

Blinders

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Horses wear blinders so they can focus on what is ahead. They are easily spooked and distracted by what is next to or behind them, which can be costly and dangerous. They trot along the single path ahead of them, unaware of any surrounding mayhem or chaos.

Dad always loved horses. He was a simple man of few words. He worked treacherous long hours outdoors in Central Park with his horses seven days a week, so we were only in each other's company at night or on days of tumultuous weather.

Yet, Dad and I were buddies. I found him hilarious. While Mom was occupied with my younger brother Kevin, and my older and younger sisters were too mature and immature to match my frequency, Dad and I were always on the same wavelength. He acted like an elementary schooler — like me. I felt comfort in hearing him come home from work when I was in bed. My siblings and I shared a room right next to the cold fridge he frequented. I liked to think that when he made his trip from his couch to grab a Heineken, he would peek his head into my room to check on me.

Dad and I had a different relationship compared to my friends. He did not go to my softball games or even know I was on a softball team. But he would bring me to Sissy's on some weekends to watch a boxing match or football game. I would get free Coca-Cola, and the bartender would allow me to spray it out of the soda gun myself. People would give me dollar bills to play Big Buck Hunter, where I quickly learned the difference between a doe and buck. I even got the code to hack the jukebox and play whatever Matchbox 20 song I wanted.

His silly energy diffused out of Sissy's and into everyday occasions. He rarely drove, but the ride to Elmhurst Hospital to see Mom and my new baby

sister was an exhilarating experience that was way too similar to bumper cars. I shared his love for horses, and on many nights, he asked me which horse did I think might win at Saratoga or Aqueduct or Belmont. One time, at a playdate, he grabbed my friend's pizza to take a fat chomp out of it, leaving us roaring. Any time Mom would scold me, I would run to Dad to protect me.

After one Thanksgiving trip, I came home and saw that Dad's beer mug was still in the sink from a few days ago. I felt uneasy. When Crazy Uncle Tom rang our doorbell, I knew something was wrong.

Months went by without him. Very quiet, clean, and boring months.



So much time passed that my eyes glazed over him when he finally returned. I did a double-take before realizing that the person in front of me was, in fact, Dad. His once-strudel belly had inverted, exposing his ribs through his new blue, pressed V-neck sweater. His big blue moon eyes reminded me of a doe, scared and trapped. His old shiny, red, patchy skin had transformed into a greyscale, cracked coating. Worst of all, he did not speak.

I felt rather confused at what happened to Dad. He not only seemed sad but robotic. He was physically barely there, but spiritually had disappeared.

His silence penetrated my ears. No more blaring music at night coming from work. No more Wednesday night shenanigans when the Giants played. No more shooting does just for giggles. Thinking of Dad and our good times made my lip quiver. I lost a friend.

Being from Ireland, Dad was a huge Gaelic football fan. I perked up one day while working on

my Social Studies homework when he asked if I would want to watch the Finals at Sissy's. Of course, I did.

Because of the time difference, we had to be at the bar at around 8 a.m. — before anyone in the house was awake. It was the end of September, where the dying Sun's beating heat wrestled the fresh, new looming chill of winter. Our walk was silent.

As usual, the smell of saturated sugary Cola and Brandy entered my lungs, wildly triggering nostalgia.

Within minutes, Dad ordered me my Cola, and for the first time, almost met my eyes. His dark blue moon eyes with draped eyelids scared me in their intensity. "Look," he stuttered, his gaze dancing around, rest in one place. The crowd at the pub almost drowned out his voice as he continued, "Mom doesn't have to know this, okay?" I nodded—not in agreement but understanding. The hiss of the open Heineken's high octave vexed my eardrum

Within moments, my old Dad was back.

When we got back home, hours later, the tide had turned. Now, everyone else was silent; and it was him that was loud— loud in voice, appearance, and smell. He repelled my siblings and Mom. I held the rope, taut with tension between my father and the rest of our family. But he kept pulling the rope harder and harder. Soon, I knew it was going to snap, with him tumbling out of our lives. Words boomed and swirled through my ears. Yet my brain was too frazzled to make sense out of them. "Promise." "Care." "Selfish." "Disease." "Repulsive." "Lonely." I wanted to stand up for him, but my face burned dry and hot at the scene. Embarrassment and guilt exuded from me. I let this happen because I missed a friend, a man to whom I never got to say goodbye. But this silly man was not so funny to everyone else. There was a profound disconnect between my family and me. Was I, like the horse, wearing blinders? Who put them on me, and most importantly, what was I not seeing?