DAD, WHY DO YOU DRINK?

RACHEL KURZYP USED TO ASK HER DAD QUESTIONS ABOUT EVERYTHING – BUT THERE WAS ONE THING SHE COULDN'T BRING HERSELF TO ASK.

I WAS GREEDY when it came to knowledge as a kid. I wanted to know more, to understand more. My dad was my favourite teacher, and he never got frustrated with my incessant questions about the world. My favourite question was always "why?"

But for years I was too afraid to ask him why he kept green bottles filled with yellowish liquid lined up behind the couch; why my mum made me promise not to get in the car with him late at night; why people asked me "how's your father?" in a peculiar tone. Dad was just like my friends' fathers, but I sensed he had a secret, something that made him deeply sad, because he'd regularly change into a different person. Sometimes he was outraged, destructive and cruel, other times subdued, abashed and disheartened. I quickly learned the telltale signs: red eyes, frequent trips to the shop and the occasional stumble. But my dad was good at functioning while drunk, and the only way I knew for sure that he had been drinking was to ask for a kiss to see if I could taste the beer on his lips.

For years I tried my best to keep my dad's secret, to hide his illness from my family by lying and creating elaborate excuses for why he was late or wasn't himself; I wanted to protect him. But as I got older his illness worsened and there was no hiding it anymore. He slowly withdrew from the world and began blaming us, not the alcohol, for his problems. I started to pick up on the way people spoke about him: they called him weak, bad and dangerous. This changed the way I viewed him, too. Soon I became ashamed to be seen with him and I told the kids at school I didn't have a father.

After a phone call informing us that Dad had been in a car accident while drinking, my mother sat me down and explained he was an alcoholic – he was addicted to drinking and was incapable of making rational and adult decisions. I wanted to help him, and to properly understand why he was like this. But he was in no state to educate me. He was now more illness than father. So I made the heartbreaking decision to protect myself, and cut him out of my life.

The next few years were hard, and I was filled with anger, regret and fear. I didn't understand alcoholism, so while my friends went to parties and did tequila shots, I stayed away from alcohol. I didn't tell anyone, but I was afraid if I started drinking I would become an alcoholic, too. I secretly judged others that were happy to experiment, and I wondered how parents could buy their kids a bottle of scotch and say, "have fun". How could I drink a beer and be sure that I wouldn't crave another? I had so many questions and I'd sent away the one person who could answer them.

My father and I reconnected when I was 21, and we began the slow process of rebuilding our relationship. My dad was committed to staying sober and for the first time in his life he'd looked inward, to ask his own "whys". He again welcomed my incessant questions, and I finally had the courage to ask him the one I'd been carrying around since my childhood: "Dad, why do you drink?" He explained that my grandfather had died of leukaemia when he was 14, and he didn't get the emotional support he needed to deal with this loss or the burden of becoming "the man of the household". He quickly became anxious and depressed. After discovering that alcohol numbed his pain, he began self-medicating. He said it happened so slowly he didn't realise it, but he became addicted.

Over the last eight years, we've become closer than I ever thought we could. Dad's done his best to explain his past and his illness to me, and helped me understand what it's like to live with an addiction. He's taught me not to judge or disregard people who are ill and need help – to look past the negative stereotypes and question the common myths around alcoholism. My greatest lesson, however, has been accepting that my father is an alcoholic. I'm the daughter of an addict, and that's okay.

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