

Choices

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It was a chilly day in February, on a Friday—late afternoon. I had been packing all day, while dad worked the day shift. He had just come home and was sitting at the kitchen table in his faded blue overalls drinking a cup of instant coffee. Mom was standing beside him and had obviously just told him I was leaving. He glanced my way as I walked through the kitchen and out into the garage where I was stacking the things I would be taking when my friend Shirley picked me up. I had been out of high school almost a year, still living at home and working nearby.

Dad looked at me, then looked back at his coffee and took a sip. No words were exchanged and I continued to go about my packing. Back into my bedroom, out through the kitchen, into the garage. It was awkward, but I kept up the pace.

I checked my room for one last time and decided I was ready to depart. As I walked through the kitchen, I saw my dad look up from his coffee with tears in his eyes.

“I don’t want you to go,” he cried. I had never seen my dad cry. Not once. I stopped and looked at him. Our eyes locked and my heart sank. My dad put his face in his hands to muffle his sobs. I was stunned, saddened, and confused. Mom was at the kitchen sink and spaghetti sauce was simmering on the stove. Time definitely stood still at that moment. I remember just standing there wondering what to do, how to react. I looked around the tiny yellow kitchen and observed the cabinets my dad had built. He had ripped out the old ones when we moved into this house because they were poorly made. I remember the striping, the sanding, the staining, the coats of varnish—the long hours of working into the night. The natural wood grain popped out in all its wondrous glory and the ugly green paint was history. Dad was a self-taught carpenter and a perfectionist. The entire house displayed his handiwork. The nicks in the Formica on the kitchen table were soon to be history as well, because dad had some new sheets of

the stuff in the garage. It was one of the many projects on his list—projects that took up his time between shift work at the plant.

So, now his elbows were resting on the soon-to-be-history Formica. And he was grieving for the daughter who was soon-to-be history herself. Here we were. Mom still standing at the sink staring into sudsy dishwater, dad with his face in his hands, and me, who was about to change the entire dynamics of one family.

I walked over to my dad and put my hand on his shoulder. He reached up and put his hand on mine. He had gained his composure by this time, but didn't say anything. He patted my hand until I removed it and walked out to the garage.

I took a final inventory of my material things—the material things that would take me to my new life, leaving behind the life that had cradled me.

I remember that day more than any other in my life. Had my dad not shown his love for me through those tears—the tears I'd never seen—my life might have taken a different path.

I stood in the garage a very long time that afternoon and thought about the choices we make in life. I didn't know it then, but I would learn throughout the years that the choices we make result in outcomes. The result of those outcomes ultimately depends on the choices we made initially.

My dad went to bed that night alongside my mother. And I went to bed in my bedroom across the hall from theirs. I ended up living with them another two years during which time I bought a car, saved money and eventually had enough to buy furniture for a new apartment. One that my dad happily helped me move into.

I never saw him cry again.