

Smashing Dream Smashing by Valeka Cruz

One of my favorite childhood memories is of my father reading the Tasha Tudor Book of Fairy Tales to me at bedtime while I dunked Chips Ahoy cookies in a cup of milk. The words were magic. I decided that I wanted to write stories like that.

While the neighborhood kids were riding bikes and playing one Saturday afternoon, eight year old me was sitting at my white French provincial desk composing a story about witches and wild creatures and princesses who saved themselves. My father stopped by my bedroom and asked what I was doing. I enthusiastically said that I was writing a story. “Do you wanna read it?” I asked as I handed him my black and white composition book. He pursed his lips beneath his dark mustache while he read. His brow furrowed as he flipped to the next page. My tummy did flip-flops as I waited to hear what he thought.

“Why are you writing this? Is it for school?” he questioned. I shook my head. “No. I’m writing it as practice,” I explained. “Practice for what?” he asked. I inhaled deeply and said “for when I’m an author. That’s what I wanna be when I grow up.” He snapped the notebook shut, handed it to me, and gave a harsh “no.” The pit in my stomach grew as I took back my notebook. My little hands felt cold.

“Why not?” I asked. “Why can’t I be an author? Other people write books.” He stood expressionless and gruffly said “it’s impossible to find a publisher because there’s so much competition. Lots of people want to be authors.” I shrugged. “You’d have to go to a prestigious university to be taken seriously.” I shrugged again. His reasons didn’t make sense to me. “And,” he continued, “your writing isn’t good enough.” THAT I understood. Hot tears flooded my eyes,

flowed down my cheeks, and spilled onto the notebook. I ran my fingertips across the puffy raised spots my tears left on the paperboard cover as my father walked out of my room.

For years after that, I wrote in secret. I wrote in bed using a flashlight and hid my notebook between the mattresses. I wrote in the treehouse at my grandparent's house on weekends. I wrote during recess instead of playing kickball. I would duck into the school library and write for hours telling my parents I was working on extra credit.

As an adult, I shielded my work from my father and anyone else who could discourage me. I thought that if I kept my creations to myself, I wouldn't have to worry that my writing wasn't good enough. Still, his voice echoed. *Your writing isn't good enough.* Part of me wondered if he was right - he is my father after all.

Growing up, we were taught that our parents know what is best for us and that we should not question their word. What we were *not* taught is that parents are not infallible. Sometimes they view things through the lens of their childhood self and the teachings of their parents. My father was a link in a familial chain of dream smashing that I wouldn't learn about until I was well into adulthood.

Years later, during afternoon coffee with my grandmother, she asked me if I still wrote stories. I said yes. "I'm glad you didn't stop doing that," she said. "You seemed happiest when you were in the treehouse with your notebooks and pencils." She let out a deep exhale and continued "I should've listened to your father when he said he wanted to be a baseball player when he grew up." My jaw dropped.

“What? What do you mean, Nana?” I asked. She pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of her housedress, dabbed her eyes, and said, “if I had encouraged him and let him know that he could be anything he wanted, maybe he’d be a happier person.” She took a sip of her coffee and said “I didn’t tell him that I believed in him. Sometimes people need to know that no matter what they dream of doing.” She looked up at the leaves of the peach tree as they swayed in the breeze. “I wanted to be a ballerina but my mother told me I couldn’t do it because I was too short and that I should get married and have babies instead,” she said wistfully. “Dreams aren’t always practical, are they?” I imagined my grandmother as a young girl, twirling and dancing.

I try not to blame my father for his lack of encouragement. After that conversation with my grandmother, I understood that my father was passing on what he had learned. After many years of hiding my writing, I decided to work towards publication. I wanted to find out for myself if the impossible was possible. It was. Decades after I wrote those stories in that composition notebook, I had poems, short stories, and essays published in journals and magazines.

The most valuable thing my father inadvertently taught me was to trust myself. I chose to acknowledge my strengths and abilities because he did not. I’m grateful to my little self for not giving up my impossible dream. Sometimes I am eight years old again and hear my father’s voice telling me that my writing isn’t good enough. I push it away. I’m breaking that dream smasher chain one piece of writing at a time.