

When I was a young girl, my father used to pull me up close and whisper into my ear. What did he whisper, you ask?

He whispered about a spring breeze; the sunlight catching the leaves in early fall. He whispered of the blooming lilies, and of the sweet aroma of apple blossoms. He told me of faraway lands, distant from the flat fields of Iowa. Places that held life and promise, unlike anything you could imagine. And most importantly, he whispered of his love for me, and how he'd never let me go.

At the time, I believed him. I was caught up in his overwhelming light and sense of good. For the first nine years of my life, my father led me through the dark, immersing me in the wonders of nature. He told me he'd always be there for me. Then why, I must ask, is he gone, taking with him every beauty that has ever surrounded me?

I often wonder where my father ran off to. Was it a jungle or a desert? A tundra or a rain forest? I've never been to any of these places. Never ventured out of the plain misery that is northern Iowa. Since he left, I feel unmistakably, irretrievably stuck. Trapped in these flatlands with nothing of interest. Jammed in a school with peers that taunt me. Lodged in a world where nobody understands me. Well, there is one person, but I haven't seen him in a long, long while.

And perhaps what bothers me the most are the unanswered questions. If my father had left in search of something beautiful, was I not enough to keep him planted in one place? Would he not have at least said goodbye to his one and only daughter before vanishing? Whenever I ask my mother, hunched over in grief and hardship, she just shrugs and smiles, and time after time all she can muster is, "He was a free spirit, never could stay in one place for long."

I hate how she does that. Talks about my father in past tense. He's not gone forever, I know that in my heart. If I could just convince the others around me of the same feat. Only, when three years passed without a word from him, my optimism began to waver.

After my father's disappearance, middle school is my biggest source of anguish. The classrooms are crowded, the hallways too loud for my liking, and I always get pelted during our weekly dodgeball games. During my first week, I somehow managed to get on the bad side of the majority of my peers. Luckily, Rose and Melanie tolerate me enough to let me sit in on their

conversations, while I mainly observe. They don't mind when I'm with them, and don't notice when I'm not. I believe my father would call this a neutralism relationship. Even though we interact, it doesn't affect the others' behavior. Most days, I eat lunch in the locker room. My "friends" don't miss me. Even if they did, it's easier for me to think when I'm alone.

It was an early March day, the kind my father loves, when I discovered the first letter. I hopped on the bus home, provoked after overhearing several kids imitate my purposefully timid oral presentation, when I noticed something peculiar. Out of the several dozen kids already situated, not a single one met my eye. Nobody wanted to acknowledge me, much less sit next to me. I plumped down in an empty seat that mysteriously wasn't there a second ago. They don't think I notice, but I do. And it hurts. It hurts a lot.

The moment the bus turns the corner I began running. Shredding my listless school persona with every step. Gasping as I reached the door, threw my mud boots on, and grabbed my father's binoculars for the first time in years. It felt odd to use them without him, but perhaps it would calm this restlessness. I chose an unkempt path that runs parallel to the tree line, casting my eyes upwards to the Black Maples framing this wild field my father loves so dearly. After several minutes, a splotch of Royal blue appeared out of the corner of my eye. I popped off the binocular caps, letting them fall soundlessly to the ground while my eyes searched for the robust burst of color. I was rewarded with a Blue Jay, quite common, but scenic nonetheless. I observed the bird for several minutes, listening to its song and noting its behavior. When I finally crouched down to pick up the binocular caps I noticed it, the paper. It lay innocently on the ground, yet I treated it as carefully as I would a bomb. In clear handwriting it says '*For my beautiful ladies*'. Inside it reads:

*I am a bird. A bird free to fly, daring these treacherous skies solo. I am a bird. You are my stars. My means of navigating this fragmented world. Aglow as darkness consumes me. And understand that while the bird is dependent on the stars, the stars are unwavering in the bird's absence.*

Endless questions overwhelm me. What was my father trying to tell me? Did he believe I would make do without him? That he is wandering, but will return to me one day? These all shout for attention, but the one I can't ignore is, are there more?

During the following week, I was on edge searching for a new letter. Even though the letter was addressed to my mother as well, I didn't mention it to her. In hope I could keep this small reminder of my father to myself a little longer (I did). And I was certain more than ever that he was out there, just waiting for the right time to come back.

After yet another day searching with no luck, I lay in bed, clutching my favorite stuffed elephant. It was a ragged thing. A worn yellow. With a heart stitched right in the center of it's chest. I fingered the glorified shape, recalling how my father and I used to scoff at the improper placement of the cotton material when the stitches loosened and the heart peeled up. I stuck my finger in, curious to feel the fabric that was under the protection of the extra cloth for so long. Instead I found a small paper, stiff from going through the wash. My bedside lamp couldn't turn on fast enough. Eagerly, I read the words written in pen by my father years prior.

*Sometimes secrets are left unsaid in order to protect the ones you love. I know that's why mine are. Because in some cases, the truth doesn't help, it destroys. Life forces us into moves meant to face alone. Moves we hide close to the heart, shrouded in layers of lies and deceptions. Some of these moves hurt more than others, but I think this one may be the most painful one of them all.*

An unexpected surge of resentment consumed me. My father had a secret, and he left because of it.

Sometimes you just want to abandon everything. Your dreams, your thoughts, your family. In this case, especially my family. Particularly my father. I felt I'd been cheated. My father was

always honest with me. Always. Or so I had thought. My rage only increased the more time I had to think it over. My father, his disappearance, the letters, the supposed secrets. How stupid of me to think he'd come back. As I stormed into my room, I grabbed a pottery butterfly my father and I created mere weeks facing his disappearance. Before I could think better of my actions, I smashed it against the wall. Watched as the butterfly fluttered to its demise. Stood there as the elusive creature flaunted its silent beauty before shattering. The sound of the wings beating the ground jarred me back to reality. My last token from my father, gone. I crossed the room, reaching down to survey the broken creature, symmetrical no more, when I caught sight of it. Another letter. I didn't want to read it, didn't want to hear my father's pathetic excuses. I wouldn't read it. Still, my eyes grazed unwillingly over the two simple sentences.

*As much as it pains me, there's something you need to know. I have Lung Cancer, and I'm losing.*

When my mother found me, hours later, I was still sitting among the demolished remains of the butterfly, more broken than any piece of pottery could ever be.

There is a difference between having a missing father and a dead one. At least before I held on to the hope that he may one day return to me. Whereas, I now know that my father is not coming back. He is gone. Gone forever without saying goodbye. And there's part of me that wants to curse him. But somewhere, deep down in a place even I have trouble finding, there's a tiny piece of me that secretly understands his reasoning. He was trying to protect my mother and I, but that doesn't mean I necessarily have to agree with it. In attempt to subdue the weight-crashing reality, I started rereading his old books. I became obsessed with the notion that reading these neglected books would bring me closer to the father who so carefully flipped each page and read word after word to his daughter. And one dreary Monday, I stumbled upon a collection of free verse poetry. It was considerably smaller than the others around it, so I picked it up thinking I could finish it before my mother arrived home from work (I did). But on the last page, at the ending of this miraculous story, its length no indication of its engaging content, I found a slip of paper. A slip

of paper left for me by the dead. I read it for I had nothing to lose; I'd already lost my father, along with a part of myself.

*I entered this world in celebration, seems just I leave it prematurely. After all, some stories don't have a happy ending. But maybe that doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things, how one dies. Maybe it's about the life lived, the love shared, and the experiences that define you. And I know that if I stay I would no longer be remembered for the life I lived, but the fight I lost. Perhaps someday you'll forgive me, make sense of my actions. Even though I may not be there to tell you, these words written on a page hold a power unattainable, and feature all the thoughts I was too cowardly and selfish to admit in person. So until we meet again I love you, I love you, I love you, and I ask that you forget me not.*

I search the page for more everyday, seeking additional words from a father that will never return, but the only ones I can ever find are *'The End'*.