

# My Father, the Wheelchair Racer

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## TOILETING

We were side by side, looking up at a sliver of moon melting in a blue-grey sky, when the warm stream of my father's urine ran over my bare foot. I flinched back but stopped myself in time from making a sound. Instead, I knelt down and adjusted the tube running out of the collection bag hanging beneath his wheelchair. Another tube connected this bag to a catheter adhered around his penis.

All day long, urine drained into this bag, until the sun went down and the Arizona heat was bearable and he would say, "Come on, it's time to water the rocks." He rattled his power wheelchair down the ramp that masked the step from house to driveway and pulled up to the edge, his footrests hanging over the rocks of the sideyard. I would unfurl the drainage tube and release the urine with a satisfying clunk of a plastic clip. I tried to aim toward the same rock every time, partly because it was the right height to avoid splash-back and partly as an experiment. Would it change color after enough nightly baths?

Experiments helped me keep up the right attitude. My mother told me not to complain, not to show disgust or resentment or boredom. "He feels bad enough already that he has to ask for help," she said. And so I daydreamed, retreating a centimeter or two back inside my skull, as I held up a tissue for him to blow his nose into, or rubbed the sweat off his forehead, or wiped up the tears that ran down his cheeks if the movie we were watching on TV together turned sad.

Decades later, my husband shouted and cursed the first time our newborn son tagged him with piss. But I had long been accustomed to contact with the bodily fluids of those I loved. I cleaned up my son's urine and snot and sweat and tears. I noted the changes in color in his diapers. "We should

feed him spinach again to see if that's what causing this mottling," I would say. "As an experiment."

## FEEDING

Picture a parent feeding a child, spooning mush into a baby's wet-puckered grin. That's not what it was like for my kids. Instead, when they got impatient with breastmilk, I put food in front of them and they fed themselves. They scrabbled up Cheerios and gnawed on bread crusts. They dunked their fists into yogurt and punched them back into their own mouths. They were issued their own tiny, blunt utensils, which they used to increase the range of the food they threw.

I bought a plastic sheet for underneath the high chair, and another much larger one to replace it when it proved insufficient to contain the overflow. I stripped the kids to their diapers and considered just serving them food in the bathtub, since that's where they ended up after every meal.

Spoon-feeding would have been much less of a mess. But I would not do it. Had even said no to the supposedly romantic gesture of holding up a piece of cake at my wedding for my new husband to bite into. I did not want to feed anyone ever again.

Feeding is intimate. You have to know how high to tip a glass, and for how long of a sip. You hold in your mind a catalog of food preferences, so that you know how many bites of the entrée to give before a bite of the side. You decide which crumbs and slicks need to be wiped away now and which should be left for a final cleanup.

Sometimes I emerged from a daydream to find that I had fed my father my own dinner as well as his. Sometimes his lips nibbled up against my fingers as I fed him the last bite of a sandwich.

I adjusted myself so perfectly to him that I could not change for another.

## CHILD SAFETY

I was given a construction set, plastic tubes that clicked together, large enough to build a go-kart or a wagon. I connected them into the shape of a wheelchair and rode around the house in it for years. I wasn't pretending—I was *practicing*. I knew my father's paralysis was the result of an accident, but I believed it would happen to me, too. I wanted to be prepared.

These days, I spend a lot of time sitting on playground benches. They aren't very crowded, since most of the other parents follow their children

around, almost stepping on the backs of their shoes as they stay close enough to ward off danger. But I am on the bench and my son is covered in triumphant scrapes and my daughter, not yet walking, crawls up the play structure to the highest slide and whooshes down. I have seen grandmothers scream when she does so.

When I was her age, a year and a half old, a piece of exercise equipment my father was using broke. He only fell a few inches. Because he had been hanging upside down, he landed on a vertebra. It broke, too. The sharp edge sheared through part of his spinal cord. He woke to find himself an almost complete quadriplegic, unable to move anything below his neck except for enough of a wiggle in his left arm to allow it, strapped into a splint attached to a joystick, to drive an electric wheelchair.

When I was too small to know better, I used to turn off the power switch and pile couch cushions around his wheels, shouting “Daddy’s in jail!” while he smiled a tight smile.

Once, at the playground, I heard a mother scolding her child, pointing at a slide that sloped down from knee height, “Don’t go head-first, or you’ll break your neck!”

If I let myself think about risk, I would conjure so many prohibitions that my children would never move.

Instead, I sit on my bench and watch, like my father watched me. But when they come to me with a bump or a boobo, I can sweep them up and sway back and forth in a motion so at the core of parenthood for me that I cannot understand how my father managed to be a father without it.

Once, he told me that he had a reoccurring dream. In it, he would wake up, get out of bed, and do something utterly ordinary. Flip on the TV, untwist a bread bag, start to fix himself a sandwich. And then he would say to himself, “I forgot my chair!” And would hurry back to his bedroom, where the wheelchair waited, sit in it—and then wake up.

He’s been dead for more than ten years now. I don’t believe in an afterlife. Except that sometimes I permit myself to imagine him getting out of bed, and making a sandwich, and never having to remember that he needs to get back in that chair.

### STRANGER DANGER

When we needed groceries, I would wheel a red wooden wagon out of the garage and drop its handle over a bracket we had bolted to the back of his wheelchair. When the chair hit full speed, the sides of the wagon jounced

up and down as we flew along the shoulder of the road. At the checkout, I packed the groceries to create a seat for myself on the way home, like a bag of sugar over a layer of a dozen cans of green beans or whatever else had been on sale. He never could resist a sale.

His accident gave us many gifts. The payout from the lawsuit against the manufacturer of the defective exercise equipment put me through college. His need for hands meant that I learned how to do everything around the house, however reluctantly. He thought that his conversion to evangelical Christianity in the hospital was another gift, as well.

But greatest of all was this: the gift of not giving a shit.

When you have a baby, strangers make manifest their judgement. You walk through the city on a spring day with your baby strapped to you, the fabric between you saturated with sweat because he gives off so much heat, like a hardboiled egg fresh from the pot, and every little old lady you pass says, “He should be wearing socks!” as if his feet were black with frostbite. Even a construction worker, once—abrupt transition from cat calling—shouted out at me, “Where’s his hat?”

You cannot escape other people’s eyes when you have a baby. My husband would cram hats and socks on our babies when he took them out, would tolerate their intolerance of these things, to avoid the comments of strangers. But I spent years being stared at and commented upon wherever I went with my father. He didn’t care, and I didn’t care, either.

If I happened to look over into the face of a stranger, open-mouthed in their car at the sight of me bouncing around on top of a sack of groceries, holding on for dear life as my father shot forward, maneuvering our wheelchair-wagon combination like he was driving one of the muscle cars of his youth, I would turn my head away from their gaze, back towards my father, and shout, “Faster!” And their face would fall out of my mind as we pulled ahead.