

**Irreplaceable**  
**By: Alice Riddle**

*“...Lady Madonna, children at your feet, wonder you manage to make ends meet...”*

One of my earliest memories is my family’s weekly “Breakfast with the Beatles.” No, we didn’t create that ever-so-witty name - we had gladly fallen victim to the clutches of a Sunday morning radio show. I don’t quite recall when we started tuning in or when “Breakfast with the Beatles” faded into oblivion, but the glimpses in my mind that I do have of those Sunday mornings will forever stay with me. Although I couldn’t have been more than three or four years old, I honestly recall feeling like a 60’s mini-hippie; the flower girl at a wedding that bridged my preschool mind with the psychedelic world that was John, Paul, George, and Ringo.

Along with this odd memory of my apparent longing to be a tripped-out toddler, I associate these breakfasts with a strong admiration of and love for my parents. The happiness in the house never failed to reach capacity as Mom and Dad prepared the scrambled eggs, corned beef hash, and sausage, with me helping in every little way I could (which, I’m guessing, meant being a four-year-old chatterbox). The aroma of breakfast slowly filtrated each room of our house, leaving nothing able to escape “Breakfast with the Beatles.” It was all just perfect bliss.

...they’re so powerful, the Beatles.

I’ve never known my father as a non-smoker. For as long as I can remember, possibly longer than the Breakfast with the Beatles era, I’ve associated every scent, sound, and sight related to smoking with him. It’s not out of spite or disdain for the addiction; I mean, it’s not even intentional. But inhaling the chemical afterthoughts of a smoker on the quad instantly reminds me of Dad. “Got a light?” *Thank you for Smoking.*

Quick-fix addiction commercials. Camel, Marlboro. Hell, even the UNC Tar Heels. The world is full of reminders. Constant reminders of my father's habit.

I can't stand that word. Habit. For me, it insinuates a sense of removal from the problem at hand; makes it a problem that cannot be helped. It makes it sound unconquerable; a scientific pull that, like gravity, cannot be avoided or reversed – “force of habit.”

I've met people who hate smokers. Absolutely HATE them. Belittle their existence, refusing to look past the cigarette and admire them for their contributions to society. In a world overflowing with social injustices, I suppose it doesn't surprise me that the human race has found yet another way of judging each other.

*“I can't stand them. They were just smoking outside. How do I know? I smelled the smoke on their clothes. They have no consideration for the rest of us who have to put up with their second-hand smoke.”*

*“But they smiled and helped you. They asked how you were doing and seemed to actually want to know.”*

*“I don't care. They smoke, and I hate them.”*

I've also met people who hate their fathers, often for justified reasons. I sadly know many father-child relationships that have been slowly destroyed over time, for reasons ranging from serious physical abuse to a lack of love and communication.

What makes this so difficult for me is that I can't hate my father. I don't want to, and I'd never be able to. It would be so easy if he was a horrible person, mistreated my family, and was as admirable as a common criminal. I'd have no problem not caring about him, then. I wouldn't care less if he smoked his life away.

In a twistedly unfortunate kind of way, then, I love my Dad. For every puff of smoke that he passively inhales, there are hundreds of redeeming, heroic qualities. The sad part is that the sum of those tiny puffs will more than likely lead to his downfall. It's almost like the flaw of a tragic hero. Oedipus was a genuinely good guy, but his pride ultimately caused his demise. Likewise, Dad's pallet of perfection is specked by this tragic flaw.

*"...will I wait a lonely lifetime? If you want me to, I will..."*

I sat awkwardly on the sand-covered asphalt in dire pain; such a mind-numbing feeling had never been experienced by my seven-year old body. Screaming what I'm sure sounded like the screeches of a banshee, I waited for Ruth to bring help. I had immediately regretted jumping off that jungle gym, and I quickly felt scared and alone. The next couple of hours remain a blur in my mind, resulting in a full-length cast on my leg. But I do have a distinct memory of being carried into my house. I laid in Dad's arms like a rag doll, tears streaming down my face like those of a newborn child. I needed my daddy, my rock, and he was there. While he tried to wipe my tears away, I know that expressions of concern were rippling across his own face. I'm his little girl, and seeing me in pain almost hurt him more.

*"....take these broken wings and learn to fly. All your life, you were waiting for this moment to arrive..."*

It's been that way forever: when I'm hurt, my parents are often the first people I turn to, and they share the pain with me as we work through it. I rarely see my father suffer his own personal anguish, but every time he lights a cigarette, I can't help but take a glimpse into a future that I'm having trouble accepting.

I picture Dad coming home from the doctor, sharing tragic news about a nagging cough. I picture him losing every last gray hair I gave him. I picture tears and hugs and

final good-byes that I never want to have to give. And I picture myself walking down the aisle alone, without the most brilliant, genuine, and frustrating man I know. Each time my mind is flooded with these heart-wrenching thoughts, I try so hard to tell myself that everything's going to be alright; I should live for the present, enjoying the time I spend with my father. But I always return to the same thought: How am I supposed to live without a worry or care, knowing that Dad's "habit" may very well kill him one day? Why can't I try harder to provide a solution to this problem?

*"...there's nothing you can make that can't be made...no one you can save that can't be saved..."*

A long time ago, he used to smoke in the house. I'm not quite sure when he made the full switch to being an outdoorsmen, but I've always believed it had at least something to do with my getting a cigarette butt in the arm. Very, very rarely do I see the "oh, shit" look on my father's face; he almost never makes serious mistakes that he immediately regrets. But I definitely saw it that warm night in the kitchen of our old house. I couldn't have been more than ten years old when I felt the hot pinch on my upper arm. Thinking I had been bitten by a bug, I looked around for the culprit; time stood still as we all realized what had happened. I anxiously looked up and saw the "oh, shit" look; the "oh, God, what have I done" look. The branding was purely accidental, of course, but holding a cigarette at your side with a hyper kid running around can never be a good combination. The shock that was quickly displayed on his face was soon replaced by shame and sorrow, but the "oh, shit" look remained, as my parents tended to my nicotine-ridden wound.

*"...it's only love, and that is all, but it's so hard loving you..."*

All the ads make it look so easy. No, not the Nicorette commercials, or the radio announcements for laser surgery to help you quit. I mean the ones with the people

standing outside the tobacco company building with signs and statistics, informing the world one passer-by at a time about “the truth.”

It’s not that I resent these warriors against smoking; I admire their drive and ability to reach out to so many people. But what about Dad? There’s only so many ways to stop a 47-year old man from doing something he’s been doing for more than half his life, something that has essentially become a part of him. Am I supposed to keep throwing facts and figures at him? Scientific proof that smoking will likely lead to his downfall? If that’s the cure, the way to make him stop, then I’ve surely hit a metaphorical dead end. Dad is, by far, the most intelligent person I know. He knows the risks behind smoking. I’m positive he can name more than one chemical found in the puffs he inhales. And there’s no way he doesn’t understand the economic grip that tobacco companies have on their consumers. So how does someone continue to engage in this activity, knowing all these sickening truths? If that’s not enough to will someone to quit, then what is?

*“...words are flowing out like endless rain into a paper cup, they slither wildly as they slip away across the universe...”*

Prior to what was bound to be another riveting game of fifth-grade volleyball, tension was already building between my team and our notoriously pompous rivals: our girls had heard the other team saying bad things about us in the bathroom. The exact words that were spoken have since escaped me, but it was harsh enough for us to tell our coach. Quiet, meek, and not looking to fight, our coach crossed the net solely to fill the other coach in on what his girls had been doing. Apparently outraged by the accusations, the gruff middle-aged man stomped – yes, stomped – his way past our coach, looking to

either confirm the details with our team, or just scare the hell out of us. I can still see his pointed finger shaking at us in time with the screams of his raspy voice.

*“My girls wouldn’t say anything bad about anybody! If you want to say that they did, say it to my face! Come on, I want to hear it from you!”*

Needless to say, we stood like whimpering puppies, scared and speechless. This huge, semi-creepy man was making us all feel like insignificant objects, simply because we dared speak the truth about his girls. The gymnasium suddenly felt like a questioning room at a police station, as everyone sat in stunned silence at the spectacle on the court.

*“If you’re all too scared to say anything to me about it, then I don’t believe you! Come on, let’s hear it!”*

*“Hey! What do you think you’re doing? They’re fifth-grade girls! Lay off!”*

The focus was suddenly diverted to the bleachers, as Dad proceeded to put Coach Creepy in his place. He stood up alone, amidst the other parents, who just sat in a timid silence, secretly applauding my father. Dad and the coach eventually left the gym to finish their conversation - which really was just that: a conversation - leaving our game to carry on (we won).

*“...it’s all too much for me to take...”*

I learned so much about my father that day. I’d always considered him to be a good man, but that incident made him my knight in shining armor. At the risk of being unpopular, Dad did what he knew was right, and this level of integrity has always been one of his defining characteristics. I can trust him with any moral dilemma I come across in my life, and I have full faith that he could successfully and diplomatically provide a solution for world peace if given the opportunity.

*“...soon we’ll be away from here, step on the gas and wipe that tear away...”*

I used to think that I actually just had a problem accepting death. When my family thought we were going to have to put our dog, Max, to sleep, I wailed and sobbed like a hysterical toddler. And that was for my *dog* (who, by the way, we didn't even have to put to sleep). So I know that the death of any significant person in my life will undoubtedly bring me to my knees in emotional pain. But with my father, I feel like I'm watching it slowly happen before my eyes; I feel like it's something that I can be preventing right now. If he ever gets diagnosed with lung cancer, emphysema, or anything that could possibly be attributed to smoking, I don't know if I'll be able to live with myself. *If only you had pushed him a little harder to quit. . .*

*"...I look at the floor, and I see it needs sweeping; still, my guitar gently weeps..."*

He does a lot better job of hiding it now. Well, he likes to think so. I suppose it's possible he's become desensitized to the smell of smoke that overcomes his clothing every time he "steps out," not realizing that the rest of us are fully able to detect its scent. When I'm at home on breaks, he never fails to discreetly leave the family room multiple times an evening, escaping into the garage. If you can't see it happening, then everything's ok, right? Never mind the evidence here; there's nothing to worry about.

They say it relieves stress. And I can't deny that my father is a stressed man. Working 40 hours a week is enough to drive anyone at least halfway bonkers, but throw in night classes to earn his Master's degree, plus work around the house on the weekends, and you've got a full-blown case of stress. Our family has been trying to pick an opportune time to try to get him to go cold turkey: a semester off from class, a low-key summer, any extra free time he may have. The jaded, cynical part of me tells myself that it's slowly turning into a lost cause, but I refuse to accept this. I can't help but keep

trying to muster up enough courage to have a discussion with him about this all. I've tried, God, I've tried, but tears never fail to overwhelm me into cowardice.

*"... here comes the sun, and I say, it's alright..."*

He sits, relaxed, in his overstuffed leather chair, half reading his \$140 textbook, half watching *The Simpsons*. I lay sprawled on the couch, about ready for bed, but savoring these precious moments with Dad. We don't speak, but rather relish in the fact that we can sit together in a comfortable silence without any pressure to strike up a conversation. As he giggles like a sixth-grader over Homer doing another inane Homer thing, my mind wanders to these thoughts that seem to plague me more and more. I suppose it's a day-by-day battle, not only with him, but with myself. I suppose life isn't all about answers; sometimes, it's just about the questions we find ourselves asking.

The episode ends, and he gets up to fix something in the kitchen. While drifting in and out of sleep on the couch, I hear him begin softly singing a song that, for some reason unbeknownst to me, has always seemed to be a personal favorite of his.

*"...somewhere in the black mining hills of South Dakota, there lived a young boy  
named Rocky Raccoon..."*