

CRAIG POWELL




My father was a storyteller, not just through his poetry, but also in telling us about experiences in his life. He'd weave the story through various tangents to paint a picture and illustrate the emotion that he'd carried from that. Hopefully the tangents of my storytelling won't get out of hand.

My family moved to Canada when I was four, and we lived near the Brandon Mental Health Hospital, where my father was on staff. The hospital staff would hold family Christmas functions, and I recall one year my father had been chosen to dress as Santa. Despite the costume beard, I recognised Daddy immediately. While the other kids were excited about the sight of Santa, I knew that was Daddy, and so my realisation about Santa had begun. At least now I knew who to ask for Christmas presents. But I was sworn not to spoil it for Matthew.

With our house in Brandon being so close to his workplace, my father often stopped home for lunch. I remember the day he turned up at home and showed my mother bandages on his abdomen. He told us how a patient had lunged at him with a knife, then my father managed to alert staff to remove the patient, and then help him stitch the wound. I'm not sure what happened, but in my young mind, I pictured my father pressing down on his wound, while he walked down to the nurses' station and gestured instructions on what needed to be done to stitch his wound. My mum later told me that I was so anxious about the attack that I would wake up screaming, especially if my father was away at a conference. My dad had survived an attempted murder, so he seemed resilient, but I knew the fear of losing him.

In London, Ontario, my father's resilience, and stubbornness, was evident again when he tripped and fell on an icy footpath, on the way to see *On Golden Pond* as one of our regular family movie outings. He'd hurt his ankle, but insisted on watching the movie, while sitting with his leg out in the aisle. Only the next day (on the only day he ever took off sick from work) did he find out he'd fractured the ankle. Nothing would stop him going to the movies with his family.

When I was a child, my father and I had our special bond: He would drop me off and pick me up from ballet class, after which we would go for ice cream. He'd hold my hand as we skipped along together through the parking lot. I can't remember if it was me who decided I was getting too old to go skipping along, though I remember times I'd laugh when he would gesture to skip along, then walk as normal.



Having a father who published poetry guided me to appreciate literature in school, so imagine my amusement, and pride, when my Year 10 English teacher asked the class to turn to a page in our textbook and said 'that's Katie's father', as there on the page was my father's poem Fingernails. Even my Ancient History teacher would ask me to send her regards to my father, as she was a long-time fan of his poetry.

My father also enjoyed when the family would go out to dinner for birthdays. For my birthday dinner just after Matthew and Robyn married, we went to Axi's restaurant in Hunters Hill. It was not an unusual event for me, but a while after this dinner, my father told me how it meant so much to him that we were all together, and how he'd thought to himself 'this is as good as it gets'. Daddy was expressive in his affection for us. Not by just saying 'I love you', but by telling us how much these moments meant to him. Being with his family was as good as it gets. And it did get better, when he became a Grandpa to Gwen and then Lily.

Our family friend Beth once remarked that the poetry my father wrote about family always seemed to have some sense of mortality about it. I feel this sense of mortality was merely an awareness of how fragile life was, and how much he treasured those precious moments, because there was knowledge of potential loss, and in life as finite.

My father's health deteriorated, much to his frustration. He went into hospital in October 2020, then after some time in hospital and respite, he went into rehabilitation. It was during his time in rehabilitation that we started plans for modifications to the house. My father went into Aged Care, to wait for modifications to be finalised. Because of the Covid-19 restrictions in 2021, construction ceased for several months, and modifications could only be completed in May this year. During the Covid-19 restrictions and lock downs, it was not possible for us to visit my father. I made weekly arrangements with ward staff to bring his laundry to me at the front door, then I'd bring his clean clothes back the next day. I'd call Daddy while waiting for ward staff, just to say hi and let him know I was there. It was a little gesture, but one that gave my father an ongoing connection with home, even though I could not see him in person. It was such a relief when we could visit again.

My father remarked on one visit that he wasn't physically able to skip through the parking lot like he used to with me. I related to this by saying my dodgy knees and ankles meant I was also not able to skip through the parking lot like we used to either.

During recent visits, my father would say to Matthew and me 'when I saw Katie as a baby I knew this was someone I would love for the rest of my life'. It was a beautiful way to express his affection for me, and it was as though he knew he did not have much time left.

On my last visit to my father, I played a recording of Seamus Heaney reading his poetry on audiobook. Heaney's work was something we had bonded over, and it was nice to sit and listen to the poetry being read by the poet.

I will miss being able to talk to and spend time with Daddy, though our shared moments will stay with me as a precious gift.

Kate Powell