

My Favorite Father-in-Law

By Sara Moss

Speaking up has never been a great skill of mine. Or maybe it's being heard that I'm not good at. I often start to talk only to be overwhelmed by the voices of those around me. Even technology knows to prioritize other voices over my own – on video chats, when another person and I attempt to talk at the same time, the thing always knows to mute only my microphone. Perhaps there's something about the timber of my voice, some resonance that needs silence in order to be heard.

When I met Len, he wasn't so good at hearing. You can imagine how the pair of us might have combined. One who can't be heard, and one who struggles to hear. You would think the two of us would feel disconnected. And yet, I never felt that way. There was something in his eyes - something thoughtful, keen, and kind - that didn't require vocalization to be understood. I think what I was looking at, that subvocal something he kept inside his eyes, was the joy and curiosity he had cultivated in his life, that he couldn't help but allow to shine on others.

I have heard stories of ancestral trauma, of hardships so intense they reverberated down the family line long after the lifetime of those who first carried it. I have also heard the stories Len told of his own life. About a young boy in a Jewish ghetto at the start of the Great Depression with a mother fighting a battle with her own mental health. Len was given trauma enough to last his lifetime and still have plenty to pass along to future generations, to pass along to Eli. I will never stop being grateful to Len that he managed to excise that trauma and start his family line anew.

Len worked hard to find his way beyond what fate had offered him. He became the first of his family to attend college and then to earn a PhD. He wrote, traveled, explored and met people well outside the scope of his previous experience. He researched nutrition and diet and how to live a healthy physical life. Perhaps most importantly, he learned about two-way communication, sought out training in peer counseling, and practiced what he'd learned, as a counselor and later as a husband and father. It took a long time for him to rid himself of that early trauma, but he did it. This allowed him the chance to start fresh, and to create one of the most beautiful families I have ever met. Just before he moved on to wherever it is that patient and persistent old souls go, Len helped us to create the genetic test that will be used to ensure that our future children are not born with the Marfan's syndrome that ended his own life. That I got to join this family is an honor for which I feel endlessly grateful and extraordinarily lucky.

It breaks my heart that Eli will never get to talk to his dad again. That Shaoping is left to captain the ship alone. That I'll never get to hear him chuckle in my ear, "my favorite daughter-in-law" as he hugs me. But to me, he never really left. I see him every day in the way Eli walks

with his long, graceful hands, his father's hands, clasped behind his back. He is there when Eli speaks the phrases and references, casually tossed into conversation, that no one our age has ever heard. Like "God willing and the Creek don't rise." Or when Eli references black and white movie stars whose legacies never managed to trickle down to the rest of our generation. He is there in the way Eli listens to my feelings with an open mind and navigates our conflicts without blame or anger. He is there in the home that is absolutely filled with books and notepads and little stubby pencils. He is there in the love he wove into his family's hearts.

Len embodied the kind of teacher I have always aimed to be - reflective, observant, supportive, kind, persistent. The kind of teacher who will let you fall and will always be there to give you a hand back up to try again. Whenever he talked about his students, he would light up, in the same way that talking about raising Eli filled his eyes with that light, that subvocal something, that had made me feel so noticed, and heard, even when my voice hadn't reached him.

That is what I remember Len talking about the most - the joy he felt in raising Eli and witnessing his son's accomplishments as Eli learned to become his own man. Some people, myself included, repeat themselves out of absent-mindedness. I don't think that's what Len was doing. I think Len's repetition was intentional, so that even after he left, we would still be able to hear the echo of him saying to Eli, with his voice and his eyes, "raising you was a joy."