

Once More, With Feeling

By, Ted McLoof

Your dad walks into a bar, and it already looks and sounds like the beginning of a joke. He doesn't fit here because this bar is you, just as you don't fit in his condo because his condo is him, and you don't fit *together*. He finds his table and you're on a platform, singing the last few bars of your latest song. Dickens is actually quite well-attended tonight; the spot in front of you that's been cleared out when you play is no longer empty now, at the end of your set. People are dancing! Your father is of course not one of these people, but then his presence alone is a small miracle: you can only ask so much, after all. But plenty of *other* people are moving: the regulars, the divorcees proving that they are still capable of fun, even a few of the employees have taken a short break to bust-a-move to your magnum opus, the song you feel is your best work yet. You've spent late hours getting this one down on paper, the lyrics and the chord progression, and this payoff from a job well done just makes you want to sing this same song on repeat, all night.

It's a slow, blues-y number about an ex-girlfriend of yours. Drew, your drummer, knew her, and once gave you not the best but the truest advice you've ever received: "That's women. They're out there living their lives and we're stuck here crying into our beers." You were, you were, you were. Every night for a year, you thought of her. You remembered, and are remembering now, still, her strangely soft laugh, the shine of her lips under street lights, that thing she did with her hands, pulling the sleeves over them when she was nervous. You know that somewhere, right now, someone else is falling in love with these qualities and that she is letting them, and she has every right to do it. And when you think of this you belt out, "Tellllllllll me now, have you forgotten?"

And you are fully aware of how stupid these lyrics are. You know it's campy and more than a little self-pitying, that feeling these things is one thing but putting them on public display is quite another. You know that there aren't any lyrics that could capture how it feels to care that deeply for somebody and have it gone the next day, without warning, how it feels to show yourself to someone, completely, and have them look away. And you know that that sounds cliché, and that saying it sounds cliché sounds cliché, and that this has been felt and said and heard and sung about a thousand, a million times before, and as your band plays you out of this ridiculous melody you've written, you curse yourself for having attempted to make it new. But it *was* new, to you at least, and what do you create songs about if not the bad shit that happens when girls leave you?

Your father, you know, has a different view on the subject (to him, there are plenty of topics, much more worthy, to sing about, he of the “We Shall Overcome” / “Tin-soldiers-and- Nixon’s-coming” generation) so you buy him a beer to butter him up. He likes Beck’s for some reason, he’s never told you why—but there *has* to be a reason, Beck’s being a truly bland and frankly crappy beer—so you order one from the bartender. The bartender knows you and gives you a wink. He sees that you’re with your father and probably can guess from your father’s suit that this isn’t the kind of place he frequents. Dickens is an okay enough venue for your band to play: it’s not too well-lit, but then the best bars aren’t, although you’ll have to explain this to your old man, who hasn’t visited a real bar since he was forced, by the state, to give up drinking.

The bartender winked at you because he thinks he knows the situation. Your father in his Armani suit, sitting by himself, waiting around until midnight, just to talk to you afterwards. Here’s a guy who loves his kid no matter what, the bartender is probably

thinking. Here is a man who supports his son. But this is a falsely glass-half-full POV. This is assuming that simply because your father showed up, he agrees with what you do and how you do it. This is assuming a history that doesn't exist, a Cat's-in-the-Cradle-sort-of-thing, maybe a little absenteeism. This is assuming it isn't deeper than that.

So you carry the beers back to the table and take the empty chair next to your dad, who is nodding his head, but not smiling.

"A Beck's, for my pop," you say, and hold up your drink to toast, but he drinks his down before you can say, "Cheers." You push the lime through the thin neck of your Corona and think, well, at least I know my alcohol, before realizing that that's not the area you'd like to one-up him in.

"That last one," he says, referring to your set. "The one where Drew played his bongos. That's the new one? That's the one you wanted me to hear?"

"Yes," you say, not wanting to sway him either way with your response.

"That's the one about Finola?"

"That's why it's called 'Finola'," you say, and realize too late that you're sounding like a wiseass, a word you used to be proud of being called but now just makes you sound like a kid, even though you're twenty-eight. You want to fall to the ground and throw a temper tantrum, screaming I want I want I want.

Here's what you want: you want your dad to hear your new song, because it took you a whole month to craft. Longer, actually, depending when you start counting. It's taken you a year and a half, if you start the day Finola left you and gave you the material.

Or three years, if you start the day the two of you met at this very bar. Or fourteen years, if you start the day you began dating girls at all, the day you got your first girlfriend and your dad gave you that look he never gave you before, the one that looked like the lovechild of bewilderment and pity. You've been trying to explain to him how much women mean to you since then, and why you let everything else drop when they exit your life, and every single time he's just looked at you the same way and said, "I don't understand why I should care. You'll get over it."

You can't punch your dad in the face; he's your *dad*. But fuck all if you haven't hated every inch of him when you saw that he was right: you've gotten over all of those girls, Penny and Hayden and Kaitlyn and Ashley and Kaitlin and Katarina and Caitlin and Heather and one day, you're sure, Finola as well. But you're not over Finola yet! Oh no! And that's why you want your dad here tonight: you want him to see you in the wake of your pain, not just describing to him its aftermath but forcing him to bear witness to you tonguing the wound in front of a crowd of people who've paid to watch you do it.

"You sing it very well," he says. "Your voice is getting better."

"And the bongos were just great," he says. "Drew's been practicing, it shows."

"He has," you say. You have to tread carefully here; you know he's a difficult fish to bait. "There was a part that I kind of wanted to make sound like you and mom."

He takes a sip of his beer and checks his watch and says, as flatly as if he were asking the time, "What did Mom and I sound like?" The past tense makes you remember why you never bring her up around him and you shift gears.

“Could you hear the song clearly?”

“Yes,” he says. “Good acoustics in here, considering.”

Considering what, you think. “Good,” you say. You don’t want to fish, but the conversation’s headed that way. Perhaps, you think, you should have handed him a sheet of lyrics so that he understood it clearly? Perhaps he didn’t hear it all, missed a word or two, didn’t catch that part about the world-turning-‘round-but-the-buck-stopping-here?

Or, more likely, perhaps he just doesn’t give a shit about the song itself. Which is a shame, because you really thought you had this one down. For weeks and weeks, you sat at your desk to work on it. You took out old photos of you and Finola and tried to remember the day they were taken. Here was the Halloween party where you dressed as Vince and Mia from *Pulp Fiction*; there was the New Year’s Eve where you sipped twin champagne glasses; behind that was the Fourth of July when you watched the fireworks in your bathing suits from your deck. And then there were the times you never took pictures of: you fought about whether she should take that job at Goldman-Sachs. You had sex on the roof, cleaned it up with the towel you laid down, tried to find constellations you never learned in elementary school. You worried about each other’s health during operations. You surprised yourself by going to Macy’s and, by scent and scent alone, guessing which perfume she wore so you could get it for her birthday, and she loved you for it, and you loved yourself for being loved by her. And there you went again with the sentimentality, but what were you supposed to do? Those were the moments that mattered, and you wrote them all down, your song becoming nothing but a list of memories, and asking Finola which ones she thought about, if any.

Your father has heard all of this before, though, or at least some other version. “Everyone gets dumped,” he’s told you. “You’ll get over it. It’s not the end of the world.” And even though these words are meant as comfort, there’s always a tone in his voice that makes you feel about two feet tall. It isn’t meant as: you are a pillar of survival, and it’s nothing you can’t handle. It’s meant as: you are weak and small for letting this affect you. “You can do better,” he has said about past songs of yours, songs you’ve sent him in e-mails because he was always too busy to come see you play. “It just doesn’t sound like anything worth caring about. You’ll move on and meet someone else.” And you want to ask him what ninety-eight per cent of all musicians are so cut up about, if that’s the case. You want to ask him why Shakespeare thought Romeo and Juliet would matter to anyone, because, come on, they were just teenagers, they’d get over it. And then you remember you can’t bring up Shakespeare, because you’re no Shakespeare, and because your dad thinks Hamlet was just overreacting and being a baby about it all. He told you that when your English class read *Hamlet* in eleventh grade, and even at seventeen you thought, “Fuck, dad, if you can’t get bent out of shape over your uncle killing your father so that he can fuck your mother, what *can* you get bent out of shape about?”

And you want to ask him, What about mom? Yes, they weren’t living together at the time of her funeral. Yes, she’d kicked him out when the drinking began to take over the house and flood every room. Yes, she’d warned you on more than one occasion not to grow up and be like him. But even so, there had to have been affection at one point, or else why would they have lived together, gotten married, had a child? So you want to ask: Is this how you felt when Mom died? Did you just shrug and assume you’d get over it? Wouldn’t it have pissed you off, Dad, if someone had said that to you?

And you know you'd have a point, too.

What you haven't told him, the argument you've barely even made to yourself, is the most convincing one: that thinking about girls means, has always meant, *not* thinking about your parents. That listening to your girlfriends laugh reminded you that you could make jokes, that yours was a life where joke-making was still appropriate, no matter how seldom it seemed that way. That listening to them cry gave you a satisfaction you sometimes felt ashamed of, because at least that they weren't crying for the reasons your mother cried, you knew you didn't have it in you to make them cry like *that*. That love is something with which it's easy to get preoccupied when you determine that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference, that hate at least shows a form of investment.

So here you are now, with your old man, sharing a beer and wondering just exactly what he thinks of you. You watch him gulp down his beer and for a moment you feel simpatico: you've seen your band mates and your girlfriends gulp down beers exactly like that, and you realize that your dad is your dad but he's also just a dude, just like anyone else. And in that moment you want to show him how much your song means not out of spite or rivalry or in an effort to gain his approval, but because you have a deep need to help him understand, to be of like minds with the guy, at long last. You want him not just to recognize your pain but to feel it too, to feel it with you, to sing sappy lyrics about your mother, but not be ashamed because he loved her *that* much.

"What did you think?" you ask, after this inner triumph. "About the song itself?"

You are his son, and he is your dad, and you're sure that connection is allowing him to recognize the look on your face as one of pure benevolence, he can see how much you love him in this moment. He takes another sip of his beer, and shrugs.

"Everyone gets dumped," he says.

"I just don't know why I should care," he says.

"You'll get over it," he says.

And so you take a defeated moment to reflect on why you thought this time would be any fucking different. And here it is: the songs you've written in the past, the complaining you've done over the years, even Hamlet's entire story. They were all *reactions* to a catastrophe. They were all after the fact, after the fact. And so your dad just chalked it up to whining. But this song; this was the one you thought was different because this was the one that talked about the good times, the stuff you cherish and hold on to and tuck away, stapled to pieces of your heart. This, you want to say, is the stuff you can't move on from, and don't want to. 'Moving on', that bastion of maturity your dad is always going on about, isn't possible without 'letting go'. Why would you want to let go of something that made you feel better than anything else has ever made you feel?

And then you realize. Your dad hasn't ever felt these things. Or maybe he has, but they've left him as he's gotten older. Yes, you'll get over it; no, it's not the end of the world; yes, his is the wiser, more adult, more intellectually savvy viewpoint. But it's also a lonely, detached, stone-cold one, and as your dad continues to sip his beer, you notice the gray hairs on his comb-over, the belly hanging over his expensive belt, the dark circles under his eyes, and though you may be a mediocre song writer and probably

always will be, you at least have your heart, and that at least helps you avoid becoming the bitter, lonely, sad old fart drinking the world's worst beer in the chair next to you.

He notices you watching him and looks surprised at whatever face you're making.

"What's wrong?" he asks, and you say something simple but endlessly true: that you are tired. Because you *are* tired. Tired of defending yourself, tired of having to justify feeling like shit whenever you get hurt, tired of being judged, tired of everyone, not just your dad, putting down songs that have touched you, simply because they see themselves as above the sentiments expressed in each stupid lyric, tired of not being taken seriously, and really just tired of the act of expressing your feelings in general.

You are tired, but you are not defeated. Because expressing your feelings, you recognize now, is all you've got; it's what makes you insane sometimes but it's also what *keeps* you sane on the whole. And as your dad walks out of the bar, nodding to you with a 'Better luck next time' look on his face—a raise of the eyebrows, an odd way of shrugging with only his eyes—you decide that he is the wrong person to have invited tonight, that when you get home you'll e-mail the song to Finola herself, and maybe she won't respond and maybe she will, but either way your father is going to sleep alone tonight without very much to get up for tomorrow besides his thankless sales job, and for the first time you *are* of like minds with him, because you're giving him that same, bewildered, pitiful look he's given you since day one.