

“The Hamster” by Michael Aviña

It’s hard to remember a time before Dad was in the cage. Sometimes, when I try really hard, I catch glimpses of my family all happy together out in public, but it’s hard to remember what my family’s smiles look like because we don’t smile often. At least not at home. I miss my dad all the time, which is strange because he never leaves the living room of our house. More accurately, he never leaves the steel-barred cage he built when I was five. No matter how long I live with the cage, it will never blend into the living room. The cage is seven feet wide, seven feet long, and seven feet tall. However, one foot of the seven-foot height is dedicated to a hollow platform with a hole leading to a bucket where Dad uses the bathroom. Really, the smell coming from the cage is less jarring than the industrial, blackened metal bars.

I’ve grown used to the smell. Not just the smell of Dad urinating and defecating on himself, but the smell of his unwashed body. Mom used to wash Dad every day around the time when he first decided to stay in the cage. Every day turned into every other day. Every other day turned into twice a week. Twice a week turned into whenever Mom noticed the smell, too. Mom got sick of taking care of Dad in every aspect. She begrudgingly cooks a separate meal for Dad every night while she complains to my sister and me about him. If we were eating spaghetti or sandwiches or take-out, Dad was eating chicken protein sludge and lettuce, the only thing he allows himself to consume. Whenever she empties his bucket, she makes an effort to slam the door extra hard on her way out to the backyard just to send Dad a message. She no longer cares for Dad out of love. She takes care of Dad out of necessity. He’s not her husband; Dad is her pet.

I feel bad for Dad, but I’m not sure why. He chose this life; we didn’t. I suppose it’s because I assume something must have happened in his life to make him want to live like this. Something must have happened. I would never know for sure. Dad never responds with more than five words at a time, it feels like. No matter how long I pester, how hard I beg, how loud I cry, or how intense I scream, Dad doesn’t budge, apart from the semi-rare occasions where he’s yelling too. No matter what I ask him, he never seems interested in responding. I don’t know his favorite color, and I don’t know what his mother’s name is; it’s almost like to him, it’s all just noise. Somehow, with how little I know about him, I’ve concluded that the cage is at least partially my fault. It must be. There’s no other reason he’s been taking his anger out on me.

There's an unspoken rule in the family that we don't talk about the cage, or, more accurately, Dad, whenever we don't have to. When my sister and I get home from school or when my mom gets off work, we walk through the front door and right past Dad, just as we walk past the couch or the TV. Dad is furniture. The couch leg is broken, the TV is glitching, and Dad needs a bath. I'm sure all my friends at school just think my dad passed away, or my parents are divorced. They assume I just have a strict mom whenever I say we can't study at my house. They'll never know about the cage because I'll never tell them. Mom doesn't flinch when calling in reservations at restaurants for a party of three. My Sister's old drawings from elementary school all have only three smiling stick figures. Even when Thanksgiving rolls around, and we gather with my Mom's side of the family, because Dad's side doesn't live nearby, we'd all rather talk about politics than the cage.

There's only one official rule regarding the cage. No one ever opens the door. We don't even touch the handle. The door isn't locked because there isn't even a lock there; anyone could slide it open if they wanted to, but even if we wanted to, we can't. This is the one thing both Mom and Dad can agree on. Nobody opens the door. When it's time to wash Dad, Mom squeezes her arms through the bars to scrub his body clean. With how thin Dad is, I'm sure he could slip through the bars without a problem. If he wanted to escape, that is, but it seems like there's nothing he wants less.

When I was seven years old, I started to grasp the concept of the cage. The concept of Dad never coming to my recitals, never pushing me on the swings, never being the type of dad I saw in the movies. It was also around that time that I felt like fixing Dad was my responsibility. I felt my dread grow deeper and deeper every day as I watched his ribs protrude further and further from his body. When I closed my eyes to fall asleep at night, all I saw was Dad's disintegrating face. His eyes receded into his skull like a zombie, creating deep black circles that seemed to burn me anytime my eyes met them.

I thought I was doing a good thing; I was saving the family. All I could envision was the joy returning to Dad's eyes and the look on Mom's face when she could finally kiss him again. I knew I was doing a good thing. I knew it. I planned out the whole thing in my head; everything was in a cinematic slow motion. I would open the cage and run up to my dad and hug him tightly, although his frail body likely would have hurt against my chest more than it would have healed me.

As soon as I got home from school, I set my backpack down at the front door and confidently walked up to the cage, not even bothering to change out of my uniform. I greeted Dad and was met with silence. I assumed he was in one of his half-asleep, dazed episodes as his body was curled up and faced away from me. So without further explanation, I grabbed the cage's door handle and tugged forcefully. As if by some primal instinct, Dad knew what I was doing before I even opened the door by an inch. In an instant, he was right in front of my face, holding the door closed with one hand and digging his overgrown fingernails into my arm with his other. The pain was enough to distract me from what he said, but definitely not how he was saying it. I had never been screamed at like that before. Maybe I don't remember exactly what he said because it sounded like most of his words were jammed together in an incomprehensible rage. It took me a few seconds to process what was happening, and I ran to my room and hid under the covers on my bed, wiping the saliva that flung from Dad's mouth off my face.

It's been ten years since I tried opening the door. Although it's been ten years and there are no scars left on my body, I still sometimes feel his fingernails digging into my flesh. However, something has changed in those ten years. I'm still scared of Dad's voice. I still blame myself for Dad's despair. But now, I have my own anger. My nails have grown too. Last night, only a few hours before the sun rose, I crept out of bed and stared at Dad. I looked at his jagged body, slowly rising and falling against the cold, metal floor of the cage. For the first time in a while, I felt disgusted. I stood there for days, it felt like, when in reality, a minute had barely passed. In that short time, my resentment grew. It grew, starting at my legs, rising up to my knees, up to my stomach, up to my arm, up to my hand, and my hand pulled the door wide open. I expected some grand moment, some kind of burst of light accompanied by a musical score, but instead there was silence. I looked at his body clearly for the first time since I was five. I was still disgusted. Still angry. I was waiting for the relief and joy to flood my body, but nothing came, so I left the door open and went back to bed.

When I woke up, Dad was gone.

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