

A House Made of Cards

Camille Archer, College of Arts and Science

My father never wanted to work in business. Instead, when he was younger, he had the big, bright dream of discovering old treasures buried beneath the earth, and therefore decided that he would pursue this passion and study archaeology in college. However, like most dreams that we have when we are young and naïve, his dream started to change as he grew older and experienced the world around him. Growing up in a small brick house in a rural town in Oklahoma, he never really understood the concept of being rich, as he had never been exposed to anyone who made more than \$40,000 a year. When he was old enough to watch television though, he began to realize that there were people out there with ridiculous amounts of money, and, with this, power. He also noticed something that these rich, successful people on the screen had in common besides wealth: they all seemed to be extremely happy. Those rich families never fought, or cried, or frowned, or were anxious, or skipped meals because they had to use most of their paycheck that month to fix their car. Money had given these people the type of life my father wished he had.

This realization, that money must bring happiness, crushed his previous dream of traveling to Egypt to uncover what lay beneath the sand, as archaeology as a field sadly did not pay as much as my father wanted it to, and thus was no longer an option. My father wanted a large salary, so he sacrificed a piece of himself to obtain it, and in the process of doing so, that elusive happiness. So, when he enrolled at the University of Oklahoma after graduating at the top of his high school class, he declared that he was going to major in business. His parents were proud of him for this sensible choice and relieved that he would have realistic job prospects after he earned his college degree. They supposedly remained proud of him when he quickly became depressed and started drinking, embarking upon his decades-long battle with alcoholism. He had to transfer colleges after flunking out of Oklahoma. No one around him seemed to know what his problem was, and no one really bothered to ask. My father never got his bachelor's degree in business; he dropped out of his second college with only a few credit hours left to complete his degree. Instead, he found work at a local grocery store. His parents were supposedly still proud of him, praising him for his admirable work ethic and unbreakable spirit, and declaring that he would be the manager of his own grocery store one day. This would be a fine career for any hard-working man in the rural Midwest.

They weren't wrong, these adamant, blind supporters of my dad. Eventually, like a true self-made man, he worked his way up the chain of command until he was the manager of his very own grocery store, married to a beautiful woman from his small town, and expecting his first child. He should have been the epitome of happiness, except for that ever-pressing desire for a higher salary, so that he could move to a nicer house and have nicer things, and therefore become truly happy. After his second child was born, he became even unhappier with the small house we lived in, and the slow-paced lifestyle of our farming town. So, chasing happiness, he quit his comfortable job and moved us to a larger city in Oklahoma to work at a larger company that offered him a higher

salary. He became a regional manager for this new company; he was in charge of most of their stores in the Midwest, and he settled into his new corporate position with the feeling of one who has finally witnessed his hard work pay off. Never mind that he went out to a bar almost every night, lying to his wife about where he had been, or that he was angry all the time. He had a larger salary, his wife didn't have to work, his children were in school, and he could finally start the process of being happy.

I remember once when I was a young girl, I asked my dad to bring me home a book I had been wanting when he came home from work that night. He arrived home late, like he always did, a little distant and a little angry, and handed me a book different from the one I had requested. Once I told him of his mistake, he got angrier, and told me he would get me the book tomorrow—and then he walked off and slammed his bedroom door. When my mom asked me why I wasn't reading the book, I told her that he had just made a mistake, and he was getting me the book tomorrow. She entered their bedroom, and a few minutes later, my dad stormed out and saw me sitting in the living area, watching my favorite late-night cartoons. He stared at me for a long second. Then he screamed at me for telling my mom about the book, and he flipped me off. I had never been flipped off before, and I remember crying the rest of the night.

The very next day, my dad got a much-anticipated promotion at work. He came home early that day, while there was still light outside, and took us all out to dinner. He didn't smile once that day, not even when we bought him his favorite dessert to celebrate. He took me to see his new office later that week, in the corporate building, and I was so proud of him once I saw how important he was and how much people respected him. He had a silver plate on his door that had his name carved on it, a large desk that overlooked the lower floors, and, best of all, his very own swivel chair. He told me that if I worked hard enough, one day I could be just like him, and have an office like his. I didn't quite understand why that sudden thought made me feel so nauseated.

The summer before I started at Vanderbilt, my dad was approaching his ten-year anniversary at his company and was telling the whole family, his wife and his three kids, about the large bonus he was going to receive before Christmas. I was glad, and I hoped it would be a large amount, as maybe that would improve his declining mood. My parents had been fighting for years, I hadn't really seen him throughout high school, as he was either always at work or a bar. Our family felt like it was now only held together by a thin, taut wire. That night, he hugged me, and told me that all our troubles were about to fade away.

The day after he told us about his bonus, my dad purposefully crashed his car into a bridge in an attempt to kill himself. He had been drinking that night, as he had been doing for most of his life, and decided that he wasn't happy enough in this life to justify continuing to live. The car he was driving was a brand-new red truck, a gift from his company, with a new stereo system that always seemed to be playing Led Zeppelin. His plan to quit the world was ruined, however, because he miraculously survived the crash, and instead spent all night bleeding in a muddy ditch until a police officer found him the next morning. After dropping him off at the hospital, the officer drove out to our two-story suburban house, complete with a large backyard, two dogs, and a paper doll family waiting within, to deliver the terrible news. My mother didn't quite understand what

he was saying, as she repeatedly told the officer, “He’s happy, no, no, he would never do that, suicide? He has a job, he has a family,” while shaking her head slowly, methodically, almost as if she were speaking to a child.

I, however, understood the moment the police car pulled up in front of our house. I was the daughter who had never again asked for anything from my parents ever since that mistaken book, who had worked a job since freshman year of high school after soccer practice and on the weekends, who had studied late every night so I could receive a good scholarship to a good school and make my parents proud. I had seen my father’s blood run with alcohol and felt the urge myself to know if it truly helped crush the urge inside that demanded more, and better, and higher. I wanted money so I wouldn’t have to worry about it anymore, so I could smile with the ease my richer friends did, who had apparently reached that level of happiness, or income, that evaded my family. I don’t think I had ever felt as close to my dad as I did when I heard that he had tried to die, because even though I was hurt by the fact that he could abandon me so easily, I knew that he had never wanted to work in business. He had built a house for himself with no solid foundation, and had torn it down himself, the same way he had made it.

My father is unemployed now, and I don’t talk to him much. He’s still at home with my mom, whom he hates, my two younger sisters, whom he ignores, and our dogs, whom he owns. The last time we spoke, months ago, he told me he was proud that I was making something of myself, and that I had great things ahead of me if I continued to work as hard as I have been for so long. I told him that I was thinking of majoring in English literature, and was also liking my psychology courses, and had he ever heard of Freud? He paused on the phone, and I heard my home in the background, with my sisters laughing, my mom yelling indistinctly, the dogs barking, and I knew what he was going to say even before he spoke:

“Have you ever considered looking into business?”