

My Brothers Became Fathers

On friendship, fatherhood, and the men we become

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There are seasons in a man's life that arrive without warning, seasons that alter the shape of all the years that came before, and I swear one of them is the season when the first of your brothers becomes a father, because one day you are boys kicking a ball across a field behind a school, and then young men with red cups in your hands laughing too loudly in someone's family basement or in a rented house on the coast, and then you are standing in the first homes any of you have ever owned, rooms filled with the early evidence of two lives being joined together, the old couches and framed movie posters carried forward from your college days now sharing space with the furniture and photographs your wives brought from theirs, and none of you knows yet what you are becoming, husbands learning the daily grammar of marriage, and then suddenly there is a newborn in someone's arms, so small she is almost only breath and eyelids, and your friend is holding her with a tenderness you have never seen in him before, and something inside you rearranges itself without asking permission.

I have seen it now, my brothers becoming fathers, and something in me still bows before the sight of it.

There is a kind of holiness in the way a man's shoulders soften when he bends over his child, as though some long-held tension lodged in the marrow unclenches, and with Tony I remember the quiet way he held his daughter, the tired wonder on his face, the stunned bewilderment of a man discovering that love can double its acreage in a single night, and I remember Elliot, who had not yet known his own children, standing beside that newborn and looking at her as though a star had descended into the room, and he did not know I was watching him and perhaps did not yet know himself that a man could love another man's child with that kind of gentleness until there he was, doing exactly that.

And Ruben, God bless that man of fire and steel, who grew up with so much hardness in the world around him and somehow did not mistake hardness for strength, somehow bloomed instead into this gentle father whose voice goes soft around his daughter, whose hands, which learned early how to brace themselves against the world, learned another language entirely when they were given their child to hold, and there is something about this that moves me beyond my ability to explain it, because some men grow up without fathers and nevertheless become remarkable ones, some men receive an absence and refuse to pass the absence forward, and I have witnessed this with my own eyes.

And then there is Brad, one of my closest friends, and Gretchen, and for the better part of a decade they tried to have a child, tried and waited and hoped and endured the strange private machinery of fertility treatment and IVF, the appointments and procedures and injections and the terrible calendar of trying again, because they knew with their entire

beings that this was what they wanted, Brad wanted to be a father and Gretchen wanted to be a mother and together they wanted to grow their family, and I cannot pretend to know what those years felt like inside their marriage or inside their bodies, cannot know the exact weight of each disappointment because some grief belongs only to the people who carried it, but I know my friend, and I knew what he wanted, and there was something both heartbreaking and beautiful in the persistence of that wanting, in continuing to make room in your life for someone who had not yet arrived.

Elliot and Kat knew all about that road too, the wanting and waiting for years, and the difficulty of becoming parents, and that is one of the many things fatherhood has taught me about the men I love, that there are so many invisible roads into it, so many private costs and fears and griefs preceding the photographs everyone eventually sees, the smiling father holding the baby, the mother exhausted and radiant, the announcement sent to friends, and behind that single image there may be years nobody can see, years of hoping for the child who is finally there.

There is something that happens to brotherhood in these years, and I used to think growing older meant friendships inevitably thinning, everyone drifting into his own marriage and work and mortgage and children and exhaustion until the men you once saw every week became men you texted on birthdays, but that has not entirely been what happened to us, because the friendship changed, certainly, the hours became harder to find and the nights shorter and calendars more ridiculous, but beneath all of that something deepened, some underground river of shared understanding fed now by sleepless nights and small hands curled around fingers and marriages and mistakes and basketball practices and illnesses and careers and children who need things from you constantly and completely and lift the dust from every corner of you, and we do not see one another as often as we once did because there are diapers and deadlines and dishes and daughters and dreams, but when we gather over a book-club dinner or a Blanton's or around a kitchen table long after we should all have gone home, there is tenderness and gravity braided into the laughter now that was not there when we were twenty-four or sixteen.

Something like reverence.

Something like recognition.

And I have been invited into their homes on nights when my own house felt too quiet. Too empty.

Those may be the nights I understand these friendships best, the nights Benjamin is with his mother and my house has that particular emptiness a house acquires when the person

who brings joy and life and noise is sleeping somewhere else, the walls echoing too loudly, when one of these men will say, *come over, brother*, and I will, and there I am sitting on a couch reading *Goodnight Moon* or *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* to the children of men I have known since we were scarcely more than children ourselves, and their girls lean into me the way children do when they trust you without having to decide to trust you, and something in my ribcage unclasps, because for an hour I am inside the ordinary machinery of a family again, bedtime and books and toys underfoot and adults finishing conversations around the needs of children, and I feel less alone, but also something larger than less alone, something closer to being gathered back into a family, back into myself.

Fatherhood has changed these men, although perhaps that is not exactly right, perhaps fatherhood has revealed them, because I have watched them leave work to make a recital and coach soccer games and learn to braid hair and tie costumes and build dollhouses and sit through endless episodes of animated shows and juggle the schedules of now four or five people, no audience for the thousand repetitions of presence from which a childhood is constructed, only the accumulation itself, coat zipped, lunch packed, tear wiped, story read again, question answered again, shoes found, fever checked in the middle of the night, another practice, another game, and perhaps this is where the holiness actually resides, not somewhere above ordinary life but buried directly inside it.

I have learned from them what it means to be a good father.

Fathers and sons are more complicated than a single sentence can contain, but there are things I needed to learn about fatherhood that I learned by watching these men, learned by watching how they speak and lead and guide their children, and how they teach and learn from them and how they rearrange their lives around them, how strength can coexist with gentleness and authority with tenderness, how a father can be fully a man and be affectionate with his child, and perhaps one of the great mercies of friendship is that we are not limited to the inheritance we received, that somewhere along the way other men can hand us what we were missing without ever knowing they are handing it to us.

There are moments when I catch one of them looking at his child with a tenderness that feels like prayer, and the room and air change around him, and I find myself watching not only the father he has become but the boy I once knew still living somewhere inside him, and all those years collapse together, the soccer fields and rented houses and red cups and weddings and jobs and losses and children, all the stupid things we did and all the serious things we survived, and I understand that these men have been teaching me for years in the only way the most important things can really be taught, without lessons, without speeches, in patience, in presence, in gentleness, in the holy art of showing up, simply by living beside me.

By staying.

By loving their children where I could see them.

Sometimes I think this is the quiet miracle of friendship, that if you are fortunate enough to know people for long enough you are allowed to witness not one person but all the people they become, the boy and the young man and the husband and the grieving man and the frightened man and the father on his knees fastening a tiny shoe, and transformation does not arrive as a thunderclap but as a slow accumulation of small luminous acts, wiping tears, zipping coats, whispering bedtime stories, standing on sidelines, showing up to every first and fifth and fifteenth thing with love and pride in your chest, until one day you look across the room at the men you once knew as boys and realize that they have become the sort of men you hope your own son might someday become.

And the older we become, the more I see it. Fatherhood reveals a man's truest character. It brings forward what was always there: the steadfastness, the tenderness, the capacity to love beyond logic or measure. It is a mirror and a map and a kind of rebirth. And in the glow of their fatherhood, I have felt something in myself soften and strengthen and open and rise.

Because loving Benjamin has been the greatest joy I have ever known, and watching my brothers love their children has widened that joy, made it feel deeper somehow, and more like something ancient and communal and passed heart to heart, father to father, friend to friend, a lineage not of blood but of witness. I think sometimes about all the ways men inherit one another, all the things we learn simply by standing close enough to another person's life for long enough, and how some of the most consequential lessons I have ever received were given by men who had no idea they were teaching me anything at all.

And sometimes, when we are sitting together at a table long after the plates have been cleared, or standing beside a field watching our children run, or simply leaning against a kitchen counter with tired eyes and full hearts, I think the reason God gives men friends may be so that when we become fathers we do not have to do it alone, so that someone remembers the boy we were before we had any idea what we were doing, someone sees the man we are trying to become, someone can stand beside us through the beautiful and bewildering work of loving another human being more than ourselves.

And if there is anything holy in this life, anything luminous and steady and worth bowing before, it might be this: that the boys I grew up with became the men I learned fatherhood from, and that love, once multiplied, never stops multiplying.

And there are nights now when Benjamin is not with me and the house is too quiet, and one of these men I have known across so many versions of my life will say, *come over, brother*, and I will go, and somewhere in that house there will be a little girl who wants another story before bed, and I will sit beside her with *Goodnight Moon* open across my knees while my friend moves through the kitchen cleaning dishes or packing tomorrow's lunch, and sometimes I think about the distance between then and now, all those versions of ourselves we somehow survived, boys kicking balls behind schools, young men drinking beer in rented houses and parents' basements, husbands and fathers and fools and friends, and how none of us could possibly have known then that this was where we were headed, toward these kitchens and bedrooms and soccer fields, toward daughters and sons, toward tenderness, toward one another still, saying in all the ways men eventually learn to say the things they once did not know how to say:

Come over, brother.

You don't have to be alone tonight.