

Alexs Pate

## **THE PAST IS PERFECT: A MEMOIR OF A FATHER/SON REUNION**

It is Friday and I am deep into the process of scouring my apartment. I know I can't really make it clean. It's not that kind of place. One that can actually be spotless. There have been too many days of lackadaisical housekeeping ever to restore this place to spotless. I dream, actually, of replacing every little thing in it. Painting the walls. New windows. Window coverings. Floors. Everything. Maybe replace all of the furniture. Every single thing. It's the only way I know to take the years away.

Once, when I didn't want to wash the dishes (and every single one of them was dirty), I loaded them into a plastic garbage bag and dumped them in the trash. I then drove to the Mall of America and bought brand new dishes. Talk about new. Suddenly my kitchen had new life. This is what I want to do to my apartment on this Friday afternoon because I'm cleaning like a mad man and it's completely futile. But I want to do it. I'm on my hands and knees scrubbing floors. I even bought one of those steam cleaner things that they advertise on television. The ones they say everyone uses in France. No detergent, just steam. It works, sort of. But it's slow and some things need soap. Pure and simple.

My cleaning frenzy is motivated by fear. My son is coming to stay for a week and I am terrified that the truth of my slovenly housekeeping will irreparably damage the growing strength of our relationship. I suppose my fear is compounded by the fact that he is currently a midshipman at the Naval Academy. I know the level of meticulousness

the Navy demands. As a veteran of four years in that service, I have some idea of how Alex's mind is being molded by the rigors of that environment.

If I'd lived with and raised my son, would I care how clean my house is? If he already knew how much I hate cleaning and how much I resent taking time out from writing or thinking or eating or even making love to do it, there would be no reason to construct this elaborate façade.

The façade? Me, the bachelor, with a cool, clean pad. Respectable. Recalcitrant. Loving. Open. Yes, this is the image I want. Someone you can take pride in calling your father. That's the façade. And, the truth? Well, of course, it's something less than that.

But the façade I'm constructing – both in the physical appearance of my apartment and in my own head – is not pure fantasy. There is a part of me that truly wants to be and sometimes is exactly what I imagine he would want me to be. To be honest, one of the consequences of being an absentee father is that you can never trust yourself to do the right thing. You can't forget that you've already betrayed yourself and your children.

I am good at building façades. At times like these, the façade building becomes the most important part of my desire. I want to be what he wants me to be.

But why? There is a space between my son and me. An emptiness. It happened over a twelve-year period. It is dark and cavernous there. Voices disappear there. No echo. He lived and had experiences. I lived and had experiences. We were separate. But knowing that empty space exists only makes me want to know him more now. It is

the impetus for my absolute surrender to him. I want him to love me. No. I want him to surrender to my love.

Our journey has not been easy, and neither one of us would make good POWs. We don't surrender to very much. Not without a fight. And we have had our share of emotional combat. So this space between us, this vast unknowing, provides the fuel for our reunion.

But there is another dimension to it. I often find myself wondering about the differences between me and men who have raised their children. Men who lived with their children every day, punished and rewarded them, loved and cursed them. Men who know their children. They are not like me. I have to ask questions. I have to learn what I don't know. I have to aggressively do that. But fathers who have raised their children know already. Or they should.

So when I'm on my hands and knees scrubbing a floor because my son is coming to visit and I don't want him to think I keep an untidy house, I'm also wondering whether those men would be doing what I'm doing. How many fathers with twenty-six-year-old sons are concerned about what their sons think of their apartments? I don't know and it puts the fear of God in me.

To be an absentee father is to exist behind the thinnest of veils, like nearly transparent curtains. Sheer enough to see what is on the other side and still be aware that there is something between you and everything else. It is to live within a self-constructed context. Men who have turned away from their children are often numb to that fact. They've built a world in which those children do not belong, where they are not expected.

And in this way, such a man is never directly reminded of his estrangement. Of course, he has to brave up to the images of single mothers who pass by him everyday, dragging their children to the laundromat, to school, to piano lessons, to the welfare office, to the doctor. He sees them and he knows. He knows when he passes a child who might be the same age as the one he has left behind. It is a flickering image, but it is there.

The depth of denial can be astounding. It was for me. And I was actively dealing with it. I was writing poems about my children. I wrote a novel about us. I did performance art about it. I've been dealing with this subject from the moment they disappeared from my life. I was *dealing* with it and yet there was a part of me that went about the business of constructing my own reality that did not include space for them.

I am worthy of condemnation. I submit freely to it. There is no good reason to abandon a child. And because this story is essentially about redemption and recovery, I think the first step a man must make is to acknowledge his own responsibility – not just his financial responsibility – but the responsibility for forgetting his children. For leaving them behind. And this is a heavy weight to bear. I remember writing somewhere that no man can live with the absence of his child everyday. *Everyday*. So, we move on. Erase. Edit. We maneuver ourselves into a place where we do not have to be reminded everyday that there are people missing from our lives who should be there.

I imagine that my son let me go as well. That he did what he could to render me irrelevant to his life. For, if a man can't survive thinking about his missing child everyday, it is too much to ask of the child. Too much. As fathers, we understand this. We know they have to move on. We have. They will, too. This is what we tell ourselves.

I move through the rooms of my house, cleaning in a completely random pattern, first the dining room, then the stove, then the floor in what will be his room, and so forth. I am whirling around like a teenaged boy at his third high school mixer who knows that something special might happen if things are done right.

If. If my apartment is right. If I am right. If time has softened his resistance to my openness.

How does a father, separated from his son for more than ten years, find his way back into that boy's arms? Who knows the way and can provide the necessary light and direction? For years I wandered through my life, living each day enveloped in a shroud of delusion and confusion. I was deluded in that I *felt* authentic, I felt real. Now I think I was more of a construction than a real, authentic person. I willed myself forward, ignoring the ever-expanding void that existed within me. Certainly I was confused in the sense that I didn't know what to do about it.

Where was it to come from? Who would provide the solution to my problem? Which of the faceless men who passed before me might be able to intuit my needs and offer help? I knew that most of the men who walked by or sat across from me had children somewhere – known or unknown. Would one of them be able to provide some insight? Perhaps they'd had experiences like mine and had figured out what to do. Perhaps they had done it.

Which of these men was like me? Men who never thought it possible, indeed never even thought about it? Men who walked briskly on their way to work, blind to the

need? Blind to the absolute, nagging need to be a father. I knew these men. They were lawyers and bus drivers. Crack heads, cops, and football players.

Men who one day simply stormed out of the house and never returned. Men who fell in love with someone new and for whom leaving was inevitable. Men who, for sport and game, cast their seed into the space usually reserved for true love .

Accidents.

I knew these men because we were all grouped together. And there were so many of us cataloged this way. We existed together in government reports, media accounts, and anecdotal horror stories. Men who had become fathers through acts of vengeance and violence. Drunken moments for which reason cannot provide support. All manner and all types. All of these men were fathers but many would never again truly hear the voices of their children. Some would not even recognize their children if they passed each other on the street.

Indeed, there are men who, when challenged, actually can deny that those offspring's faces hold remnants of themselves or that those voices even make sounds. You've seen them on *Judge Judy* or *Texas Justice* or *Montel Williams*. Men who seem out of place in their own skin, hoping against hope that the consequences of their sexual urges bear no deoxyribonucleic connection to them. Their breathless stares into the camera encourage us to hope likewise.

The children, well, the children are mist. Smoke. Shadows. Non-corporeal entities who are blessed with life and breath and names, but not with active, hands-on fathers.

I was one of them. It was like being an “is” and an “isn’t” at the same time. A father and yet not. A phantom father, yes, a phantom phasing against a swirling background of denial, anger, fear, and incompleteness. The child we helped bring into being left to the wherewithal of his mother’s capacities.

This story is a wind-swept prayer, a living regret, a promise, a glimpse of joy. This story, when it is fully told, is the only true reason for silence. It is not a story about the gender war that provides the context. It is not about the other women, men, and children who populate the landscape surrounding this story, although there are many such people and they indeed figure prominently (their contributions to the truth must find their own voice). While I might occasionally speak of them, there is only one focus, one theme to this story. It is a story of reconnection. One errant father’s trip into the abyss of absenteeism and the spontaneous and wondrous way in which life changes the moment a lost child’s voice is heard again. Two years later. Five years later. Twenty years later. It doesn’t matter. When a father sees what he knows is *him*, or *her*, hears a voice, although encrusted with the dust of time, recognizable as that of his son or daughter, there are no known words to describe the feelings that torche through his body.

I’m here within the seam of these words to profess a profound, powerful, and personal truth: There *is* a way back. For us who have passed into the forgotten. For us who have succumbed to denial. For us who throw tokens at shadows. For us whose anger is sharp enough to defend itself. For us who have sent thousands and us who have never looked back. There *is* a way.

It is not pretty. But we already know that. We littered the path with our own debris. Regardless of what happened, who did what to whom, when we left, the breeze we created scattered all manner of trash behind us. We left a mess. Perhaps there was one before we even got up out of bed or off the couch to leave that last time. That might have been the reason we left in the first place. Wrought words. Wrung hands. Screams. Shouts and silence circled us. It was a mess already and we knew we didn't, couldn't belong there.

So we left.

Or we fell in love. Embraced something or someone other than the one we promised. Or maybe there were no promises – only children.

It doesn't matter what the situation was. If there comes the day, as it did for me, when reconnecting with your estranged children becomes even a slight possibility, it is worth the journey. There is a path back. It might be arduous, but I guarantee it is there.

I suspect it is a different journey for each separate man and each circumstance. This is just one. One path. One parent. One child. Stumbling. Groping.

But it is worth it. The hole can be repaired and the void filled. I trust in this. I embrace this. When it seemed that this – living a less than fulfilling life – was the only way to survive, I was given a gift: the chance to inhale the fresh, rejuvenating energy of a child's breath. I was given an opportunity to try to repair the broken thing in me and in my son at the same time.

It should be said now that this opportunity was given to me by my children. The child must eventually grow to value the resuscitation of a dead relationship and offer the possibility of it. For me, this chance to reconcile, to rediscover fatherhood – was offered.



My son tells me that his once burning passion for perfection has turned into a quest for wholeness. I can only claim to be a few steps ahead of him. Wholeness? What is that for a black man? How can we be whole here? In this country? In this time? How?

I knew how to be less. Less strong than I thought I was. Less of a father than I thought I'd be. Just plain less. I knew it the moment I realized that the family I'd created, I was about to destroy.

From the moment I was separated from my children, I began a private (and public) lament. Like a chant that kept reverberating in my head. *They are out there. They are out there. You don't know them. You don't know.* This chant required no action; it only triggered a potent sense of emptiness in me. On birthdays: *they are out there. You don't know them.* On holidays. At graduations. During illnesses.

Holidays were the worst. As an absentee father, as a black man who had virtually no contact with my children, it was an excruciating time. While it is true that I was not there to show my love, to give presents, you can be assured that no matter where I was, the chant bloomed within as if my body were a hothouse. I felt an unspeakable pain so prickly it made my insides raw.

African American men have been painted with the cruelest of strokes. We are portrayed as criminals for being so irresponsible as fathers that we should be hunted down and jailed. This society evaluates our humanity based on the amount of tax money they have to contribute to the care and feeding of our children.

Yes, financial responsibility must be addressed, but I want to talk about feelings. About how absentee fathers *feel* about their children. How they deal with their loss.

What they *think* about their children. What they miss about not being present. What they *should* have done. Some part of me believes that if these were the issues that framed the discussion about absentee fathers, child support would be less of a problem.

There used to be a sitcom called *Mad About You* that I watched religiously. I loved the ridiculous way that their relationship always found its balance by the end of the half hour. No matter what Paul (the husband) did, how much he hurt or disappointed Jamie (the wife), they always found a way to invoke a sense of inevitability in their struggle to be happy.

When Jamie got pregnant, I was even more attentive. I remember watching as comedian/actor Paul Reiser anxiously but gently rested his ear on his sitcom wife's belly to listen for the first time to his child's heartbeat. It comes at the end of an episode and it hit me hard. I'm sure I did the same thing when Gyanni, my first child, was expected. I'm sure there were many moments of total excitement and anticipation. But I can't honestly say I remember them. None of my three children was planned in the way that many of my contemporaries plan their families. None of my children was expected in the way that television commercials promoting pregnancy tests flash images of anxious couples waiting with barely restrained excitement for the strip to turn blue. I watched those commercials and wondered who those people were. I was severely impoverished.

The atmosphere that accompanied the announcement of our three children's conception, of their being, was for me a mixture of panic and "God give me strength." Each child, it saddens me to say, was greeted with a fixed, pleasant expression on my face as a way of moving forward. From the beginning I was filled with shame. How could I be a father when I didn't know who I was or where I was going?

It is important to say now, since this is a record of my conscience, that these feelings never prevented the development of love. That love may have been flawed, incomplete, or fragile (and consequently its validity might be challenged on this basis alone). But from the first moment I held my daughter in my arms, I was deeply in love. The same is true for each of my children. I have always loved them. The problem is that there was no way they could have known it.

I grew up watching *Leave It To Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, and *The Donna Reed Show*. I knew what marriage and family were supposed to be. What I was supposed to be. I also knew that as an African American man, my responsibility to contribute to the rehabilitation of the image of the Black family was virtually non-negotiable. So that feeling of panic was one of the first (and perhaps most significant) challenges to the realness of my sense of manhood. It rattled the core of my existence in a way that was totally unexpected.

I watched as Paul went to birthing classes with Jamie. I saw them swoon over every shift of the baby in her stomach, every kick. I could feel the overly sweet energy between them – an ideal sweetness I now understand – an energy that said there was nothing more special, more powerful to Paul and Jamie than the birth of their baby.

I never felt that way. I was too frightened to enjoy it.

In the end, even with all of the socialization I was bombarded with – from television to the political demands of race to the admonitions and examples of my extended family – it was entirely too easy for me to walk away. In the end, it was a personal choice I made, and I rationalized it by believing that it would have been a

greater tragedy had I stayed with their mother. This was the worst decision I have ever made and represents a moment I'd give anything to do over.

It wasn't until years later that I realized that I, to some extent, had jeopardized my children's future for what I thought was my own. I can almost hear them say, "So you'd rather I be the tragedy? That's it, isn't it? You sacrificed *me* for you." For this there is no absolute forgiveness.

Of course, the first question, the first act of confrontation is "why did you abandon your children? How could you leave them behind regardless of your relationship with their mother?" People ask these questions knowing full well that no man can answer them adequately. Not to his children, to a reporter, or to himself. But there are some things that might be said, that *need* to be said.

For example, I know that my embarrassment at the failure of my relationship was the result of a kind of incompetency. I was incapable of the emotional negotiations that were required of me.

My ability to leave my children behind, I believe, began even before they were born. On *Mad About You*, Paul knew you had to fall in love with a child from his or her very beginning to make leaving him an impossibility. You have to talk to, read to, and even hug him before his first breath. You must dream about the life of a child before the child is in your arms. That doesn't mean you can't love a child after that. Of course you can. But I believe it's much harder to leave him if the connection is made organic from the very beginning, even before the child makes his or her first sound.

Social traditions and my own lack of sophistication at the time contributed to the fundamental disconnection that I, in retrospect, suffered with my children. In the late

1970s it was still unusual for a man to be a part of the birthing process. All of the prenatal and birth moments were experienced entirely by the woman. I always felt outside. The first time I saw my daughter was through a glass window. That is a part of what was wrong, then, for me: the way men were socialized to relate to children. For many men in my generation, the relationship between father and child was established *through* the mother.

When love fades between mother and father, it is the father who catapults away. Anything else is a fight upstream. I wanted to be away from their mother. Not them. But every contact with my children involved, on some level, a contact with my estranged spouse. I couldn't separate my responsibilities, my anger. I couldn't tell where she ended and they began.

The mechanics of maintaining a healthy relationship with children you don't live with requires an unflinching commitment. A clarity. You must love them enough to overcome the nastiness that often goes along with separation. You suddenly have to structure your life around weekend visits. You start buying toys that you won't get a chance to see them play with.

Inside my body a war raged. Much like that Saturday morning cartoon angel and devil thing. On one shoulder the angel said, "Fight for this family; be like your father," and on the other was the evil opposite who whispered, "Go. You've got another chance. Freedom is that way."

But how could I, a symbol in my own mind of a resurgent, empowered, responsible African American man, leave behind the children he'd fathered and deeply loved? Years after, when those children had grown to be adults, I realized it must have

seemed like I had simply walked out one day and never returned. But those days of agony are written on my bones, grooved into my brain, twisted into scars that mark my heart. It was a wrenching, horrendous thing to contemplate. It wasn't freedom. The only chance it represented was the chance to retard my development by twenty years. I just didn't know it.

From the very beginning of my separation from my children, I began writing about it: first as poetry, then as a play, and finally in novel form. When I was in the midst of beginning yet another revision of my novel, *Finding Makeba*, the final form of this creative meditation of loss and reconnection, I was introduced to a young woman who would come to have a tremendous impact on my work.

During a reception at Minneapolis' Walker Art Center's opening of the Malcolm X exhibit, a man, whom I didn't recognize, approached me as if we knew each other. This happens to me quite often and I never know where exactly the blame should be placed. I instinctively admonish myself for being less diligent than I should be in memorizing names and faces. Nonetheless, he warmly shook my hand and introduced me to his wife. She was perhaps twenty-five. He insisted I tell her about my novel. This in itself was surprising since I don't usually talk publicly about works-in-progress. I quickly recovered myself and gave this young woman a short explanation of the story of *Finding Makeba*. But her husband was unsatisfied. He asserted his power with a wave of the hand and insisted I go into detail. How he knew what *Finding Makeba* was about I didn't know, but I could see clearly that he knew enough to ask for a more meaningful description of it. So I took a deep breath and began a more detailed accounting of the novel.

Just as I began talking, he excused himself, leaving me alone with her. As my mother would say, I was completely outdone. But I nodded him off and continued on with my story. Suddenly it felt like there was no one else in the room but her and me. As I talked, tears sprinted from her eyes.

I was saying to her that in my point of view, any man who has fathered a child is incapable of forgetting that fact. Irrespective of the quality of that relationship, if he worked two jobs, was a member of the church, and tucked her in every night after a bedtime story, or if she never really knew him – that man was still a father. He could never truly *forget* that. The biological truth was one thing. The emotional or spiritual connection between them was perhaps just as incontrovertible. I knew this; it was the theme of my life.

She looked up at me and said, "That can't be true. I know my father. Wherever he is, he doesn't care about me."

I knew why she said it. I imagined my children were saying the same thing and had been for all the years I wasn't there. But in the same way I knew that men who are fathers are incapable of *forgetting*, I also knew that they never really stop caring. "Maybe he doesn't know how to show it, but I believe he cares."

I've heard too many private lamentations from black men about their relationship, or lack thereof, with their children. I believe there is a great degree of guilt, confusion, and fear impaneled in the bodies of African American men with respect to children. Long after that night, while on a book tour with *Finding Makeba*, I found corroboration in a most surprising way. As I read from the book in stores in urban areas, I noticed increasing numbers of black men standing in the back. When the reading ended, some of

them would linger, wait until nearly everyone was gone, and tentatively approach me. They were mostly down-and-out kind of guys. Men you see walking around on the streets. The ones who make you nervous, even though you know they mean you no harm.

Those who approached me would find a way to say that they were estranged fathers. And in the sound of their voices, in the way they averted their eyes, I could feel the tremendous amount of guilt they carried. I would ask them about it, the stress of the guilt they felt. They would invariably respond that yes, it is hard to know you have children somewhere that you know nothing about and have taken no responsibility for. Eventually they ended up saying that it was for the best. To some, their absence had been a noble sacrifice. “What kind of a life,” they would say, “could I give a child?” In some backasswards way of thinking, they rationalized their behavior as proof of how much they cared. So even the worst of the scofflaw fathers might secretly believe they are doing right by their children by doing nothing. I realized I had been guilty of the same ridiculous illogic.

So I meant it when I told this young woman that her father cared about her. I knew that it was possible despite the fact that neither she nor I would ever be able to assemble any proof.

I also realized that night that I had to keep this woman and her sadness present in my work. Even though I already had a tragedy to tell, I had to remember her. I was dealing with her sadness, too.

The specifics of each case are as varied and complex as are the lives and personalities of the men themselves. This is an important point. Every man who has allowed himself to become disconnected from his children is an individual. Some of us



are scared, some arrogant, some angry, some defeated, and probably most of us are confused.

That confusion does solidify into a life that keeps going almost as if that man has never caused the birth of a child. There are thousands of us.

My son, at age twenty-six, is a marvelous physical specimen. He is nearly six feet tall, knotted with muscles like a basketball player or a rap star when his shirt is off. He is brilliant, both in the energy he radiates (although confusion sometimes sparkles like a gemstone) and in the way his mind works. When you set your eyes on his deeply burnished brown glaze, you can see it. You can actually see how smart he is. How hurt he's been. How desperate he is to be free of it all. Alexs, my son, passionately seeks his freedom. Most of all, in his face, you can see love.

In the smallest, earliest memory I have of his face, the theme of love dominates. His eyes ask for it. His smile gives it. Perhaps every child's eyes have only one purpose other than *seeing*, and that is to ask for love.

It's oddly funny, or more likely sad, that I have the hardest time keeping a clear image of my son in my mind's eye. The problem is the picture I kept of him when we were estranged. In this picture where he sits with his sisters, he is four years of age. His creamed coffee complexion, that forehead, and those eyes. Intensity from the beginning. Curious. Precisely the kind of boy who never should suffer such betrayal.

I should have known from that face of his that whatever *distance* or *disconnection* or *context* I constructed could never effectively replace my actual presence.

I need to be clear here. It's not just presence that I'm talking about. It is *my* presence. Me. My way of dealing with issues. My ideas about male sensitivity, sensuality, and sexuality. My inherited and nurtured respect for people who are intense and who are perpetually curious, as he is. I would have been good for him and him for me if that space had not opened between us.

This is important because I don't mean to over inflate the presence of a biological father in a boy's life. I can see how important it is. That doesn't need debate. But I also know many fine young men who have managed quite well without it. The number of competent, powerful, hard-working women, especially black women, who have raised their sons and daughters without much help, if any, from biological fathers is legion. As a teacher I often stand in front of single mothers who are working, going to school, and raising children. So, in a way, this isn't about how important I am. I know that my son, while conscious of whatever deficit he accrued from my absence, would not necessarily choose to live it over differently.

But if, as a father, you get the chance to listen to your son question things about himself that you struggled with, *maybe even overcame*, you cannot help but realize that what he is questioning is precisely one of the contributions to his life you could have made.

For more than ten years, the picture of Alexs at four was the primary way I kept him in my life. In comparison to most of the people I know, I have precious few photographs. I think, now, that this idiosyncrasy (disdaining my own picture being taken and not hoarding piles of photographs) has something to do with my long-term and self-anointed status as an absentee father.

I carefully secreted away the few pictures of my children that I had. And late at night – no matter whom I was with, who had gone to sleep wondering why I was still up at four o'clock in the morning – I would take time to stare at the pictures and feel sad. My daughters. My son. Wondering. Feeling shitty.

That little boy with his soft, plaintive eyes became the foundation for my expectations. His was the image embossed in my mind. I'd tried, of course, to age him. I mentally drew my own picture. He was the same kid, just older. How wrong I was. It was just another trick that absence puts on us. It fools us into thinking we have a clue as to the impact of time and experience on our children. We can't know. We don't know. We are just W R O N G. About almost everything.

Parents who live with their children everyday will confirm: children teach us as much as we teach them. I have discovered that time does not diminish a child's capacity to teach a parent. The only requirement is: they (the children) have to want to.

So yes, I persist in the cleaning, constructing this reality with which to embrace my long-lost son. The potential of my recovery and salvation, I fear, is embedded in the details.