

A Clean Start

“We need to talk.”

My dad stood at the bedroom door, leaning against the frame. I didn't realize he'd been standing there and hearing his muffled voice, I looked up from my laptop and I saw him watching me, waiting. Pulling out the ear plugs, I switched off the music and gestured with my head for him to repeat what he said.

He stepped into the room and sat on the edge of the bed and repeated the question. I rolled my eyes and put away the laptop, bracing myself for another 'talk' or another lecture about something I've done or something I should do. Pressing with both hands on the bed, I pushed myself higher up against the pillows and waited.

My dad looked defeated. He was leaned over, resting his elbows on his knees with his hands folded together as he gazed at the carpet. For a while he didn't move or say anything and I just kind of looked at his slumped shoulders, at the way his dress shirt curved and followed the form of his backside, the ridges of his spine visible.

He glanced out the window and muttered, “It's such a nice evening out.”

“Are you ok, dad?”

From the side of his face, I detected sadness in his features, in the tone of his voice. He just stared out the window, distant, purposefully stalling whatever it was he came in here to talk to me about. Then he said it.

“I lost my job.”

“Oh.”

There was an awkward silence and I just studied my hands, now folded together like his were folded. My hair hung down around my eyes and I avoided looking up at him. I think it was more from embarrassment than from being upset or even angry. When he spoke again, he told me how I came first and all that and how we wouldn't have to worry about anything and how he would make sure we stayed safe, that we had a roof over our head and food on the...

“Dad, I get it.”

He gave me a smile that I could tell was hard for him to make. He was holding back his emotions, for me.

For the first few months, my mom was really upset. Sometimes at night, when I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling, just contemplating the future, I could hear her crying. I didn't know what was going to happen. What I did know was that I couldn't wait to graduate high school and go to college and get away from this rut. But, the more I thought about everything, the more I worried that we might lose the house or we'd be

forced to move into an apartment somewhere or I wouldn't be able to afford college or my parents might get a divorce. Or something like that.

My dad spent weeks looking for jobs, contacting friends and old colleagues, networking like crazy. Things were so bad though, no one could really help him. The more he tried and the longer the weeks went by, the more he seemed to lose hope. He got no calls, no interviews. He took out money from the savings to pay bills and buy food.

My mom wasn't working; she'd never worked. Ever since I was a baby, she'd stayed home to take care of me and the house. It was fine because my dad always made plenty of money to support us, so her working was a foreign idea. When money started to get tight, she told my dad she would go to work somewhere, but he said no, it's better if she's home. I think he wanted to keep a sense of normalcy, to keep our lives in balance, despite things getting out of balance.

In the spring, I took a job bagging groceries after school. It was really more something for me to do so I could pay for stuff I wanted. But that only lasted two weeks. The manager there kept telling me I didn't have enough work ethic and I didn't dress according to code. It seemed stupid. So, I just quit. I didn't tell my dad about it until a few days later. He wasn't mad, but he said I should learn from the experience because sometimes you have to do stuff you don't like to do in order to earn a living.

I didn't know if I agreed with that, but I didn't ignore his advice either.

Then my dad did something I didn't expect. He started a home cleaning business. I was stunned. Here was my dad, a former executive at a major company, getting ready to go clean people's houses. It was low and disgusting. The shocker was he wanted me to help him. Suddenly, the job bagging groceries with the overbearing manager was looking better.

We got our first client, some rich dude that lived in a neighborhood close to us. I went to school with his daughter and I was pissed that I had to go clean his house. I couldn't look him in the eye as we stood at the doorstep, like beggars, me holding a blue bucket in my hand filled with a bunch of cleaning supplies. My dad smiled and shook our client's hand like he was making some kind of amazing business deal. My stomach churned and I stole glances inside the house, hoping the daughter wasn't there.

We washed countertops, we mopped the floors, we vacuumed carpets, we dusted furniture and we scrubbed sinks and toilets. Occasionally, the client talked to my dad about golf and other stuff, but I tuned out. I kept my head down, focusing on the cleaning, making the time go by faster so we could get out of there. The good thing was the house was already pretty clean, so it wasn't so bad. And my dad got a decent check out of it.

I brightened a little when he offered to buy us dinner to celebrate our new venture and we stopped by his favorite sports bar and watched the game on the giant screen television, eating burgers and greasy fries. When my dad swallowed his beer, I saw relief in him. He put his arm around me and squeezed my shoulder and I smiled back, my cheek stuffed with food. He made me promise not tell my mom about what we ate and then we both laughed, just bonding together and I knew things would be okay.

Then we got more clients. And some of them didn't keep such clean houses. I gagged at the smells in their kitchens and bathrooms and for some reason, I always got stuck cleaning the toilets. I started to resent my dad for making me do this, forcing me to get on my hands and knees on the floors where these people walked all the time. Most of the clients were people who already knew us and while we cleaned their houses I had this gnawing feeling they were looking down on us, judging us, as if we'd crawled to them pleading for money and moral support.

Someone at school made fun of me and called us house maids. It burned me. I stood in the hallway, in front of a bunch of friends and strangers, trying to ignore it. But then he snickered and the humiliation boiled into rage and I lunged at him, pushing him against the locker and we threw a couple swings at each other. The history teacher, Mr. Carlson, had to pry us apart and I got detention for fighting.

I was still pretty angry that afternoon and when my dad and I were driving home after cleaning the last house for the day, I told him off. The sun was still bright and it beat into the car like a throbbing headache and my face and body were hot and I'd been feeling crappy all day. I didn't want to say anything, instead just bottling up my feelings inside, shoving them down and sucking in air until it was making me nauseous. It was no use. I finally snapped. I told him I didn't want to scrub any more toilets, cussing at him, telling him he was being lazy for cleaning people's houses instead of finding a real job that made real money.

He was quiet the rest of the way home. We ate dinner in silence and my mom knew something was up. After dinner, my dad retreated to his office and closed the door and I didn't see him the rest of the night. For the whole week he didn't ask me to come with him to clean houses and I felt even worse. I stayed in my room mostly after school and did homework, sometimes going downstairs to get a snack or make a sandwich, which I took back to my room and ate without watching television or listening to music. I was too depressed to do much of anything.

"I love you, sweetie," my mom said to me one night as I climbed the stairs back to my room. Her attempt to make me feel better only worked temporarily.

I barely slept. Most of the night I was awake thinking about what I'd said to my dad and I was ashamed. I hated myself for letting someone at school get the best of me and disrespecting my dad in return. I pictured him alone in those houses, cleaning everything himself, strained from the effort, the burden of it harder on him because I wasn't there to help. Deep down, I knew all of this wasn't his fault. He couldn't change what had happened and it hit me that his sense of security must have been hurt a hell of a lot worse than mine and yet, he really was trying. He wanted to make everything okay for us and all I did was push him away.

On Friday night I heard my dad's car pull up and the car door closing in the driveway. I went to the window and looked out and saw him standing by the car, staring across the yard at the other houses in the neighborhood. It felt like I was invading his privacy and I stood back a little, behind the curtain, and watched him. It was hard to tell, but his shoulders looked like they were moving, shrugging up and down and he wouldn't look at the house. I stepped away from the window and went downstairs and opened the

front door. He glanced at me and I saw his eyes were wet. I went over to him and I hugged him and we stood there for a long time, not moving, just holding each other. The following week, I offered to go with him again to clean houses and we managed to get back into our routine. I wasn't so embarrassed anymore and we came up with games and jokes to help keep the mood light and pass the time. We never stopped. Every day my dad cleaned during the morning and afternoon and then I joined him after school and we'd go on to the next house. In the summer, I helped out a lot more. The days got longer and we'd finish cleaning just about when the sun was fading away over the horizon and then head back home.

The work wore me out. I was exhausted and felt gross, but I didn't care because I knew we'd put in a hard day's work and it felt good. Slowly, I came to appreciate what work ethic was all about and kind of understood how you have to work hard to get what you want even if it's doing something you don't want to do. Somewhere in the back of my mind I already knew that. But, honestly, when you're seventeen, working and holding down a job is one of the last things on your mind. High school is the final stretch before college and you want to make the best of it, enjoy it and live young. Some of that fun may have been lost, spent having to help my dad with his new business, but I didn't regret it. I realized that he was running this cleaning business like a pro, as if this was his livelihood, his dream. I saw something in him that I hadn't seen before, a new outlook on life and he actually seemed happier. He even took some time off for us to get away for a vacation and I really didn't mind spending it at the beach with my parents.

Today, my dad owns one of the most successful cleaning businesses in our area. He's started other branches in sister cities and he's had offers to take his business nationally. I'm impressed now more than ever with my dad's determination not to give up. He took what could have been a temporary thing, a dirty job cleaning people's grimy houses, and turned it into a successful business that made money. What I learned more from it, though, was that money is not as important to me as it used to be. I didn't realize how much I'd taken for granted the stuff we had, the house we lived in and our sense of freedom to do whatever we really wanted.

Even though we may have gained some of that freedom back, it's different now, there's a certain weight to it knowing that it was earned and I have greater respect for it. I love the time I spent with my dad, the way we got to know each other on a deeper level as we worked together, side by side, hunched over and wiping away the dirt, making a clean start. It may sound corny and sentimental, but I don't care because it's true and I can't forget it. As I head off to college, I know that I've learned a great deal and that I've gotten a head start in life in a way others haven't and I've got my dad to thank.