

## KICK IN THE TEETH

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You know how every kid has a story about walking in on their parents having sex? I can out do every single one of them. In my story, I skip choir after school because I've got a headache, and I come home to an unknown car in the driveway. When I unlock the door, the dog comes running to meet me; she's got a red bra in her mouth. I walk into the living room and I find my dad having sex. Rebecca from my third-year chemistry class told us a similar story once. In hers, she screamed a bit and her parents shooed her out the room. It was embarrassing for all of them, but they laughed it off. In mine, it's not my mum on the sofa with my dad. It's Lesley, who works at the pub that my dad takes his clients to for lunch. None of us screamed and we certainly didn't laugh it off. They didn't have to shoo me out the room. I turned around in silence and I walked straight back out the front door.

I don't know how you're supposed to react in that situation, but I don't think I did it right. I didn't cry, or get angry, or show much of any emotion. I walked to the end of the street, sat at the bus stop for twenty minutes, then walked home. The situation really didn't help my headache either. The car in the driveway was running and Lesley, who had mascara everywhere it shouldn't be across her face, just about ran me over as she sped away. My dad was standing in the doorway wearing mum's dressing gown. I told him that was quite disrespectful considering the situation. He told me to shut up, which I think was uncalled for.

Dad, somewhat distraught, asked me what I was going to do: was I going to tell mum and ruin all our lives, or was I going to keep quiet? He left out the part of the second option where I would live the rest of my life with a horrible secret slowly destroying me. I realised something quite important that day - I realised that the type of person who tries to guilt trip their own daughter into lying to their mother about an affair, is probably not the sort of person you'd like to have a daughter with. I often wonder why my mother ever made such a big mistake.

Perhaps that says something about the type of man my father was; a manipulative and occasionally-downright-terrified man, with loosely disguised self-esteem issues. There had been so many times I felt so much burning anger towards him I thought I could kill him. He always thought he was more important than he really was, and he managed to convince a few people that he was god's gift. Maybe that's why Lesley liked him. He regularly spoke of books he'd read at university, his incredible travels, and extraordinary people he'd met along the way. He always wafted about and spoke in passing comments, as if his existence was only temporary and you were blessed with his company for only a short time. In reality, he was nothing of the sort. He hadn't read a book the whole way through in years, he'd lived in the same town since he was born, and the most famous person he'd met was one of Thatcher's secretaries for Agriculture.

When my mum did come home (she was back late from work and she looked drained), after three more hours of my dad trying to bribe me, I told her straight away. She looked at me, and at my dad, and then back and forth a couple more times. She sat down at the kitchen table and told my dad to get her a glass of wine; when he didn't move, she screamed at him. My mother had always been a sweet, pure angel in my eyes but that day she could have given any movie villain a run for their money. Honestly, I think that was the first time I had ever seen her properly angry. Obviously, she'd been I've-asked-you-seven-times-to-clean-your-room angry, and she'd been god-damn-it-you're-forty-seven-Martin-why-can't-you-load-the-dishwasher-properly angry, but she had never been downing-a-glass-of-wine-because-my-husband-is-having-an-affair angry. I'm not sure how many types of angry are worse than that.

Turns out, my granddad – my mum’s father – had died that day and she was late home because she had been at the hospital with him. My mum wasn’t always the biggest fan of her parents, but her mother had died when I was very young and since then my granddad was very prominent in my life. I think he was lonely and he wanted to be a part of his daughter’s world. Granddad always hated my dad; he would contradict everything that my dad ever said, no matter what his personal opinion was. I think it was probably for the best that he never saw my mother divorced, because although he didn’t like my dad, more than anything he would hate to see my mother unhappy.

Mum always had a lot of walls. Partly to protect herself, and partly to protect the people she loved. I think it probably ate away at her - all the secrets she kept - but she did a damn good job at pretending otherwise. Maybe it was a saviour complex, or she was just too kind for her own good, but she always attracted the worst people and still saw the best in them. When you desire things that are bad in their own nature, as my mum has and does, I believe you lose a lot more of yourself than if you’re surrounded by love and positivity. Kindness is a positive virtue, but it’s much harder to get than to give, and I think my mum gave too much. It was probably inevitable that one day it would come back to haunt her.

I don’t think I have ever felt so conflicted as that day. I had grown up with the ‘perfect’ family: my parents both loved me, we had a nice house and we never fought. As I grew up I slowly saw that my parents were never supposed to be together; they were so unbelievably incompatible that I still can’t understand why no one stopped them getting married and having a child. It turns out that they did fight, a lot as it happens; they just never let me witness it (or I wasn’t paying attention). I wanted so badly to stay a happy, perfect family but I knew that the happiness and perfection wasn’t real. My entire wonderful, flawless childhood crumbled around me as I lost my dad, my family, and my granddad. I guess someone up there really had it in for me day.

So, that’s probably the day I knew that life is kind of, like, fucked. Life is just one kick in the teeth after another, really. I haven’t seen my mum angry since that day either. The following morning, she filed for divorce and organised an entire funeral in six hours flat. My dad was banished from the house, effective immediately, and my mum burned anything that he left behind. We watched *The Princess Bride* and ate tomato pasta and somehow, the worst kick in the teeth life ever gave me ended with me and my mum asleep on the sofa, probably happier than we should have been under the circumstances.

The next kick in the teeth came nine months later. Lesley and my dad had a baby. Lesley - the twenty-seven-year-old my dad cheated on my mother with when he was having a midlife crisis. Needless to say, I had a few choice words for my father. They named him Fabian (you can laugh, don’t worry, I did too), almost like they were *trying* to get him bullied at school. They got married four months after he was born and suddenly my dad wasn’t my dad anymore: he was Fabian’s dad and Lesley’s husband and I wasn’t part of their happy family. For a short while, my dad tried to include me, but Lesley didn’t like me (because Fabian preferred me to her) and so after a while I only saw them on special occasions.

I was seventeen when my dad died. Fabian was two. Lesley was a widow at thirty. Perhaps I shouldn’t say died. I was seventeen when my dad killed himself. Fabian was two. Lesley was a widow at thirty. There were occasions I would have killed him myself, but he died before I had time. He wrote three letters: to me, to Fabian, and to my mother, and he left them on the kitchen table. He texted Lesley that he loved her and then drove to a lay-by twenty miles away and he gassed himself to death. He left the radio still playing - an audiobook of Sylvia Plath poems, fittingly. There is nothing glamorous about my father’s suicide. He wasn’t a hero, or a celebrity and he didn’t even have a proper reason for doing it. In the letter he said that he was sorry, but he was so unhappy that he

didn't want to wake up another day feeling how he did. He said that he would always love me, and he would always be my dad. That's not true. My dad wasn't my dad anymore and he wasn't Fabian's either. My dad wasn't anyone's dad anymore.



