

LETTER

# Seventy Years, Most of Them Tired

*A letter to Dad on his seventieth birthday*

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A letter to Dad

Dear Dad,

Seventy. I keep saying the number to myself and it still doesn't quite land, because in my head you're always somewhere between the man in the folding chair on the sideline and the one standing in the rain telling me to try the lug nuts again. But here we are, and I wanted to write you something instead of just calling, because there are a few things I've been meaning to say out loud for a while and I never seem to get to them in conversation.

I think about those thirty-one years at the mill more than you probably know. Nights, for that long - I didn't understand as a kid what that actually cost you, what it does to a body and a sleep schedule and a life, to work when everyone else is sleeping and try to be present when everyone else is awake. But I remember the soccer games. I remember looking over during a water break and seeing you out cold in that folding chair by halftime, and at the time I think I just laughed about it with my friends. It's only now, being older myself, that I understand what it meant that you were there at all. You'd worked all night. You could have stayed home and slept and no one would have blamed you. Instead you came, every Saturday, and let yourself fall asleep in public rather than miss it. That's not nothing. That was never nothing.

And I don't think I ever told you that I noticed how tired you were. Not just on the sidelines - all the time, underneath everything, in the way you'd come in the door and the way you moved through a Sunday. You never complained about it. Not once that I can remember. You just kept getting up and doing the next thing that needed doing, for Mom, for us, for whoever needed you. I didn't have a word for that when I was a kid. I just thought that was what dads were like. It took me a long time to realize that it was what you were like - specifically, deliberately, at a cost you never once mentioned.

I still think about the tire, too. I was sixteen, it was raining, and you made me change it twice. I remember being annoyed - I was soaked, my hands were freezing, I'd already proven I could do it. But you said I had to do it again so I'd know I could, not just that I had, once, under supervision. I didn't get it then. I get it now. I've changed four flats since that day, every single one of them on some side of some road I didn't want to be stuck on, and every single time, without fail, I think of you standing there in the rain refusing to let me stop after one. That lesson outlasted the car, outlasted probably every car I've had since. It turned into something bigger than a tire. It was you telling me, without saying it directly,

that you wouldn't always be there to do it for me, so I'd better actually know how.

That's the thing I keep coming back to as you turn seventy - that so much of what you taught me wasn't in words at all. It was in showing up exhausted anyway. It was in making me repeat the hard thing until it was mine. It was in never once making your own tiredness someone else's problem to manage. I notice now, as an adult, how rare that actually is. And I'll tell you honestly: it's the thing about you I'm trying hardest to copy. Not the mill, not the night shifts specifically, but that instinct - to show up, to not complain, to make sure the people you love actually know how to stand on their own. If I manage to be even half that for the people in my life, I'll count it as one of the better things I've done.

So happy seventieth, Dad. Thank you for every Saturday you fell asleep in that chair instead of staying home. Thank you for the rain, and the second tire, and for thirty-one years of nights I didn't fully understand until long after they were over. I see it now. All of it. I hope you know that.

With love,