

Long-Distance Dad

Prologue

by Michael Beckett

We sat in the warm morning sun of a Johannesburg sidewalk cafe. I looked across the table at this kid, a young man really, who was a complete stranger not so long ago.

I'd been looking forward to this trip for weeks. We both had been. But now something felt off. The person I had journeyed to see for the first time, who greeted me with a high-wattage grin, had become increasingly quiet, almost sullen.

It had been a week filled with new experiences. For me: the first time south of the equator, first time in Africa, first time seeing abject poverty up close. For him: the first time on a plane, seeing the ocean, eating in restaurants.

I watched my companion devour his breakfast, and knew it would be a long time before he had a good healthy meal again. I fretted about what he would have for dinner that night.

His resolute silence made me uncomfortable. Old insecurities were triggered. Sparks of resentment flashed. I felt confused, concerned, and a little sad. In a short while, I would get on a plane for the 17-hour flight home. Our conversations would go back to texting, emails, and occasional phone calls. I had to know what was going on; I didn't want this tension hanging over us from afar.

Direct, emotional conversations are not my strength. Nobody in the history of my family has ever engaged in one. But I had already stretched myself in a hundred different ways for him. With the slightest quiver in my voice, I haltingly plowed ahead.

“So... buddy. I want to talk about something. You’ve been so quiet the last few days. It makes me feel bad. Are you upset about something? Do you not like me? This was supposed to be a great trip. I thought you were having a good time. What’s the matter?”

His jaw worked as he thought of a response. His posture was usually so proud and poised, but now he seemed shrunken, his head down. I knew that he didn’t like to be put on the spot. And he knew the mumbling grunts I’d been hearing lately weren’t going to cut it.

He stole a glance at me and quickly looked back his plate. “Sometimes I fear you.”

I was shocked. Nobody in the world meant more to me. “What!? You know how much I care for you. Why would you think that?”

“Well...” His eyes stayed focused on the table. “I stay quiet because I’m afraid I might say the wrong thing and anger you. And then you’ll leave me, and my life would crumble.”

My breath caught. Tears welled. The immense significance of this relationship hit me full on. At that moment, I truly understood.

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Michael Beckett is developing a book about the mutually life-changing journey he’s shared with his South African son.

For more on their inspiring story, visit www.Michael-Beckett.com.