

Hanging By A Moment

by Michael Downing

It's come down to this: you're a grown man afraid to face his own son.

For the past few years there has been tension; it's not physical and has nothing to do with intimidation or fear. It's impossible to put a finger on exactly what happened because it hasn't always been this way, but as the years inched forward the distance widened so much that an edge creeps into every conversation.

Winter at the Jersey Shore is a cold, depressing time and the wind off the ocean grows harder with more bite as the weeks pass. By early January, summer is only a distant memory; towns are bleak, the streets barren, and the leftover Christmas decorations still dotting storefronts and neighborhood windows creates an eerie, desolate feeling. As you slog across the parking lot you pull your ski jacket tighter and lean forward with your head down, shielding your face from the cold. You try remembering that six year old boy you once hoisted on the Seaside Heights boardwalk instead of the brooding, twenty year old you expect to face now.

It's funny and somehow ironic, but you can still feel the weight of his body on your shoulders and the way he held on — safe in your grasp against anything the night could throw your way. Even though it has been years, that memory seems close enough to touch and hold near if you try.

An inch of messy wet snow blankets the parking lot, sticking to cars and building in exposed spaces along the corners of the diner. Two to four inches had been predicted but there's a big enough margin of error that it could turn into a foot with the right weather pattern or nothing at all if the cold front shifts north. It's only been snowing for an hour but there's enough accumulation to make the roads very slippery. You didn't think it was that bad until you changed lanes on the causeway and the Jeep fishtailed across

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the road before you eased your foot off the gas and regained control. The butterflies in your stomach remained all the way to the diner.

But it's not just the weather that has created that anxiety.

You take a seat in the booth farthest from the door, bumping your knees against the table while sliding across a vinyl seat patched together by faded green cellophane and mismatched plastic tape. It's a little past eight. There aren't more than a handful of people in the diner — a few couples in the booths, a table of high school kids working their burgers and fries, and some solitary figures along the counter staring holes into their cups and plates. The booth is far enough away that you won't feel the chill that rips through the diner every time the door is opened.

The waitress brings a cup of coffee. You slowly stir in two containers of cream and stare out the window, watching headlights first passing then dissolving into tail lights on Route 37.

You wonder if he'll drive carefully — he rushes through so much of his life with no understanding about things like that. You laugh about it with friends — all of you with sons who share the same youthful recklessness and the same worries. You have always worried about him; like how you obsessed the first time he ventured alone to a friend's house as a ten year old and you worried he wouldn't look both ways before crossing the street. You wonder if you'll ever look at him as an adult, capable of making his own decisions or if he's forever doomed to be a little boy in your eyes.

Your father's been dead almost twenty-five years; whatever he could say about that transition from boy to man and the way each looks at the other has been lost forever.

Outside the wind picks up with a howl. The yellow beams from the street lights are dotted with snow flurries that fly into the night or blanket the streets in a white carpet.

Inside it's warm. The night is full of questions dying to be asked but you need to tread carefully; yours is a tentative relationship, filled with a history of misspoken words, anger, and hurt accumulated over time. Too many things said in innocence

have led to an acrimony you don't understand - one that hurts more than you can express accurately.

That undercurrent of tension never fades.

There's a dull ache, like a knife blade cutting into your skin. It's a familiar kind of pain. Maybe what you felt as a twelve year old trying to connect with the father you had only met a handful of times — moments filled with uncomfortable silences and talk about baseball when you really didn't care about the Phillies but it was all you had to talk about. When all he probably wanted was recognition. When all you really wanted to know was why he had left your mother, and if his life three states away was better than the one he might have had with you.

The steam from the cup rises as you take a sip. The coffee burns the inside of your mouth as you swallow, remembering with a grimace how neither of you ever got what you wanted.

You see your son enter, his eyes searching the tables and booths until there's a look of recognition. When he slides into the booth he gives a brief hello and quickly opens the menu.

He's got at least two inches on you — all legs and arms, and when he leans forward his dark hair falls into his eyes. You resist the urge to reach across and sweep it from his face, knowing that no matter how innocent the intention, the move would be viewed more as a threat than anything else.

He puts down the menu and tells the waitress he's only having coffee and in that moment you know that your time together tonight will be short. He's here because of an obligation — nothing more than that. From the moment he made the commitment to meet it has been a race against and about time — in his mind he has already determined how much of it will be devoted to you. If there was a need for money or an urgent problem it might be different, but with no crisis looming tonight's allocation of minutes together will be brief. Long enough for coffee, some stories about nothing important, and vague promises about getting together again.

It's in the low thirties outside but he's wearing a tee shirt and a lightweight jacket that he pulls off, pushing to the side.

There's a hint of blue ink on his arm below the sleeve but you can't ask because its part of the boundaries you've set for each other. In that instant you realize just how far out of touch you still are and how distant his life is from yours.

No matter how much you try, you can't reach across the distance.

It's always tough knowing how to begin again. You can't pick up from the last time because there is nothing left from those conversations - at least nothing that matters. Much of what passes comes in short spurts and inconsistent dialogue that lacks any real bite. You remember having more meaningful conversations with strangers on the 5:47 out of Midtown, and you don't know how to change it.

There's talk about school and the upcoming semester but nothing of value — certainly nothing with substance. He has no idea what's going on in your life and makes no effort to find out. When you drop little pieces about it into the conversation the words dry up and blow away like snow flakes in the street. Anything he has to say about that dies the same way. You find yourself falling into a conversation about hockey; the Rangers have replaced the Phillies, but it's still the familiar pattern you lived through years earlier with your father.

He tells you again about his plans to move off campus - how he has it all figured out, and even though you had tried talking him out of it the last time you spoke, it's like the conversation never happened. For the first time you realize just how much he is like you, but in none of the ways that are good or add value to character. You see parallels to your own youth — a consistency not only with the mistakes you made but in the same kind of stubbornness and refusal to bend. He is determined to carve out his own path no matter what you or anybody else has to say, even as he takes the exact same steps you did.

Every time you get together it's like looking into a mirror to your own past.

Like sitting across from your father, reliving the same feelings from a different side of the table.

Your heart screams to be heard and you want to tell him everything that's inside, even if it's been said before. Apologize again for not being able to love his mother and be there for him and his sister — thinking that it's what you always wanted your own father to find the courage to say. Let him know how you have sacrificed everything you had just to make it possible for him to sit across the table from you; three years into an unaffordable college, but one you didn't want to deny him. Tell him that you want to be a part of his life.

You want to say how the best times in your life were the days when you would walk through the front door, exhausted from a two hour commute out of Manhattan and a dead-end middle management job you hated, and he and his sister would scream, "Daddy!" at the sound of the key in the front door. How they would race down the hallway and leap into your arms before you could even drop your briefcase on the floor. How important and treasured you felt. How that little boy made you feel loved and special with his own display of affection.

That little boy is gone now — left only in memories you draw on to fill the void in your heart where you both used to dance and play together.

It's not the way you pictured it.

All those promises to be a better dad than the one you had, and the years of Little League practices, Cub Scout meetings, and parent-teacher conferences have left you at this point with nothing except a history you want to hold on to, but one he desperately wants to ignore. The pain and emptiness hurts worse than anything you have ever known.

After thirty minutes he says something about leaving. Things to do, he tells you. Things that have nothing to do with you; there's no explanation and you stopped asking for reasons and more time long ago. There are those vague promises to meet again before he leaves for school but the words are wasted — meaningless and

pointless promises that will never come true, and you learned that it's easier to steel yourself against the inevitable sense of loss that often sweeps over you by refusing to raise your hopes and expectations.

There's an emptiness you can't shake. You drop six dollars in bills and coins on the table and hurriedly follow him through the diner, zipping your jacket as you trudge outside. The snow crunches underneath your boots as you step down the stairs, holding on to the railing to maintain your balance while he walks effortlessly and unassisted. There's a confidence in his footsteps that's missing in your own. When you reach the center of the lot you both stop, and he turns to say something that's lost in the wind gusts. It's nothing too important and he smiles - barely a slight movement of his mouth that no one else would recognize as a smile.

You tell him about the road, reminding him to be careful as you fish for your keys in a pocket. He gives you a confident nod and says that he'll call in a day or two, but you know not to wait on the call. He gives you a loose, sloppy hug — the kind of embrace that lacks feeling — and turns towards his car.

You stand there in silence, alone in the parking lot, watching him walk away. As the snow turns into rain you move slowly towards your car, giving a casual wave as he drives past with his attention already focused on the road ahead.

You don't even feel the tear inching down your cheek as you pull onto the highway and head home.

