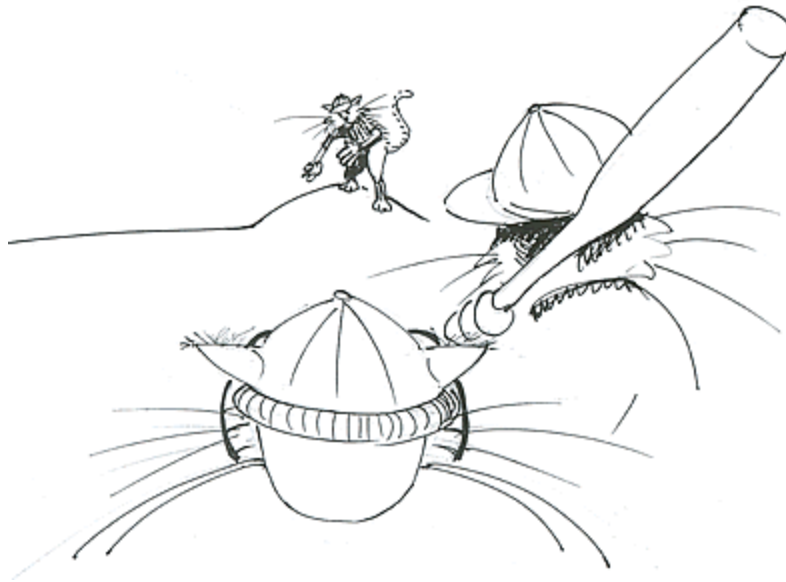


## Hardball Hairball



### On Dad

"First, the covertly depressed man must walk through the fire from which he has run. He must allow the pain to surface. Then he may resolve his hidden depression by learning about self-care and healthy esteem."

### Terrence Real

When my dad died, I was left with the feeling of never having been loved. I don't remember him going with me to a ball game or inviting me to join him to go shopping. He never talked to me about what I wanted to be when I grew up. It was only at the end that he opened up and told me about his personal life. I was only 42 years old; he was 79.

As a kid, I cherished him and longed for his attention. I clung to him during math exercises after school, crying because I couldn't add two plus two. When he died, I cried because I couldn't recall a deep feeling of his support. I couldn't call up a memory of him saying, "Go ahead, you can do it, Kate." I asked my mother, "Did Dad love me?" And she paused a long time: I remember that pause.

I think I quit breathing after he died. My anxiety about life doubled. I was a 42-year-old therapist and I felt like I was five. I don't think I feel a dad inside, one who says, "You're okay, you can do it, go for it."

The result has been that I cling to men who are just out of reach, who don't want to commit, and don't want to talk about feelings: The type that think I'm too critical, but don't know how to cheer me on either. And I do feel angry in these relationships: I get judgmental, furious, and often hurt. When I try to relieve my real feelings, going deeper into the hairball in my gut, I hit a wall.

My life is on hold in so many ways: I don't take risks, make effective decisions, take action and move forward. The internalized father, who should have supported me, isn't there. All I wanted was his love, not the John Wayne thing, shut down and acting strong. It only left me lonely, standing at his closed door, scraping, crying, knocking, kicking and wanting it to open.

I never played ball with my dad. Maybe if I'd had more direction from him, or we'd spent more time together, I'd be better at setting goals and accomplishing them. It's as if there's nobody inside me to make decisions, create objectives and stick to them--no strong director in my affairs. Maybe that's why I'm not good at driving a ball, catching a ball, or even throwing a good hard ball and getting it to home plate.

My father sat in the back of the bleachers a lot, high up in the stands, looking like a tiny speck from the field below: You wouldn't have seen him cheering me on.

Now, anger propels me into grief, and from my tears comes a new longing. The little girl in me insists on being loved, believing she is, after all, enough. She wants to put her foot in the door and get what she wants in life. Instead of despair or rage I want a father inside: I want to stand up for myself.

Getting out my hairball and grieving this morning helps me to see more clearly my own frozenness. I often feel stunned, as if hit by a hard ball, unable to make decisions. Instead of running away, I'm facing my own emptiness where a dad should have been. Like an architect and builder, out of the ashes I'll construct my own shelter within, and it'll be my own.

As I sit writing, I think I need to get this hairball out, a conversation with him I should have had a long time ago:

Dear Dad,

Ever since you died, I've wondered why I can't establish a relationship with a man. Writing this to you is painful and terrifying, but write I must. I idealized you. I really wanted so much to be seen by you, involved with you, but I always felt you were at a distance. Maybe I thought Mom would be jealous if we got too close: All I know is I really needed you.

I loved you; wanted you to take me places, tell me you liked me, throw the ball back and forth - but you didn't. I don't blame you for it; I know you did your best.

Now I long to build a dad inside me that guides my life as if he was my coach. I want to move forward with my dreams. I want to say goodbye to you again, one last time, and kiss you as I did at the end. I know you'll walk beside me now, maybe with more strength than before. As I sit here, I imagine you might actually help me from heaven: Maybe you can send me wings!

I long for your validation, yet I expect abandonment, neglect. Just when I needed your approval the most, I'd feel a vacuum inside. I never felt I had a strong supporter, someone at the bottom of my psyche who said, "You can do it; you're the best little girl in the world." What I usually experience with men is the same old pattern: "You're okay, but you could use some improvement: I'm too busy now, but maybe someday we'll be able to spend some time together." I select men or people who aren't willing to be there for me. Now I'm hard-wired for unavailable people and believe I don't deserve to belong. I'm sometimes too needy from this black hole in my middle, where power should be. Even when I'm alone, there isn't a strong sense of self-support; there's only an echo chamber and helplessness.

I loved so many things about you: your gentleness, your kindness; you read so many books. You were never mean to me, but maybe your own sense of inadequacy is now in me.

I remember you in your coffin. I just couldn't let go. I was amazed at your beauty; even then, you were my god.

What is very difficult to say, and I must force this out, is that you weren't there for me, not interested in me, not helping me find out who I was, confirming what I did well. Were you afraid to get closer to me? Worried that Mom would have resented that?

Your death left me crying in the bathtub, rambling out loud. All I could mumble was, "Did he love me?" And Mom, sitting on the toilet next to me, in rare silence, wondered whether he'd loved either of us. Or was it our own inability to know we were loveable? You too had so little self-esteem, perhaps you couldn't reach out to us, extend yourself.

I don't know, I only know I loved you and perhaps I keep searching for you. Time and time again, the men that remind me of you are far, far, away. Like birds, they don't want to land, to commit, and I'm not the one they want.

What happened to you and me, Dad? Maybe I need to write about how undeserving I feel of love. Am I open to a different kind of man, someone available, not my old pattern? Can I say goodbye to abandoning

men and open my heart, create a dad inside me who speaks up, and gets close to others? Can I learn to love, to be respected and wanted?

#### HAIRBALLS FOR THE READER

- 1) Do you have a pattern in relationships that causes you to suffer? What is it?
- 2) What would you want if you felt deserving of it?
- 3) How can you create that?