

# **The Sunday Funnies**

**Ben Aschaker**

*I love you Dad*

It is a simple knowledge shared among every kid that when life hands you heartache, you follow your dad to the Wisconsin Dells. It's an understanding. I'm a kid. I fumble and cry and scatter in fitful abandon. And the Dells, a funhouse of kitschy water parks and scams that are worth it, is the fix-up shop for all miseries that need mending. Dad may resist as he always does, but he understands.

It would've been us together with mom if she hadn't left years ago. It was never the plan, her joy ripped out by a curious god I was told was named "Cancer" though I preferred not knowing his name at all. Names I can remember.

I didn't want to remember him.

There was a coldness the day she passed. A chill in the air flittering among the summer heat. It ironed into my skin and the skin of my father and cloaked us like a fresh coat of steel.

I remember when it started, in the sanitized room where I sat and watched my mother close her eyes while the beeping monitor so sluggishly siphoned her away. I could only look down at my shoes and wonder. My father, next to me, held her hand and looked into her eyes til the very end. It was here that I'd foster the silence that would power my new identity.

In a sketchbook that laid unclaimed in a lost and found I'd let the quiet move through me. And with a pencil gifted to me by a sympathetic nurse, I made my first mark on a page.

I wanted to draw my mother. I wanted the last time I saw her to be an image of her smiling. I wanted to see her with me and dad by her side.

My attempt was thwarted by my anxious hand and tears pattering the paper. Out of frustration I used my pencil as a knife and slashed the page over and over. Despite the repeated attacks, I couldn't cut through it and what I was left with was blobs of graphite and harsh thick lines that intersected to create a wall of gray.

Our house, a humble dwelling in the Wisconsin backyard, was without music for weeks. Dad would wake up, go to work, come home, and read. I'd wake up, go to school, come home, and stare.

I stared at the walls. I stared at the ceilings. I stared at the washing machine. When the

ticking sound of the clocks grew too loud of a distraction, I'd go outside. Then I'd stare into the canopy of our forest, at the hornet nests and decay in the garden. And dandelions, alive like fire, infesting the countryside.

We lived like this until the winter season. When the first snowflake landed on my tongue, I turned to smile at dad. He smiled back and we both let the moment capture us. Here in the first snowfall since we lost her, we found ourselves again. We forgot we could share a laugh because we tried so hard to grieve.

The days when I looked forward began. I returned to my sketchbook and tried. I'd take in the images that surrounded me and record my reflections on the page.

At the end of every week, dad and I would read the Sunday Funnies together. We'd share a laugh like we did that first day of the cold season. The silence in my heart thawed with my patience and the art, the work got better.

Together we would forge the everything that you could read in-between the lines of each delicate frame.

Every couple of years, he'd take a few dollars and we'd vacation at the Dells. I liked the enchantment of the place. It was Paris every time we'd visit, the only world away I knew. It wasn't the same for him.

For him, it was a simple remedy to rest my sadness. It was an environment he wasn't meant for, but he survived in it if only to see me smile.

As the years moved ever forward, I grew sick of the stale color of the place. The vibrant world I had known in my younger years had soiled into a sepia toned flavor. It felt like nothing to the senses. It felt like air.

It felt like turmoil.

My father very rarely drank. I made up for it. Every night I'd foul myself with alcohol. Every morning I'd wake up with a pain pulsing like a separate, anxiety poisoned heart burrowed into my skull. To ease the routine suffering, I take an Advil and sink it with green tea.

Then I place a pile of torn up paper shards and folded away mistakes on the clean ashtray that resides on my window sill and set it on fire. By watching it burn out and stink the air, I can feel a sweetness that hushes the migraine.

I sketch in the morning. I paint houses in the afternoon. In the twilight of rest between the job and the drink, I write. I write and file it away with the morning's work and the next day I repeat.

Every Friday I take a phone call from my father. I let him know I am well and that I keep up with my payments. I don't hear any disappointment in his voice. I don't have to.

The next Friday I am evicted from my apartment. I take my art and some of my clothes and I make do in a friend's basement. I won't tell dad.

One summer, amidst the obliterating heat, I realized he somehow had an understanding of my situation. And here I thought he hadn't a clue. I was sleeping alone when he called in the early Sunday morning. I couldn't answer, I was still taken by the night and couldn't hear the phone ring.

He left a message.

"I'm worried," he said. "I know you keep telling me same old, same old, and that everything is as fine as it's always been. I just, I'm sorry, I just get this feeling that you're not telling me everything. I worry. Maybe I worry too much. Please stay safe and please know I always listen, even if it doesn't really seem like I do it so well. Love you, dad."

I listened to it. Once and twice and deleted it. I wrapped a Crown Royal in a paper bag and drove north. There was nothing else but that, clothes I liked but didn't expect to need anymore and a feeling of embarrassment thick in my gut. I settled in a green embankment by the Wisconsin River, just outside the comfort of the Dells. There I'd soak the whiskey until my eyes refused to level with the earth. My hope was to fall into the river, like an accident, and let the water put me away. And so easily I'd feel the pulse in my skull relax to a blissful departure.

With the encouragement of my therapist and a promise I made to dad, I took several months and assembled my writings and artwork into a graphic novel I titled *Dry County*. A memoir of sorts, styled with depictions of small town comedy and a hint of that silent rage that deflates in the daytime only to explode come sundown.

It hurt me to write it, but it possessed me with joy when it was finished. Unfortunate that no agents or publishers took any interest in it. Again I had found the riverbank. I was buried with exhaustion and a unique flavor of loneliness.

It took a certain hand at my side and a shared glance of the eye to allow me to keep going.

My next phone call with dad will be at a bus station in Madison. There are hundreds of miles between us but no empty air occupied that distance. I had finally reached zero in my personal bank account and needed just a little cash to afford a ticket. This would be the twenty-eighth time in my life I'd beg him for money. The first few times were supposed to be the only times. The last three involved the most difficult conversations I've ever lived through.

When *Dry County* was finally published, the critical acclaim was everything a storyteller could ever dream of. The monetary gain of such a "momentous achievement in literature" was, some might say, not worth the trouble of it all.

I lost every job I've ever been hired to. When I found success of a spiritual kind in the pages of a book, it didn't bring me much more than trivial pride and several hundred followers on a social media page I rarely had the time to manage.

I lived with dad for a few weeks in his small home in the UP. It was the first time I had seen him in-person in years. Our first embrace had a new warmth emboldened by that particular happiness you feel when you remember you're still alive. It burned with the intensity and life of a good poem. The kind that even when you think you've finished it, you know the work is never quite done.

As life wanders forward, there are days I ask myself if I'll ever have a home again. Money comes and goes like the chaos of a thunderstorm at sea. I find myself somedays drowning and others afloat. Never a rich man, but a reliable gambler that's able to get by.

My greatest achievement in my fledgling career as an artist was an internationally distinguished award. I thought I'd hit the feeling of finally being recognized beyond my cult following of lunatics and dreamers. They tell me I'm a major influence in modern comics. That I have fans in every corner of the globe. That even if it doesn't seem like all that much, I can count the world's most prestigious masters among my collective fanbase.

And they wanted a comment.

Dad has long since passed. He never remarried and he never regretted that decision. In all the miles he traveled in his life, he never turned to look behind him. I was by his side,

so he didn't have to.

Some might find it funny that in my brightest moment the only thing that occupies my mind is him. I don't.

The day I unpacked my things in my first ever apartment, that beginning of my life that I assumed would be separate from him, we had our embrace and he told me how proud he was. I felt bewildered. "Why?" I asked.

"I don't know." He doesn't do this very well. "I just feel like you've caught on."

That was it. It seems like nothing more than a simply put statement, but I knew. I felt what he was trying to say and I smiled. When we had finished for the day and he left to venture back home, I walked to my pitiable desk and took out a paper and pen.

I wrote "I love you dad" then folded it into a reasonable square and stuffed it in one of my books.

As the years burned, that paper migrated from book to book on my shelf. It may have wilted as most paper does over the decades, but the markings of my note did not.

So when asked for comment, I took it out, unfolded it, and mailed it to the committee.

I sat down by my window and looked outside into a scatter of forest. Cold air had started to breach, a most welcome greeting for this time of year. The chill awakened a memory in me that I couldn't quite grasp through the fog in my brain. It brought a warmth with it, that much I could feel. And I was delighted by its return.

I threw on my tattered coat and went outside to feel the breeze and the light touch of the falling snow. I held out my tongue to catch it. One drop and I remembered, and I felt whole again.