

## Fathers

“Wasn’t this your father’s?” I asked.

“Oh, right. I was wondering where this camera came from. I think my aunt told me he was really interested in photography.” She glanced at the boxy 1950s camera and tossed it back into the storage bin as we sorted through my boxes to move to my university dorm.

My mother continued cleaning up, thinking nothing of the provenance of the camera. I, on the other hand, held it in reverence. Imagining my grandfather, with the strap wrapped over his neck, taking pictures of his daughter as a toddler, dressed in her wool coat and beret, mittens on strings, posing in the snow outside of her home.

He had passed away unexpectedly when my mother was 4 years old, and my grandmother, shattered by the death of her husband, never spoke of it. My mother, having no stories of him, felt nothing, and often framed it as not missing out on a father but missing out on a mother - an involuntarily single mother who worked full time and was rarely home.

My mother, like my grandmother, swept the pieces of her childhood under the rug, and I found myself trailing behind trying to put them back together. While my mother forged toward the future, I disappeared more and more into the past. I filed through old census records, searching for evidence of my mysterious grandfather whom I never knew, marveling at his occupations: Acadian farmer, Stevedore. I delighted in his meticulous cursive writing that slanted to the left, just like mine.

Years later, my mother developed an interest in photography. She would send me photos that she had taken. Nothing boring like landscapes or wildlife, she would say, but interesting like people and events in the city. She captured a woman doing interpretive dance to a fiddler at the jazz festival, a vibrant row of tutus hanging on a line outside of a vintage store in Kensington market.

“Wasn’t your father interested in photography too?”

“Oh, that’s right. He was. Hm.” She continued to click through her pictures on Photoshop, adjusting the colour and lighting, “What do you think of this one?”

Surprised by my mother’s lack of interest in her own father, I realized I too had been blasé about my own. My father, like hers, had also been absent that year, albeit only temporarily and largely due to my request for him to stop calling until he paid back the money he owed my mother after their divorce. But I realized I wanted to be left with more of my father than just a boxy camera from the 50s and indifference, so I decided to forgive him and mend our relationship.

With little in common, my father and I began to call each other and chat about mundane things. We brought up the show, “Lost”, talked about Roger Federer winning Wimbledon, and sometimes my dad would tell me about his love of camping. Eventually, we began camping together. He taught me how to build a fire, and I would stare into it, adding log after log, as he cooked our meal over the Coleman stove.

This past summer, confident in the skills I had learned from my dad, I invited my mother to go camping with me one weekend. I built the fire, the wood burning then disintegrating into embers, as I stacked them on top of each other like a log cabin.

As I stoked the fire, my mother took out her new camera, "I learned a new trick to take better pictures of a fire. You have to change the shutter speed to make the flames more defined."

She stalked around the fire, crouching forward, the sound of the shutter clacking, "See?"

I leaned back to avoid the smoke spilling upwards from the damp burning birch bark, and I could finally see that we were never in any danger of losing our fathers- not my mother as she adjusted her camera lens, not me as I poked at my campfire- our fathers have always been there, indifferent as we may or may not be.