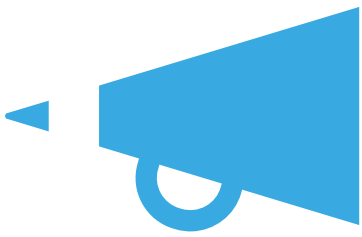

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by

Jon Paul Roberts

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‘Yet how can I say thank you, I who can’t hold my liquor either,
and don’t even know the places to fish?’

Raymond Carver,
Photograph of My Father in his Twenty-Second Year

i.

I wake up with a head like stone. I’m wearing pyjamas but I don’t remember putting them on. The mop bucket is next to my bed and I try to sit up but it’s not going to happen. I am alone in my bedroom. The friends that were supposed to be staying at my house are not here.

One of them texts me – *Have u spoken 2 ur dad this morning?*

I don’t reply. I can barely see the screen and can only just make out the words. A reply seems impossible. When I finally drag my hung-over head downstairs Dad is watching TV. I curl up on the other sofa and he turns down the TV.

‘Do you remember anything from last night?’ he asks.

I shake my head. It’s about all I can muster.

‘Nothing at all?’

I’m not sure if I should shake my head or nod in agreement. So I combine the two. Even though it must have looked weird he seems to get it and gets up to leave the room. He puts his hand on my shoulder on his way out. Holds it there for a second then pats it.

When my head hurts less, memories of the night before came back to me. Laying face down in the road, sick in my own hair (and I have short hair), cheesy pop music, a mix of wine, Jack Daniels, and fancy flavoured alcopops

consumed very quickly, trying to climb into my friends' pool, pushing someone into a bush, leaving the 17th birthday party at around nine thirty.

An hour or so later I'm able to properly look at my phone and I read the texts I've been sent.

Thought u should know, one says. *You came out to your dad last night while you were throwing up into the toilet.*

ii.

'Have you decided?'

Dad, clearly bored, rubs the top of his head, where his hair is thinning. We've been in Woolworths for forty-five minutes and I've spent the entire time hovering around the girls' shoes. Hannah, who lives on my street, has a pair and when she wore them out to play I knew I wanted some. They were small chunky heels, only about two or three inches high, with reflective pink squares on the straps. I was planning to get them in pink, but now I'm here there's a choice of gold, blue, and green.

I've been waiting for the aisle to clear, but random mums and employees keep coming. Even though I've been desperate for these shoes I know that no one else can know the extent of that desperation. I don't even want to try them on but Dad refuses to buy shoes, of any kind, without them being tried on first. It's due to this stubbornness that we've been here this long.

I didn't know what I was going to do with the shoes or what occasions I'd wear them for. There are surprisingly few opportunities for young boys to wear sparkly heels organically. I would probably end up wearing them round

the house when we didn't have guests or in the garden when I was playing with Hannah. As someone who already owned the shoes she was the only person I could trust to wear them around.

Dad has yet to show any signs of disapproval that his son wants high-heels. His only gripe is how I'll pay for them. He doesn't want to give me the money outright or just buy them for me. In my household, chores only ever happen when my brother or I want money for something. So, in the end, I got two weeks' pocket money in advance for helping clean out the garage.

When I asked for them, at first, I just said I wanted a new pair of shoes.

'You've already got too many shoes,' Dad said.

'These ones are different.'

I couldn't say how they were different or what kind of shoes they were only how much they cost, information I got from Hannah, but when we arrived at Woolworths and I lead him to them he didn't seem overly surprised.

The aisle finally clears, so I whip my shoe and sock off in one swift motion and pull the heeled sandal onto my bare foot. I don't keep it on for more than a few seconds, long enough for Dad to see it fits, before it's off again. Dad takes them off me and walks towards the till and I have a smile from ear to ear.

Dad's under strict instructions to say they are for his daughter if anyone asks, it doesn't matter that he doesn't have one. This imaginary daughter is the saving grace of my childhood. She got a Barbie, high-heeled shoes, A *Little Mermaid* plate set, the *100 Greatest Songs from the Musicals* CD, and other things that I didn't think a boy could have.

The cashier, a small wrinkly woman, scans the shoes and looks around. 'Where is the little princess?' she says, craning her neck over the counter. Spotting me she says; 'Oh, you're not a princess are you.'

I nestle my head into Dad's stomach.

'Who are these for then? Surely they're not for you?'

'They're for my daughter,' Dad says, as rehearsed.

'Oh phew. I thought they were for him for a second. Imagine him prancin' round in heels,' she laughs.

'Why don't you mind your own damn business?' His voice stern; it always had been.

iii.

'YOUR DAD IS A MACHINE.'

A boy from school writes this on my Facebook wall in reference to Dad smashing a metre rule into pieces to make a class quieten down. This will go on to be a story that everyone hears. His nickname, for as long as he's been teaching is 'Psycho Roberts.' Throughout my time at school he will: shout at my friend for being inside at break time, break three more metre rules, shout at me the one time he substitutes my class, be generally feared by most of the kids at my school.

iv.

In the changing room at the swimming baths I check my phone. The little Nokia brick I have had for about a month now. I was the last of my friends to

get a phone because Dad said I couldn't have one until high school when everyone else got one in year six but I had to wait.

I have four missed calls from Dad. Even though he knows I'm swimming. I call him back and he says he's waiting in Staples car park across the road. He doesn't really sound like himself.

When I get to the car, my hair still damp from the pool, he says 'you should have dried your hair properly. It's cold out today.' It reminds me of one winter, when it snowed, and we had gone for a walk. For some reason Steve, my brother, had decided not to dry his hair. Dad went mental, going on about colds, pneumonia and death. He took off his woolly hat and forced it onto Steve's head.

As he starts to drive I realise we are not going home but we're going to Grandma's house in Liverpool. I don't question it because we've been back and forth to Grandma's a lot recently because Granddad's been sick.

I fiddle with the radio because Dad isn't talking. I've had my Gwen Stefani CD in the player for the best part of a month and I know Dad's getting sick of it. He doesn't like the way it's a redo of that song for that film he can't remember the name of. It's the same reason he doesn't like boy bands. 'Always redoing songs,' he says. 'Write your own bloody stuff.'

He turns off the radio and pulls into a car park about half way to Grandmas.

He doesn't take his hands of the wheel, or turn the engine off but just sits there, looking out the windscreen.

'Granddad died,' he says. 'This afternoon.'

Then he starts crying. It is weird to watch him cry. I have never seen Dad cry before and I have no idea what to do. He takes his glasses off and wipes his eyes then we drive off in silence.

When we get to Grandma's he sits on the sofa. Grandma sits in her chair. She's wearing all black which is something she never does. She's always dressed colourfully, in sky blues and pastel pinks, but never black. Or green, because she hates green.

Above her fireplace are four things. The first, is a terrible art deco clock that looks like an exploding glass star, the second is a picture of Dad and his sister (who died shortly after that picture was taken), third is a picture of me and Steve, and, fourth, a picture of my Granddad singing at the club. There isn't a picture of her though.

Grandma and Dad go out to the kitchen to talk and soon the house will become a Mecca for mourners. Aunts and Uncles will come but mostly it'll be people from this street, and the surrounding ones, because of that sense of community that people say we have lost. When back doors were left unlocked and you really knew your neighbours. Enough to mourn their death and feel the need to pop by. Dad grew up on this street.

I've heard stories about him when he was a child because my Grandma loves to tell them. Her favourite is when they went away to a small cottage in Wales. The owner told her that there was feed for the chickens in the pantry and they had to make it last the entirety of their stay. But Dad, around four years old, had a different idea and fed the chickens seven days' worth of food the morning they arrived. When she found out what he'd done she'd been furious but then, I think, she laughed. She had a picture of the

occasion too. Dad small and blond throwing feed like confetti as a parade of chickens followed him.

I'm sat in the living room, alone, looking at Granddad's chair. He got a new chair recently, when he got worse, that was beige, and electric, and rose up until he was in a standing position. I go to sit on it and, as I always do, put my knees to my chest and press the button. I cling on for as long as I can before it's too steep and slippy to stay up and I fall to the floor with a thud. Dad and Grandma come in through the frosted glass door. The door Dad pushed his sister through when he was younger. Dad looks at me to say *not now* and Grandma looks at the chair, stood fully upright and starts crying.

v.

When Dad drives me to school he tells me a story from before I was born. He's talking about the snow, how it's rare to get snow nowadays. Then he talks about a snowy day when he was at school, him and his friends decided to throw a snowball at the next person to come through the school gate. The three of them stood, snowballs in hand, and threw them at the first figure to come though. It happened to be the Headmaster. It was the one and only time he got caned at school but when he tells the story now, he's smiling.

vi.

Normally, we would open our presents in the front room, but this year we're in the back room. What used to be our dining room is now Dad's bedroom. A single bed laid along the far wall and the dining table, folded away, against the

other, his oxygen tank up against the glass doors to the conservatory. The room hasn't been redecorated since we moved in and Steve often jokes that Dad must have had a stroke when he decorated our house. This room is a prime example; yellow wallpaper and forest green carpet.

It's hot in here. The heat reminds of an episode of *Friends.* The one where their radiator breaks during a Christmas party and guests line up to stand next to the open door of the fridge and Monica tries to convince the maintenance guy to fix it. I laugh to myself then realise I shouldn't be laughing.

Dad told me he was sick about a week after my eighteenth birthday in September. He sounded optimistic, though he didn't seem positive. Over the next three months his condition will get worse. He had already stopped working by then, but now he will spend nearly every day in bed, and Steve will take time off university to look after him. The school he worked for will put out a newsletter and then the messages of support will start flowing in. Luckily, I have left that school to go to a sixth form college thirty minutes away.

In five years' time, when I try and put this story onto paper, I'll think about how I wasn't really present in those final few months. I was physically there, but my mind checked out, unable to process what was happening.

Dad, perched on the edge of the bed, opens a neatly wrapped present from my brother, a joke book, and starts to cry. Steve moves to put his arm around him. Grandma starts to collect the torn wrapping paper from the floor and puts it into a bin bag. Something she's done every year since I can remember.

After the presents have been opened Dad stops crying. Steve says it's best to let him rest before we go out this afternoon. Dad, me, Steve, Grandma, and Dad's oxygen tank are all heading to the Wirral for Christmas dinner at my Aunt's. The dinner will feel odd. There will be an elephant squashed into the corner that we will all be ignoring. The cracker pulling and joke telling will be done as if we're amateur actors in some local play.

On the drive home I'll sit in the backseat, so cold I can see my breath. My Grandma will hold my hand the whole way home while Dad sleeps in the passenger seat.

vii.

The drink is bright yellow, with a neon pink straw wrapped round a neon green one. It's his fourth. The all-inclusive holiday package means that house cocktails come as part of the deal. This Banana Daiquiri has become a favourite of Dads.

The bar is quiet. The large glass wall shows you the Greek beach and sea as the sky is getting dimmer. The marble floor that reflected the sun is now slippy from Dad spilling his third drink.

I'm allowed one drink but they don't have alcopops so I don't know what to order. I choose vodka and lemonade in the hopes it might taste like Smirnoff Ice but it doesn't and I have to take tiny sips. Each one makes me think I'll never drink alcohol again. Steve has a beer.

This is the first time either of us have seen Dad drunk. His face red, a big grin, the slurring of his words, and the telling for more terrible jokes. He's wearing a linin shirt and crème chinos, that he had to buy at the hotel shop because you aren't allowed to wear shorts to dinner.

He slurps the final drops of his fourth before asking the waiter for his fifth. When the bar closes at 11pm my brother and I, one under each arm, lead him to the elevator. My brother is a lot taller them me, so Dad hobbles along like the Hunchback of Notre Dame as we guide him to bed. He's out by five past, snoring.

viii.

The house phone rings late at night. None of us answer it. We assume it will stop but then, almost at the same time, like a hive mind, we all think *Dad's in hospital so we should answer*. Steve, Grandma, and I all come out of our rooms at the same time. Just as the phone stops ringing. We all wait. We don't say anything.

Steve's mobile starts ringing. He answers and it seems like instantly we're in the car driving to the hospital. Grandma stays at home. 'I'll only slow you down,' she says. I call Dad's friend, ask if she can come round and sit with Grandma or she'll be alone.

It's January and there is still a little snow on the ground. Small stretches of it across roofs and in places where the kids haven't been able to get to it. We set off before the car has time to warm up. My bones ache and body feels stiff in the way it does when it's too cold. I look down at what I'm wearing and understand the phrase, *Did you get dressed in the dark,* because I did and this outfit of baggy cropped jeans, a green t-shirt that's too tight and vans make me look like a nineties children's TV presenter.

On the way into the hospital my brother says, ‘If you’d said you weren’t coming I’d have dragged you here by your hair.’ Why did he think I wouldn’t come? What does he think of me? A little rage is alight inside me now, so when we can’t find the right ward I’m getting really angry.

When we find it, and see him, the rage is gone instantaneously. No emotion has ever left my body so quickly. No specific feeling replaces it. In the years to come a whole range of feelings will take its place; on birthdays, at Christmas, my graduation, anything a father should be present at, I will feel low. I will struggle to talk with strangers when they casually refer to my parents and most of the time I will pretend to them he is still alive. I’ll realise that I had no reason to worry about being gay at all and when I look back I’ll see that he knew all along. I will try and prove myself to be independent, and in doing so close myself off to a lot of my emotions. I will try and write the story of Dad’s life down and find it too difficult. So I’ll cut it up and arrange the fragments out of order to make it easier.

His eyes are partly open, but only just, his breathing is short and quick as if he’s just exercised, but he clearly hasn’t. His skin is pale. It doesn’t really look like Dad but I can’t figure out why, then I realise he’s not wearing his glasses. There was a time, when I was younger, when Dad got contacts and he stopped wearing his glasses and I hated it because he didn’t look the same. He had to have surgery on one of his eyes a few years later and he started wearing glasses again but he wasn’t now. I look in the drawers by his bed for them but I can’t find them.

Steve sits on one side of him and I sit on the other. Steve is crying but I’m not yet. It becomes clear now why Steve would have dragged me here by

my hair as I realise that we're here because the doctors think he's going to die and I wonder how doctors know things like that and how often they can be wrong.

He's trying to say something and I get the sense that this process isn't as painless as the nurse says it should be. Looking at him I can tell he doesn't want to go.

I hold his hand hard, leaving marks on his skin. His eyes close. His breath slows down until it stops. There are two nurses here but they arrived so quietly I didn't know they were there until they spoke. 'He's gone now,' one said. The other checks his pulse.

'No, he's still here,' the other says.

There's a long silence.

'Now he's gone.'

I could have done without this guessing game.

16/01/2012

ix.

At the zoo, as we peel our oranges, Dad tells a joke:

Two oranges are rolling down a hill.
One stops suddenly.
The other Orange turns to him and says
'Hey! Why've you stopped?'
He says, 'I ran out of juice.'

x.

I'm looking at the rain outside the car and shaking my head. Dad has twisted himself in the driver's seat to look at me. Me, in this rugby top and shorts, long thick socks up to my knees and my boots sat next to me on the seat. The boots are bright red and Dad screwed the studs into them last night. I wanted the red ones because they reminded me of *The Wizard of Oz.*

These boots, like everything else I'm wearing, were bought last night just before Sports Direct closed. The same night I'd decided I wanted to join the Under Eights rugby team. Dad had been over the moon about it. He'd taken me straight to the shop so I could start Sunday morning and wouldn't have to wait a week, when I could change my mind.

Yet here we are. The rain lightly tapping on the windows and I'm refusing to get out the car. I don't want to do it anymore. I can see the other boys arriving and waiting on the pitch but I don't want to join them.

'Are you joking?' he says.

I shake my head.

'I've just bought you all this stuff.'

I'm still shaking my head.

'What a waste of money.'

He gets out the car with Steve, who does play rugby and has done for as long as he was able to. They go to the club house and I watch them from the car.

When Steve is playing his sports I normally wait in the car. I pretend I'm driving it or that it's some sort of spaceship or that it's suspended high up

in the air like I saw in a Spider-Man cartoon and I'm Mary Jane waiting to be saved but today I don't do any of that.

I climb into the front seat and kneel so I can see over the wheel and watch the Under Eights train.

When they're finished they file into the club house and Dad comes back. He opens the boot and pulls two plastic bags out. Steve's change of clothes and mine. He opens the front door and gives me the bag then closes it again and goes back into the clubhouse.

When I'm changed I sit in the front seat again, hands on the wheel, and wait. Dad comes back again with a tray of chips and gets into the passenger seat. We eat them and watch the rain, which has gotten heavier, waterlog the pitch.

About the Author

Jon Paul Roberts in the winner of the inaugural Spread the Word Life Writing Prize in 2017. He is an essayist, journalist, and screenwriter from Chester. He worked as an editor for a Liverpudlian literary magazine *In The Red*, as well as contributing to various sites and local publications within Liverpool. He has run events including launch parties, open mic nights for writers, and other readings. In his essays he hopes to find the line between his experiences and the forces that influenced him, whether that be film, television, family, or friends. He aims to find silver linings in darker moments by writing about them because, as his hero, Nora Ephron, said, *everything is copy*.
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