

Dad's Smashed Finger

My dad lay on the cool concrete floor of our garage, his face as gray as the cement and covered in a sickly sheen of sweat. My mom had placed a wet tea-towel across his forehead, and suddenly overcome with relief that the crisis had passed and his resemblance to my grandmother, who always wears turbans, my mom started giggling. "Oh my gosh, doesn't your dad look just like grandma?" she asked, trying to stifle her laughter. I took one look and burst out laughing. My dad glared at us weakly from the floor.

It was a beautiful summer day in Portland, Oregon. I was nine years old. My little brother and I were playing in the backyard, most likely digging for dinosaur bones, while my mom weeded the vegetables. My dad had decided that he wanted to remove a small slab of concrete from our yard, and since it was only about 3x3, he decided to do it himself, without the aid of power tools. As we played, the steady ringing of sledgehammer on chisel beat a steady rhythm.

And then, the air was filled with horrible screams! Somehow, as he had lifted the sledgehammer for another mighty blow, my dad's left pointer finger had slipped and landed on the head of the chisel just as the hammer came down. Trapped between metal and hard rubber, every blood vessel in his finger exploded and my dad howled with pain. He grabbed his hand and ran up and down the yard swearing and cursing, finally falling on his back in the grass and writhing in pain.

He lay there for several moments as the rest of us, wide-eyed, gathered around. Then, his voice hoarse but tinged with steel, he said, "I can't lose this fingernail. I have to meet a major client tomorrow." With that, he slowly lifted himself to his feet, like a prizefighter rising from a knockdown, and hauled himself to the toolshed he had built.

My mom stood behind him with her arms around him in case he fainted. Unnoticed in the crisis, my brother and I stared aghast as my father winched his finger into the vise so that he couldn't move it. In an injury like this, it's the pressure of the burst blood that forces the fingernail to come lose and ultimately fall off. To relieve the pressure, my dad did the most hardcore thing I've ever seen. In his good hand, he took a powerdrill and attached a tiny, needle-like drillbit, and proceeded to drill just enough through the fingernail that suddenly the pressure of the pooling blood was released, and a little crimson geyser sprayed out of the center of the fingernail.

It was like time stopped. I couldn't believe what I had just seen. Groggy now, my dad released his finger from the vise and my mom helped him into the garage; he looked like he would pass out at any moment. As he lay helpless on the concrete floor, our nerves and overwhelming squickiness gave way to helpless laughter when we realized that my dad, who could give Chuck Norris lessons in tough, had morphed into my grandma. Not once during the whole ordeal had he passed out or said a single self-pitying word; it was just his usual torrent of profanity followed by steely reserve. And that is why I never introduced a boyfriend to my dad in high school.