

“Only.” by Nathan Logan

Transitioning to highschool brought a new dynamic to our relationship. After my dad quit his job and joined my mom as full-time self employed architects, our interactions weren't limited to the time slots just before he left for work in the morning and during dinner, which he would arrive as it was being served. Passive, rudimentary “how was your day?” check-ins ceased to exist. The focus of our conversations shifted to critiques and tips on my school projects and decisions in my lifestyle. A soda with dinner was met with a frown and a comment on my goals to play soccer in college. My architecture ideas were never fully fleshed out in his eyes, I needed to “do another pass” and read the books he referenced that would help my vision become realized. I didn't know that I desperately needed him to tell me that he liked the idea I was working with, and that he was excited to see me work on it. But he would say that “an idea isn't worth anything until it's begun to be worked on, and revised and refined.” He would say “the hardest part about design is knowing when you are done, because there should almost always be something to iron out and make better.” He cherished his strong work ethic, and preached the importance of such an ethic in order to be successful and happy.

With each of my last brush strokes staining the poplar legs, I felt increasingly relieved and ecstatic that my chair was finally completed. It was a rare moment where I felt like a project of mine was actually done, nothing more to add or revise, and I was genuinely proud of my work. At that point, I hadn't completed a design and build project that didn't appear to be obviously done by a child. I was sixteen years old and I designed and built a chair that didn't look like it was designed and built by a sixteen year old. That is partly because it wasn't. The chair was a project from a woodshop class in school. My highschool was originally a blacksmithing school in the (very) late 1800s and the “shop” courses have been core to the curriculum ever since. I designed the chair in the class and had begun building it but due to an ambitious design and limited hours to work at school I wasn't able to finish by the time the semester ended. With the help of my dad, who has a passion for carpentry and had converted our garage into a wood shop, we finished the chair over winter break.

Before I reached a point of self awareness in which I felt certain that I loved design and wanted to pursue a career as a designer, growing up with both my parents as full-time architects I often felt disengaged and uninterested when they talked about their work. I remember most of the father-son field trips to Home Depot on Saturday mornings to be gray, mundane, quiet journeys. My dad and I never joked with each other and rarely smiled together. For most of my childhood I never questioned the silent car rides.

Set free from reality, my mind soared over the hilly landscapes and colorful houses of San Francisco as they flowed and flickered past me in the car window. My most secure moments with my dad were my times lost in a fantasy painting of my hometown wrapping around our car as we drove through it.

Exiting Highway 280 in Colma, a town just south of San Francisco, signaled a closing to my tranquil escape in my surroundings. Concrete off ramps and large parking lots remind me that I still have to accompany my dad to Home Depot. He needed various screws, clamps, and a new router bit for the cabinet he was building. As we approached the store my dad was still quiet and so was I. He often ran through a check-list in his head of all the stuff he needs and foreshadows how it will be used just to make sure he buys the correct items and not to forget anything.

Maybe he didn't know how to interact with me. And I didn't either.

I followed him around Home Depot, my head just behind his hip as he talked to himself under his breath, narrating his search for the tools he needed. Towering metal frames populated with stacks of palettes and the murky yellow ceiling lights instilled an ambiance much less suitable for a lucid daydream. My thoughts ricocheted off and in between the metallic framework only to fizzle to an inevitable expiration on the cold, cracked concrete floor. Too young, too shy and shelled to meet the experience with enthusiasm and interest. Too disconnected in the moment to value and take note of the details and lessons that would eventually be fruitful in my discovery of my passion for the craft my dad had become

so dedicated to. Unacknowledged, uncomfortable moments with my dad when I was in elementary school became affirming and inspiring memories once I began working on projects of my own. The distance I felt from him though was too far for me to appreciate our times and feel a warmth in our relationship. Being intellectual, articulate, and composed were keys that appeared to allow access and engagement in conversations with him growing up. Spontaneity, banter, playfulness led to algorithmic disinterest and/or critique of my behavior and mindset. The activities he wanted to do together and things he wanted to talk about contained a lesson, tip, or instruction on how to do something the right way. The way he did it. The only way he knew. As an only child, that became the only perspective I knew too.

As our relationship tightened during my highschool years, the increased pressure I felt to abide by the intricately spelled-out guidelines for life my dad was imposing on me angered me, shrunk me, and took away my agency to drift and turn through the tides of adolescence on my own accord. Though frustrated constantly, the never ending supply of references, critiques, ideas seeped into my brain despite my best intentions. His presence in my life came with lofty expectations which made me feel unappreciated for simply being his son, but he was indeed very present in my life. Quiet car rides with him remain my fantastical haven, but now his instructional words echo in my head and inspire the sketches I make on top of the mountainous skyline canvas I see out the window.

Completing my chair with my dad felt like all the laughter we didn't share while I grew up finally released and poured over us. Overdue affirmations and support packaged into each technique he helped me refine. The seemingly constant tensions vaporized while we worked in the frigid garage, chilled by the low fog rolling in. In highschool I began to understand that my dad looked at our relationship with somewhat of a professorial lens. He is an accomplished architect, who taught architecture courses in graduate and undergraduate programs on several occasions. In fairness, he was much more familiar with academic perspectives than emotional support and vulnerability. His family during his childhood was cold, disconnected, and traumatic at times. He only called his parents by their first names, usually serious and unexcited when he would have occasional

conversations with them. Expressions of care and friendship that I didn't know I needed, he didn't know how to give because he never received them either. Ironically, his guidance and knowledge while I finished my chair led me to realize the channels of love that we do have open; our relationship didn't consist of just never-ending expectation and stern instruction anymore.

The proficiency and dedication my dad has with carpentry made it the medium in which he can express his passion and care to me most eloquently. "Three points of contact when clamping," "measure twice, cut once," "make sure to account for the thickness of the blade when measuring," helpful guidelines for constructing furniture resonate with me as ways to grapple with moments in my life. Tightly fitted finger joints create an invisible yet palpable clasp, an acknowledgement and message of love that exists now in the physical form of vertical grain Douglas Fir and poplar stained with an ebonized tea, precisely and meticulously cut, assembled and glued together.

(this is the chair btw):

