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His Only Daughter

BETH SPENCER

Once, he drove for an hour at 9 am just to get his only daughter the autograph of the lead singer of her favorite band. He brought her camera and took half of a roll of photographs for her. Sorry you couldn't make it! the singer had written on a piece of her father's Xeroxed stationery, with writing scrawled with the permanent marker her father always kept in his pocket.

Once, he came home at 6 pm in the evening. He'd been gone since the night before. There was the rumbling of his red car (with one blue door) pulling into the lawn, and he emerged, in the same dirty clothes he'd been wearing the night before. His ex wife met him outside, they argued, and he said

nothing to his children of where he'd been or why.

Once, his only daughter called him.

Can we go to the record store so I can trade in some CDs? she asked.

I talked to the people there, he said, they don't remember you.

So, she said, they remember you! I can still sell my CDs there.

Are you on the computer or on the phone? he asked.

What the hell are you talking about? she said to him. She had no computer.

You need to call up Oprah so that you can meet Eddie Vedder, he told her. Her heart fluttered slightly. She had always wanted to meet Eddie Vedder. But then a realization hit that this was not possible, that things weren't that simple, that something was horribly wrong.

What the hell are you talking about? she repeated, her voice becoming higher, more aggravated.

I can see you on my computer, he said. He didn't own a computer either.

I don't know what you are talking about! Please, Dad, what are you talking about?

Wait, he said, am I talking to the right Beth?

Yes, she said, this is your *daughter*, and what the hell are you talking about? You know it's me, Dad.

She handed the phone to her brother, who had been waiting by her impatiently, and he argued with his father, and they finally hung up, frustrated. When his ex wife came home, she called him, and talked things over with her ex husband. She said his state of mind was from lack of sleep.

His only daughter called him back again. "Hey, can we go to the record store now?" she asked as her brothers yelled in the background.

Who was that? he asked. David and Scott, she said.

Then he asked, despite already having received his answer, Was it Oprah?

Once, he drove her to the other side of the state so that she could go to her first real concert, to see the singer/guitarist of her favorite band's wife's band at a tiny club. The opening act yelled and screamed and handed out propaganda about aliens and wore 5's on armbands like swastikas. To this day, her father is the only one who fully understands why she screams every time the clock strikes 5:55.

When she was a junior in high school, he walked downtown and into an upscale motel. Soon, he was arrested for disturbing the peace. He signed his name "Elvis Presley" and was admitted to a psychiatric ward for a couple of weeks. His mother told her only granddaughter that no one knew anything about why it had happened, although it could be a chemical balance, but, oh yeah, there's sort of this thing with a history of mental illness in the family.

Once, he carted his 14-year-old daughter and three middle school friends to the basement of a university building an hour north of the city where they both lived, but not together, to see a local band perform on a cable access show. He treated her and her friends to Pizza Hut on the ride back.

Once, she thought her father was okay, but she saw a package in the backseat of his car. It was covered in tape and was addressed to Oprah.

When she was in first grade, her father had taken her to the father-daughter dance. They boogied, and her father mingled with other fathers, and she played with other daughters, and they all gathered together and danced to "Ice Ice Baby." She won a door prize. It had those white "wedding nugget" cookies inside.

Once, his mother was laid in bed after returning from the hospital. All three of his God-given children were in the living room, cramped by old books and piles of records. He said, I have a problem that we need to talk about. She sighed. *I know what the problem is; we all do. We need to wait hand and foot on Grandma because she shits on the floor and we can't afford to put her in a nursing home, I don't want to sit here and talk about this.* The problem, he said, is cocaine. What about cocaine? I have a problem with cocaine, he said. After his admission, he drove his daughter to her workplace in complete silence.

When she was ten, her period started. Her father went to the supermarket late at night and picked up feminine products for her because she was his only daughter and his wife didn't menstruate anymore. His daughter hadn't even asked for them, but needed them.

Not once, but many times, she paced outside of her job the summer before she would leave for college, waiting for her father to arrive and take her home. Many times she waited, only to end up scrounging for change to call a friend, crying, or catching the bus. Then, she would sleep on the living room couch as she always did, and he'd arrive in the middle of the night as he often did, and she would yell and scream empty threats until he took a long trip to the bathroom and then crawled into bed, saying he was exhausted.

Once, when she was in elementary school, she went to an "adult" party with her father. She chewed on cookies while her father talked to other adults. He was offered alcohol but refused, saying that he needed to drive his daughter home. She had never seen him drink, or smoke tobacco, or even swear.

Once, he promised that if he didn't show up, he would buy her 5 CDs from the record store. He never came, and she only ended up getting two.

Once, he came home late at night and pulled his twin sons from the basement to show him, he said, why they should never smoke crack. They already knew they would never smoke crack. But there was a single bullet hole through the center of the windshield of his car, with cracks spread like a spider web all over the front of the glass, and shards strewn all over the inside of the car. He wanted his only daughter to come with him to the gas station as he vacuumed out his car. His ex wife told her only daughter that he owed a man some money, and the bullet hole was to scare him, although no one was hurt.

Once, her father got her an orange t-shirt with sparkly monkeys on it. Orange was her favorite color. Monkeys were her favorite animals. She loved things that sparkled.

She was grateful to move away and go to college. She no longer felt the need to constantly babysit her father, but unfortunately, winter break would come, and there she would be again, listening to stories of what she's missed out on. A team of mental health professionals intervening, her brothers dropping out of high school, and she spent a night again on the couch. Her father left early the next morning and came back that night, New Year's Eve, and she asked him what he was going to get her for Christmas. He told her he didn't have any money. Then, he asked everyone to pray with him to help him with his addiction, the reason he didn't have any money. She screamed at him, angry at someone who wanted God to help when he couldn't and wouldn't help himself. She cried, begged her friend to take her away, and made arrangements for summer housing so that she would no longer feel the pressure of babysitting her own father.

Once, they made plans to go to Seattle, or maybe Windsor, or Vancouver. She looked up price rates online. He said that he would love to go to Seattle. She had wanted to go since she was young. He offered to pay half of the cost.

Once, her father had told her that he was going to drive up to her college and bring her money. She called his house, and his only sister told her that he had left hours ago, with the sixty dollars she had given him, and wasn't he there yet? No, of course he's not here yet. He will never be here. I'll call back tomor-

row and yell at him, she said.

Once, her father took his almost 8th grade daughter to see the Rock n Roll Hall of Fame. They walked all around, and when she wasn't looking, he bought her a calendar there that he later gave to her for Christmas.

Once, she called up her father from her dorm room to ask for money. He was unemployed, and had been for a year and a half, but often received money on the side from selling things on eBay and to record stores. Well, he said, I've been in the hospital all day. Why? she asked, even though she knew why, and he said, to get help, and she said, help for what, and he said, help for my problem. They might put me on disability, he said. What, she said, they are going to fucking pay you to smoke crack? Well, he said, I'll be getting some help there. That is so fucked up, she said, you do not deserve to be paid to smoke crack. They'll be helping me, he said. As he'd said before. She knew this was something that she could never escape.

When will he learn? she thought. When will he learn that he is only hurting everyone, that blowing \$200 on a high, and maybe owing people money, is fucking ridiculous? Then, she realized her dependency on her father, for money, for attention, for rides, for entertainment. When will *I* learn? she thought. When will *I* learn?

Once, the summer before her sophomore year of college, her father took her to the zoo an hour north of the city they both used to live in, but not together. She spoke in the car of her new life, and local bands, and how the great record stores in Grand Rapids had all closed. They visited one that was still open, and he told the worker, I'm up here in Grand Rapids because my daughter wanted to go to the zoo. They left, she with two new CDs, and she mentioned the concerts of her younger years, and he said, I miss going to all those concerts. I had just as much fun as you did. Well, she said, all the bands broke up. And the ones that are still around suck now. Well, he said, it was a really great time then. Yeah, she said, it was a really great time. Then, they rode in silence until they reached the zoo.