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Creative Non-Fiction

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*To Know Him is to Love Him*

At forty-three, the last thing he thought he'd be was an expecting father. Actually, let me rephrase that. At forty-three, the last thing he expected was to be welcoming a fourth daughter; me. I obviously wasn't there when he found out, but I know him well enough now to picture how he must have reacted when my mom told him the news. An emotionless expression on his face, his face is hard to read. His hands, however, give it all away. They have a lot of stories to tell.

After unfolding his arms, he probably ran his hands slowly through his facial scruff, rubbing right under where his jaw meets his ear as if a 43-year-old could struggle with wisdom tooth pain. I imagine a deep breath followed and then some sort of joke that was almost offensive but said in such a way that it was charming or he went the opposite route and just let out a simple

“alright.” The kind of ‘alright’ that made you believe that everything was truly going to be alright because he was going to make sure of it. Then he'd smile with a soft chuckle shaking his head.

I'm from the same town where both my parents grew up, a block away from each other. My mom went to private school, her dad drove a Cadillac, and she went shopping every Thursday with her Grandma. My dad was the youngest of eight, was perpetually donning hand-me-downs, and claims to have walked uphill both ways in a blizzard to school every day. Although not actually true, maybe there's a metaphor there or something because from what I've heard he didn't have it very easy.

He doesn't talk much about his childhood. At least not in a deep way. I know that there was always a home-cooked meal on the table, and his mom would wake up and make him breakfast at 4 o'clock in the morning when he had to be up to run his paper route. He also often explains the contrast between the way we grew up and the way he did. He'd see our slew of shoes and say growing up he had two pairs, one for play and one for Church. I know about his accomplishments as a baseball player, football linebacker, and boxer. Then I know the wild stories like when he broke up a fight outside a bar and one guy refused to leave without his fake tooth that was knocked out, so my dad picked up a small pebble, handed it to him, and said, "here you go."

He's smart like that. Smart mouthed of course, but an avid learner. If there's something he comes across and doesn't know enough about he'll research it for hours until he's comfortable in his knowledge of the topic. He was always the one who helped with homework. Hours were spent at the kitchen table making sure that we understood the topic before we were able to get up. Then later that night he would email us videos to watch on the topic. We were given homework, on our homework.

My dad is pretty popular in my town, I know this because I rarely go anywhere without echoes of "*Are you Gary Wood's daughter?*" ringing in my ears. Of course, I claim him, and I am then bombarded with stories of how he was an amazing athlete, did excellent work on their house, or has been a good friend. I can't complain though because his popularity has gotten me some special privileges. In high school, we were able to cut the drop off-line when he brought me because he played football with the security guard. "You're a good man Gary Wood!!" he'd yell as we passed by, and I'd duck down so no one would see me. The mechanic on Main Street fixed the dent in the back of my car for free when he found out I was "Gary Wood's baby." The strict dress code at my high school was no match for my dad. If a teacher tried to question the length of

my shorts or the thickness of my tank top straps, multiple adults would come to my defense with either “If Gary Wood let her out of the house, then she’s fine” or “You don’t want Gary Wood coming in here.” They must have seen him angry before.

He rarely loses his temper but is definitely not someone you want to make mad. As kids, my sisters and I were on our best behavior when he was around - or we at least tried to be. When he wasn’t around, any variation of the words “wait until I tell your father” could still make my face get hot and my hair stand up on ends while I beg for forgiveness. He’s not the yelling type, but you can almost see the anger take over every part of his body. His eyes go from the color of grass on a warm spring day, to a dark gray that warns of an impending storm. I’ve gotten in my fair share of trouble, and he’s yelled maybe twice that I can remember. He’s stern though, he talks slow and deep. He gets in your face and points one large finger from his hands just inches away, jabbing the air in front of you with every syllable. He pushes out his lower jaw, exposing crooked teeth that he talks quietly through. As young kids he’d make us sit on the stairs as punishment, sometimes leaving us there until we were so bored we’d fall asleep, but then he’d be the one to carry us to bed and tuck us in. The worst though, was when he expressed his disappointment. My dad is very big on respect and honesty. He thinks that being late is a sign of disrespect because you’re saying that your time is more important than the person who is left waiting on you. If my sisters and I joined a sports team and wanted to quit half-way through the season, as we usually did, he’d make us finish the season because we made a commitment to the team and owed it to the rest of the players, because apparently someone had to warm the bench.

On the surface, he’s a tough guy. His hands are worn and calloused from working with them for the past forty years, but he takes pride in their sandpaper feeling. He says a man is judged by his handshake, but my dad is so much more than just a handshake. Not only are they rough, but

they're huge as if he has baseball mitts on both. My sister's boyfriend took one look at his hands and whispered, "his hands look like he could kill someone..." He smells like sawdust. It's not a gross smell, but it's the kind that you would know anywhere. The kind that you smell and recognize immediately. He's typically covered in cuts and bruises - usually on his forehead - that don't have a story behind them or the story is too embarrassing for him to tell. His once black hair has progressively changed to look as if someone dumped a bag of flour on him. He blames this on me. Once you crack that tough exterior though, he can have a very very small soft spot - mostly for babies, puppies, and of course his four girls. Requests for having a catch in the yard were hardly ever declined, even after a long day at work.

If you met him for the first time, you'd probably be intimidated. He's a man of few words, but many thoughts, he observes and absorbs. When he does choose to chime in, it's usually something that will make you laugh, whether a soft chuckle or a full-blown outburst of laughter, the kind that makes your stomach hurt. And it's usually at someone else's expense, but never crosses the line. I've had to explain to a number of friends that if my dad makes fun of you, he likes you. It means he's warmed up to you enough and feels comfortable expressing himself and his sense of humor.

He isn't perfect though, no one is. He's moody and will shut down sometimes if he's mad. He can, and has, gone weeks without talking, in the winter months especially. My sisters and I refer to it as the six weeks. Which leads me to believe there could be some seasonal depression sprinkled among his typical class clown behavior. It could also be because the happiness of Christmas Day was taken from him about 17 years ago when his mother passed away early one Christmas morning. He'd never admit it though, he's too stubborn and prideful to admit that. He's a man from the baby boomer generation, mental health is not something in their vocabulary. At

least not for himself. Whenever my sisters or I have a problem, however, he's the first one we go to. He's the definition of an emergency contact. If you have an issue, you call him because he can fix almost anything, cars, houses, and hearts. Before you even get off the phone he's by your side. He once cut a 15-minute ride in half when my sister had an issue at work. He's also very chatty in the morning, and any morning person to me is certifiably crazy. He loses EVERYTHING, keys, wallet, phone, money. He's constantly walking around the house in circles, with heavy sighs pushing his hair back, with his shoulders hung low. Muttering things like "have you seen my...." or "I'll give you a dollar if you find my..." with a few expletives in between.

As the youngest of eight children, four should have seemed like a small brood. But raising four *girls* seemed harder than climbing Mt. Everest in the dead of winter. And to some, it may have been, but my dad made it look like a stroll. Did he want one son to carry on the family name? Sure. Did he wish one of us had gotten a touch of his athletic abilities? Definitely. Did he want at least one of us to be more interested, or at least more able, to help with yard work? 100%. And he'll tell you that. But he'll also tell me and my sisters that we mean the world to him.

On the surface, he lacks emotion. I can't remember the last time he told me he loved me, but I know he does. He doesn't tell us with his words but rather his actions. We know he loves us because he's 62 years old and gets out on roofs to make sure that my sisters and I have everything we need and more. He made sure we were not spoiled with material things, that was my mom's job, but we were spoiled in the things that he did for us. He taught us that you have to work for the things you want and to appreciate everything that you have, I just hope he knows how much we appreciate him. At forty-three, the last thing he expected was to be a father to four girls. But he's so much more than that. He's a shoulder to cry on, a listening ear, and a hand to hold. He is the true definition of a "girl dad".