…”

He used my first name, which was usually applied when the trash needed to be taken out or

lackluster report cards had been sent home, riddled with comments about missing assignments and unruly behavior. He continued.

“If you come back from Argentina before the two years are up, for any reason besides an honorable release… I’m going to kill myself.

I paused, unsure of how anybody or anything would be expected to act in response to such weighty words.

“I can’t have it all rely on your younger brother.”

And there was the truth of his words. Having a son serve a full 2-year mission was a trophy that he absolutely must have in his display case, else he couldn’t bear living. It wasn’t enough that my older sister served a full honorable mission. That was only a mandatory 18-months, so I guess it didn’t count. His love for me, expressed as it had been, never felt so conditional. This was a father’s love, dependent on met expectations and dreams fulfilled vicariously.

I am the third of four children, second of three boys. I don’t try to embody being a middle child, I’m just extremely good at it. It’s definitely apparent in my silent screams for the attention I never felt I fully had, or my carefree attitude boasting I never had the burden of responsibility growing up. I was always just there, like a perfect middle-child should be. My older siblings were great examples to me, they had their expectations set and paved the way for those who would trudge those paths at later dates. My sister, the scorpion queen, felt inspired to go on a mission when women missionaries were permitted to go at 19 years old. She set the example for the rest of us siblings, but it wasn’t expected that she would go. She was a girl, and still is I might add, but being a girl meant that there was no cultural requirement for her to go. While she was still out, my older brother was prepared to take the plunge into the mission life. Unfortunately, he was shackled to the burdens and expectations of being the oldest boy. Like buckets of cement, being shackled to those burdens did little to keep him from drowning in those unspoken depths.

The culture that’s been attached to missions has its shadows. Like a leech stuck to the underside of a serene swan, everything above the surface looks to be pristine and exemplary. Peering below the water reveals the parasite, feeding on the lifeblood of the symbolic creature. Those young men who choose not to serve, even though a mission is purported to be a total voluntary experience, are shunned and seen as lesser, sinful creatures. I saw this with my peers as I grew up, those who chose not to go were assumed to be unworthy of such a call. I saw this in my church communities, those who chose not to go were expected to not even remain in the church. I saw this in my home, those who chose not to go didn’t understand obedience. Serving a mission was the paramount any young man could aspire to, but I never knew how anybody could reach such great heights while shouldering the weight of the world.

My older brother Brodie left for his mission two years before I would. We had anticipated my departure for my mission before he would’ve been back from his. We were never the closest growing up, but part of me was regretful that it would be almost four years before we would see each other again. I think those regretful feelings must have been evermore present in him than I, because I didn’t have to wait 4 years after he left, I only had to wait 18 months! For reasons known to him and his mission president, my older brother was sent home just shy of his 18-month mark. If any of the negativity I mentioned with mission culture earlier was true for choosing to not go, then it’s all doubly true for those who come home early. The hard work and strenuous effort put into the mission before the departure is somehow forgotten, as if erased by the actions that resulted in the discharge from service. This affected both my parents diversely, but they both saw it as a failure of their parenting up to that point even though it was my brother’s own agency that led to it.

I had decided to serve a mission for a few main reasons. Most of my friends in high school thought that I wouldn’t, so me being a spiteful bastard decided to prove them wrong. I saw things in myself that I wanted to change, and I felt I couldn’t without a drastic change in my environment. I also wanted to travel, experience more of the world and love new people. When my dad told me that my mission was do or die for him, all those reasons became one reason, don’t kill my father; don’t fail. It was like a black hole had swept in, the bright star that once shined and motivated me to do great things, now collapsed under the weight of itself and had absorbed everything around it, not letting any light escape. When I finally left for Argentina, the fear that I would be sent home and responsible for my father’s death loomed over me like a sharp sword, held up only by the thin horsehair that was my previous reasons for leaving. Arriving in that new world, I was quickly inundated with such a new lifestyle. I wasn’t a toddler sticking a key into the electrical socket, I was a death row prisoner strapped tightly into the cultural electric chair. The Spanish language was so simple on paper, I could read it so well in the controlled environment on those pages. When I was expected to express all I had been learning though, my failings became so apparent. The collective laughs shared by everyone I spoke with in those first months had led to my presupposition that all Argentines were just a cheery friendly bunch. My Spanish eventually improved in greater degrees, and I was able to just barely realize that all the laughs I’d been hearing were directed at the way I talked, not ever because of what I had said. I hadn’t been making friends, I had been made fun of, mocked, and ridiculed. I hated the people I was supposed to love. I felt like it was impossible to love them because I was doing so out of obligation. I hardly remembered why I was there in the first place outside of my dad wanting me to go, and me wanting to make him proud, as if that was a real choice when the only other option was his suicide.

It got to the point where I could hardly tolerate being there anymore, and I felt it impossible to remain for the reasons I was. I decided that it wouldn’t fly hating everybody around me. Doing so would’ve had me quitting early and heading home, and then bearing witness to my father doing the same albeit a lot bloodier given his propensity for guns. Nearly reaching my breaking point, I knew changes were necessary. I so desperately needed to find a better reason for anything, because I felt like I had no reason for everything.

The blistering heat so reminiscent of that Arizona sun dripped off my back. With the incessant companionship on a mission, the shower was one of the only places I had to my lonesome. It was there that I learned how to love others. On my knees on the mildewy tile that held the stench of still water and dirty feet, I would pray every morning asking for the ability to love those I was called to teach. It became one of my most sacred and exclusive rituals. I was the cult leader and the congregation, and self-immolation was the cleansing needed to ascend. The shower became my refinery, and that time I spent alone thinking led me to find certain changes in myself. I realized that like any other choice I had made in life, I could choose to love the people who I didn’t feel loved me. If I had loved the Argentine people immediately, it would’ve felt shallow and cheap. I had to work to love them, and it’s all the more valuable because of that work. I learned how to replace the fear that motivated me with that love I had earned. It was also there in the shower that I accepted my father for the man he was. His choices were his, and mine were mine. I would choose to love the people there and choose to forgive him as well. His choices regarding my missionary service were his, and his reaction to any of my actions were owned by him alone. I would choose to move past that moment in our lives and love the expectations he had for me, because I learned what unconditional love could be, and I would practice what I preached.