

This is not a Eulogy
by Clay Allen

It was the second time I walked in on my dad masturbating that summer, and the most horrifying thing about it was how little it changed our relationship.

My dad had just entered retirement, and already I could see that he was screwing it up. He bought a two-thousand pound television which was already out of date by the time it washed up like a beached whale on the shores of my old bedroom. He pretended he'd begun a consulting outfit, but all it consisted of was a computer with an AOL account and the intention to print up some business cards. After thirty-some years on the job, my dad was unused to a life a leisure and utterly lost in its sylvan wood.

I, on the other hand, had three years of college under my belt and considered myself an something of an expert in draining to the dregs low-responsibility situations. I figured I'd help the old man out, come home for the summer and lead by example.

So one morning in late August, I threw my laptop into a bike basket and pedaled out to the country club. Country clubs, like the suburbs at large, afford a lovely sensual experience at the expense of any and all challenging ideas. And so it falls to us, the urbane and progressive, to bring challenging ideas to them. Most often, this took the form of costuming myself in a giant, novelty sombrero and colorful swim trunks that ran high on the thigh. When I wasn't composing important screenplays on my laptop, I would share with the gawking natives my zest for life between dips in the pool and the endless river of rum stone sours, curried to me by teenage girls in white polo shirts.

Are you paying attention, dad? This is how you do it.

Coming home from such a day left me sun-baked and stoned and looking forward to a little nap. It was breezy and cool in our old house, and quiet as church. With a twin bed situated under wide windows, my room was the perfect place for renewal before the evening's engagements.

Apparently, my old man felt the same way, only his restitution was a bit more exertive. I swung open the door to my room and found him sitting naked and splayed on the floor, shimmering in baby oil and abusing himself vigorously to muted pornography. He shouted my name in surprise.

Maybe you can smell that? It's the sear on my brain where this image is burned. It heats up when I tell the story.

Now, being that this was the *second* time that summer I'd walked in on my dad masturbating, you might think I'd know better what to do or say. I didn't. The first time had been terrible, and was followed by hot-faced apologies and a promise never again to speak of what had transpired. This hateful and inglorious second occurrence now made forgetting impossible.

I slammed the door on the nightmarish sight and flew down to the basement where I trembled and paced. I lit a cigarette, realizing there was no way I could get in trouble for smoking in the house. Besides, I needed something to rid me of the sweet perfume of that sinful oil.

He came down the steps and stopped before coming in. He just stood there, peeking around the corner.

And then, to make certain that my knowledge of his sexual endeavors be complete, he offered an explanation about how his diabetes can make impotence a problem. "So, the whole thing's really kind of futile, anyway."

I was being told that, really, I hadn't walked in on my dad pleasuring himself. There was nothing pleasurable about it. He was dealing with an unfortunate medical condition and had been conducting important research. The results were interesting, but inconclusive.

And this is why the second time I walked in on my dad masturbating marked no major change in our relationship. It was indicative of his ability to instantly re-imagine events of his life. It was like he had a filter through which his short-comings became trophies for Dad of the Year. When I was a kid, it worked every time. In high school, it made me think my dad was a phony. As an adult, it created distance and disappointment.

In hindsight, this was really the beginning of a period of oblivious self-destruction that left him divorced and living in a crummy apartment, tangled up with an out-of-town woman who was clearly using him for money.

Though tragic, these events seemed golden opportunities to for my dad and I to mend our relationship and start fresh with each other. There was just no need for bullshit, the cards were on the table. Let's can the filter and see what we got. But this just made him defensive.

"Every night," he'd say, "when I kneel down for my prayers, I thank God for you and your sister. You're the brightest and happiest part of my life."

"I love you so much," he'd say.

And that's wonderful. Every kid should hear that from their parent. But as an adult, on practical level, it just doesn't hold a lot of water when the guy doesn't call, doesn't write, and doesn't visit; when he forgets your birthday, how old you are, and what you do for work. I hate for this to sound cynical, but 'nightly prayers' from a man who never went to church sounds like it's straight from the filter, and I was desperate for something real.

I tried hard to communicate this, and after a couple years, maybe to shut me up, my dad finally asked me for a practical thing he could do to address my problem with our relationship.

I said, "Call me as much as you want."

He said, "I don't want to bother you."

I said, "I'm giving you permission to call as much as you want. And if I don't pick up, call back the next day. If you don't hear back from me then, call again. Call me until you get me. That's what you can do."

He said, "Alright."

And there was about a month that I kind of wished I hadn't said that, because indeed, the old man was calling and talking at great length about his life, which I would come to learn was stranger and more challenging than all the giant sombreros in Acapulco.

"My hard drive broke," he'd say.

"It's a brand new laptop. Take it back."

"Well, it got run over by a taxi cab," he'd tell me.

"I don't understand how that could happen."

"Well, Clay, I don't either, but I'll tell ya, I'm having a ton of problems getting the cab driver to replace it. He's Dutch."

Or, "Have you heard of Krispy Kreme donuts?"

"Yes."

Steve Takaki and I are bringing the franchise to Japan."

"Really? Are you actually buying a franchise or..."

"Well, we haven't talked to them about it yet, but Steve has several contacts over in Japan, there, and I think it's a great market, so things are moving pretty fast."

Or, in the winter following the White Sox World Series victory, he told me, "I'm re-watching the season. Every game."

"Didn't you watch all the games this year?"

"Yeah, but they were some really good ones, and I don't remember all the plays."

Or, "I'm sorry I haven't been able to call, but I lost my phone and then couldn't get to the store to get it replaced, because it's too cold for me to get my car."

"Wait, where's your car?"

"It's in a parking structure about a mile away. I can't just leave it on the street, Clay. It's a Porsche, and it's leased."

"But what do you do if you need it?"

"Sometimes I'll take a cab, but if I don't have cash, I just wait."

Then, "Did you know that when you lose your phone, they can just give you a new one with the same number? That's pretty cool."

As bizarre as those things sounded, I knew that this was still the filtered version. Whatever the real story was, I wasn't getting it. But maybe because these conversations were so weird, it ceased to matter, and I began to appreciate our relationship for what it was. It might not be what I wanted, but it something.

That's how it stood for a couple years, until things finally imploded with the out-of-town woman. Then, at last, he started to sound better.

Just this past Christmas, on a call that can be hard for both of us, my dad surprised me with a bright, energetic tone of voice.

"Hey there, Clay! What a great day here! I'm out in the coffee shop right now and I'm meeting up with some folks and going to see Benjamin Button. Have you heard of it?"

We passed around the phone and wished him a merry Christmas, before hanging up and saying, "He sounded really good."

And that was the last time we talked. After he didn't return a New Year's call, we called his friends, who called the police, who found him sitting on the floor of his apartment, his computer on his lap, dead of a sudden, massive heart attack.

It's not for closure that detail our awkward relationship and that I walked in on him masturbating. I think we all know that grisly business will never, ever close.

I write about my dad because like him, I've got a filter too. And I believe that whatever we shared that went through his can now benefit from going through mine.

And so I tell you that when we went back to clean out his creepy apartment, before sorting through his stacks of mail and cryptic notebooks, the first thing I did was slip away from my mom and sister and rifle his drawers until I found two VHS tapes of pornography. I took them out to the garbage and quietly threw them away.