



# No Matter What

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WHEN MY SON HAD HIS FIRST big show it was in a part of town I'd never been to. Down by the water, on Water Street actually. "Where are you taking me?" my date asked, as we drove beneath the concrete pylons of Morrison Bridge. Bums were nested under tarps strung between shopping carts, but she said it with a smile. Beth, or Oregon\_Native22 as I'd first known her, was a spunky, adventurous woman and I was looking forward to a lot more light in my life since we'd been matched on Match.com.

It was only my third date since my divorce, and the first of my son's shows that I'd been to. Combining the two had seemed like an excellent idea. I'd look hip and adventurous in Beth's eyes, with a talented child to boot, and not have to stand awkwardly alone, the oldest man in the room. Now, pulling up to the looming warehouse with *Mercker Auto* painted in faded letters on the front, I wasn't so sure. Little men with spiky black hair and piercings stood around the doors smoking cigarettes. The tattoo-covered bouncer eyed me curiously as I handed over our tickets. "Joy the show," he said.

Maybe twenty people were clumped together at the bar at the far end of the cavernous space, drinking and laughing and ribbing each other in tattered leather coats. The walls smelled faintly of exhausted rubber, as though haunted by the ghosts of tires. We found a spot in the center of the floor with a direct view of the stage and thirty feet of emptiness on all sides. I realized we must be early, though it was the supposed start time.

Talking to calm my nerves, I told Beth about my recent trip to New York

City, the first trip I'd taken on my own in decades. "I stayed in the Bowery and tried not to just do all the tourist stuff, but The Statue of Liberty, I was surprised by how emotional it was. For so many people it was this...a new life." I trailed off. A woman resembling my ex-wife had stood beside me at the ferry's railing and I'd cried when the pale green statue emerged from the fog.

"Before I had my boys I used to travel to New York for work. Some *long* nights let me tell you." Beth smiled. "Let's have a drink."

We went to the bar and I bought a Tanqueray and tonic for her and an IPA the bartender recommended for myself. Then she told me about her two sons Dylan and Dean as more and more people trickled in.

Twenty minutes later when the first opener went on, Beth had gotten through their adolescence, but was cut off right in the middle of Dean's trip to India. He'd just rented a motorbike. "They don't even *have* helmets there," she said.

With a cymbal crash, the band began to play. I've never taken pleasure in extremely loud noises, but the people around us did, and Beth smiled and started sort of bobbing around. So I smiled and sort of bobbed around, too, trying to ignore the fact that the insides of my ears were vibrating. Not to mention the two decades we had on everyone around us.

Soon the room was mostly full, intensifying the noise. I clenched my fists and added to my bobbing by pumping them up and down. A space cleared around me. Beth managed to keep dancing while sipping her drink. I was hoping my son would come out from wherever he was backstage and see me smiling and pumping and bobbing, really enjoying myself at his show. Maybe he'd make his way through the crowd and give me a big, thanks-for-coming-I-know-how-hard-all-the-absences-and-Mom's-new-boyfriend-Kyle-have-been-for-you hug.

I must've had a pretty silly grin on my face because Beth elbowed me in the ribs and we smiled at each other. "I can't hear myself think!" I shouted.

"Me neither!" she screamed.

That, I'm sorry to say, was the high point of the night. My son never came out to hug me. Instead, about halfway through the first opener's set, he poked his head from a door to the left of the stage and anxiously scanned the room. He'd grown a scraggly mustache and shaved his skull and looked, quite frankly, insane. I lifted my hand. When he saw me his head yanked back in as if it were on a bungee cord.

I dropped my hand.

Beth kept right on bobbing, sipping along on her drink. Maybe he didn't see you, I told myself, knowing that he had. When the first band finished, a momentary calm settled over the room. "What does he play?" Beth asked.

"He sings," I answered. "And the guitar."

Her eyes lit up. "Dean plays the guitar! He posted the most amazing picture of himself with all these little Indian kids circled around him." A muddled tattoo of a sea bird covered the inside of her forearm. I hadn't seen it in any of her pictures. She was a little heavier in person, too. "He has a gift with kids."

I nodded.

"It started with his little brother. He was so *gentle*. He'd carry him around, read to him. Did you think about having more kids?" She stopped, stretching her lips back into a kind of grimace. "Oh, I'm sorry. Was that too personal?"

"No, no." I looked down into my beer. "We thought about it, I don't know. The timing just never seemed right."

"Well, it seems like he turned out okay." She smiled at the filling room. Her voice had a dramatically sympathetic lilt. I wondered if she was from the Midwest. "But enough of that." She tipped her empty drink right and left, clinking the ice cubes.

"The same?" I asked.

She nodded brightly. Elbowing toward the bar, I thought it might have been good for my son to have a sibling. Someone to play with. It might have been good for Cyn and me, too. Stay positive, I told myself, trying to catch the bartender's eye.

The second, even louder, opener played for an hour-and-a-half, which I'm surprised their instruments survived. To calm my impatience, I surmised that maybe their parents were there the same as I was, watching their kids thrash away. Reveling in their gifts. I stood on my tiptoes and peered around. A couple of older guys were bobbing on the fringes of the crowd, but they had tattoo sleeves on their wrinkly arms and looked like the types who'd been coming to shows like this for their whole lives, with no time to procreate, and would probably die at one, their leathery bodies added to the floorboards.

It was almost midnight when the second band got the last of their gear off the stage. I was exhausted and my head had begun to ache, ten being my usual bedtime. Beth's smile had also started to wilt. We'd hardly been able to talk, due

to the noise, and I'm afraid my bobbing had become rather rigid and machine-like, tired and agitated as I was about my son. None of which was her fault, of course. When *New\_Single\_Dad12* had asked her out she'd probably thought he meant a nice dinner and, if all went well, a stroll around Laurelhurst Park. I gave her a little elbow nudge, trying to be affectionate. She stumbled to the side and caught herself on the shoulder of a tall man in metal-toed combat boots. She looked up at me, startled.

"Having fun?" I shouted. The punk music blasting from the speakers as the techs reset the stage was nearly as loud as the bands had been.

She nodded. "Do you come to a lot of shows?"

I shook my head.

"The last time I was at a show like this was just after college." She looked at the ceiling, a glassy sheen covering her eyes. "I puked everywhere! Seems like a hundred years ago. Derek had to carry me to the car and we didn't see Lily and Ethan for the rest of the night. The Beakers? Something like that, from Seattle." Her eyes refocused on mine. "Lily's a doctor now! Can you believe that?" She shook her head. "The people who become *doctors*."

A new song came on that sounded familiar. The Ramones, maybe. I'd had a fantasy when my son was little of him becoming a doctor. An anesthesiologist. I'd read that they have the highest quality of life. Beth laughed suddenly, a single high note. "She and this foreign exchange student—everyone called him Eddie but really it was Edwitoutse or something—had sex on the roof of the student center while practically the whole school watched. And now she delivers babies!"

I'd gotten her three gin and tonics and seen her go up for at least one more. I wondered if in addition to all the spunky, adventurous qualities she'd listed on her Match.com profile she was also an alcoholic.

"Is your son still—" one of the speakers crackled horribly, drowning me out.

"It's great!" she shouted back. Then she craned her head over my shoulder. "I'm going to find the bathroom!"

She wound her way into the crowd and I glanced down at my shirt, hoping I hadn't sweated through the armpits. My father was an alcoholic and one thing I'd always told my son was that having a drunk for a dad was no picnic. If I'd ever brought so much as a tambourine home, he would've broken it over my nose, and I wouldn't have survived the night if he'd had to pick me up from a police station.

Sometimes, though, I wonder if my determination to be the opposite of my father is the reason my son is so cold to me. How he tells me he wants nothing to do with me and doesn't call on my birthday, let alone Father's Day. He didn't even invite me to his big show. The only reason I found out about it was that Cyn and I are still inexplicably friends on Facebook and she marked Going on the event page, which made it appear on my Newsfeed. Though I knew she wasn't actually going because she and Kyle were camping, or whatever, on the coast.

I counted down from sixty, trying to clear my head.

Beth was waylaid on her way back from the bathroom by a group of kids with big metal gears in their ears and bleached Mohawks. They said something to her and she gestured animatedly with her half-full drink. The place was really full. Packed even. I had no idea what the capacity was, large parts of the warehouse being closed off to hold an artisanal bakery, but we were surely nearing it—everyone jostling and screaming obscenities. In the midst of the uproar, I was happy for my son. All these jostling, obscenity screaming people had come to see him. Which was all he'd really wanted from the time he showed his bare butt to his fifth grade class, including parents and teachers, during the talent show and received tremendous peer support and adulation. My wife had been sure it was a phase. I'd had to take vacation days to watch him during the week he was suspended.

Several young couples separated Beth and me so I didn't get to lean over her ear and shout, "That's him!" when my son finally came on, as I'd been looking forward to doing, but I did catch her eye and nod up at the stage as his band picked up their instruments and settled in. We both smiled before she went back to saying whatever she was saying, which must have been at really tremendous volume, to the Mohawked boys.

"Thanks for coming, cocksuckers!" my son shouted. Then he turned to his band, two of whom I recognized from his bad crowd, high school days, nodded, and all four of them assaulted their instruments in unison, creating the colossal smashing sound of two buses colliding.

A swampy, Mediterranean heat settled over the crowd as it jumped and heaved. All the sweat and noise and a pungent tinge of marijuana created an atmosphere in which I suspected new life forms could emerge. Scaly, hulking creature rising up from the fog. Shoulders crashed into me. Hair whipped my

face. Struggling to breathe, with my elbows skewed out to protect myself, I was reminded of my own childhood: the hour of afternoon television I was allowed before my father came home—Captain Kirk’s face glistening as he explored a suspiciously fertile planet.

I wanted to like my son’s set but (and this is something I learned at a young age during my family’s first and only trip to Disneyland) sometimes when you’ve been looking forward to something so much and built it up so big in your head it’s actually disappointing and sort of crushing when it comes. I could hardly understand him. He didn’t look at me, even when I tried to wave. His band was very clearly the loudest, which made everyone around me happy, and incorporated the most obscenities into their lyrics, which seemed to make them happier still, and at one point he repeated the move he’d first used in fifth grade, dropping his jeans and bending over, which the crowd reacted to in a way that can only be described as apoplectic. An even greater success than it had been a decade before when his butt had significantly fewer of what appeared to be cigarette burns.

My son, what have you done to your butt?

Heat rushed up my cheeks to my forehead. I stared straight ahead. Beth let out a loud whoop and waved both her arms. She worked her way back to my side and spilled a bit of gin and tonic on my toe.

I wished I was in bed. Asleep, alone. But I’d made a promise to myself that I’d be the kind of dad who showed up no matter what.

My son’s band played song after song, none of which I recognized. Beth’s hip ground against mine, but from the glazed look in her eyes I guessed she could’ve been grinding against one of the bridge’s pylons outside. Steadying myself by raising my arm above my head, I checked my watch. I had to be at work in seven hours. What a stupid idea coming had been. Another in a seemingly endless string, a decade’s worth. I closed my eyes and allowed myself to be jostled back and forth, a dreadlock slapping my cheek.

The ringing in my ears had reached a shriek by the time my son kicked the mic stand over, flipped us off, and jogged off the stage. I didn’t know if the gesture was meant for me but there did seem to be a particular, pointed menace to it. The girl on my left, who’d been thrashing her head so hard that bits of eyeliner clung to the stud in her nose, looked up at me and said, “Fuck,” in a dazed, awestruck voice.

Beth nodded in agreement, stepping back into the loosening space. “That was loud!” Her mouth remained open, the lower part of her jaw working as if it needed to reset itself.

I nodded. “They’re doing really well.”

The doors opened and people began to push toward them. I guided Beth along by the elbow. She leaned on my arm with a complacent, dreamy expression as if most of her was already asleep. Unwanted questions swirled through my aching head. Would Cyn have stayed if we’d had another child? Would my son be less angry?

It was a great relief to feel the cool night air. To smell the freshness rising off the Willamette. A hot dog vendor appeared on the sidewalk and was swarmed by eager, still shouting drunks. I managed to convince Beth to wait for a bit, tired as she was.

After thirty minutes and a hot dog, when she was dozing on her back on the curb in a position that was adventurous, I realized my son wasn’t going to come out this way; there was probably a backstage exit or he’d stay back there drinking and whatever else for the rest of the night. Getting burned on the ass. Christ. Most of the crowd was already gone. Only a few kids remained, laughing and smoking on the corner while the vendor packed up his cart.

Stars perforated the sky. Red beacons shone atop transformer towers on the ridge above the city. I helped Beth up and got her into my car, hoping my son would get safely to wherever he was going.

“Oh my God, I have to *work* tomorrow,” she mumbled. “I’m not ready.” She looked at me fiercely, closed her eyes, and tipped her head back against the seat.

I turned off the radio and drove toward her home. We passed below blinking yellow lights, a street being shut down for a parade. I didn’t know where my son’s apartment was. I didn’t know if he had a girlfriend, or if he was still taking classes at the community college. Beth dozed, her face calm and showing its age beneath her makeup. A strand of drool slid down her chin. We were both closer to fifty than forty. What was there to look forward to? I had no idea how to even begin to fall in love again.

“Is your son still in India?” I asked.

She opened her eyes the slightest bit and made a gentle, grunting sound of affirmation

“Is he coming back? I mean, when did you see him last?”

“We Skype,” she said. She rolled her head away from me, looking out at the dark trees in Grant Park. “Almost two years. It’s hard. I’m glad he’s brave like that, though. To get out in the world. I never was.”

“Me neither.” As a young man I’d been too nervous to take sick days, and I’d never taken my wife anywhere more exotic than Crater Lake. The ridges of the steering wheel were warm beneath my fingers. “Do you know what song he was playing? I wonder what music of ours they know.”

She turned back, looking at me like I was a fool. “The Beatles. Everyone knows the Beatles.”

“Of course.”

At her doorstep, she woozily hugged me and said it had been great. “They were so good. You should be really proud.” Her small, slumped body was framed by the darkness of her hallway. A whole life in those shadows, mysterious and sad. She backed inside, smiled briefly, and then closed the door. I stared at the complex pattern in the glass glazing. The smell of lavender shampoo and gin lingered in my nose as I walked to the car.

It was after two in the morning; the streets were mostly empty. Lights glowed in the towering buildings downtown, and up on the ridge the beacons blinked on and off. The wide, black river divided the city in half. Driving east, I thought of the first time I’d held my son: his little, red, loaf of a body. How it was the best I’d ever felt, and how sure I was that I’d redeem myself. Regain some of the balance that my father had violently knocked out of whack.

I didn’t go straight home. Instead, I got on the interstate and made a loop around the city, from the Lloyd District and Broadway over through the Pearl and up to Forest Park. The city where both my son and I were born. As the ringing in my ears subsided, I thought of my father. There were brief windows when he’d been kind, mornings when he’d stood in the sunlit kitchen making eggs, and somehow those moments were still precious to me.