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NON-FICTION/ SPRING 2019

## Daddy

By Jennifer Abcug

We pull up to the Center -- the Dialysis Center. The place where artificial membranes serve as toxin filters. So that he can live another day.

We will do this three times a week, though this day concludes only our first set in a series of what I hope will not become a circular succession of mechanical keep-aliving.

After all, he's not a machine. He's human. He's a man. He's my father. He is a runner. A woodchopper. A skier. A landscaper. A nature lover who taught me to never toss my garbage anywhere but into a can.

Because the earth.

Because we are blessed with a miraculous planet from which we draw life. The air. The mountains. The mutual exchange of gas which passes between us and the trees. He loves those trees. Nature's natural filtration.

The Center sits just off the West Side Highway. An industrial corridor where the wind blows, ferociously, off the Hudson. It is grey. And boxy. And unnatural. It is a noisy, sensorial blight. The whirl of garbage trucks incessantly filtering waste. Kind of like the membranes in the machine. It's fascinating, actually. The parallel mechanics of the blood filtration-processing center running alongside those garbage trucks. A toxic wind tunnel, if you will.

The room where they sit (the humans getting filtered) is bright with artificial light. There are lots of treatment chairs. Set up in a square. They each have a number. A chair address. Almost like the blueprint of a village so that there is a sense of community? Or something. It's hard to say.

The humans don't look well. Especially connected to filtration systems where they will spend at least four hours of their lives—twelve total out of the 168 hours we each have allotted in a single week (but really more like eighteen hours if we're being realistic about getting there and back) for a grand total of 10.7% of one's weekly 168-hour life-bank.

10.7% of the week dedicated to being artificially kept alive.—

Of course, the body doesn't like this process. This isn't the natural order of human toxin filtration. Artificial kidneys sucking the life-blood out of all the bodies in the chairs. Then,

pushing the life-blood back into the bodies in the chairs. It's a shock to the system. Literally. Fluid out, fluid in.

Rinse, repeat.

Three times a week. Every other day except on weekends, so that by Monday those bodies must feel as if they are slowly moving towards death again. I imagine. I wouldn't know for certain, yet. What it feels like. He hasn't had a first true Monday, yet.

Ask me next week and I'll tell you what he tells me it feels like to go unfiltered for 48 hours.

Rinse. Repeat. At least this is my newbie understanding of how this works. Maybe I'm oversimplifying it.

I've learned he's cleared to leave about 20-30 minutes after he's unhooked. For stabilization purposes. So that the rinsing 'takes'? I'm not exactly sure.

He doesn't seem stable when I arrive to retrieve him. The tiny man in the glaring white room. I barely recognize him. Thankfully, the bushy, grey beard doesn't seem to care whether the kidneys function properly. It is lush and still thrives. This comforts me. He is easily identifiable to me because of it. Little else of him is.

He seems half his size. Where muscles once sat—taut and chiseled as if he spent all of his time curating himself to be just that way (which he didn't—he just looked that way, my dad—vital, strong, sculptural) the skin now holds on for dear life.

The skin now reveals the bones. I can wrap my arms around his entire torso. And I do, as I try to protect him from that ferocious wind—the wind that might blow him away if I don't hold tight.

So backwards this is. Daughter protecting father. I worry he's cold. The man who always runs hot now feels cold. Another reminder that he is fragile.

Wrapped around him, I feel his sharp edges. The protruding shoulder blades I want to push back in but don't because I don't want to kill him.

We need special cars now. Because of the wheelchair.

Where I once devoted myself to the sustenance of the yellow cab industry, I now rely on Uber. Only Uber can guarantee they'll find us on that dark industrial corridor all the way out by the river—down a path no yellow cabs take because why would they? There's no life down here. It's a good place to dump a body. The path less traveled.

We wait for the special car. I worry about the wind, again. So I am forced to park him. Inside. And leave him there—alone—as I make sure that our special car can follow the beam of light

emanating from my phone. Uber has a beacon of light feature. Who knew? But down here, where it's dark, that beacon of light is necessary. Here we are. Ignore the garbage truck. Here we are. Please find us.

Leaving him alone makes my heart race. But so does the thought of not getting him back to the other facility. The other life-sustaining place. So many balls in the air to keep this man alive.

I panic at the thought of dropping one.

Our ride arrives. I again wrap myself around him. My now tiny father. A man I love with such ferocity it hurts. What this guy wouldn't do for me.

He ran the 1989 NYC marathon. But I was at school in Boston and didn't like to fly. So he drove four hours (a dialysis session!) to pick me up and four hours (another dialysis session!) to drive me back. So I could be there. For him. He did that for me so that I could be there for him.

His legs cramped towards the end of the marathon. A runner myself, I now realize it's probably my fault. He finished that marathon in agonizing pain because of me.

This Uber ride is a struggle. The driver is new and I hold my dad for what feels like hours, wind bearing down on us, as the driver wrestles with all the safety belts, locks, hooks and equipment it entails to be sure my father is safely attached before we drive off.

Hooked up to machines. Hooked up to his chair. Hooked into the car. So many hooks.

I have to sit in front of him. He's like cargo back there and I feel sick to my stomach. A bag of human bones. I try to keep him engaged. So he realizes that I know he's human. He's not baggage. He's my dad. With my eyes, I try to let him know how much I love him. His head hangs sometimes. He's so tired. So I keep my eyes locked on him, until he looks up. So he knows.

The ride back feels interminable. But we get there. We've completed this dialysis marathon together. I'd always hoped we'd run one together. A real marathon, that is. New York City. I console myself with the fact that I'm here with him for this alternative marathon. Life's marathon. I guess that means something.---

The warmth of the Rehab lobby helps me stop the flow of tears that have been intermittently flying out of my face while running this marathon. Salvation. I've gotten him safely back to the other place that keeps him alive. We go upstairs. The elevator doors open and the nurses greet us.

Welcome back! Did you eat? Let's order you a sandwich.

Back in his room, he's so close. So close to the bed and the warmth of his blanket and the comfort of sleeping clothes. But I can't help him. And he can't help him. He's in a seatbelt in his wheelchair. He needs to stay there to be safe until someone with a skill set I don't have arrives to salvage his night.

I try to imagine the feeling. This grown man. This fiercely independent operator having to sit and wait. For everything. I help him with his shirt. That much I can do because the seatbelt stays on and he can't fall. I gently remove the sweatshirt, careful not to disturb the filtration tube protruding from his chest.

There they are again. Those shoulder blades. And the skin where the muscles once were. Or rather, where the muscles once anchored that skin.

Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry.

She arrives. His competent caretaker. My momentary lifeline. I guess she is his, as well. She can take him to the bathroom. She can help him transfer safely from his chair to his bed. I just stand there. Facing away so that I offer him some semblance of father-daughter dignity. My eyes are burning. My head is pounding. I'm so angry. I'm so sad.

The lifesaver leaves. I want to stay. I want to fix this. I want to fix him.

I lean over to hug him. He tells me he's tired and I should go home. I start to stand back up but I smell the remnants of Old Spice from earlier in the day and I lose it. On him. I bury my head (carefully—because of that filtration tube) and I sob. He hates this. I know it. But I can't help it.

He hugs me. Under all the outward weakness, he still has great strength. And he uses it. To hold me there with him. A marathon of a day we shared, he and I, so that he can live another day.

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