

“Like Father, Like Son”

By Neha Tallapragada

Chapter 1

Middle age is one of the most disorienting, destabilizing times there is. You’re limited by the paths you’ve chosen, and you’re just now starting to come up against the invisible barrier of those limitations, pressing your hands against it in disbelief. *When did this appear?* When you look in the mirror, you look into a pair of eyes, not of yourself, but of a gray-haired stranger and his strange, twisting smile.

In some ways, you feel blessed to even be having a midlife crisis. As a young man, you didn’t think you would ever get what you have now. A stable career, a loving wife, a beautiful son. Your childhood was marked by enough to make you think these things might be impossible.

Your own father loomed larger-than-life when he was around. He would pick you up and perch you on his shoulders, push you on the swing until you were soaring. His laugh, large and loud, bounced off of the walls of your home. But change was inevitable—it was written into the bloodline that bound you two together.

It began with the jumpiness—he would shrivel up at the slightest sound. His anger following these moments was dark and heavy, weighing the house down. Then came the dropping of things. Wallet, plates, kitchen knives. When he lost his job, everything disintegrated. You started to avoid the house after school, sneaking back in after dark, so you wouldn’t have to

see him the way that he now was. Then roles reversed, and he started leaving, staying out for longer and longer periods of time, until one day, you woke up and he was gone.

He left everything—his clothes, the car. You carried on without him for a few weeks until your teachers caught on. No one ever gave you an answer. All you had was your memory of him, and as time went on, as you swapped between foster homes and became accustomed to solitude, he became a ghost to you.

You got a phone call when you were thirty-six. A hospital the next state over had somehow tracked you down. You bolted out of bed, you drove at a breakneck speed, no thinking or feeling, just the sensation of go go go.

The man in the hospital bed had the life completely bleached out of him. White hair and bluish skin. The nurses told you that they didn't know where he had been before. He smiled wanly to the sound of his own name, but would switch out of his good mood quickly, lobbing his dinner fork at the wall in frustration when his hands inevitably started to tremble. At the time, it was too painful for you to speak to him about the years of distance that had separated you. Now, though, you regret not asking him. You regret a lot of things.

He had a tattoo on his ankle, an etching of a snake eating its own tail. You didn't remember if he'd always had that, and it bothered you that you didn't know.

A doctor appeared next to you, and he said something about inheritance. Something about you.

Chapter 2

You're dreaming all the time now, and the dreams are so vivid that sometimes you wake up and forget that they're not real. Sometimes you kick your wife in your sleep. You had a dream recently of you, your father, and your son lined up inside each other, like a nesting doll. When you look in the mirror now, you see apparitions of them layered on top of you. You all have the same dark hair and big blue eyes: watery and translucent, always looking as if you're on the verge of tears.

Your son doesn't know everything, but he knows that things are changing. Dad doesn't go to work anymore. Dad is really jumpy now. Dad keeps bumping into things. Dad can't help with anything. Not homework, not cooking, not cleaning. Your wife's hair is thinning, and sometimes you catch her pulling clumps of it out of her scalp.

Your son is at the age where nothing he feels is a mystery and everything is laid bare on his face. Anger and fear. The same emotions you see when you look at yourself in the mirror. You both had a huge fight yesterday, during which he cursed in front of you for the first time. The fight was over baseball practice, for which he needs to be driven all the way across town. But you can't drive him. Because you can't drive at all.

He doesn't know this, but one morning about two weeks ago, you got in the car, and your hands started twisting into new shapes. It's not new to you, but it's never been this bad. The doctor calls it "chorea," which means nothing to you. You feel that it's more like a wild animal has become attached to you. In the car, the animal whipped your wrists back and forth, and then the animal started chasing its tail around your foot on the gas pedal, and all in all you barely made it to the mailbox before screaming for your wife.

You still don't know what to tell your son about the animal. Because the next question that he will have, after he searches *what is Huntington's Disease* on the internet, will be, could he have it? He's too young, and he shouldn't have to think about that, you reason. But your wife disagrees. *Better to find out about it sooner, rather than later*, she says passionately, which silences you.

You wonder, if you *had* known as a child, if your father had known about himself, would anything have changed?

Today is the day of your doctor's appointment. You like speaking to the neurologist, because she asks you questions that everyone else is afraid to talk about with you.

Tell me more.

You tell her that you've felt like whatever dial people have to turn down their emotions, their impulsivity, you've lost it. You tell her that you feel like you're moving away from yourself, and you don't know if you can return.

And you realize that while you're talking to her, your leg is moving. Actually, your whole body is. You are slowly writhing, tensing and relaxing, throughout your face and trunk and arms and legs. The animal is back, a snake uncoiling throughout your body. Your pen drops from your hand, and you don't bother picking it up.

It takes a lot of work for me to move intentionally these days, you say to her. To do the things I want to do. I'm exhausted.

She asks you how the medication is faring. spurts of relief are meted out in small blue pills of Austedo, but you don't know that it's enough. The shadow of your father creeps up behind you and lays a hand on your shoulder.

Chapter 3

We should go to the amusement park this weekend, you tell your wife.

Why now?

I don't know. Let's just go.

As you and your son watch your wife expertly shoot down cartoon creatures with a water gun, you draw your son in close to you.

What, Dad, he mutters in irritation.

Hey, you say, you know you can tell me anything, right?

You want to be there for him. You want him to come to you for advice when he gets older. You want to move him into his college dorm, hold him through his first heartbreak. But what if you can't be that person for him? What if you're a completely different person then? What if you can't tell him what to do, because you don't know how to make those decisions anymore? The worst, most unspeakable thought to you—what if you can't be there because you're not there, in his future, at all?

Yeah, I know, Dad. Now can we go on the ride?

Your son helps the worker strap you into the roller coaster seat. *Are you sure you can do this, Dad,* he asks suddenly, and the expression on his face, still youth-fattened, is so furtively sweet that you almost burst into tears. This is what you always wanted to do with your own father. *I wouldn't miss this for the world,* you say. He rolls his eyes.

The terror you feel as the coaster ascends is not just yours, but it is also that of the animal, coiling its way around your insides once more. *You can't have all of me yet*, you tell the animal firmly. *We'll have to coexist for now*.

As you reach the peak of the coaster, your breath catches at the sight of the sunset looming over you. The cool breeze settles over your face. Your son's wide eyes and blinding grin. In his eyes, your reflection. And, for the first time in a while, you recognize the man staring back at you.