



# A Dad in the Dark

How does a blind father guide his daughter through life? He learns to let her lead

BY RYAN KNIGHTON • ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL STOLLE

**MY FATHER HAD A DISTINCTIVE WAY OF BELLOWING.** Like a stun gun, his delivery was quick, explosive, and confusing. My ears still ring with his preferred barrage, “*Would ya Jesus friggin’ cut it the goddamned hell out?*”

It worked, sort of. My siblings and I would halt in our tracks, but only because we were trying to translate his dadspeak.

Now, as the father of a toddler, I can better appreciate my dad’s muddled expressions. When your kid is inches from poking a car key into an outlet, you don’t shout “No!” You short-circuit, and out flies, “No key! Finger ouch—bad!” It’s classic dadness: Do as I say, if you can decode it.

In my case, all this fatherly instinct is intensified by the fact that I’m blind. I might hear keys jingling, but I’d be hard-pressed to find my daughter before she cooked herself playing truck driver with the wall socket. The words can’t leave my mouth fast enough, forcefully enough,

or in the right order. Then I realize I’m yelling at the dog. Her collar jingles as she, not my daughter, waddles over for a pat.

No doubt, being a blind father has its perils, which change at the dizzying speed of my daughter’s development. When Tess was a baby, her poop posed unimaginable threats. I’ve tracked innumerable blobs on my socked feet. My wife especially enjoyed my artistry with a diaper. Tess would sport Pampers origami, her disposables attached at bizarre angles, or inside out, or my favorite, back to front, sagging like a diaper mullet.

But my greatest challenge came when Tess started walking. No longer able to cradle her and feel her every move, my only means of supervision was through words. Children aren’t known for their listening skills. If she ignored me, she snuffed my daddy powers. Silent, darting from curiosity to curiosity, she could play with wall sockets or the dog or the most perilous of

toddler toys, the stairs. A few choice words aren't always enough. The question is, when your child won't do as you say, what do you do?

One evening, in the middle of dinner prep, my wife asked me to walk to the grocery store three blocks away to grab a few items. This is a challenge for a blind man, yes, but that doesn't excuse me from helping out. I put my boots on. Tess spotted me and began jumping up and down, shouting, "Me too, me too!" I froze. We'd yet to hoof it anywhere, just the two of us. Cars rocketed past as I stood in the doorway, my little girl begging to walk with her blind father, possibly into all that traffic. We live in East Vancouver, flanked by two of the city's heaviest traffic routes. My wife and I had been waiting for this dangerous crossroads.

Dreading it, rather.

I crouched down to Tess's level and looked her square in the eye, or the earlobe, or somewhere. "If you walk with me," I said, "you have to hold my hand. All the time. No running. Okay? All the time."

She nodded, I think. I dug deep for my most authoritative dad voice, but didn't add my own father's "Jesus friggin' goddamned hell." Clarity was more important than emphasis.

"Papa's very serious," I said. "If you don't

hold my hand, then we'll have to come straight home. Understand? No running away, or else." Not that I'd know how to find her.

We put her shoes on. My wife seemed to be chopping vegetables faster than before. Anxious dicing.

Now, I know what you're thinking: *Use one of those child harnesses, dummy. Problem solved.* Believe me, we debated it. A harness would have made me feel safer walking with Tess, but it wouldn't have made her feel safe with me. *Wanna go to the park on your leash?* No man wants that kind of bond with his child. Like any father, I needed to learn how to trust my kid, not hang on tighter. And she needed to be trusted, to become trustworthy.

We held hands, descended the front steps, and crossed the street. The first block of our trip was loud with tires on wet pavement. We seemed to be the only pedestrians. I pulled her hand closer every time a car whizzed past. Within another block I began to relax, chatting and joking with my little girl. She was still too young to comprehend what blindness meant, so if she declared the prettiness of a flower on the sidewalk, I agreed, and hoped it wasn't some trampled old gun.

"Papa?"

"Yes?"

A truck blew by, so I couldn't quite hear what my daughter said. I suspect it was something like "I don't want to hold your hand anymore," because she slipped her fingers from mine and was gone. I bellowed. What could I do? Out came my inner stun gun, every Jesus friggin' thing I could think of to make her come the goddamned hell back. Nothing worked. I stutter-stepped a little this way, a little that, and then resorted to words again. I'd already lost 10 seconds. How far can a toddler go in 10 seconds? Easily under a bus, or halfway to Seattle.

But the more I barked, I quickly reasoned, the more afraid she would be to come hither. I silenced my father's voice. Another tack was needed. Another man.

"Hey, punkin'?" I called. "I've got a secret. Want to hear it?"

I crouched down and waited patiently. Quietly. A hunter. I feigned a giggle. Then I heard her feet padding closer. She asked what my secret was. I waved her closer. She grazed my arm, and like a mousetrap, I snapped her up, marched ahead, and laid into a lecture. Angry and relieved, I was also proud of my ingenuity. Parenting is a prolonged state of near-catastrophe averted by improvisation.

"That's it. You didn't hold my hand so I'll just have to carry you."

She protested and writhed for freedom. The punishment proved appropriate: I reinforced my point with every step of the remaining block. By the time we reached the store, my arm felt like it would snap under her flailing weight. It's not as if I could switch arms, either. When

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you're blind, you flirt with the life of an amputee—a white cane is permanently attached to my right hand. But I wouldn't let up. I had a fatherly lesson to teach. Parenting is all about staying on message. Or is that politics?

Ten minutes later I'd bumbled into the right grocery aisle, but I still had to paw the shelves for the items I needed. The nerves in my child-bearing arm pitched a hissy fit.

"You okay?" the cashier asked as she scanned my packets of herbs.

"Fine," I winced.

"Did you want the gum too?" she asked.

She took several packs from Tess's hand. My lecture about impulse shopping would have to wait. The thought of lugging Tess home was too much. I had to put her down, but I also had to find a way to hang on to her. We needed a system beyond words and fatherly authority, and we needed it now.

"Punkin'," I said, plopping her down by the door. "I have an idea. Would you like to carry the grocery bag home just like Mommy?"

Tess lit up and clapped yes.

"And would you like to carry the change in your pocket? Then put it in your piggy bank?"

I placed some coins in her hand. She made a big show of jingling them in her pocket.

"And can I hold your elbow so you can guide me home?" I finished.

"Like Mommy!" she chirped.

"Yes, you guide me like Mommy. Are you big enough to guide Papa?"

She slung the grocery bag over her shoulder. I stooped over and gingerly pinched her elbow, my blind man's hitch. A child and her man-wagon.

"C'mon, Papa," she said. "I walk you."

It worked.

Sure, it wasn't perfect, shuffling three blocks brutally hunched over, clinging to an elbow at knee height, Tess steering my head into a parking meter. But we made do, and I always knew her whereabouts. It still pleases me to wonder what passing drivers made of the sight—a little girl swinging her grocery bag, pulling a large, tattooed blind man like a balloon.

The economy of power is a funny thing. Since that walk, Tess has rarely left me wondering where she's gone. We've stumbled into the mutual trust all fathers seek. I've realized that command is only the bluntest tool of the parenting trade. Such a small thing like, "Can I hold your hand?" instead of, "Hold my hand," makes a world of difference. In giving her power, I gained mine back. It's like a smile. You don't get one unless you give one. These things have a circuitry. True, I haven't seen a smile in a long, long time, but whenever I give one to Tess, it sure feels like she answers in kind. ■

### Your destructive dad

No father is perfect, yours included. Overcome his shortcomings.

#### 1 He missed every ball game

##### The fallout

"You may internalize your father's absence as 'I don't love you,'" says Edward Hallowell, M.D., author of *The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness*. Successes feel insufficient and rejection automatic, so you may become defensive.

##### → The fix

Contextualize it: *Why* was your dad MIA? Perhaps he had a demanding job, or marital strain kept him away. You're not excusing him—viewing his absence through an adult lens helps you understand or even relate, says Dr. Hallowell.

#### 2 He dissed your decisions

##### The fallout

Your choice of college, career—heck, even your haircut—was wrong, so why wouldn't everything else be? Your father planted seeds of self-doubt that became overgrown, says Jim Anastasi, M.S., a licensed family therapist.

##### → The fix

Stop seeking his approval, and you'll strip him of his power. For less biased input, find a more reliable mentor, such as an older coworker, who knows your circumstances but is less emotionally involved, Dr. Hallowell says.

#### 3 He was a total tightwad

##### The fallout

Still steamed about the Nintendo that everyone had except you? You may end up with a closetful of gadgets. Stingy fathers can lead to financially reckless sons, says Rick Kahler, C.F.P., a board member of the Financial Therapy Association.

##### → The fix

Invest in future happiness. "People who overspend often overvalue the present and undervalue the future," says Kahler. Tempted to buy *another* Wii? Place half of its cost into savings and the rest into a vacation fund. Memories last longer than games. **BRIAN DALEK**