

Portrait of my Father

Around my suburb one summer, I began noticing fliers posted around. "Have You Seen Me?" posters featuring a picture of an elderly man circulated my small town. I thought it was crazy to think an adult could go missing. In my head, only children went missing because adults know how to use maps and have cell phones. I finally asked my dad one day as we drove through town, "Why is an old man missing?" My dad sighed. "Sometimes when people get older their brains start to deteriorate. He probably has Alzheimer's and maybe he wandered off. It's very sad." I took this information sadly. I had heard of Alzheimer's, but only when a boy in my class told us about his grandmother putting a shoe in the toaster. I knew it made people loopy, but I didn't know it took lives. My dad sighed again and told me, "Never stop reading."

My sister, Cassidy, was the middle school girl who always had a "boyfriend." It was harmless until one year, she asked to go to Olive Garden for a date with her boyfriend on Valentine's Day.

To give his response, my dad organized a "come to Jesus meeting" with all of his daughters involved. Kari, my oldest sister, Cassidy and I went down to the living room and he told us to sit down. I wasn't not sure what was going on, but it seemed serious, so naturally I was laughing out of discomfort and anxiety. Dad got started right away by telling us a story that seemed wildly irrelevant.

"The other day I went to a funeral for a 16-year old girl. See, she had this boyfriend for a while, but she wanted to break up with him. When this girl says to her boyfriend, 'I'm

breaking up with you,' her boyfriend says, 'No you're not.' Scared, the girl tries to reason with her boyfriend; things aren't working out, she isn't interested in him anymore, but the boyfriend refuses her saying, 'You're not breaking up with me.' The girl feels trapped because she and her boyfriend had gotten intimate--"

He looked at me at this moment and said "That means they had sex." I laughed, offended he thought I didn't know what that meant. I was a sixth-grader after all. He continued.

"And when they got *intimate*, the boyfriend had taken pictures, and now that she wanted to be finished with him, he threatened to post them on the *internet*. The girl felt so trapped that she killed herself. So, that's why, I'm sorry Cassidy, but you're too young to date. You can be 'boyfriend and girlfriend' but you can't date."

Kassidy rolled her eyes, and sulked to her room. My dad seemed to internally pat himself on the back, and retired to his room. I laughed with Kari, thinking how silly Cassidy must have been for trying.

In 2007, Barack Obama ran his first presidential campaign against Republican, John McCain. My dad, an avid Republican was appalled by Obama, regardless of his race—my dad was black, too. He was a fairly outspoken conservative, and he stuck to those beliefs his whole life, regardless of what everyone around him believed. His four brothers, his mother, and his wife

were all Democrats, but my Dad praised President Bush and denounced who would become President Obama. He instilled these beliefs in me, his youngest child who did not understand politics.

I carried his beliefs with me to school. All my friends chanted “Obama” because of how cool it would be to have a black president. I had no problem proclaiming myself a Republican, even with the slurs that accompanied it. A boy named Hamza told me my dad was a “disgrace to black people” because he was not voting for Obama. In my social studies class, Mr. Prugar gave us the assignment of writing who we would vote for if we could vote and why. I wrote, “I would vote for John McCain because he is in favor of offshore drilling, and I am too.” I had no idea what that meant. To me it meant more gas at cheaper prices, which mattered to me, a 12-year-old.

Obama was elected president, and history was made. My dad picked up a newspaper that remains on a shelf in my house as part of the history we witnessed, even though we disagreed. He watched the polls close on TV and said, “We’re not gonna win it,” to me as I went to bed. “Sorry, dad,” I sympathized.

One night in the tween years, my mom was out with her friends and left my dad home with me and my sister Kassidy. Well before our “bedtime,” he found us both in front of the TV and said, “You can go to bed now, or you can come watch a movie with me.” We both groaned at the thought of spending time with our father. We were well into our “parents are lame” phases. I

very rarely fought with my parents, though, and secretly enjoyed spending time with them. So I put up a melodramatic fight, but said “Fiiiiine. I’ll watch a movie with you.” I climbed into my parents bed, and he started *College Road Trip*. We talked a lot about my future and college. From very early on he told his brothers that I “would be his smart one.” He took pride in my natural affection towards academics. He always rewarded me, and challenged me to do better. Honor Roll wasn’t enough, straight A’s were better.

In the movie, Raven-Symoné and her father Martin Lawrence go on a road trip to visit colleges and of course, madness ensues. They visit Martin Lawrence’s character’s alma mater, Northwestern University, which at the time was my dream school. He makes a spectacle of himself, embarrassing his daughter in a typical Disney “parents just don’t understand” motif. I ask my dad, “Is this how you’re going to be when we visit colleges?” teasing him, but secretly dreaming of the future we should have had.