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Dad Music

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Cover Page Footnote

This piece was written and workshopped in 18F.

Dad Music

For years, my dad and I would climb up the hill behind Edna Maguire, my elementary school, to watch the sun set behind the city just across the water. And once it was just barely dark, we'd pet the horses that people paid to keep there. We always talked about bringing something to feed them, but I don't think we ever did. It's the sort of sunset, vibrant like acrylic on canvas, that you'd like to dig your fingernails into before it drags away, or kid yourself into thinking you'll remember.

One day, I paused just when we arrived at the top.

"Dad?" I asked.

"Yes?"

"I don't want to go to Edna," I said.

"Why's that?"

"It was preschool and now elementary and then middle school and then high school and then college and then work forever."

He asked me what was wrong with that, and I explained that what bugged me in particular was that I noticed adults never went on playgrounds anymore. And I thought they would want to, but I couldn't imagine driving home and seeing a playground and not being able to go on it at all. I remember my dad sort of nodded and looked out onto the bay, lights reflecting over the water. Then he said, "college is fun."

I protested that college was just four years, and anyone would have been able to tell that he was teasing, but I fell into worrying about what I could possibly want to do that wouldn't be playing outside or pretend games. I still hadn't learned to use scissors, and that was mostly because I didn't want to.

The other day, now in college, I called my dad to confirm plane flights home. I leaned back precariously in my chair and put a foot on my desk as he asked how I was. I could hear the car beeping, and I knew he'd come back from a master swim practice. He'd be sitting with his flip-flops off, below the pedals, and his hair spiked and dripping chlorine.

"Oh, no, I'll definitely be sad to leave," I said. "But I do have a ton of work. I complain about it far more than actually studying" And then, as usual, I added, "So basically, I'm dying."

So he, as usual, replied, "Honey, we're all dying."

Which I corrected, gesturing with my right hand to the empty room, "Technically, from a neurological standpoint, I don't start dying until age 25."

And I know he saw my hand, and I saw him shrug as if to say, "what difference does it make," and we sat in silence, some thousands of miles away, before I heard him reaching into the back seat for crinkling paper grocery bags, the car door creaking too as it opened and he would lift them upstairs. I asked: he got the cheesy bread from The Parkside.

And maybe it wasn't the same bread that he used to get when I lived at home, but it might as well been for the cheese melted and cooled and the sticky levain that would crumble on the cutting board on the counter. (And if I can imagine it, I suppose there is no difference if my dad is there or not, but it matters to me, and if he wasn't, I'm sure I couldn't imagine it quite the same.)

My dad listens to punk rock and '90s hip-hop. It's jarring. When my cousins and I were little, my dad would drive around Sacramento suburbia blasting House of Pain's "Jump Around" with his windows down, rolling slowly. If you don't know the song, it contains the lyrics "I'll serve your ass like John McEnroe/ If your girl steps up, I'm smackin' the ho." Fortunately, my cousins and I were too young to pick out those words, and bounced up and down, elated, in our seats

yelling “Jump! Jump! Jump!” to the chorus as we drove past the old people walking their dogs and PTA moms pausing their jogs at crosswalks. It was one of our favorites.

I’ve told him before, the music only emphasizes his whiteness and his dadness, and might even border on cultural appropriation. My dad shrugs and smiles and giggles just a little. The last time I listened to The Jumpy Song, I played it for myself sometime when I felt a little lonely on a walk home. Years later, it still sounds like medium-old-car smell and fuzzy toyota camery upholstery, the way it gets bristly after rubbing up and down. I remember that, I think, if I am not just remembering remembering.

I was afraid for years that my dad would die on my fifteenth birthday. My dad’s father died when he was fifteen, and none of his siblings believed it at first. I was too worried ever to mention that I was worried it would repeat. It would jinx it, I thought. But my birthday came and went without incident, and my father very much looks like he will live forever, and very much like how he did then. If I close my eyes and try, I can’t remember what he looked like exactly then, but I know there’s a difference in his eyes that seems pronounced around my baby pictures. He’s exhausted, tossing me into the air, but the dark of the shadow and around his eyes bring out the lighter blue. Not that his eyes don’t glimmer, because they certainly do, but it’s not something I see as much as the tiredness sometimes. He’s told me, and he’ll tell you if he ask, that the time when I was a newborn he was one of the times he’d been most tired in his life. I’ll try and take his word for it: it’s something entirely irrational to be concerned about, anyway.

My dad drove me around when I was little to when I was sixteen and got my license, which meant on some Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays, he’d drop me off at my mom’s house. The drive is from Marin to Kentfield, and it goes like this. Leaving Marin is agonizingly slow, partially because there’s always traffic merging onto the highway, and also because there’s an awareness that the drive will be over soon, and I know I’ll be going from my dad’s warm apartment kitchen to my mom’s larger house one, where the counters are made of stone and soak up the evening cold. Besides, by the time we get there in winter, it’s dark anyway. Sometimes we’d have feeble attempts at conversation over the hum of the motor, in which I’d ask him about his day or he’d ask about mine, and after a few quick back and forths he’d see the exhaustion in my eyes and I’d sigh a little.

“I kinda just want to stay at your house,” I’d say.

“We can turn right around,” he’d answer. And I’d think about how nice it would be to lift the weight off my shoulders for an evening (and a few times I did, but most of the time I went on).

But I couldn’t explain to my mother why I wouldn’t go to her house (she’d be hurt, wouldn’t she?) and I’d be embarrassed.

And I’d say something like, “I really should go to mom’s.”

And he’d say something like, “It is important that you have a relationship with your mother.”

And I would remember in the back of my mind what I’d thought to myself whenever I missed my mother at my father’s house: that that was far worse than missing my father at my mother’s.

And the drive seems to go interminably fast at this point, and it’s hard not to be aware of the car as it merges onto the freeway and my dad moves into the fast lane, and it’s over the hill into Corte Madera. Fast, even with a sea of brake lights.

And now that my fate is sealed, it’s not quite so slow or so fast. We know it’s there and we don’t have to talk about that part, so we listen to music or a podcast he’s picked out or play a game of sorts. I know he gets it.

Once I get past the Trader Joe’s, the drive gets pretty quick again. The Richmond traffic is bad, and I wonder what it would be like to forget all this and go back to Sacramento again, as if my

cousins and I will still be bouncing-age and grandma will still be alive, but that's not where we go. To Richmond, we'd go right; now we go left, to Kentfield. Sir Francis Drake is a fast street in the evening. Past Bon Air shopping center, past the elementary school, up Wolfe Canyon and then Wolfe Grade ("No outlet road!" one of us will say, because that is how the street is marked.)

And then the drive is over, and it gets faster as it goes and suddenly I've arrived and there's nothing to do but to go out into the cold and dark.

The thing is, that's not quite right. There's plenty to do.

I'm sure I've said this out loud and leaned back, putting my shoes on the dash.

"Your shoes are dirty." my dad scolded.

I sighed as I put them back. "But my point is, we could just sit here forever. There's no reason not to."

"You're drawing this out."

"I always do."

"Feet," says my dad, because I've leaned back to plop them on the dash again.

It's one of those moments where leaving is the best option. I'm kidding myself if my dad's apartment is as good as I imagine it is, if my mom's house is as clear-cut cold as I tell myself. And there's a melody like a warm car against a brisk blue autumn, and there's a motif that the right thing to do is just to go, and a refrain that it doesn't get easier, you just get used to it, and a symphony like 90s hip-hop over a loud car engine as it drives away.

Still, I am telling myself there is a place where nothing could go wrong, it is my dad's house as soon as he gets home from work. I'd be sitting in pajamas cross-legged, showered after practice, and he'd either wave his hand to indicate he was on a call or set his briefcase on the worn-out couch. The light is decidedly yellow, and something is either fresh from the store or starting on the stove or in the oven. I think we've always gotten along so well because as much as we exchange words frequently, we hardly talk about anything at all. Dad berates me for leaving my papers on the table, which means he wonders if my work is too much. I'll say I'll clean it up eventually, which means I'm doing fine with it, I just don't want to finish. He tells me I better clean up, which means he knows I can.

It's not that all of this is wrong; It's just that it's oversimplified to the memory of a sunset, a few moments made to last an hour or more.

When he was on a business trip, I did my own laundry and spilled detergent on the floor. It was everywhere: a blue mass that couldn't be worked out of the carpet with water and paper towels.

"Oh, that's it?" he asked when he came home and saw the stain.

"Yeah."

He shrugged. "You're my daughter," he said, as always, whenever I did something wrong but well-intentioned. Like when I lit an oven mitt on fire, or broke a glass vase.

"No paternity test needed."

(But if a second shoe's about to drop, we might as well admire the sneaker chandelier.)

I was talking to my dad the other day, complaining or worrying about something or other.

"Things will change and not necessarily for the worst. You have to trust that," he said.

"Yeah, maybe someday I'll learn," I said.

"You're always learning."

"Hmmpf."

"Well said," he responded quietly.

I wonder if my dad and I will hike Horse Hill again when I get home. I'd like to imagine we will. I'd like to think he'll be back from work in time, because the sun sets early in winter. I'd

like to imagine we'll watch the colors fade over the water only to be replaced by the reflections from office windows. We'll savor the moment before the hill is painted over in darkness and drive home to hear about work drama. Before we go to bed, before I go back to school, before we both leave and go somewhere else, we can savor the music of quick conversation and something sizzling on the stove drifting through the kitchen, windows reflecting the stove and the table against the dark outside.

And I can savor that hear. And because it is not mine or tangible or certain or set in stone, I'll tell myself I can make the melody last forever.