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When Things Fall Apart, Can We Keep Going?

Julie P. Center
College of DuPage

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When Things Fall Apart, Can We Keep Going?

We land at The Quiet Cup, our neighborhood's small coffee shop that connects to the ice-cream parlor by a short hallway. Both shops serve as the local hangout and are infected with young teens at night. They don't lick ice-cream cones or sip on brewing beans but instead clutter the sidewalks and benches. It's our favorite place to go in the morning when it's empty, but now my parents shuffle in their seats as a small crowd forms on this late July afternoon.

My mother orders her usual small caffè latte, sprinkling cinnamon on top. But my dad boasts, "I can get just coffee here. That's all I want. No fancy stuff. No foam. No mocha. No bullshit. Just black for me." And about five sugars he's tapped into his cup, leaving little crystal remains on the table. Today, he's dyed his hair chestnut brown, and I struggle to find any remnant of the salty mane my 60-year-old father has had for the past decade. He's dressed in a navy suit with a gray tie, wider than it should be and adorned with an art deco design. Where his moustache should be suddenly appears a limp upper lip that has been hiding for 40 years. I stare at the crookedness forming above his mouth each time he talks.

"I'm not getting hired because I'm too old. It was your brother's idea." My brother Elias is a 32-year-old sales consultant. He trains his clients to rip people off and is paid \$100,000-a-year for it. Dad has been Elias's new project. "Do I look any younger?" he asks, pushing the sugar crystals onto the floor, sneaking a glance to notice my expression. My mom narrows her light green eyes, signaling a warning to omit laughter. After a pause, I manage to say, "You've taken off at least ten years." He sighs and smiles, satisfied.

An hour from now, Dad will be at his third interview of the month. He shows me his revised resume. He has tried to mask his 40 years of experience working for AT&T by leaving drastic gaps in hopes that he will appear younger. He has been a technician, a manager, a trainer. But, when the company suffered severe lay-offs last year, Dad took a forced retirement, leaving his \$55,000-a-year position as Benefits Coordinator. Today, he's hoping to be hired at a local motor club, for \$8.25 an hour.

My mom warns, "Eugene, didn't the doctors say to cut out caffeine? For your medicine to work?" When she speaks, even her questions contain an order. Her raven hair forms like a football helmet around her ashen face,

making her look more like 70 than her 63 years. She has never minded looking older than my father, but with his new look, she sits restlessly next to him.

"I don't care!" he tells my mom as he loosens his tie. "I need my coffee. The real stuff, not that decaffeinated shit you make at home. And my shaking's never gonna stop anyway." My mom abruptly stands up and walks to the side counter, powdering her cup with more cinnamon. My dad has a genetic hand tremor that has been getting increasingly worse with age. Two times a day, he takes a medication used for Parkinson's disease, though he hasn't yet been given that diagnosis. His shaking is so bad Mom has to fill out all paperwork and sign his name for him.

"Dad, you have to work on this," I take Mom's side. "You can't just sit around and do nothing about it." He moves his glasses up as he pinches the corners of his nose, squeezing his murky blue eyes closed tight. He concentrates on the darkness, combating the tears that might come. Finally he speaks, his words slow and deliberate, wanting me to take in every word.

He squeezes my arm to jolt my focus. "Look, I don't want...anyone telling me their ... solutions. I know you're both right, but I don't want any other person's...version of what's right. I. Want. My. Own. Version." His voice is loud and shaking, and the other patrons in the quaint coffeehouse start to stare, so we decide to leave.

As we drive away, my mom tries again. "Eugene, you know you're happier when you've exercised and cut out caffeine. Can't you just try?"

"You know, I can't stand this!" Dad bellows, slamming his fists on his knees. In a hushed tone, hoping to forfeit a fight, Mom whispers, "You can't ever be happy." My dad is silent. As I drive, I stare at my dad's eyes through the rearview mirror. I look through his glasses, past the glare. I squint my own eyes and now see the gray specks that veil his irises' blue.

There is a buzzing I hear, the humming of the engine making the car run away home. We say nothing. Mom is staring out her window, opening it a crack to let her cigarette smoke escape. I notice her eyes through the window, their reflection still a light green. When I pull into our driveway, I wait for something to keep me there. I turn off the car engine. Dad takes a deep breath, inhaling Mom's smoke. His cough is raspy.

It's been a month. Dad has been working in the motor club's noisy call station, filled with about 80 other employees. On his corner cubicle's desk, he has a desk calendar with pictures from Saturday Evening Post and a small battery-operated clock. The thing he likes best about his new job is that his cubicle is right by the window. The thing he likes least about his new

job is everything else. Center: When Things Fall Apart, Can We Keep Going?

My mom and I meet him at The Quiet Cup, and my dad orders his “real” black coffee again. He has started growing out his hair, specks of white sneaking out at the roots. Already his moustache is back, completing his upper lip. But his eyes still look the same behind his glasses. Local students started school this week, so Mom sits comfortably next to me. She forgoes ordering anything today.

My dad had another interview this morning, this time for a party supply company’s admin office. “How did it go?” I hesitantly force a smile on my face, trying to make it easier for him to tell me.

“My hands shook so goddamn much it took me an hour to fill out the forms. They already had the same information from my resume.” My mom shifts in her seat, wishing she had something to sip on to distract her. Her green eyes gaze at the concentric circles my dad’s coffee has created on the table.

“Got any other interviews coming up?” I ask.

“Not a one. But I’ve gotten used to the motor club. I don’t like it, but I know I can do it for now until something else comes along.”

“Well, that’s good...isn’t it?” I tilt my head like a dog who doesn’t understand the command.

He slowly answers without looking at me, as if he has rehearsed this for a while and wants to get each word right. I hear my brother’s voice when Dad says, “Energy spent worrying about a job is useless. The motor club is not my future. I have other goals I can achieve.”

He takes his glasses off and slowly wipes them on his tie, this time burgundy to go with his white button-down dress shirt. Without the smudges, his eyes change to a pale blue. Finally, his voice comes back and asks, “What if that was it, you know? What if that was my only chance to get a respectable, well-paying job?” I want to encourage him to not give up, but he interrupts the thought. “Look, I make eight bucks an hour, and my pension’s going down every year. I can’t afford a new car; I can’t afford anything. I’m 60 years old. What do I have to show for it?”

My mom looks up from the table. “Look, Eugene, no matter what job you have, you will never be satisfied. It’s not like how it used to be. When we were in our 20s, living in a small apartment in Skokie, you made \$3.15 an hour.”

“Yeah, but I would’ve done that job for free. It was fun.”

“It was fun because we were young and stupid. It’s just a job. And the motor club is just a job. It doesn’t define you.”

My dad stands up, towering over us as we sit crouched in our chairs. He turns to me. "Would you like something else to drink?"

"Uh, sure. Another green tea." I stare at my mother, who has resorted to picking up a newspaper that a former patron left behind. She purses her lips as she reads. When she blinks, I notice her eyes aren't green at all. They are hazel, more amber than green, reflecting the blouse she is wearing or eye shadow she has on. Today, she is wearing a red t-shirt, and her face is clean of makeup.

I go up to the counter to check on my dad, with the request for my tea to be topped with some ice. The cashier sets down the two drinks and rings my dad up. \$8.25. My dad unzips his wallet, lifts out a \$10 bill, and hands it to the cashier. He cherishes the \$1.75 he receives as change.

-Julie P. Center

"Self Portrait 2018"
Hannah Davis
Photography

