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Like Father, Like Son?

12 Stories About Boys and Their Dads

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Extract

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Introduction

I've always been deeply fascinated by stories about fathers and sons. I could say that's because it's a very important subject, but the truth is that it's probably because I don't feel I ever really knew my own dad.

My parents got divorced when I was seven, and my dad's job took him abroad a lot. So there were large stretches of my childhood when I hardly saw him at all. Although strangely enough, the less I saw of him, the larger he seemed to loom in my mind. I thought about him all the time. I wondered where he was and what he was doing. I loved getting postcards from the exotic places his job took him to, and read them over and over again. I longed for him to come home, for him simply to be here.

I also remember being very envious of friends whose parents weren't divorced, boys with dads who gave them advice and showed them how to fix things and played football with them, or better still, came to watch them play for school teams. That's what I wanted – a dad to tell me what to do, and to give me

his approval when I did something well.

Most of my friends took their fathers for granted, and by the time I was a teenager I realized a real flesh and blood dad is rather more complicated than an ideal father in your head. I was seeing my dad regularly by then, and although he gave me a lot of the approval I'd been looking for, we also had plenty of disagreements. He didn't like my long hair and jeans. I didn't like his politics. And we were both embarrassed by each other.

The years passed. I grew up, got married, became a dad myself, to two beautiful daughters. Things didn't go so well for my dad. His business went bust, and like many men in that position he felt bitterly disappointed with the way his life had turned out. After all, aren't men supposed to be ambitious and strive for success? To be good providers for their families? Still, it was a time when at least we were talking more, and for a while I thought there was a chance I might even get to know him a little better.

But it wasn't to be. My dad had been quite ill for several years, and suddenly he was absent again, only now there was no chance that he would come back. His death came as a huge shock, partly because my own writing career was starting to take off and I wanted him to see I was doing well. But also because a few months later our third child was born – a son.

It almost seemed spookily strange it should turn out that way.

So I found myself wondering what kind of father I should be to my son Thomas. Certainly not an absent one. When my parents split up (in the early 1960s), divorce was pretty unusual. But by the time I became a parent it was a lot more common, and many children were growing up without fathers around. I didn't want that to happen to my kids.

But should I be Dad the Disciplinarian, the stern father who lays down the law and hands out punishment when it's broken? Or should I be Dad the Teacher, the guy who knows everything and shows his son how the world works? Or should I just be Dad the Friend, a playful companion with a car and a credit card? But of course, what I soon learned was that being a dad meant I had to be all of those things, and a lot more besides.

Sons want a dad they can look up to and respect, a dad who gives them approval and love. But sons also want a dad they can react to, even rebel against. As sons, some of us discover that we want to grow up to be like our dads, and some of us are absolutely terrified in case that happens. Sons worry they might be a disappointment to their dads. Dads worry they're letting their sons down. Many of us feel all of those things, so it's no wonder that we men

sometimes find it hard to express our emotions.

But one emotion I can express is a delight in the stories you're about to read. It's been fascinating to see how the experiences of writers from Britain, the US and Australia have been similar to mine. Like father, like son, indeed. In these pages you'll find every kind of dad, and every kind of son too, and discover how they get on with each other. Or don't, as the case may be. I think my dad would be proud of me for putting together such a terrific book, and that my own son will enjoy reading it.

I'm sure you will too.

Tony Bradman

The Wordwatcher

JOSEPH WALLACE

"Look!" Dad says. "Approaching the road verge! A scrub jay!"

Right then, our car coughs (like someone swallowing wrong), gurgles (like a baby crying), groans (like my brother does when I make a joke)... and dies.

Dad pulls to the side of the road just in time. I look around. Yep, we're halfway between Nowhere and Nowhere Else, Arizona. There are no other cars in sight, nothing but grey bushes and cactuses and the black, empty road in both directions as far as I can see. The only things moving under the hot afternoon sun are the mirages, which look like dancing pools of water on the road but which disappear when you get close to them. If your car is still moving.

I can hear the dead engine popping and a bird squawking. For all I know, it's the scrub jay.

"Uh-oh," Dad says. "It appears that our trusty steed has succumbed to the inevitable effect of the inability of the internal-combustion engine to

function indefinitely on the merest wisps of sublimated distilled petroleum."

Understand that? Well, I do. All that talk of trusty steeds and sublimated petroleum – it's the way you'd say, "This car's been running on fumes, and now it's out of gas."

That is, it's the way you'd say it if you were a normal person, and not Mr Strange.

I mean, *Dr* Strange.

Dad's a doctor, or, as he calls it, a "physician". Whenever he stubs his toe or bangs his head (and, since he's really tall and skinny and has these long legs, this happens often), he says, "Physician, heal thyself!" and then laughs. No one else thinks it's funny, but he doesn't care. He just says, "Physician, amuse thyself!" and laughs some more.

He works at Memorial Hospital and in an office down at the Medical Arts Building in our town in Westchester County, which is just outside New York City. He's a rheumatologist, which means a doctor who treats people who have arthritis. Arthritis is when your joints ache and you have to take pills to feel better.

Once when I was little I heard him call himself a "sawbones", which I guess is another way of saying doctor. But I heard it as "sore bones", and that's still how I think of what he does – he treats people who

have sore bones.

Dad's not the kind of doctor who spends a lot of time running down corridors or yelling orders in the emergency room, like doctors do on TV. In fact, I think a rheumatologist isn't really much of a doctor at all. Maybe that's why he calls himself a "physician", because it makes him sound more important than he really is.

I can't believe it. "We're out of gas?"

"I think so," Dad says, tapping the little dial on the dashboard, as if that's going to help.

"How could it happen?"

"We were betrayed by the fuel gauge," he says, sounding sad.

"Betrayed?" I ask. "How? Did it say the tank was full?"

"No, it reported that the tank was empty," he tells me.

I look at him.

"When the gauge registers *Empty*," he says, "I've always been of the belief that the gasoline tank will harbour at least another gallon of fuel. More than sufficient to carry us to the next establishment where gasoline is offered for sale."

I close my eyes. It figures he'd do this to us. I mean, this trip was supposed to be for *me*. It was *my* thirteenth birthday two months ago, *my* bar mitzvah last month, *my* present. A trip with just Dad, without

my brother and sister. Just the two of us.

And here we are, sitting in a dead car on an empty road miles from anywhere.

Couldn't he do things like everyone else for just one week?

"What are we going to do now?" I ask. My voice sounds a little babyish in my ears, which I hate. But I'm wondering if we're going to be stuck here for hours... maybe overnight... before someone finds us, and though I don't want to admit it, the idea is scary.

Dad has his cell phone out, the silly cheap one he got at 7-Eleven. "It's a phone, Jack," he said when I begged him to get a flip phone with a video camera, net access, games, text messaging, and downloadable wallpaper. "Why should I surrender five times as much hard-earned remuneration so my telephone can do a mediocre – or even wretched – imitation of what a camera, a computer, a cable connection and an interior decorator can accomplish far more ably?"

An interior decorator? Oh, I get it: "Wallpaper".

Dad is staring down at the teeny screen on his dumb little phone. "It appears to be roaming," he says, and then starts singing, "Roam, roam on the range, where the microchips and satellites play..."

Then he frowns and slips the phone back in his pocket. "No service," he says.

Of course there's no service! I want to yell at him.

We're in Nowhere, Arizona! In fact, we haven't even made it to Nowhere yet!

But instead I just say again, "What are we going to do?"

Dad smiles at me. There's already sweat shining on his bald head, but he seems totally cheerful.

"It's a magnificent day for an expedition," he says, waving out towards the empty road with its dancing mirages. "Shall we perambulate?"

My Dad is really smart. Everyone knows that. He's so smart that half the time you need a dictionary to understand what he's saying.

I'm serious. He'll step outside after dinner, take a deep breath, smile, and say, "Ahh, the gloaming!"

Do you know what "gloaming" means? I didn't either, until I looked it up.

It means "evening".

Dad is so smart that he was only sixteen when he went off to college somewhere down South, and only nineteen when he graduated. He had the third best average of anyone in his college class, even though everyone else was two or three years older than he was. Like I said: smart.

Unfortunately, being smart doesn't mean that you have a clue.

"During the rainy season, torrential downpours in distant mountains sometimes create great flash

floods here. It's an awe-inspiring display of nature's fury," Dad says, pointing at a dry, dusty gully. It's as hot and dry as the inside of a pizza oven.

I look at him through the sweat pouring down my forehead into my eyes. It stings, like when you open your eyes underwater in a swimming pool or the ocean. But at least underwater it's cool, and wet.

"Though I believe that in the rainy season," Dad says, "you don't run such a sobering risk of encountering venomous serpents."

I look at him. "Venomous serpents?" I ask. "You mean... like rattlesnakes?"

Already I can hear the deadly tick-tick-tick sound in my ears, and every stick along the side of the road seems about to raise a fanged face at me.

"Yes, but I believe most will not venture out until dusk, when the worst of the heat has abated." Suddenly his gaze moves to above my head, and his eyes widen. "Look," he says.

I look up, almost expecting to see a flying rattler. But it's only a flock of small birds with pointy wings darting and swooping over the road. There must be a hundred of them.

"Ahh, violet-green swallows," Dad tells me. "Did you know each one consumes thousands of flying arthropods *every day*?"

"No," I say. Mostly what I know right now is that

there's sweat pouring down my neck, my arms, my legs. I think the road is melting, because it seems to be holding onto the bottoms of my sneakers each time I lift a foot. Everything smells like tar.

"It's true," Dad says. "Swallows have among the finest eyesight and quickest reflexes of any creature on earth."

Dad, on the other hand, wears glasses whose lenses are as thick as the safety windows in our school. He can't see three feet without them. If he was a violet-green swallow, he'd be doomed. He'd starve to death trying to catch one flying bug, forget thousands.

Then again, if he was a swallow, he might not even last long enough to starve to death. He'd fly headfirst into a tree while he was using big words in swallowese to drive his swallow kids crazy.

Dad's still looking up at the birds, which are almost over our heads now. Then he says, "Imagine what it would be like to be a gnat and see that vast avian assemblage approaching!" He flaps his arms, as if desperately trying to escape the deadly horde. "Oh, no!" he cries, flapping. "We're doomed!"

A minute ago, I was hoping a car would pull up and give us a ride. But now I'm glad we're alone.

A lot of doctors have to work on weekends, but not Dad. I guess his patients with arthritis don't really need him until Monday. I should be happy about that,

but I have to say, sometimes I wish he was around less.

He doesn't dress like any of the other fathers in the neighbourhood do on their days off. Dad gets up on Saturday mornings and puts on the kind of clothes most other men wear to work. I mean, like these neat blue pants and a shirt you have to button up the front, with a collar and everything. And a sports jacket. And black shoes.

Sometimes he even wears a tie. On the weekend!

Other fathers play catch with their kids. Dad has an old baseball glove, which he first got back like in 1970, but he doesn't use it much, not these days. He used to go out and play catch with me every once in a while, but it never lasted long. Pretty soon he'd be making faces and rubbing the back of his shoulder, and that would be that.

"I've got burstitis," he told me. Or at least that's what I thought he said, and at first I thought he meant that something had burst inside his shoulder. I got this visual of tons of stuff like red chilli bubbling around in there, and when he said he had to stop throwing the ball, I didn't argue.

But then I looked up the word, and found it was really spelled "bursitis". And you know what it basically was? Sore bones.

Figures.

"Do you see that bird?" Dad asks.

Another bird? I think, though I don't say anything. I have so much sweat in my eyes that I can barely see where he's pointing, but then I get a look at a small grey-and-black bird perched on top of a thornbush beside the road. It's staring at us with an eye like a shining black button.

"That," Dad says, in a voice that's so proud and happy it's as if he built the bird himself, "is a loggerhead shrike."

"Uh-huh," I say.

"Shrikes," he goes on, leading us a little closer, "are, gram for gram, perhaps the most ferocious carnivorous predators on earth. They confront creatures twice their size, with only their beaks as weapons. But what a beak!"

The shrike's beak is sharp and hooked. Now that we're close enough to see it clearly, it does actually look pretty fierce.

"And after it has disposed of a sparrow or a mouse, you know what it does next?"

"What?" I say, though I know he's going to tell me anyway.

"It eats as much as it feels like, and then impales the rest on a nearby thorn, or on a piece of barbed wire, if one is present."

I think about this. The shrike lifts its head, as if it's been listening too and likes what Dad said.