

Dad's Don't Last Long

The outside of the house looked like mum's lipstick used to when Mrs Waller was still his Kinder teacher and mum used to come home on Wednesday nights so late it would even wake his father up and he'd stand in the hallway outside his door and yell, his dad's voice getting louder as he progressively woke and mum's voice strident from the get-go, her lipstick eaten away by the day's long hours, and her high heel-ed stumble down the gauntlet of the entrance hall like a hypnotic induction to this unique space of repression. Rules of war mandated they only wage combat and disfigure new leaking headless casualties between midnight and whatever hour they drew up stalemate contracts in their room over much breathless debate. Hours when he was meant to be asleep but never was. Nights after mum finished, drunk and well-paid, were for revising statistics of loss and betrayal and reminders of who dominated different outcropping well distant from each other in the war. He got up, PJ'd and bleary-eyed, to be yelled back to bed, eventually she'd maybe come in, eye mascara all abstract-expressionistic, voice soothing (him, or herself?), her knees under her rayon dress looking fragile, pouty.

He walked up the pebbled drive, seeing weatherboards framed in sky all chocolate billabong, the wind raking the grass into visible ripples, looking for some long lost wrist's long lost watch, looking for... something. The sky was filled with diamonds like the one on the ring his mother had given back to his dad before she went away... He was walking up to this long, low house looking at the paint peeling off like it hadn't listened to its mum and had got really sunburnt, reaching up to hold on to his father's hand like he had a question that couldn't wait, feeling cold and sick and needing a home, please don't let it be this one, please, please.

His dad reached down and picked him up high into the air, probably the last time he could ever remember him doing so, and pointed at the crippled deck attached to the front of the house.

"Look mate, we'll be able to sit there and you can play your games or whatever and I'll sit back and look at the you beaut garden. Just have to fix it up and a few other things but we'll get there."

The house was as old on the inside as it looked out, with mildew having eaten out the floor in the bathroom so it sagged in the middle; a gas stove that didn't work and when dutifully pulled apart and investigated only yielded the sad secret of a family of dead mice curled together; ceiling panels that hung down to reveal cavernous darkness and rustles, innumerable minute spots for the breeze to poke its fingers in. His father worked on the house every day, in between patches of short but necessary employment. The young boy got the best room, which just needed its threadbare carpet replaced, his father a darker room further into the house that had some of its roof struts visible.

His dad would be up at 7 am some mornings, before his alarm—a Captain Planet clock his mumma had 'spoiled' him with—had even sung him awake for school, hammering, with not enough clothes on in the cold, arms still looking big and able, a certain wild quality to his eyes and the bags that were jamming up traffic in the capillaries below. Every time he'd bang, a whole coterie of birds would fly away from somewhere and another board in the house would shake loose with a sneeze and clap to the ground. Once he was done with the front of the house he'd walk the perimeter and nail in all the new boards that had come off, eyes slit, watching for sudden movements. He'd find a few panels dropped like groceries pouring from a broken bag and whack them efficiently back into place, trying not to disturb the house. But no matter how few taps he made, how delicately, with eyes half-closed like when you try to pop a balloon by slowing moving a pin closer to it, he'd hear more boards come undone, fixtures fall out. Then he'd start his circuit again, hammering in five boards, hearing three or four more, in the hazy distance of the other end of the house, dropping like poisoned possums. In the first six months they had the house his dad barely slept, walking constantly around the house, trying to plaster the ceiling, trying to not think about his now gone wife. He stopped sleeping and stopped looking like the person in his driver's license photo. He started talking about ghosts, explaining to his little boy that the noises he heard at night were just mischievous ghouls—they weren't after him but liked older prey— but that if he could finish the house and stop up all the hidden entries they wouldn't be able to get in. When he'd wake up at night hearing his father pacing the house outside, his little strangled voice ruminating incoherently, accompanied by chunky scoops as he dug a place for a hill hoist at 3 am or sanded back a board until it snapped, he'd pretend his father was protecting the house from ghosts, out there with a

shovel beating them back to the underworld. He never had nightmares if he imagined hard enough, fantasised away dim night hours until his dad came back inside and started cleaning the pantry shelves or something.

One summer he spent the long molasses days running around the backyard pretending he was an animal, leaping in and out of the grass that was so long because his dad never had time to cut it, gathering horsefly bites and freckles on his shoulders. He was encouraged to go back inside and play computer games, leave the yard, be quiet— his shimmying sashay through the green whispers of grass like a voice in the back of his dad's head, its words sub-audible but the intrusion creating headaches no aspirin had the number of. His dad would watch from the creaking deck while tearing off insulation for tiny holes he thought he'd erased but which seemed to tear open again overnight when his back was turned; banging in off-colour boards into the acne'd face of the house which bloomed in variegated thyroid betrayal; ducking his head like a learnt reflex whenever glass panes fell out of freshly puttied windows shaking under his hammer's cheek. That summer his father had come out to the yard, covered in shit, wearing overalls stained with his and his son's lovingly gathered faeces, his face and mouth made into shadows from the effluvia, his raised hand about to smack and discipline for the transgression of distracting him with youthful noise from the simple task of replacing piping in the sewerage system. He ran into the yard dry-reaching contaminated spit through his nose, exasperated that the simple job of unscrewing a cracked pipe and screwing on a fresh one had come to such grief, needing someone onto which he could displace his anger, anyone that wasn't himself. And his son was always in the backyard playing like a gazelle or a deer, stomping divots of beautiful grass out, dismembering newly-raked leaf piles, playing as some feminine, pansy creature. His eyes when he got yelled at lit up all blue and wounded and he'd run inside to his room with a pallid face as if pursued by a tiger, slamming the screen door so that freshly nailed-in screws unwound and dropped to the deck with a crystal chime and inevitably rolled into a gap between not-quite-flush boards, summoned by the Ghosts.

A defining characteristic of his dad was he'd never pay anyone to do a job he could just end up doing himself with a lot of backbreaking labour and frustration and more money invested in it than it would have just cost to hire someone from the beginning. He assimilated into roles he had no business assimilating, his long arms and slightly bent torso becoming disfigured in the process from too much transformation, marks and scars from disembodiment constantly into the cramped, odorous space of other professionals which there was no need for him to assume. The inside of his forearms became chequered with burns from sparring with the hot water system; his hands grew as cracked as the concrete he mixed and poured; his face broke out with hairs as hard as the wood he chopped for their fire. He constantly vacillated between martyred exhaustion and artisanal pride. One day he'd make it seem like he was singlehandedly creating science for the benefit of wider world; the next he was choked with admiration for himself over what he'd been able to achieve, standing with his hands on his hips and holding a beer—a celebratory one this time—after he'd called stumps for the day. He'd stand back from the vantage of a hard day's work, proud of what he'd achieved— a lone venturer into a foreign field— but despair still tapped its foot far back in his head at the preponderant percentage remaining unfinished. He blamed Ghosts for riotously dismantling his hard work—if you ever made the mistake of asking him why some job he had finished a month ago now needed re-doing.

As he got older and outgrew his clothes, his Power Rangers costume and Osh-Kosh overalls, his father's self-congratulations became rarer than hen's teeth and about as valuable. Any sense of impending completion ran dry as time bored little rivers of defeat into the skin on his forehead and cheeks. His mouth seemed to have a constant stream of liquor dampening its corners—he said beer kept the Ghosts from appearing. The little boy asked when *he* could drink beer, wanting to help his father finish the house but barely big enough to hold a screwdriver, let alone a full strength. He stayed up at nights listening to his dad fight the Ghosts in another room of the house but never saw them himself.

By the time they had lived in the place for nearly three years and they had fed enough firewood into its cold maw to denude the backyard of fallen trees, his dad started getting him to help around the house. It started small, Get down there and grab those weeds for me my back is killing me, his father not wanting to surrender power or claims of having Done It All Alone. "We all have to do real work when we're older mate, better get used to it now", he'd mutter in his chesty mumble, suggesting he was being generous letting the kid help out, make a few insignificant contributions,

dirty him up in the safe demesne of the home before the world at large did with no one to supervise or enforce the rules. His dad was still working a bit at this point, working manual labour, “shit-kicker” jobs, that, if they didn't break his back, seemed to break his heart. “All to give you an education. Wish someone had done the same for me—I wouldn't be walking around this house putting bandaids on bigger problems watching my hard work fall to the ground. I'd be with a beautiful, sane girl drinking whenever I wanted.” He didn't so much as shout as blow wind through his mumble until it became audible outside the four walls, sanctimonious deliverances that came beery-breathed—a cologne he was now learning to associate with his dad—in the afternoons after he got off the school bus.

Then, Grade 3, a good year at school but a bad year at home. In the mornings before school he wouldn't awkwardly run into his father painting flies into the weatherboard or removing yesterday's rain-streaked paint to have a second crack today, (the night having been perfect and the grass dry so no-one knew where the rain had come from or gone to, the tanks still dismally empty), he would instead encounter in the violet mornings a pocketful of change his old man had left out on the counter for him to take, lunch money that, by who knows how fine of a last-minute margin, had resisted condemnation to the publicans till. He'd sneak into his dad's room to be reassured by his heavy breathing and solitary posture beneath the blankets, then he'd rattle down to the bus stop and get on with the other kids going to school. Every day when he'd return at 4 his dad would be in some new posture of discomfort and rage, pulling the TV aerial down because its bindings had a type of screw, the hardware man told him, that no-one sold anymore and which he'd need to fix the castors on the lounge room door; or tearing the rear wall of the laundry off (and welcoming in a new draft that lingered for weeks) because it was a unique shade of puce he loved that wasn't manufactured anymore and the relocation of which was the only way he could replace the wainscoting in the hall without changing its sedative colour.

He would come home from school with a bag full of advanced readings and maths homework to navigate and his dad would be standing on the door's sill—tightening a fixture that held the brass doorbell no one ever rang— as if he didn't know where to direct his attention, inside or out, as if the pyrrhic victory he was cautiously winning over the house could be jeopardised at any moment by discovering another area he had forgotten that needed detail. His eyes stared off at mountains that didn't darken any corner of the land because they didn't exist in collective reality, eyes that saw all faces as wearing the same judging mask, involved with ghosts.

All his youth he was never really allowed to bring friends over. He could remember maybe three or four times, some kid named Tom, or Thom, maybe? They'd run with mirth across the deck and into the house, cracking rotten boards with their steps. Vases and infrequent ornaments his father displayed seemed to be pushed off of high things with invisible hands, liquidated into formless entropy, mementos of his mother wantonly wrecked. So pointless, no lessons about loss and attachment to be gleaned. And it wasn't him and his little friends doing the destroying. It was the ghosts, which they'd hunt for in the back of closets and under his dad's single bed, but never find .

One time he and a mate, when his father still begrudgingly let strangers come admire his handiwork, were kicking a footy in the backyard—one of those soft ones with the padding on the outside that you can boot barefoot and barely even feel. His mate kicked it directly up into the air where it seemed to hang like a kite, the air it was filled with merging with the air outside it. They watched it, stunned, sitting as high up as they'd ever seen a footy sit in real, non-televised life. It stayed up there unmolested by gravity, then fell with great trust and speed directly down, the still day becoming instantly windy somehow beneath it and sending it through a skylight in the 'study'. Locked eye contact in the silent moment between action and reaction flickered with electricity. Inside they found that the footy, which was no heavier than the air inside it, had torn through the plastic skylight, bounced off his father's old school desk (which he had somehow managed to save and trundle through adulthood), and ricocheted widely taking down a chandelier that already hung in the house when his father bought it and which singly escaped his fastidiousness because he believed it to have more value untouched. They saw the chandelier, all smashed and undignified, on the floor and felt like there was a fist in their intestines. Somehow the ball had snapped the cable that held it up. His friend told him they must be dreaming; but that night alone with his dad was more like a nightmare. Nothing withers a young man's soul more than his father losing pride in him, except for maybe him shaming himself for ever having had a son in the first place. When they tried to gingerly pick up the chandelier all the electrics attached to it got ripped out the roof and

unspooled in a snake pit of hissing wires around them. Another job; his father's temple vein another throbbing wire that might explode and kill them both if touched. Eventually, because he was smaller, he crawled out under the trellis of wires and outside to flick the switch in the powerbox. His father would have preferred to escape under the wires and flick off the powerbox and then come back into the house and save himself too but alas, he was too big. He never said 'thankyou' either, like, the young man was learning, all real men don't.

Sometimes the old man would have people over, robust drinkers he met down the pub who liked to sit around and yarn and pass out in the back of taxi's taking them home. His dad never had an agenda, maybe just wanted someone to talk to about things kids' ears shouldn't hear, and he never gave anyone advice unsolicited. His dad only got angry when he invited someone over and they started commenting on the house, suggesting this or that repair, or this or that friend who could do the job. His eyes would fire up like someone had tossed pine offcuts onto a bed of hot coals and his voice would change from its usual placid mumble and become angry and abrasive. Even if one of his friends was a painter and was trying to help him by offering the correct way to use a roller, his father would kick them out resentfully. One time a bloke he had told to leave kicked his toolbox down the stairs of the front porch. It bounced with a heavy sonorous sound on every step and spilled out the different sized wrenches and screwdrivers his father had slowly collected from scratch, as well as the millions of subtly different screws he was always sorting through hunting for the right one. His father looked like he was going to chase the man, but instead just crouched down next to his boy who had run from inside and was sliding his arm between steps to pick up loose, dirt-caked iron.

"We have to get them before the ghosts take them away to their hiding place and they're gone," the young fella said.

By the time next summer circled back around lots of drink had disordered the fine movements his hands had learnt from near continuous struggle, so that he was injuring himself more and more and leaving the house un-kicked, un-punched. Early mornings trying to connect wires in the dark with arthritic hands became untenable and embarrassing, he having to send his kid under the house to do it, yelling out directions to him he knew by muscle movement alone and not conscious planning, causing great friction. When he finally pulled the dusty figure out of the darkness with his little shoes he'd amassed enough dirt to be covered in spiderwebs and smut for weeks— his school clothes getting a wash only on rare occasions when his father had a woman stay who took pity on the little kid heading off to school with tomato sauce and mud all over his yellow shirt and asked him in her nice voice "got any other shirts I could wash for you fella?" If they never wanted to come back for his father he'd see them at least once more when they returned the shirts, nicely folded.

As he neared the final year of primary school he saw his dad pass out nightly, often before dusk, and wake up at 7 with bourbon in his coffee and a screwdriver in his hand, sawdust sometimes making a little irrelevant galaxy in his dawning beard. He became more animalistic banging the loose weatherboards in, swinging wild haymakers, purposely missing nails just so he could hit the wall over and over and OVER and over again. He was losing his eyesight and hair, his back becoming hunched and misshapen like a snails'. The jobs that he occasionally worked disappeared: either his reputation as a drunk spread or he stopped applying; the women who came by offering to cook for him and his son got ugly and loose-skinned and disappeared into a wider undifferentiated background of desperation and poverty; the money from his mother's family, which had delicately cushioned them when his father was too inebriated and sad to work, had been pissed away. He blamed his bad fortunes on the weather, his hands, the ghosts.

It was becoming winter more and more in the town they had bought into, the cycles of the seasons stalling, dark consistently asserting itself in early afternoon with no regard for after school plans like an omnipresent bully waiting somewhere in the coils of your neighbourhood. At school they could hover around the purview of amber-faced gas heaters, their hands extended to its brilliant disorder like olive branches hoping for an armistice. At home he had to wear extra layers, all his hand-me-downs zipped over each other until he looked like Bibendum but not as cheery, and pace back and forth while doing his maths workbooks just to stay thawed, his blood feeling cold and uncirculated despite making its rounds dutifully. He would get stuck on some graphing or trig and look out the window at his dad, wanting to ask for help but too afraid to go disturb the

figure who looked like a scarecrow out there in the wind, in just a t-shirt and jeans. He never seemed to feel the cold, possibly warmed internally by liquor, possibly determination.

The house was like a palimpsest, like an overworked doctor's calendar. It was hardly the same house, every piece of wood and nail had been changed and interchanged and discarded and replaced at least once. Even the grass in the yard had been dug up by his father one winter when it tended to mud and he'd replaced it with imported Bermuda grass, a much lusher, emerald blend, which turns out won't grow in this climate and died in patches and then wholesale before them like a spreading epidemic. His father stood amongst all the patches one morning smoking a cigarette, emotionless. "Why is there no grass dad?" He asked.

"It won't grow in this climate apparently, too cold. So it dies instead."

"But why won't it grow, why would it make itself die?"

"Because sometimes dying is better than living in the wrong place, mate. You have to grow."

Sometimes his father was chock with these sad wisdoms. Like one day when his face looked more leathery than usual, and his voice had been heard throughout the night arguing with someone who never argued back.

"Why don't I see the ghosts?" His son asked.

"Because you don't believe in them. I know they're real, so I have to put up with them visiting me, not you."

Sometimes he was exasperated and browbeaten and looked like he would surrender and if you asked him anything his answer would fill you with guilt and weariness. Any interaction with him was equivocal and could 180 into insults and violence—charges of you not helping and leaving it all on his shoulders. He used the violence life was perpetrating on him like some signature weapon against anyone who tried care for him. He'd make you feel guiltily responsible for all his suffering and, if he had more of an education, would have claimed Atlas was a lazy layabout who had an easier trot than he did. If you told him you loved him his brow would crease like his mortgage just doubled.

Soon he started sleeping in late so you couldn't even say a perfunctory 'have a good day' to him as you left for school. The wood he sliced into well-defined sections to replace the back steps or a new fence just got fed through the oesophagus of the pot-belly heater. His old 4-wheel drive had rusted outside and been colonised by dense spider's homes inside so they couldn't even go collect firewood anymore because no matter how much Mortein they sprayed the spiders wouldn't budge. He had started to glimpse an ethereal finality in the house's metamorphoses, and it didn't involve consummation, but abandonment. In this way the house started to consume itself. His father started leaving the nails that dropped out of the walls on the floor so you had to always watch your feet where you were walking. Boards that collapsed off walls or jutted up from the floor were ripped out and tossed into the potbelly. The vegetables and fruit trees they had tried for years to grow in the backyard, and which never survived but died and left naked, emaciated corpses everywhere, were exhumed and became compost that emanated a smell summoning threats from the local council.

The Ghosts had free reign of the house now. They could both hear them pissing fatal urine on the rose bushes and nailing holes in the new spouting. His dad would lay alone in the bed in his room cuddling a quart of whisky and listen to them run riot. One day, nearly at the age of pimples and resentment now, he came home from school and his father was deep in the house outside his bedroom slumped against a wall. There were pearls of Red Label in his beard and maybe something saltier too. Inside his room the ceiling he had mended had fallen clean out of the roof and crushed the bed in the early hours after his son had left. He had gotten up moments before it fell because he had wet the bed and still needed to go and there in the bathroom, covered in his own defecations, he heard final the crack and fall. His son got his uniform heavily imbued with the smell of booze trying to reassure him. But when he tried for a hug numb distance was reaffirmed. They went in a pushed all the wood splinters and iron onto the floor. After that he slept every night in that room looking up at the void in the sky.

One night, head unconsciously lulling on his workbook where he had been finishing some last exercises, the young boy was awoken by the sound of shattering glass. His head flew off the page and his sleepy head notified him to listen, hoping it was a dream or just some drunken acquaintance in the shed. Then he heard screaming coming from within the house itself. He heard his father's voice twisted into a scream. He was in the lounge room, swinging around with a dagger

of glass made from a broken bottle, feinting at no one he could personally make out in a ring full of empty space. He was yelling out broken english commands to some unseen persons. A full torrent of invective and swearwords he was forbidden to use at school and nonsense like “Fucking cunt stay away from us we don’t need 8 mil phillips head need home and number four-thirty-seven violet paint, screaming at me all night like some demon with unfinished business the sliding door castors that never get oily enough no matter how much elbow grease I spill on the boy before school still has to go like everyone except not forever can always come back to a rotten house that grows your bones out of it like compost never finished...” On and on and unbroken— his lips moved like they were murmuring rosaries. Then he’d get stuck and say “floorboards, floorboards, floorboards” or something mundane that had for him become charged with the emotion of his failure and vilification. He called out to his father but couldn’t be heard. He wanted to run and hug his dad and pull his hands down but he flailed around with the glass so erratically you couldn’t ambush him from anywhere without risking sure laceration. He felt powerless and resigned himself to watching from behind a wall with the top half of his head sticking out. That was the night his father abandoned the house and ran into the night with a broken glass bottle neck in his hand, screaming knowingly at the dark. That was the last time he ever saw his dad. No one found him. No one came to ask where he was or why hadn’t they seen him. There was no corpse; he could still be out there somewhere, screaming and attacking the the same medium that possibly kept him alive. He was a disappeared man whom no one missed. As far as he could tell his dad’s name was never spoken by human lips again. Except for when he thought of him when the house shed a board or the faucet’s stopped working there was nothing of his dad left. No one came to check up on him either. He just got up and went to school and came home and got older until the Ghosts wanted to talk to him too.