

## 6 pm

*By David Fluß*

I couldn't stop staring at my phone. This message, it just put me in an indescribable state. 6 pm. Something like a smile went over my face. But not a smile of happiness. More like a smile of "This man can't be serious right now." My dad left me almost twenty years ago, when I was five years old and these messages he sent sounded like a conversation between two childhood friends who wanted to reunite after graduating high school. Although my mother always put great effort into telling me fairy tales about him that were supposed to make me feel better, I started realizing at a young age that my father had simply left me and my mom to – probably - start a better life somewhere. And now, two decades later he had decided to text me saying "I want to explain everything. Please give me a chance and meet me in the café at Vegas Boulevard. 6 PM." Who did he think I was? Some housewife waiting for her husband to come back from war?

I noticed a really weird feeling overwhelming me from the inside; Even though I was totally mad and wanted to scream at this man, I felt the urge to see him and give him a chance for some reason. Would I in some way betray my mother if I met him? I decided to call her and ask her for advice. When I told her about it, she was surprised too but due to her kind of superstitious beliefs as well as goodwill, she told me that I shouldn't throw this chance away because otherwise I'd regret it one day. She was right. Meeting with my dad didn't have to mean that I'd forgive him but I could at least listen to what he had to say.

So, I made my way to the Vegas Boulevard. The feeling I had earlier had not disappeared and I wasn't even able to decide what kind of coffee I wanted to take because my mind was so distracted. I was actually going to see the man who was supposed to raise me but decided for a different life. But there was one thing: meanwhile twenty minutes had passed and he still hadn't shown up. I figured that showing up twenty minutes too late is nothing compared to getting to know his son twenty years too late, so I waited a little longer. But after 35 minutes and no answers to my calls I became a little impatient. Was he in a state of emergency? That could have been the only explanation because what kind of man would ask his son to reunite and then not show up?

The weather was nice so I went outside and just watched the people walk by – something I did a lot when I was bored. Vegas was literally the “city of amusement” but everyone here looked so stressed out. It reminded me of a factory where thousands of machines do only one thing all day long. Nobody seemed to be passionate about anything here. But there was one guy who didn’t fit into that picture. Considering the fact that he was homeless he actually looked pretty okay. He just sat there and smiled at me. It wasn’t a creepy smile though. It was more like he could read my mind and knew what I was thinking. At this point I gave up hope for meeting my dad. An hour had passed since he had wanted to be here and there was still no sign of him. I was disappointed but I thought he didn’t deserve it for me to feel sad.

The homeless guy was still staring at me, with no shame. And because I had nothing better to do I just went up to him and asked him for a cigarette. “What does a kid like you want with a cigarette?”, he said. I told him that I’m 24 and his jaw dropped. “Do I actually still look that young?”, I asked and he responded something I didn’t really understand but he gave me a cig so I didn’t ask again. He glanced at me and asked me what I thought when looking at all these faces. I explained my analogy to him and he suddenly started laughing. “That’s exactly the same thing I thought! There is so much that went wrong in my life but when I watch all these successful and glamorous people here I feel like I’m still happier than them.” He had a point in some way but maybe it was just because he had already lost everything in life, so he didn’t have anything to worry about. Was it weird, talking to a total stranger who was also homeless? Yeah, most likely it was but for some reason I didn’t care at this moment.

“What exactly went wrong in your life, if I may ask?”, I said and he stared deeply in my eyes. “Well. It wasn’t always like this. I was in love with a wonderful girl. We had everything we needed. I had a well-paid job at a bank and after two years of marriage we decided to have a baby.” That reminded me of my own situation, I had totally forgotten about my dad. “Everything was fine until the bank I worked for had to close down. They just put me out on the street like a dog even though I was one of their best employees. I couldn’t manage to find a new job and slowly realized that the American Dream everyone was talking about was nothing but a lie. But instead I found pleasure in alcohol. My wife was supportive at first and even worked harder, so our little boy could have everything he needed. But I lost control over myself. Actually, I lost control over everything.

There was not a minute where I was sober and my wife finally couldn't bear it anymore. She took our child and left me. Told me that I should get my life going again before I could be a father for her son again. She was right the whole time but thanks to my selfishness I blamed her for my situation instead of the alcohol. After ten more years I decided to get sober again. It was the best decision I could make but my life was still not going well. I was already homeless and had no job. Everyday I wanted to call my wife and my son. But I was too ashamed that I hadn't supported my family for ten years, neither financially nor emotionally."

I didn't really know what to say. The similarities with my dad's situation were frightening and for the first time in my life, I got to hear such a story from the other perspective. I thought maybe my father had his reasons as well but then I remembered that he had not only left me once but he also hadn't shown up after asking me to meet him. The homeless guy and me talked for another twenty minutes and I genuinely enjoyed it but then he ended the conversation telling me that he had to look for a place to sleep. I wanted to give him a few dollars when I said goodbye but he refused the offer. What kind of homeless person wouldn't take money that was being offered to him?

I decided to text my dad while I was watching the man leave towards the sunset. Nothing special, just a simple "F\*CK YOU". The homeless guy took a phone out of his dirty jeans. He turned around and smiled at me again. I smiled back at him and I didn't know why but it felt like we had some sort of connection. All of a sudden my dad texted me back and I felt like I was going to faint. The message said, "It was nice talking to you, son."