

The Pizza Shop:

It was a sunny summer morning at Virginia Beach. Pedaling quickly through the neighborhood, I bolted through stop signs, enraging the drivers in my path. They broadcasted their anger through blaring car horns, and I responded with a wide grin.

I pedaled a few minutes more, until I arrived at the back-entrance of the pizza shop. Using the handlebar of my mongoose, I carefully propped it against a brick wall in the alleyway and rushed to the back door. The worn hinges creaked, as I peered through the slit in the door. There was no sight of my dad. I ran stealthily to the dish-cleaning room to begin my first task of the day.

Water from the sink faucet filled a small bucket with hot water. Bubbles foamed, as the water reacted with soap on the buckets bottom. I tossed two rags from the industrial shelf into the bucket and waddled to the front of the store.

Steadfastly, I doused the rags, wrung them out, and wiped the tops of the tables. I had wiped all six of the countertops, and two pairs of 2x2 booth seating, before my dad came out to check on me. When we made eye contact, a part of me felt that he knew I was late, and I feared that he would erupt in anger and condescension. However, this was not the case. Instead, he grinned and chuckled lightly to himself. He stepped a bit closer, and shouted from the main walkway of the restaurant,

“Hey Mr. Tardy! You’ve got five minutes to finish cleaning the tables. I need your help in the kitchen. Hurry up!”

My father’s exclamation elicited excitement. During my first couple of weeks working at his shop, I had mostly wiped down the counters or washed dishes in the back. He never asked for my help in the kitchen, outside of asking me to pull stuff from the fridge. Naturally, I couldn’t help but theorize what my dad needed help with. *Pizza-making?* Unlikely, since the store wasn’t set to open for another 40 minutes. Clueless, and eager to learn a new skill, I quickly wiped down the remaining booths in the seating area and waddled back to the cleaning room.

Muted blue-gray currents sloshed in the sinks bottom as the nasty pine-sol-pizza-crumb water flowed from the bucket. I wrang out the rags, rinsed them out, and tossed them back into the bucket. Imprinted onto a plastic bottle containing blue liquid was a yellow duck covered in oil. I remembered my dad’s number one rule. *Always wash your hands before dealing with food.* I squeezed the Dawn into my palms and scrubbed vigorously. Scalding hot water cascaded over my palms. Swiftly, I rinsed the suds then turned the knobs of the faucet. I dried my hands with a paper towel and joined my dad at the kitchen prep station.

A collection of vegetables, cutting board, and chef’s knife were the first things to catch my eye. They had been laid atop a stainless-steel countertop. This struck me. I had always watched from afar and had been forbidden to touch a knife. A part of me felt that my ban on knives was being lifted, but to confirm, I inquired my dad. “Hey Dad! I’m done cleaning. What do you need help with?”

Softly, and enthusiastically, he chimed, “Hey bud! Thanks for getting the storefront setup. I was thinking you could help me prepare the house salad for today’s guests. You up for the task?”

“Pshhh, yeah! It beats cleaning the dishes. Plus, making a salad can’t be that hard. Let’s do it!”

I was genuinely excited to help my dad. He smiled, and said, “Well alright then!” My dad grabbed a red onion and held it in his hand. Then, he started his instruction,

“Well, first things first, to make a salad, you need to cut up the vegetables into bite-sized pieces. And to do that, you need three things: a knife, a vegetable, and a cutting board. Each vegetable will require a slightly different chopping or slicing technique, but they all require the same philosophy and that is ... what Austin?”

I was genuinely confused, so I uttered, “Uhhhh, I don’t know...?”

With confidence and assertiveness, my dad replied, “The philosophy is simple. Never cut vegetables in a way that sends the knife towards your body. To avoid this, you must always cut down and away from your body. Never cut upwards or towards yourself. That is how you will slice your finger off. And we cannot be doing that, because, well ... your mom would kill me. Do you understand?”

I nodded my head as we locked eyes for most of this lesson introduction. A notable fear welled up in him, when he brought up the potential ostracization by mom. This was the first summer I was able to work with him, and even with all its qualms, I felt like I was getting closer to him, and I didn’t want my mom to yank that away from him because of my inability to listen.

I responded playfully, but respectfully, “Haha, yeah, she would. Don’t worry dad, I’ll be careful and cut down and away from my body like you said.”

Assured I had listened, he continued to relay the best techniques for chopping each vegetable safely. He instructed how to cut cucumbers into thin slices, and how to be slow, but forceful when slicing the red onion. Every step of the way he stressed the importance of cutting down and away from the body.

By the end of our lesson, we had a nice pile of chopped red onions, romaine hearts, artichoke hearts, halved cherry tomatoes, and cucumber slices. We added croutons, and our signature vinaigrette, before tossing it with a pair of metal tongs. We covered the metallic mixing bowl with siren wrap, and would uncover and dump its contents onto small plates throughout the course of the day, whenever customers decided to dine in.

Time would go on, and my six weeks in Virginia Beach with my dad would come to pass. Shortly after, I went back to Maryland, where my mother and other siblings lived. It was time to start my first year of high school. I originally went into my summer with my dad, mostly excited to be close to the beach. However, I left that experience, with more than just pictures of sandy toes and cheeky shirtless pics. I had learned some valuable life skills, like how to show up on time to work on my own, and how to do basic skills in a restaurant like washing dishes and creating the house salad. However, the biggest lesson I learned was the importance of quality time spent with my dad. I had felt fairly disconnected from him for most of my early and adolescent development. I spent most of the year with my mom and friends, and would only see my dad during holidays, and during my six-week summer stint with him. Previous summers were spent in Pennsylvania, where he would work most of the day. I barely spent time with him. This summer

was the first time I really felt like I had been included in his world and understood what he was passionate about. I could see the joy on his face, as he talked with customers, and tossed pizzas in the air. I watched him from my spot in the cleaning room, with a bit of envy, but also with pride that he was my dad. It's sad, but this is one of only a few moments where I felt this deep pride and happiness to call him my father.

A few months after my stint in Virginia I was walking home from wrestling practice, on a cold January evening. I had received a call from my mom, telling me to come home. My mom wasn't the one to anxiously call me out of the blue, she was absent for the most part, so I knew something was awry. I walked through the front door and eventually received the news that my dad had passed.

Turmoil and despair ravaged me soon after, and it took me a while to heal, but over time I came to terms with what happened to my father. He was complicated, and sometimes disorganized or impulsive, but at his core he was a man of passion. At the time, I didn't quite understand why he would put all his effort into a business that failed immediately, but now that time has passed, I've come to understand things a bit more.

Sometimes, as humans, we have these images of ourselves embarking upon life within what we would consider an ideal state. For my dad, a restaurateur was considered ideal. I didn't inherit this vision from him, but I had my own, to one day become an engineer. And sadly, in my head, my pursuit feels less genuine than his.

My desire to become an engineer wasn't born from an innate desire to build things in the world and improve lives. The desire came purely from the knowledge that engineers made good money and had stable jobs. I would soon come around to the idea of public service post-graduation, and this is what has kept me working in the profession to date, but it wasn't the initial source of my motivation. The pain poverty had inflicted upon me was soul crushing, and I so desperately needed a sense of stability in my life. For this reason, a part of me envies my dad. He went all-in on something that he knew he could lose money on and pursued it anyway. Ultimately his blind faith did him in, so maybe there is an argument to be had against pursuing one's passions at the expense of everything else important in life. He threw all his eggs into one basket, and when it failed, he had nothing else to prop him up.

So, I guess I'm thankful to him for being able to teach me this lesson. Even if it's one I'm coming to terms with fifteen years later unbeknownst to him. At this moment, I find myself wrapped up in a conflict with passion. The idea of being a nomadic writer has always tantalized me, and I consistently find myself at a crossroads. On whether to put my engineering career on hold and to pursue my passion for writing full-time. However, I've never found the courage to divert my path. My current one is comfortable, and reliable. I make enough money to sustain myself. I eat well and live in a city that provides me with a high quality of life, where I have fun things to do, and fun people to do them with. Pursuing my passion could jeopardize all of that. Yet, if I stay on the course as an engineer, I will continue in this generalized state of dissonance. I don't feel like the path I'm traveling along is completely my own, and up to this point it's been all circumstance. *But isn't that most of life?*

I'm sure my father didn't just conjure up the idea of becoming a pizza shop owner out of nowhere. He worked in rural Appalachia, where pizza shops were popular, and it was a reliable way to make money. Maybe he learned to love pizza making, and the idea of owning a restaurant overtime was cosmic coincidence. I'm sure some form of passion just came from the joy he

experienced when receiving praise from customers on his pizza making skills. Humans really are simple creatures.

My passion, writing, has landed me sizable scholarships and allowed me to obtain my undergraduate degree with minimal debt accrual. My abstract submissions for speaking slots at conferences have been consistently accepted over the past year, so it makes sense that I feel a similar level of mastery and genuine joy from the act of writing. Writing is therapy for me, and it's one of the few things I get lost in for hours.

So, maybe that's how simple life is. Find the thing that draws you in for hours and hold on to it tightly. For my father it was tossing around pizzas, and for me it's been writing in a journal or typing on a keyboard. His pizza shop is my novel. These larger-than-life ideas, and things to work towards, make life worth living and less daunting. That alone, the faith to pursue something bigger than yourself, regardless of its outcome, is probably the best lesson my dad has ever taught me.

Thank you, Dad.