

WELL-RED

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In my father's small apartment in Salt Lake stood a bookshelf that nearly scraped the ceiling. Titles like *The God Particle* and *The Story of Civilization* rested next to each other, packed more than arranged, because my father always knew where his books were, just like most people keep track of their fingernails. The middle and bottom shelves were my playground, a sort of intellectual playpen. I would pull volumes away from the shelf one by one, scanning pages for recognizable words, but mostly finding vocabulary that felt strange on my tongue, like it didn't fit. I stared at the pages with words like *archaic* and *pathology* and *eschatological*. I propped the books up on my skinny boyish knees; I invited their heaviness. I felt that merely holding the book would somehow grant me knowledge; that contact preceded understanding, as it was for meeting people. So I came to view books as people, capable of being spoken to, addressed, regarded with dignity.

My fingers would run over the indelible kiss of my father's red pencil, scratched into the margins like a beacon of my father's mind. His contribution. Seeing that made the weight of the book worth it.



In 2017, I completed fifty-three books. My goal had been fifty.

"That's a lot," my father says over the phone.

"Yeah, I guess," I trail off, holding my breath in hopes that he might interrupt me to ask what I had thought of Capote's *In Cold Blood*. Did I enjoy the nonfiction novel form? Did it inspire my own writing? Did I

admire Capote for reasons other than his authorship—maybe the fact that he was unabashedly queer? Just talk. Talk to *me*.

I take a breath. He still hasn't said anything. I clear my throat—a signal, a ploy to entrap the voice in my ear, a voice that I wish to remain there. Speaking. Or, if not, at least breathing.

“Well, bud, I need to go. Great to chat.” It had been two months since we last spoke. He hangs up and I walk over to my daily journal to write *spoke to dad on phone*. I place a checkmark next to it.

Did we speak, really?

I scribble out the checkmark.

If so, by what standard?

I cross out the words.



“I think Dad is the smartest person I know,” I once told my mother as we sat eating a lunch of tuna fish sandwiches with sliced pickle. “Way smarter than my teacher.”

My mother was startled. Was I just being precocious? Or was it something more? More worrisome.

“Heavenly Father doesn't want you to be *too* smart, Tait. Otherwise you won't have any faith.”

I sipped my milk quietly from a green plastic cup ruddy with the residue of too many washes. My eyes caught the bag of library books by the front door, then turned back to her face, which felt blank, even with her furrowed brow, and I wondered if she really meant what she had said.

“But I *want* to be smart. I really like reading.”

“Just make sure you're filling your mind with good books.” The bookbag was open slightly. I could see inside, but only a peek. A cover flashed. I looked back at her.

I hoped she wouldn't look in the bag.



From a very young age, I could tell that my father was different. The other boys had gruff, stupid fathers with big bellies and stooped shoulders. Their fathers spoke in short sentences, failing to pronounce the “g” at the end of certain words. Their fathers made them play catch or shoot hoops on Saturday afternoons in the arid Utah air that partnered with a sunny noon to produce an army of farmer tans. I would see the boys, nodding and frowning at their dads while avenues of sweat paved their way down furrowed brows. But my father wasn’t like that. He was tall and lean, with a sharp jaw and intelligent, sad eyes. People said we looked alike, and at the time I didn’t believe them: he was too untouchable, too mythic, too *amazing* to be like me.

Saturday mornings, when it was his weekend, he would wake my sister and me up early for a hurried breakfast of grape nuts and whole milk, maybe some sliced banana if he had it. He would load up a red backpack with some sandwiches, chips, water bottles, a tarp, a book, a map, and usually a bit of rope, always the Boy Scout. The three of us would ascend the steep highway that cuts through Little Cottonwood Canyon outside Salt Lake, the wind before us, my father driving with his left hand at the top of the wheel, playing music that I never heard anywhere else and yet to this day feels as familiar as a grandmother’s cursive scribble on a birthday card.

My ears would pop from the gain in altitude, and I felt smaller, somehow shrunken in the shadow of both my father and the mountain. I liked to stare out the window at bends in the road, watching as the rocks above us changed color: dull brown to ocher to black, melting into reds and flecks of orange. I would read to my father from whatever book I had with me. He said I had a good reading voice. He would pause me to ask things, and if I glanced quickly enough, I could see the gears of his mind begin to churn and sputter, picking up speed as his questions flowed. I

read to be able to answer my father's questions, knowing that if I didn't have an answer, I would feel stupid. And stupidity was disappointment.



My parents divorced when I was five years old. My mother was granted full custody, which, as I would later learn from a pamphlet on divorce, is typical in the American court system. There was no abuse, no infidelity, just a difference of religious opinion. My father didn't want to be Mormon anymore, at least not the way my mother wanted him to be. They were both young and angry, so the divorce was long and costly. The only thing I remember is that at one point I slept in between their sheeted bodies, like a meadow nestled in the crook of a tall valley, and then I didn't anymore. Instead, I slept alone on a hand-me-down mattress in a dark apartment in north Salt Lake, listening to the bellowing of trains in the distance, wondering if my father heard them too.

Three months after my mother remarried, we moved from north Salt Lake to the suburbs. It's what she wanted more than anything. Family being the prime directive for Mormons, couples purchased homes as soon as they could afford the mortgage, meaning that for a Mormon former-divorcée, "home" and "family" were just different shades of the same aspiration. For the next four years, incalculable hours were spent driving on I-15 between Salt Lake and Kaysville, which was, and still is, a predominantly white Mormon community of cookie-cutter homes, pristine lawns, and middle-class morals. The judge had granted my father every other weekend, a unit of time which became "Dad's time." On Friday evenings when he pulled up to our yellow home, the rush-hour traffic having carved a frown into his eyes, it was a reminder that my father didn't live with me; that he lived in the big, dingy city with his books and his red mountain bike and his small fridge packed with disgusting soy milk and incorrectly-named Red Delicious apples; that if he wanted to see his children, he had to come pick them up, like we were a package and my mother the postman.



One time I came across the word *diplomacy* in one of my father's books. As soon as I grasped what it was, it dawned upon me that I was an expert; I had lots of practice already.

Never show too much favor to one parent. Never cite the good deeds of one parent to another parent. Never tell one parent what the other parent said, unless they demand it, in which case you might as well give in. Never say the words "I don't want to go home" when visiting your father for the weekend. Never act too sad when you show up on your mother's doorstep on Sunday evening, a half-hour late, and definitely don't say anything when she begins yelling at your father because "we said six o'clock, not six-thirty, Shane."

By the age of eight, I could equivocate, prevaricate, and obfuscate. I would learn later what they meant.



The relationship between my father and me became one between minds around my eleventh birthday. It was then that he began talking to me about Mormon Church history, a topic which I was trained to avoid by a mother fearful of my innate curiosity. Her fear, obvious to me, was simple: she was haunted by the memory of an ex-husband who wanted knowledge more than anything. I knew I had to do whatever possible to *not be like my father*. But even as I saw my father bringing up topics that I knew were off-limits, I never stopped yearning to be like him, even with little things like how he sat when he ate (straight as a rod, feet firmly planted), or how he spoke on the phone (answering the call crisply with "this is Shane"), I wondered how admiration and rejection, which felt so opposite, could exist in the same mind.

By the time these conversations began, my stepfather had moved us to Seattle for a new job. Trips back to Salt Lake were scarce and therefore precious. Each vacation meant another conversation with

my father—another chance for him to speak to his son, who was fast becoming less and less of a boy.

The next five years were spent riding a see-saw of reason and belief, the ebbs and flows correlating with my travels back home. My father challenged; I retorted. My father prodded; I ignored.

“Religion demands that you shut your brain off, Tait. You’ve seen this.” We’re sitting at a kitchen table. I’m staring at the placemat, which has frayed at the edges because I’ve tugged too many times at stray fabric.

“I don’t feel that way, though.”

“That’s just it—a feeling can never be truth. A feeling is nothing more than a chemical reaction in your brain.”

Eventually, my faith shrunk in the same way that children lose baby teeth: slowly, but with bursts of momentum, each burst less surprising than the last. My boyhood vision was dissolving, and I now viewed my father’s bookshelf with suspicion. I avoided certain shelves for fear of what I might find, knowing that if I opened the first page of a book, my eye would leap to the second. I knew that if I succumbed, I’d be just like my father. Just like my mother had said would happen. I didn’t stare up at the shelves with wonder like I did as a young boy. Now, they stared at me as my mother’s words bored their syllables across my eyelids. *Good books. Good books. Only read good books.*

My mental shelf groaned with the weight of scattered truths—the detritus of anguished nights spent wandering the labyrinths of mind. Quotes. Figures. Images. Stories. They molded and melded together, an alloy of my independence and curiosity and unrelenting admiration for my father, no matter the indictments of my mother.

And then the shelf broke. The books I had long avoided had found their way into my book bag, which I held close to my chest like a scarlet letter: evil, yes, but irrefutably, irreducibly mine to carry. I hid them under my bed, under my pillow, behind curtains. I slipped them into my backpack and read them on the school bus, finally safe from my mother’s gaze.

As I discovered my voice, markings from my own pencil joined my father’s red ones in the yellowed margins.

“I hadn’t caught that,” he said once, commenting on a note I had made in B. H. Roberts’s *Studies on the Book of Mormon* during a summer visit, “Nice job.”

I had earned the right to an opinion.



Shortly after my sixteenth birthday, I decided I could no longer believe in Mormonism. I had made the final plunge, yanking a thread of testimony out of my family’s time-worn tapestry of unshakeable belief. Overnight, a rift tore its way through my family. I had expected this, spending restless nights calculating the size, the scope, the severity of the rift. I stood on one side with my father. My mother stood on the other, wondering if she had lost her only son: the one who would serve a mission in some far-flung locale, marry a good Mormon girl from a good Mormon family, serve honorably in his Church callings, and produce beautiful Mormon children whom I would baptize on their eighth birthdays.

In the moments after my mother discovered the fateful truth, my father shined, marking those precious seconds as the pinnacle of my trust and admiration.

“She told me to leave,” I whispered into the phone. I thought I was crying, but the choking was just fear. His voice, steady and measured, was all I needed, as if he knew, just as he had always seemed to know.

“I’ll buy you a plane ticket.”



The fifty-three books sit stacked on my dresser, the read scattered among the unread like a sedimentary layer. My eyes scan each spine. I turn each letter over in my mind, considering its weight, its power, its necessity. I’m reminded of the hours spent sitting on the floor of the Salt Lake apartment, staring at words I didn’t understand and pondering their meanings. I consider how many hours could have been spent

discussing these fifty-three books with my father, just as he did on our canyon drives when I was a little boy. I count how many moments were instead spent in an aching silence that had crept into a corner of his vast mind years ago, made itself at home, engorged itself on his humor, his voice, his love of adventure—features of my childhood that were once crisp but now fade into creases as if left by the press of my fingers on an old photograph.

I consider all the things I should have said when he told me he had to get off the phone: *you've changed, you don't try to call anymore, and I know that me being gay is hard on you, but can't you see how much I've done to prove I love you like a son should?* I ask why I didn't say them, then I see his weary face and his salt-and-pepper hair and his thoughtful frown and his clenched jaw and I know why I didn't say them, and now I have to stop thinking about him stop splashing the canvas of my memory like a madman abuses a white wall with sickly paint stop hating him stop loving him stop thinking about him stop.

I fall asleep that night gritting my teeth, running over scripted words, preparing for an argument that will never happen. Because it is always an argument with my father these days, even from a thousand unreachable, inaudible miles away. It is an argument with no resolution, no reconciliation: an argument chiseled into the smooth marble of a headstone, the final resting place of memory. The father of my youth, the father who proudly displayed books, the father who picked me up and gave me rides upon his strong shoulders, the father who tousled my hair and called me “buddy”—this man is dead.

Behind closed eyes, I see my father's red pencil. It's still there, marking in the margins of a book I've never read. Not sure if I ever will.