

Worms Shouldn't Drink Whiskey

by Tyler Koch

I have two memories of my dad. The first is a story he liked to tell:

So my old woman came home one day with a worm. She sets the worm on the counter and goes into the cabinet, slams down a bottle of whiskey and a glass, pours the whiskey. Now, here I am thinking, Damn! My old woman is finally coming around! Pouring me a drink for a change instead of trying to hide my bottles. So there it is, a glass with whiskey and a worm on the counter. She looks at me, not saying anything—like she's trying to prove a point—and puts the worm in the whiskey. I think to myself, I could probably still drink that. Then I laugh, because, right, what's not to laugh about? Who puts a fucking worm in a glass of whiskey? The worm twists in the brown liquid caught right in the middle, like it's trapped. And then a minute later it dies and sinks to the bottom. My wife watches me the whole time.

"You see, Jerry? You know what this means?"

I laugh. "It means worms shouldn't drink whiskey."

Here's the second:

I'm thirteen years old and it's nearly midnight. I don't remember exactly what woke me, only that I'm awake, lying in bed staring at the ceiling. I hear a noise from downstairs, like someone is walking around, but they're making a mess of it. I don't remember why I chose to get out of bed, only that I did, and then I'm walking down the stairs. I pause on the bottom step and look through the darkness, my eyes adjusted but seeing nothing. Only a coffee mug on the kitchen table, there by itself, alone, like it was abandoned. But I know what that means. My dad only drinks from coffee mugs.

A sound comes from the living room. *Tap Tap Tap*. My father. Quietly I return up the stairs but he calls my name.

“Rus!” And then the second time, louder, sloppier.

“Rus!”

I have no choice but to obey.

He's lying on the couch, his head propped on a pillow, one foot on the floor, the other turned out. A bottle of whiskey rests on his chest, pointed to the ceiling.

“Rush,” he says this time. Even in the darkness I see his eyes crinkle in amusement. “Come here.” He pats the empty air at his side.

I smell the alcohol on his breath. It's familiar, like a cologne worn for so long you recognize the person by their smell. I sit on the ground and cross my legs.

“Rush,” he says, and there's laughter in his voice. He reaches out to pat my head but misses. The amber liquid sloshes in the bottle. “It's late Rush.”

“I couldn't sleep,” I say.

“That's what thish is for,” he says, smiling.

He tries to readjust his position and only moderately succeeds. He'll be on the couch until tomorrow morning. My brother and I call this Dad's Sleeping Couch. Nobody else uses it, not even now. It's his, the contours of his body molded into the cushions.

“We haven't talked in a while, Rush. How're you doing?”

His words slur, like he can't open his lips properly.

“I'm good dad,” I say. “School is good. I got an A on a test I took last week.”

“Thish is good,” says my dad, his eyes fluttering.

Bolstered by the encouragement I continue: “I had a good game today. Three for four with a triple.”

My dad's eyes are closed now, the beginning of his slumber, and when it comes, nothing wakes him. Not even a fire.

“Good,” he whispers. He takes a deep, contented breath. The bottle rises and falls on his chest and I smell the whiskey. “Good.”

"I'm going to go back to bed dad. Okay?"

It's a good moment for us and I won't want to ruin it. But instead of answering he smacks his lips. He taps the bottle with his finger. *Tap Tap Tap*. I uncross my legs and begin to stand but he reaches out and stops me. His fingers rest on my shoulder.

"Rush," he says. His eyes are still closed but there's a strength in his grip.

"Yes?"

"Don't do thish Rush," he breaths. His grips loses its strength, and I know when it releases he'll be asleep. "Don't do thish."

"Okay dad," I say.

His eyes snap open and there's a clarity in their depths I rarely encounter. "Don't," he says.

"Okay," I say again, feeling scared.

"Don't do thish." *Tap Tap Tap*. "Promish me Rush."

"I promise dad."

His eyes become slits. "Promish me," he says, and his eyes are closed. "Promish me," he says in a whisper.

"I promise," I say. "I promise."

"Promish you won't be like me."

His fingers release from my shoulder and fall to the ground. He's already snoring. The bottle of whiskey points straight to the ceiling, and the amber liquid rocks gently to my father's breathing.

