

Tea for the Tillerman
CAT STEVENS



Cat Stevens

"Father and Son"

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Our Song: Reflections on Cat Stevens' "Father and Son"

Jack Somers

It's not time to make a change. Just relax. Take it easy.

Mom worked late, so Dad picked me up from kindergarten each day. On the way home, we always stopped at the bar. He'd have a beer—whatever was on tap—and I'd have a Shirley Temple—a glorious glass of pink fizz topped with three maraschino cherries impaled on a miniature plastic sword. After I sucked down the cherries, I would pocket the sword and take it home to arm my G.I. Joes. I had a sizeable arsenal of the multicolored swords at home. I kept them stowed away in a plastic G.I. Joe carrying case under my bed. I knew even then that it wouldn't be good for Mom to see them—damning evidence of how often Dad and I went drinking.

The bartenders—in my memory all twenty-something women, all candy apple red lips and towering, teased-out perms—doted on me. They asked me about school. Did I have a crush on any girls in my class? Was my teacher a witch? They brought me paper and crayons, and taped my wonky sketches of dinosaurs and soldiers to the wall behind the bar. Once I proudly announced to them that I was wearing a brand new pair of Masters of the Universe underwear. I told them that there was a picture of He-man and Skeletor fighting on the back. "I have a battle on my butt," I said, and they all laughed. Dad shook his head and grinned at me. "He's a comedian," he said. "Just like his old man."

Sometimes we went right home after our drinks, and sometimes we went hiking down by the river behind the bar. When our hikes went long, I would start to worry. I worried about getting home in time for dinner. I worried about Mom worrying about us. "I think we should go back to the car," I would say as we tromped along the brambly bank. "It's getting dark."

"Just relax," he would call back to me, his tone calm. "We'll turn around in a minute. We're not in any rush."

Back in the Volkswagen Rabbit, he would feed his well-worn cassette of Cat Stevens' *Tea for the Tillerman* into the tape deck. We'd drive home in the purple light of early evening listening to "Wild World" and "Where Do the Children Play?" and "Miles From Nowhere." When "Hard Headed Woman" came on, he would say, "This song reminds me of your mother." And when "Father and Son" started to play, he would say, "This is our song" and tousle my hair.

I was once like you are now, and I know that it's not easy...

I started first grade at a new school—a Catholic school where I didn't know anyone. On the first day, I saw some older boys playing basketball during recess and asked if I could join them. I was immediately pummeled with jeers. "Get out of here, dipshit!" they spat. "Get lost, bucko!"

At the bar that afternoon, Dad noticed I wasn't guzzling my Shirley Temple with the usual gusto. "What's the matter, buddy?"

"Some big kids were mean to me at school," I said. I felt a prickling behind my eyes. "They called me dipshit and bucko."

He contemplated his half-full beer glass for a few seconds. "You know when I was your age, I got picked on, too," he said.

I cocked an eyebrow at him. How could anybody ever pick on a guy like my dad? He was fearsome—a bulging, burly goliath. I'd seen him play rugby in an old boy's game the week before, and he'd knocked several men clean off their feet. He was like a bull out on the pitch. No one in his right mind would call my dad a dipshit. "I don't believe you," I said.

"Believe it, buddy. I was small and frail. I had chicken legs and big buckteeth. Kids used to call me Bucky the Beaver."

"What did you do?" I asked, still not entirely convinced.

He took a swig of beer and licked his lips. A trace of foam clung to the bottom of his mustache. "I promised myself that when I got big, I would never give smaller kids a hard time. I didn't want to make anyone else feel the way those kids made me feel."

I studied my right hand, my stubby little fingers, my plump white palm. "I don't think I'll ever be big like you," I said.

"Big is overrated," said my dad.

How can I try to explain?

Rummaging around in my basement my sophomore year of high school, I unearthed my dad's sophomore yearbook. I flipped through the musty, yellowed pages and found half a dozen pictures of him. On page thirty-two, he was posing with the football team, broad-shouldered and beaming in the center of the back-row, only sixteen and already the star. On page forty-eight, he appeared with the French club. He was the lone boy in the group, and the girls who flanked him seemed to be pressing toward him, as if they couldn't get close enough. On page fifty-nine, he was pictured with the other members of student council sitting at the center of a table in the library. He looked just like a young JFK in his skinny tie and fitted blazer, his longish hair meticulously combed and parted on the left.

At sixteen he was the king of his school. And what was I at sixteen? The first word that came to mind was invisible. I floated through the halls of my school like an apparition, a gloomy mist. I had no friends and few acquaintances. I was on the soccer team, but I was a clumsy player and spent most of my time on the bench. None of the other kids on the team talked to me outside of practice or sat with me at lunch. Some days I skipped lunch so I wouldn't have to endure the agony of eating alone. I never spoke to girls. I was too self-conscious about my acne, my cracking, quavering voice, my underwhelming five-foot-seven frame.

I had no one to talk to about my misery. Mom always came home from work late and exhausted. I didn't want to trouble her with my problems. And Dad? What was the point of confiding in him? Why bother trying to explain to him what I was going through? How could he possibly understand? What did he know about being an outcast? Nothing. He'd never been ostracized or ignored or overlooked. The pages of his yearbook made that pretty clear.

Now there's a way, and I know that I have to go away.

College for me was an opportunity for escape—escape from my house, escape from my loneliness, escape from myself. As soon as I hit campus, I began remaking myself, transforming myself into the person I wanted to be—a freer, happier, less inhibited person. I joined the poetry club and the jazz band. I got a job at the student coffeehouse. I loaded my schedule with literature classes and started actively seeking out and finding people more like me.

I flew home for Thanksgiving that year and met my dad in the airport. In the three months since I'd last seen him, I'd grown my hair long, lost about fifteen pounds, and sprouted a patchy beard. I was a new man. When he saw me come out of the gate, he smiled, strode over, and wrapped me up in a tight hug. For the first time in a long time I felt the power of his body, the crushing strength of his arms. Still at the age of fifty he could snap me in half. Still he was formidable.

He released me and stepped back. "Look at you," he boomed with pride. "I don't even recognize you anymore. You look ten years older. You look like a man."

I shrugged and looped my thumbs around the straps of my backpack. "It's the beard," I said.

We walked over to the restaurant across from my gate and sat down at the bar. Dad ordered us both beers, and the bartender didn't ask questions. When the drinks arrived, Dad held up his bottle. "Cheers," he said.

I clinked my bottle against his and took a sip. I didn't particularly like the taste, but I resisted the urge to wince. I didn't want hurt Dad's feelings.

He thumped me on the back with his left hand. "Just like old times."

I nodded. "Just like old times."

But it wasn't. I knew that. He had to know that, too. I had crossed over to a different place. I had moved away from him. I had become my own person. I was no longer the chubby six-year-old who idolized him, who hung on his every word and copied his every move. I still admired him. I admired his toughness and his plain-spokenness and the immense joy he got out of simple things like having a beer with his son and hugging in an airport. But I knew we were different people and that we would never again be as close as we had been on those shimmering, peaceful afternoons fourteen years earlier.

Find a girl. Settle down. If you want, you can marry.

My dad liked Joanna almost immediately. Like my dad, she was a strong personality and didn't hesitate to speak her mind. Like him, she thought my mother and I worried too much and needed to relax. When Joanna and I got together with my parents for dinner, my dad would say fondly, "Joanna's on my team" and then look askance at my mother and me to let us know we were not.

At our wedding, my dad was happier than I'd ever seen him. He raised a glass and gave an Irish toast at the dinner and got teary-eyed when Joanna and I said our vows. It was the second time I'd seen him cry. The first was the night his father died twenty-five years before.

Look at me. I am old, but I'm happy.

Almost nine months to the day after Joanna and I got married, Jane was born. That fall, Joanna and I started a new routine. Every Sunday, we would drive to my parents' house with the baby for dinner. As soon as we entered, Dad would pour us each a generous glass of Cabernet Sauvignon, and then the four of us would sit in the living room, chit-chatting and staring wonderingly at our new baby in her car seat.

My dad loved Jane more than I think he'd ever loved anyone. He would hold her tenderly in his brawny arms and talk to her about all the adventures they would have when she was older. He had big plans. He wanted to take her skiing. He wanted to teach her hand-to-hand combat. He wanted to see her graduate from high school.

Occasionally he would glance up at me and say, "You guys did a good job," or, "I always knew you'd have a girl. You're so sensitive," or "She's a beaut."

In January of 2013, Joanna and I found out we were pregnant again, and in April we discovered it was a boy. My dad was jittery with excitement. He was going to have a grandson—a little boy to spoil and adore and mentor. He was counting down the days. The baby was due on September 25th.

On September 23rd, in the middle of a bike ride with some friends, Dad had a massive heart attack. The doctors shocked him twenty times but were unable to revive him. At the funeral, Jane, now two years old, skipped around his casket and sang gleefully as the priest said the final blessing. Dad would have loved that. He would have scolded the rest of us standing there, our faces streaked with tears. He would have said, "Look at that beautiful little girl and cheer the fuck up. Don't feel bad for me. Sure, I only lived sixty-three years, but I packed more fun into those sixty-three years than most people pack into a hundred."

I know Dad would have been proud of his grandson. Henry is built just like his grandfather—like a bull. He's athletic and easygoing and full of laughter like my dad was. I'd like to think my dad's spirit jumped out of his body in that emergency room and into Henry in the birthing room. I don't think it's a preposterous idea.

Not too long ago, I picked Henry up from pre-school. On the way home, I slid *Tea for the Tillerman* into the CD player. Henry listened attentively to "Wild World" and "Longer Boats" and "Hard Headed Woman." I could tell by his glassy gaze and partially opened mouth that he was transfixed by the music just as I had been at his age. About five minutes from our house, "Father and Son" came on.

"What's this?" said Henry.

"This is our song," I said.