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I Am Not Mike Smith

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By: Mike Smith

Then the time comes for you to be your own man and take on the world, and you did. But somewhere along the line, you changed. You stopped being you. You let people stick a finger in your face and tell you you're no good. And when things got hard, you started looking for something to blame, like a big shadow. Let me tell you something you already know. The world ain't all sunshine and rainbows. It's a very mean and nasty place and I don't care how tough you are it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it. You, me, or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. But it ain't about how hard ya hit. It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward. How much you can take and keep moving forward. That's how winning is done! Now if you know what you're worth then go out there and get what you're worth. But you gotta be willing to take the hits, and not pointing fingers saying you ain't where you wanna be because of him, or her, or anybody! Cowards do that and that ain't you! You're better than that! (Stallone).

"His Father must have loomed large to him".
(Griffin 335)

As the hours wore on, I continued to slip in and out of sleep. I could hear his labored breathing, slowing after each exhale, as the pain of fifty seven years escaped his body. There but not really there, I prayed for the moment my father's soul would escape the chains that shackled him to this broken, beaten, and used body, the moment his pain would go away, the moment my pain, my emotions, would take hold of me and remind me of who I am not.

Eleven years old is supposed to be a fun age, the age where little boys discover little girls and then quickly forget about them for the frog that was found in the ditch. The child's innocence is still intact, not yet soiled with the sins of the world. It is not supposed to be the age that you realize your father, who you have attempted to emulate your entire existence, may be the most disturbed and awful human being you have ever known. This moment, this epiphany, strikes the child harder than the hand he held some twenty years later ever had.

The whispers had always been out loud. As I continued to mature the secrets underneath those whispers began to surface. The older I became, the more my family and friends felt it was okay to show me the man my father really was, a manipulative, possessive, wife beating alcoholic, who was incapable of holding a job or telling the truth. Everyone believed I would turn out just like my dad. Deciding to prove them all wrong a course was set to become a better man than my father. To lead such a great life that those who knew him would no longer remember the terrible things he did, my accomplishments would over shadow his failures as a man.

The son shall not bear the guilt of the father

There she lay, on the front porch broken and battered; sleeping, she is just sleeping, my nine year old brain told my heart. Dad had just come home from spending a night in jail; Mom had bailed him out and picked him up not an hour earlier. Having decided she could no longer bear living this life, she stood up to him and spoke the words that brought upon this beating: "I am leaving you." This was not the first time she had bore the brunt of his anger, but it would be the last.

The sound a steel toed work boot makes as it crashes into the side of my mother's head never leaves my memory; the sickening thud, the crushing of flesh, the pop as her head bounced off the wood deck, then the silence, the deafening silence. Time stood still and I could not move. I did not cry and I did not rush to my mother's side. I immediately started making excuses for my father and what he did. I did not want to think that he was capable of doing this. It just was not possible that my hero could ever do anything like that, especially to my mother.

For thirty years, I have carried my father's guilt. Every decision I have made has been a conscious effort to separate myself from him. Society does not allow that to happen easily. As a male child whose similarities so closely resemble your father's, you become pigeon holed to the man your father is. I was considered to be just like my dad before I had even entered puberty. Years after my parents' divorce and my mother's subsequent remarriage, the words "you are just like your father" haunt me. To this day people believe I am him. Inside their heads in their memories they know what he did and still believe that I am capable of the horrible acts he committed.

Drinking was the life and death of my father. At one point, it had become my life as well. All I could think about was being able to go to the nearest bar and drink until I could not stand. And I did just that many times. It was my escape from the world, my escape from the memory of my Father's actions. However, the more I drank the more I became like him.

As my hand crashed through the window of the car and into the driver's face, I could think of nothing but rage everything was black. I did not regret what I had done as I fought off the rushing throng of attackers. I could not understand why I was being attacked in a parking lot of a bar. It was a bar fight it happens all the time. As I was pulled out from under the crushing blows of the angry mob by the police I saw why everyone was trying to kill me. There on the stretcher being taken to the ambulance was the person who received the brunt of my rage, bloodied, broken, and crying. For a moment I had become my father, I let him in and let him control me. The victim was my ex-girlfriend but in my mind in my soul on that stretcher I saw my mother lying on the wood patio.

The back story does not matter, all that matters was that I had done what I had promised myself I would never do: physically harm a woman. She received from me as much rage and hatred as any man ever could have. The feelings of rage had left and what remained was regret and shame. I had come to the realization that I am capable of doing those terrible things my father had done so many years earlier. I cried for my mother, my ex-girlfriend, and for myself. The people who had always whispered were right: I was twenty three and I was just like my father.

I was twelve when I came home to my father's house after school with a bloodied lip. I was dreading walking through the door and reporting to him that I had gotten into and lost a fight. I remembered his rule on fighting "if you lose I will beat your ass, if you win I will beat your ass, and if you run away I will break your jaw". The actual conversation escapes me to this day; all I remember was the ensuing punishment. After he had hit me and I picked myself up of the kitchen floor, he told me to stop crying and if I did not he would throw me through the wall. Now this was a trailer made in the mid-seventies so the walls were not very sturdy; thank goodness. I recall going through the wall headfirst then him picking me up, brushing my hair off, hugging me and whispering "I am sorry I love you" in my ear. I went to my room and laid on my bed. I woke up the next morning thinking I got what I deserved. How strange was it that I actually believed this punishment was fitting for me losing a fight?

Letting Go

Walking into the hospital room I could see that this man was losing his battle with life. It had been two weeks since I found him in his bed lying in a pool of his blood. He was no longer the six foot two, two hundred and forty five pound monster from my youth. He was weak and frail, barely one hundred and fifty pounds, unable to sit up and scarcely able to speak. Walking over to him and grasping his hand, I bent over and whispered into his ear: "I am here Dad". In a barely audible tone he whispered back, "Take me home." I responded, "When you get better you can come live with me." Dad asked, "Do you promise?" I replied, "Yes Dad I promise".

Already having spoken to the doctors I was aware that it was just a matter of time before my Father's difficult existence would come to an end. He was not going to get better and I could not stand. And I did just that many times. It was my escape from the world, my escape from the memory of my Father's actions. However, the more I drank the more I became like him.

My History

I was raised in a small farming town called Felicity, thirty five minutes east of Cincinnati. In this town there were two classes of people: those that had and those that did not. I fell into the latter of the two categories. Both sides of my family had been dysfunctional for as long as I can remember. My mom had come from a divorced family and was sent away to Catholic school because she did not get along with her new step-mother. My mother had five kids with three different men. The first, an older sister was born when my mother was fifteen. She was forced to give her daughter up for adoption. Following her were my two older sisters, and finally my younger brother.

My father's family history is a bit more torturous than most. He was the youngest of five children, but is not a full sibling to any of his brothers or sisters. Uncle Jerry, the brother he was closest to, was hit by a truck and killed when dad was fourteen; dad never really recovered from that. The family secret says that my grandmother had an affair while her husband was away for work; out of that affair came my Dad. Her husband would not claim the child so they divorced and my grandmother married the man I came to know as my grandfather shortly thereafter. This man was not my dad's father, but raised him nonetheless. However, he refused to adopt my dad and give him his last name. Once my father had turned eighteen, he legally changed his name from Kidder to Smith. I believe he did this so he could have some sort of connection to the man who raised him. This is not the makings of a horrible tragedy but what made it so bad is that no one would tell my dad who his real father was. Even when he was a grown man with children of his own and asked family members, including his Mother they all refused to give him an answer.

My father's past is very important in explaining who I am or what has made me who I am today. I honestly believe had his family not kept the name of his father such a closely guarded secret and allowed him to know, and possibly search him out, he could have received the answers to the questions that gnawed at him his whole life. Maybe he would have turned out differently, and in turn, my life could have been completely different.

I had always known I would end up in the military, not because it was what I wanted to do but because I wanted to succeed in an area where my Dad had failed. Dad had joined the Army as a way to honor his late brother. He joined at eighteen and left home for basic training, within six months he was kicked out due to his drinking and inability to stay out of trouble. I was seventeen when my Mom took me to the recruiting station to sign the papers to allow me to join. I left home two weeks later, finished basic training, and returned home and graduated high school. Three weeks later, following the death of my grandfather, I was on a plane to Ft. Hood, Texas for my first duty station. I did not return home for five years.

I did not want to come home. I missed my family but this was my chance to separate myself from my father. I hoped that being away and succeeding in the Army would be a way to make those disbelievers see that I was different than dad. It did not work.

I did great things in the Army, was very proud of myself as was my family. But people still saw me as Mike Smith's son. I was beginning to see that no matter what I did or where I went I was not going to be able to escape it. So after five years I came home and attempted to build a healthier relationship with my dad.

The first time I saw dad after my five year self-imposed exile, he was drunk, not buzzed, not a little drunk, full blown drunk. I sat at his kitchen table trying to talk to him and tell him about my life the last five years. All he wanted to do was bring up the past and make excuses for his behavior. He started talking bad about my mom and my step-dad. He called her names, claiming I loved my step-dad more than him and probably called him dad. He then proceeded to accuse me of stealing money from him. I had not left the chair I was sitting in since I stepped foot in his house. Having had all I could take I told Dad I loved him and would stop in and see him another time. As I walked out to my car he came after me calling me a fag and saying some things a child should never hear from a parent; regardless of the child's age. He reached for me and grabbed my shoulder and spun me around. Out of instinct, I came around swinging and knocked my dad out cold in the middle of the parking lot. I immediately felt guilty and tried to help him up telling him I am sorry through a flood of tears. He picked himself up and went back inside. I got in my car and cried for longer than I can remember. We did not speak for another four years.

A New Life

The doctor handed him to me even before my wife had held him. I was the first person to hold my newborn son. He was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. As I stood there looking at him, ecstatic and scared at the same time, tears welled up inside of me out of happiness and regret. I regretted that my dad was not there to see this, and that my son may have to hear the same whispers that I have heard my entire life. I made a promise to my son; I would make him proud to be named Michael Dale Smith III. He would never have to escape my shadow and would never have to go through what I went through as a child or as an adult. My son was my new life; I changed everything for him. I stopped drinking, got serious about my career, and even attempted to hold together my failing marriage years later for him. All these years of trying to escape my dad's shadow meant nothing to me now. In my own mind becoming a father was all I needed to be able to accomplish that.

The Ending

As I lay there drifting in and out of sleep, a baseball game muted on the television, I could hear his labored breathing. It was just him and I alone in this sterile white hospital room. My sisters had gone home to be with their children and my younger brother was outside taking a walk. Then it happened the room became silent, so silent it woke me up. I slowly turned my head to look at my Father praying that he was still there; he was not. My father passed away on August 25th, 2004 at the age of 56. I was there with him holding his hand as he took his final breath. I am at peace with my father and his death. At the very least he was not alone at the end as he had been for the vast majority of his life. He could not beat the demons in his life while on this earth and now he does not have to wake up every morning and go through that battle. He has finally found the peace in death that he was unable to find in life.

Even though my dad was not a good person and had made my life and my family's lives a living hell for so many years, at the end of his life, he was still my dad. He and I had made peace with each other two years prior to his death. He sought me out because he wanted to be involved in his grandson's life. I told him it would not happen if I came over and he was drunk. I had to live with that as a child and I would be damned if I was going to expose my son to it. He did not quit drinking and I had given up trying to help him quit. However, whenever he wanted to see me or my son he would call and set up a time and would stay sober long enough to spend some time with us, then would binge on alcohol as soon as we left. In my eyes it was better than nothing.

Acceptance

I have accepted the fact that I will always be judge by my father's sins. I know that I have it in me to drink my life away, so I do not drink. I know from experience that there is a dark side to me so I do not tempt it. I have yet to be faithful to any woman I have been with, so I stay single so I am not labeled a cheater or hurt anyone like I did my ex-wife. I can be manipulative, mean, and uncaring just like my father was. So I tend to keep those emotions bottled up. My sister's marvel at how much I sound like him, how my hands look just like his and how when they look at me they see him. When I hear my voice, I hear me not him, when I look at my hands I see my hands not his, and when I look at my reflection I see me not him. But, deep in my soul I know I am his son and that I could have easily become him.

I am who I am not in spite of my father but because of the man he was. His actions showed me what I do not want to be. I am a better dad to my son because he was a horrible dad. I am a hard worker because he was not. I do not drink because he was an alcoholic. I tell the truth even if it hurts someone's feelings because he was unable to be truthful. I am in college because I want to be more than he was. I am a hard worker because I want people to know that I earn everything I get.

But I am who I am mostly because I want my son to be proud to call me his dad. My dad did not have a father to be proud of and neither did I. I want to break that line here and allow my son a family history he can be proud to talk to his children about.

I could have focused this paper on where I grew up or other fluffy things as a way to work my way around telling the truth about what has made me who I am and I would have done fine and received a nice little \$ and moved on. But, I have not led a cookie cutter life, this is me. This is who I am. My life has been harder than most and easier than some and I am thankful for that fact. It has helped shape me into a good father, son, brother and friend. This is my reality and my truth. As hard as it may be to share, this is me. It is not therapeutic to talk about my life or put it down in writing as many people would like to believe. But I am not ashamed of it. We all have demons to fight; some are just bigger than others.

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My Joy of Discovering an American Dream

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By: Anastasia Henize

My heart was racing hundreds of miles an hour, just like the airplane that was taking me to the land of my dreams, to the place of unknown, to the wonderful future.

When I grew up in Russia I would always wonder what it was like to live in America. Something was very mysterious and majestic about life in the USA. Something I had not discovered yet, America was so far- far away. What was the American dream?

Since I was a little girl, I had heard about the good life in America. The people who lived in that country had everything; they were all rich, most of them were millionaires. They all wore crispy clean white clothing and drove fancy automobiles. Americans are all making good money, have big houses, great jobs; they travel around the world and had millions in their bank accounts. The land of opportunity and freedom was calling me with all its might. I was young, restless and full of grand dreams. The decision was made promptly, almost compulsively. After enduring some difficulties of obtaining an American visa, proving my Russian income, a thorough background check and ticket purchasing, I was on my way to Miami Florida in the United States of America.

During my 12 hours on an airplane I was very anxious to see that famous and great country. My anticipation was growing by the second, panicky thoughts buzzed in my head, strange country, unfamiliar people with a different language, but it was too late to turn back. Luckily my anxiety was disturbed by the beautiful flight attendant. She had a gorgeous bright smile, neatly tight hair and crispy white shirt with proudly attached pin that said Delta. "Oh, how American" I noticed. She welcomed me to the flight with an alcoholic beverage, the best tension remedy ever! After a few of those remedies, my mind was joyful and calm while the airline was taking me to the land of the American dream of success, fame and wealth. After nine hours in the air, our pilot announced something in English; I guessed it was landing, because passengers got cheerful and started applauding showing appreciation to the crew. At last, I arrived in Florida, my remedy wore off and I started worrying again. I didn't speak English, just enough to say "hello," and "good morning." I had one thousand dollars in my pocket and a small duffel bag. My family always was cheering for my adventurous character, traveling skills, and most importantly my brave (but somewhat naive) decision to come to the USA without language, family or place to live. Previously, I was able to travel and visit a few foreign places without knowing local language and places to stay; Poland, Czech Republic, Turkey, plus a dozen of a former Soviet Republics were in my travel history. That experience of the new places made me more curious about the world and different cultures. I was so excited about my new adventure; I was so sure everything was going to be perfect!

Finally I arrived in Miami very late in the day. My close Russian girlfriend Tanya greeted me at the gate with a gigantic bottle of Stolichnaya vodka. She was very happy and because we had not seen each other for two years, we jumped and hugged each other probably a million times. "Welcome to A-me-rica!" she screamed over the noisy Miami Airport jungle. She took me to a beautiful ocean site, where the air was warm and moist, the palm trees were green and swaying, and the American people were upbeat and friendly. I seemed to be getting welcome greetings from all directions. I instantly knew I had made the right decision to come here and soon I was going to discover my American Dream!

I was lucky I began my discovery of the United States in Florida. I went to Miami, Naples, and Orlando which are all wonderful, friendly and affectionate cities full of tourists, attractions, restaurants and a mild weather year around. I settled in Fort Myers, a city located in South West Florida. At first, language was a major problem so I was quickly enrolled in an English as a Second Language course for immigrants. I sat in class with students from Mexico, Somalia, China and other countries. English sounded like "wa-wa-wa-wa," and I could not separate the words or sentences. Some American expressions did not make any sense to me. I discovered that some words like "I can eat a horse", "let's pig out" or "drunk as a skunk" and "my dogs are barking" had nothing to do with animal conditions. I learned how to roll my tongue when saying "cheeseburger" and curled my lips in "very well". My English teacher was an immigrant from Mexico, Mr. Suarez, who taught us Spanglish. I wanted to absorb the whole experience with my every breath. I wished to learn English quickly, not just the language, but the mannerism of the culture. I knew if I did not know how to communicate, I would not be able to survive and be happy.

My discovery of American English took me straight to an American television. You can learn a massive amount of information about the USA from that TV box. Eight hundred channels for everyone, the choices seem unlimited. There are movie channels, sports channels, music channels, learning channels and so on to infinity and beyond. I started mimicking people on TV, learning names and brands of an American life style. I learned how to act like some ladies from soap operas and memorized words of American songs with Sesame Street's characters. One show was very difficult for me to understand, but it was very popular, so I had to watch it. You can learn a lot about young people, American marriage and progressive language with jargon from A Jerry Springer Show.

My next discovery in the great United States of America was most enjoyable for my stomach! American food, what could be more delicious, scrumptious and satisfying? The golden arches of McDonalds, massive hot tables in Old Country Buffet, triple cheeseburgers, super French fries, barbecue, Cold Stone Creamery with one hundred choices of ice cream. I love it! Double this, triple that. The best is Dunkin Donuts, "Buy one dozen, get the second dozen FREE!" Did you hear that? FREE! What a joy! Don't let me get started talking about the enormous grocery stores! Publix, Wal-Mart, Kroger and other supermarkets; they are the monsters of the grocery world, carrying different types of food choices for everyone. My favorite product is a hot dog with perfectly fitted hot dog bun, just needs to be placed in a microwave for seconds and consume. No cooking! What a dream, an American dream!

Speaking of the American dream, I also discovered that you don't really have to leave your car at all. You can drive through everywhere; pick up food from restaurants, wash your car, do your banking, change your oil, obtain medicine from the pharmacy, drop off and pick laundry from dry cleaners, even have alcoholic beverages delivered to your car without you leaving it. Just drive through! I am dreaming? I was really in America, in this wonderful place, eating this delicious food, with these friendly people, across the world from where I was only yesterday.

Today my journey has continued with the help of all the friendly American people, who are very proud of their country and rights. "We, the people", one of the Amendments in American Constitution starts with these words, which I discovered was very true. Freedom of speech, religion, press and other privileges I did not have in Russia. American cities have accessibility for the handicapped and seniors, services for people with needs, free public bathrooms, help for your car in case of an emergency on the road, friendly greeters in shops and restaurants. This great country has learning opportunities for everyone; learning centers, libraries, free tutors even free transportation for the students! I admire the unity of the people who live in this country. They are all connected by the great honor to be an American. I respect them for the way they love their country. In time of needs and natural disasters American people are the most generous in the world. Schools and churches, neighborhoods and communities all come together in great support of each other and even for people in other countries.

After 12 years of living in this country I am still in search of that American dream. I definitely discovered a lifestyle that people in other countries do envy. People often question me about my decision to come here. They wonder why I would leave my country and my home, with no guarantees of the life that lay ahead of me. Why this foreign land and language? Moreover, why pick the United States over all other choices? Perhaps I see the opportunities, great lifestyle and the freedom that far too many Americans take for granted. There is no other country in the world where a person could start with nothing and become a success if they were willing.

What is an American Dream? Twelve years have passed since the day I arrived in the USA and I am still enjoying my journey, but now with the title of American Citizen. Now I can place my right hand over my heart and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Here it is my greatest joy of discovering an American Dream. Now I belong to this wonderful country with the first democratic constitution, the home of Abraham Lincoln, John Adams and other great people that I admire. What an HONOR! My American Dream has come true! Now, I have an opportunity to become anything I want. I have my freedom and my pride. I am proud to be an American!

"So, how about my rich American Dream full of millions in the bank, fancy cars, big houses and crispy white clothing?" you might ask me. I would answer, that my rich American Dream is still alive, but now it's imprinted with gold of American people's kindness, jeweled with greatest American history, and shined with hard working citizens.

Postscript:

"Welcome to McDonalds, would you like to try our new triple cheeseburger with double cheddar and bacon?" The cheerful voice from intercom of a drive-through restaurant asked me.

"Oh, yes I would," I replied, "And make it with a supersize drink and double fries!" I am an American now!

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Piling Up

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By: Karie-Lee Sutherland

They say you can recognize a lady by looking at her hands. I think a better indication is to get a look in her laundry room. Laundry is like life, you know. Sometimes it piles up on you.

Being a kid is when you have it made in the laundry department. Coming home from school, finding a pile of fresh-scented, neatly folded laundry - you knew your mom was thinking of you while you were gone. Laundry on the floor was "no biggie." Once I fell out of the top bunk in the night; laundry on the floor saved my life. Back then, the only possible worry about laundry was having the good underwear on in case you were ever in an accident and had to go to the hospital. Holey underwear would bring disgrace on your entire family.

Growing up, however, and being in charge of the laundry brings a whole new perspective to the matter - a new meaning to the term "sweating the small stuff".

Laundry on the floors is no longer acceptable - I am not a paid housekeeper, you know? My children think a pile of clothes in the floor is tidy. I tell them heaven only knows what's growing under there - a hive of rodents could make a nest and eat right through the carpet. This does not alarm them.

I try to keep after it, but no matter how many baskets of laundry I put in, the gathering loads are like an oncoming army of stinkiness, overwhelming my resources. I am fluffing, folding, fretting, but never ever finishing. Another wave advances.

I have never seen the bottom of my laundry bin. Well I did once, but it wasn't pleasant; stuff accumulates down there. Stuff that little boys collect in the pockets and cuffs of their pants - pretty pebbles, half-eaten cookies, what you hope is pieces of garden mulch, inexplicable bits of kitty litter.

But there are other things buried beneath there as well; good intentions, broken dreams, missed opportunities - the important things in life that you lose track of while wasting your imagination on crummy counter tops and the fuzz on your ceiling fan. Heaps of meaningless business obscure our aspirations, and hopes and dreams and get lost under the chore of day to day living - too often forgotten before we have a chance to discover them again. Time to write a poem, hunt for pirate treasure, or to see a whale in the clouds gets used up making sure all the grass stains have been removed and every sock has a mate. For every load taken out of the dryer, another three get thrown in the basket.

Next thing you know, all the pirates have sailed off to college.

The laundry will let up I suppose, but then I will have to take out the garbage myself. With nobody there to mow the grass, my dreams might well be stuck in the laundry forever.

That's it - today is the day. I will dig out those dreams, dust off the lint of delay and distraction, and dedicate my best energy to the pursuit of the goals too long obscured by mounds of smelly socks and towels. In fact I will get started on that right away... as soon as I finish this next load.