

# The Man Behind the Mustache



I hear the sound of heavy footsteps on the front porch, and the loud, metallic screech of our stubborn door knob turning. I looked up from my mangled, tangled Barbies and there he is: standing in the hallway between the kitchen and the living room, where I'm playing on the burnt orange carpet. He's wearing his blue striped mechanic uniform that says "American Tire and Brake." The uniform is as much a part of him as his blue eyes, as his wavy Hugh Grant hair, as his thick dark mustache. He is permanently oily and red-faced, which makes him appear either jolly or irate, depending on his mood and the amount of booze in his system. But in my five-year-old eyes, he is handsome and invincible. He fixes everything and fears nothing. He flies me around the room and tickles me until I beg for mercy. He has superhero strength and a hint of magic in his blood. He is the center of my world.

He heads up the stairs to shower and wash away the dirt and drudgery of the day. I continue to play with my Barbies, waiting for the sound of his footsteps on the stairs. When he reappears, I catch my breath—audibly gasping. His face is all wrong. Something is missing. I start to cry. My dad has done the unthinkable: He has shaven off his mustache. His face is naked and exposed. As he comes closer, he scoops me up into his strong arms and wipes away my hot, sticky tears. He is chuckling now, telling me it's okay and not to cry. He is still my dad, he says. I look up at the place his mustache is supposed to be, and I see a small but profound scar running parallel to his upper lip. "What's that?" I ask with snot and tears still running down my face. And this is the first time I hear the story of the scar. He tells me about a bar fight with an Indian chief involving a broken beer bottle. I listen intently, hanging on his every word and tracing the scar with my tiny finger. This is the first of many stories I will hear about how it happened. I may never know the true origin of that scar, but its presence is always there, hiding quietly behind the mustache he grew back quickly and never again shaved off. My father is a man of many features and scars. Some of them are clear as day: marks of hard work and hard living. Others lie dormant beneath the surface. His hands have cuts and gashes, permanent stains from working on cars, and rough callouses from guitar picking. They tell the story of a man of many trades and tales, a man with deep wounds and dark secrets.

Flash forward ten years and I'm on the basketball court. I'm starting on varsity as a freshman and the pressure is on. I catch the ball at the three point arc. I pump step,

face, and drive to the hoop. I'm fouled going in for the lay-up and now I'm on the line. The crowd is quiet: watching, waiting. And then I see him out of the corner of my eye, staggering into the gym with that unmistakably red-mustached face, still wearing his mechanic's uniform. He is cheering loudly, slurring, and making a scene. I want to run off the court and shelter him from the stares. I want to rip the onlookers to shreds and feed them back their mocking words until they choke on them. I am fiercely protective of this man. I've fought more than once defending him. But he has grown smaller in my eyes, no longer invincible. I've covered for him, made excuses, and cleaned up his vomit. I've discovered there are many things he cannot fix and many fears he will never face. The magic has worn off, and he is mortal after all. I finish the game, walk off the court, and drive my dad home.

Another decade passes and I have my own home and family. My young children are running around the house, freshly bathed in their pajamas, playing with toys on the living room floor. The doorbell rings, and as the door opens, they run to greet him. His red face and mustache haven't changed in twenty years. His wavy Hugh Grant hair has more gray in it, and the lines of his face have deepened, but mostly he looks exactly the same. He still smells of oil and booze. But as I watch my children float around him, I see the magic reflected in their eyes. He flies them around the room and tickles them until they beg for mercy. He tells them stories about bar fights and shootouts, and they hang on his every word. They trace his scars and hold his calloused hands. I want to freeze time and let

them keep their image of him, forever untainted by age and experience. I want to protect them. I want to protect him. I want to go back to a world where my dad could fix everything and feared nothing. I want his superhero mechanic's uniform to make him invincible. I want his mustache to hide all his scars. ▲