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Without You

Padraic Kane
Syracuse University

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Without You

Padraic Kane

I returned to the Boulevard, which seemed strange, but at the same time so familiar.

I stood there waiting for him, like I have been my entire life.

I stood nervous, with butterflies in my stomach, as if I were meeting a complete stranger.

I returned to that moment—not just that one, but all the moments he hadn't been there.

I stood there asking myself, *Why am I even here?*

But despite all these thoughts, I still stood there waiting. Hoping that one day *he* would be there.

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I met him at the 7-Eleven on the corner of Van Nuys Boulevard. It is where most of my memories of him take place. He offered to buy me whatever I wanted in the store, and not having seen him in years, I opted for a Big Gulp and some nachos. Shortly after that, he began with the typical questions about everything going on in

my life. I initially thought, *What is the point of letting him know what is going on when I know he is going to be out of my life as soon as I finish my Big Gulp?*

About an hour into our meet-up, a man from the 7-Eleven came outside; it was clear he knew my father, because they dapped each other up—from where I was standing, I could hear the clap of their hands as they came together. I noticed the man didn't call my dad by his real name. At this point in my life, I knew that my father was a part of gang life, and I was pretty familiar with gang lingo. They called him "Boog." He had even shown me the tattoo with his name and set, and at that moment, I had known this was something that was branded on him forever. Branded so much that there was no hope of his ever leaving that life.

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I know how things look right now. If you go on my Instagram or Facebook page, or catch me out on the weekends having a great time with my friends, you might

Layout by Chamella Moore. "The Blemish Redefined" by Ashli Florini.

make certain assumptions about my life. For the most part, the assumptions might be, "He is really enjoying life." You might assume that since I am from Los Angeles—a place where it's eighty degrees and sunny in March—I have it made. You might think, *I wish I had his life. I'm so jealous of him.*

But what if I told you that it's not always sunny in California? What if I told you I had to go through adolescence watching my mother deal with the stress of raising me on her own and using prescription pills to deal with the stress? What if I told you I lived with an uncle who was an alcoholic and who stumbled into my house night after night reeking of Popov vodka? What if I told you that when I was younger, I was sexually abused at

my own elementary school by a teacher? Last, what if I told you that while all this was going on, I didn't have the one person in my life who could have made a difference?

My father. There are some days when I wonder why I put the word "my" in front of "father" when I talk about him. It's hard to claim something or someone when he is never there to claim. I could easily count on both hands the number of times I've seen my father, and I'm twenty-three now. I was five when he went away, convicted of assault and gang affiliation, for just the first of many times.

I always ask myself how he could continue to do all the bullshit, knowing that he has a son. *What kind of man are you? What are the incentives for getting in-*



volved in things that you know you could easily be locked up for? And all the times you told me that things were going to be different—that you were changing. Growing up with an incarcerated parent is tough. The feelings of isolation and stigma that I and others like me experienced were difficult burdens to bear. It was often as if I were alone in a dark, deep hole, trying to find my way out to the light.

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“Hotheaded,” “short-tempered,” and “ticking time bomb.” All three of these descriptors could be used to describe my father. My mom would always tell me he was like a tornado when he lost his cool—everything in his path would be destroyed. Fortunately, I never had to witness this with my own eyes, and I didn’t think much of it until my first semester at Syracuse University. Growing up, I was never the kind of person to start any kind of confrontation, because I got along with almost everybody. Because I never truly spent time with my father, I thought most of his traits had never been passed down to me.

In the fall of 2011, I was hanging out in my room with my friends Sam and Sarah after getting back from a party on South Campus. Twenty minutes later, I walked Shawn. Since he started pledging

a fraternity, we had seen him change, and we didn’t like it. That night, Sam and Sarah had some “liquid courage” in them and started calling Shawn out. They were both making valid points, so I decided to give my two cents, and I got into a heated argument with Shawn—one that could have been settled with calmer words. But something inside me didn’t want to solve this with words. About five minutes into the argument, I lost myself and went off on him. A couple of minutes later, I had him bleeding on the floor. I stormed outside and questioned whether what had just happened was real. At that moment, I realized that I was more like my father than I could ever have imagined.

That was the first of several moments when I’ve seen him come out in me. At these times, it feels as if everything I know suddenly means nothing. These times make me wonder if I am becoming him—a person I told myself I would never become.

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I’ve always wondered what entices someone to be in a gang. Maybe it’s because people become bolder in groups and will do things they would never dream of doing on their own. Because of the isolation already present in many individuals’ lives, gangs are able to become their support system. In turn, this will typically give the gang whatever it needs in order to maintain its



membership and privileges. Was this the case with my dad? I honestly have no idea. Maybe one day I will get the chance to ask him.

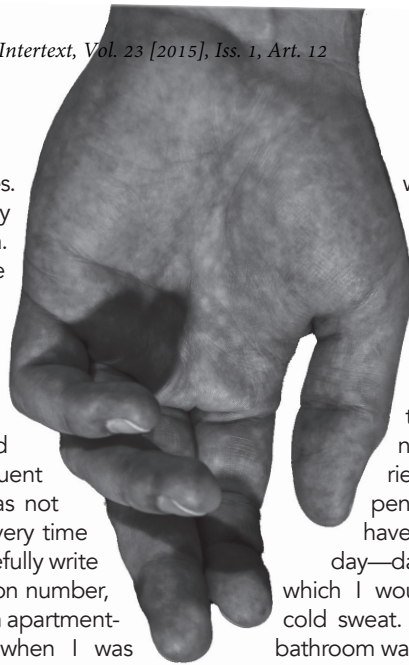
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At the beginning of his absence, we maintained contact through infrequent phone calls, although I was not aware of where he was. Every time I wrote to my father, I'd carefully write his department identification number, thinking it was a code for an apartment-complex mailbox—until, when I was eight, my mom informed me that my dad was in prison.

My mom would always ask if I wanted to know exactly why he was in prison, but there was a part of me that knew that if I were to know the details, it would change my perception of him. I'm glad I didn't learn what he did until I was older, because learning something like that at a young age can really create a sense of resentment later on in life. At the time I was already dealing with enough stuff, more than any child should have to go through.

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The concept of things being "forgotten" is one that I have struggled with my whole life. As much as I've tried to put myself in places and situations where that part of my life could be burned and buried, it always manages to resurface. I can still see Children's Place vividly, and it's been almost fifteen years since I last set foot there: The playground with the wooden train



we would all play on during recess, the stepping-stone in front of the homeroom with all my classmates' names on it—these recollections are tainted now by the memories of what happened there. I used to have dreams about that day—dark dreams, from which I would wake up in a cold sweat. In the dream, the bathroom was darker than it was when the event took place. I had no way out. Then it walked in. It was always a dark figure that was hard to make out, and no matter where I tried to hide, time after time It always seemed to find me.

Since I was in fourth grade, I have thought, talked, and—most important—written about that person who left a scar on my life. It has never come down to talking about the cold, hard facts; instead, it has been about the emotional impact that the experience has had on me. Going to therapy might have helped me talk about things more, but I don't think it was until I was older that I realized how it affected me. I know now why it is hard for me to establish mutual trust with others, because I lost trust in a person I thought was looking out for me. I'm not the most open person because I opened up to someone who took advantage of me.

Can writing about this serve as a form of justice? Probably not, but it can serve as a catalyst to unite the many people in the world who have

tried to forget similar memories. Maybe this can inspire others to tell their untold stories. It's never easy to deal with things of this nature on your own. I appreciate everything my mom did for me—but at the same time, there remains the lingering cloud of the one person who wasn't there when he needed to be.

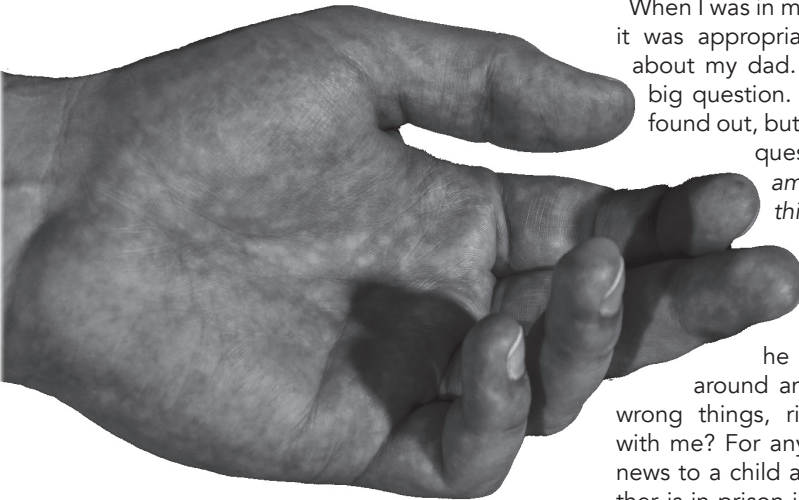
I remember telling my best friend, Stanley, in eighth grade about what had happened to me. The look on his face, the lack of words, was something that I was familiar with. This was always

I was seeing a therapist three to four times a week. This was a pivotal point in my life, a time when I think my father could have really helped me cope. Don't get me wrong, I love my mom for all the support she offered me when this happened, but having that masculine shoulder to lean on and learn from would have really helped me. This was just one of the many things I had to learn to get through on my own.

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When I was in middle school, I thought it was appropriate to learn the truth about my dad. I asked my mom the big question. I began to cry when I found out, but even then I remember questioning my tears. *Why am I crying for something that he could have easily prevented?* I think most of the tears were because it made me think he didn't care. Why run around and get involved in the wrong things, risking his relationship with me? For any parent, breaking the news to a child as to why his or her father is in prison is difficult. I just knew I wouldn't be seeing any more of my dad.

My father didn't leave just me when he went away; he also left my mom alone to raise me. The job of a single parent is one that I believe only a few can do successfully, and I applaud her for everything she did to help me get to where I am today. Raising a child by yourself adds a financial strain to the emotional distress. This stress led my mom to adopt bad habits, such as her



followed by the typical "I'm really sorry that happened to you." Hearing that never really did anything for me. Hearing it from counselors, friends, and family was swell, but the one person who could have made a difference hasn't even acknowledged it.

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addiction to prescription pills.

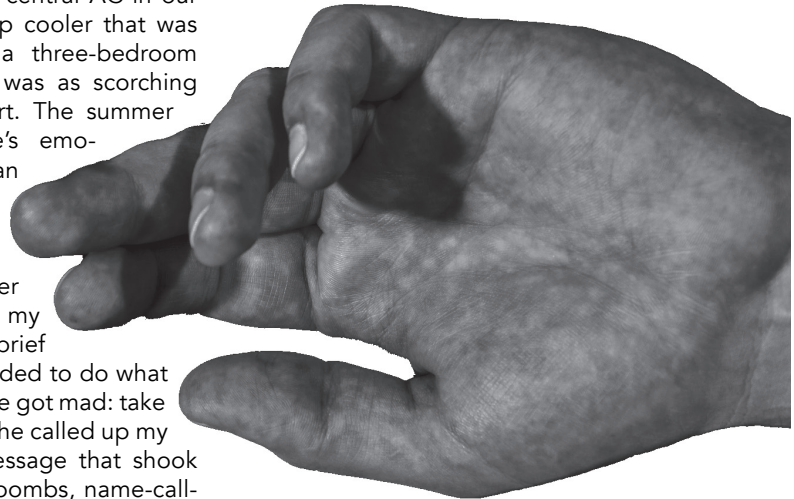
My mom has been a nurse since she was in her twenties. She saw her access to prescription drugs as an easy way to relieve the pain. Her dependence on these drugs caused her to lose her job and her nursing license. For a while, I hated her for resorting to this option.

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I could see the anger and frustration that my mom had toward my father, specifically on one hot summer day. We didn't have central AC in our house, only a swamp cooler that was supposed to cool a three-bedroom house. The kitchen was as scorching as the Sahara Desert. The summer heat had everyone's emotions cooking like an egg on a hot skillet. My mother was hurting financially, and it was causing her to fume. At the time, my father was out for a brief period, and she decided to do what she did best when she got mad: take it out on someone. She called up my father and left a message that shook the heavens. The F-bombs, name-calling, and excessive cursing had me in awe. At the same time, I felt that what she was saying, each and every word coming out of her mouth, was true. This only made me angry and added fuel to the fire. Still, I couldn't find it in me to write him off. There remained a glimmer of hope that he might attempt to salvage what relationship he had left with me.

As my mother left the message for

my father, I could see my grandmother's uneasiness as she sat in her chair. The look of disappointment, anger, and embarrassment that two of her own family members could actually be going back and forth like this was beyond her control. It had to be one of the most uncomfortable situations possible. Her youngest daughter yelling and screaming at her own son; her grandson yelling and cursing at his own mother. What was she to do? Not only was my grandmother a witness to World War III; so were many of my



cousins, aunts, and uncles.

I remember going back and forth down the hall between my room and the kitchen. Each and every time, we had something to say to each other. Many of my family members tried to calm the long-overdue storm, but there was nothing they could do. They told me I should just stop and let it go, but aside from keeping me in the same

complacent position I was always in, what would that have done? I had never stood up for myself before. No—this was it. I had to show her that I wasn't always going to adhere to everything she said, and that I was perfectly capable of making responsible decisions on my own.

Right before I left, I remember crying in the bathroom. The emotions of the situation had consumed me. I packed a duffle bag of clothes, gathered what money I had, and left. I then walked to the Orange Line so I could go to stay with my friend Greg, because I couldn't stay in that house anymore. Soon afterward, my mom took it upon herself to cut off my phone so that I really was on my own. On top of all this, I was still going to school at Valley College and working at Marshalls. I made sure to hide whatever feelings I had from my peers and coworkers. This was something I had programmed myself to do since I was a child.

Even after my mom lost her job, she was still finding ways to get her hands on medications, and it became so frequent that we had to call the ambulance on several occasions because she was unresponsive. I can't say for sure if my dad's being around would have kept my mom from going down this path, but whenever you have someone else to lean on, it makes any adversity easier to overcome.

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Maintaining communication with my dad had become important to me. Like any person, I wanted to make sense of my existence. My childhood was

full of positives and negatives, yet a cloud filled with doubt and anger hung over me at times, making me wonder whether or not I was worthy of love. I regularly dealt with awkward conversations that started with the question, "So what does your dad do for a living?" For a while, I wouldn't even bring up my dad, and it often hurt to see a lot of my friends doing stuff with their dads. I thank God every day that I was blessed with strong, caring uncles to look out for me, but it still wasn't enough to make up for the absence of my father.

After some practice in these situations, I came up with different lies depending on whom I was speaking with. It wasn't until I reached college that I fully realized the impact of my father's incarceration on me.

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Setting: Walking down Sherman Way at one in the morning to get Casa de Tacos on a summer Tuesday night.

Zac: It's crazy, man, to think that....

Me: That's what I'm saying, man; I ask myself the same question every day about my dad. How could someone continue to do the same bullshit, day after day, knowing he has a son at home?

Zac: Did he ever tell you why he was doing what he was doing?

Me: Nah, dog. In the handful of times that I have seen him, the only thing

he would say every time was that he was staying out of trouble, and that we were going to see each other more.

Zac: Crazy.

Me: Yeah, man. I haven't spoken to him since my senior year of high school. No call. No letter. Nothing.

Zac: It's crazy because I would have never thought of you being in this kind of situation, because you would never be able to tell from the outside.

Me: Yeah, it's a fucked-up situation, and there used to be a point where I really didn't feel comfortable talking about him to others. I can remember back in middle school, when one Sunday he met me after church. It had to be one of the most nerve-racking experiences ever. The mixture of feelings and thoughts that were running through my head was enough to drive you off a cliff. Questions like, What are my friends going to think about him showing up after all these years? How is he going to act when he meets the other parents? It was just wild.

Zac: That's a trip, man. I couldn't imagine.

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Even within my circle of family and friends, I did not know how to have a conversation about my dad's situation. I internalized my feelings of shame, letting them spill out only to my mother at times.

I never met other kids who experienced

anything similar to my situation. I was always a quiet child, but I think the situation further encouraged me not to stand out or share too much with others. I didn't deserve to grow up without a father, but I was still capable of becoming a healthy, competent adult who had gained maturity and strength through all of life's challenges. It is interesting to consider who I might be had I never faced certain challenges in my life. Not everything is as it seems. I may never know what it is like to call my dad when I feel like it. I have to wait for a phone call from him, and who knows when that day will come. I always tell myself there may still be a chance that he will be released one day.



Photograph courtesy of Padraic Kane.