

# Hey Dad

*Zee*

*[a phone conversation]*

“Stop that dad. You don’t get to use Mum’s death as an excuse—

“You know, sometimes I wonder, do you really miss her or do you just miss not having her around to follow everything you say—

“There you go again with your self-victimising threat. You don’t get to ask me to walk in your shoes to—

“Right. You sent us to expensive schools and bought us expensive things. Well Dad, why don’t I send you to an expensive old folk’s home and get you a gold-plated walking stick as a token of my love? How does that sound? Hello— Hello—”

*[hangs up the phone and addresses the audience]*

That was my dad. He is a difficult man.

During my childhood, we’ve shared a few good moments together. Like when I got whacked by my mom for breaking her pots, it was my dad who sat next to me, attending my bruised leg.

Oddly, growing up I felt closer to my mom instead of him. No matter how much my mom scolded and whacked me for misbehaving, I knew I loved her more. It was effortless. Loving my dad just did not come naturally.

My dad is the protective type of father, you know. Like a pilot in an airplane, my dad sits in his cockpit and takes charge of the family. His view of everything inside and outside of the plane is entirely different from his passengers. He never communicates his thoughts to us, his passengers. He only focuses on bringing his passengers to a safe destination of his choice.

My dad’s parenting manner has always created a distance between us. He may have been the head of the family, but he was never part of the team. I mean how can you be part of a team when you pick yourself as the sole decision maker of the family? Our opinions, our thoughts, our preferences mattered not. Most of the time, I felt more like a hostage than a passenger on his plane.

I know he loves me as every parent should. But sometimes love becomes meaningless if you don’t show it the right way.

*[short pause]*

You know, when I was 12, my dad came home one day and announced to the family that he has decided we should renounce our religion and become a Christian. Having been brought up as a Buddhist, it was confusing to watch our idols taken down and spaces made for the cross. At such a young age, I was forced to go through an absolute change of faith. All my questions about the matter went unanswered. The only reply I received was, “Do as I say.”

Throughout my growing years, I saw parents of my friends being too engaged in whatever their kids chose to do. If the school football team wasn't giving their kid enough play time or the English club didn't pick their kid to represent the school in a competition, the parents would be marching to the principal office, demanding for their kids to be given a chance.

That wasn't the case for me. Whatever I was passionate in doing, my dad had a completely different plan for me. Like when I wanted to join the drama club, he insisted I joined the Math Club. Or when I wanted to play basketball, he'd ask me to play badminton.

Growing up with a dad like mine, I learned the art of suppressing my instincts – I learned to delay my reactions and I learned to avoid conflicts. Those were the only ways I could cope with everything he wanted me to be. But even with all that, I still looked up to my father highly. He was still ‘the man in the cockpit.’

He decided on most things in my life. My university, my course, my job. And I let him.

Many years later, when my marriage failed and I was unable to fight for the custody of my children, I was forced to process many things I've kept hidden in the back of my mind. I finally understood why I failed to notice any of my ex-wife's affairs and why I gave up on my children, allowing my ex-wife to take them away.

I was conditioned since young to avoid conflicts. To sweep things under the rug and pretend everything was rosy. And so, when my ex-wife insisted on going for late night work meetings wearing pretty clothes, perfume and make-up – I waved her goodbye and tucked my children in bed, not wanting to suspect anything.

I was a lame-dick, I know that now. I should have done something to protect my marriage. To protect my children....

When I finally came to the realisation of what I had lost, I fought so hard for my daughter and my son. They were too young to be sucked into the emotional rollercoaster. But I failed.

My dad failed me. Now I failed my children.

Since then, I kept my dad at a distance. I refused to let him ruin my life. Learning to be the pilot of my own plane, I finally built a life for me. I found myself a woman I love. I got reacquainted with my children.

And then, two years ago, my mom lost her battle with Cancer. Without her, my dad became so weak and sad. I was forced to move back in with him. It hasn't been easy. Every day has been a battle. I try so darn hard not to be angry and spiteful, but what can I do, seeing him is like scabbing my old wound.

I wish I could make myself stop caring about him. I wish I could leave him alone in his house and never look back. But I can't. He is my dad.

He has messed up my life trying to do what he thought was right. If I did the same, there would be no difference between us.

So here I am, picking up bits and pieces of his remaining life. I make sure he takes his medications. I help him settle his financial affairs. I sit beside him when he cries at night missing my mom.

And every once in a while, we scream at each other for old time's sake.

*[phone vibrates, [picks up phone]*

“What now, Dad?”

“Yes, I got your bread. I'm com—(Sigh)—I said I'm coming...”

[END]

## **A Short Interview with Zee**

### **What led you to write this piece?**

For me, writing this play script was a cathartic experience. I was hesitant to share my personal experiences at first, I realised how much it helped me process my emotions and come to terms with my past. As a mental health practitioner, I also recognised the potential impact it could have on others who may be in similar situations.

### **How much of the text changed in the course of the performance?**

We were told earlier that some changes would be made to allow the actor to bring the character to life and deliver the lines in their own unique way. Then, seeing the performance firsthand, it was as if the script had come to life in ways I could never have imagined.

To top it all off, one of my dearest friends, Karam, had taken on the role and delivered an outstanding performance.

### **What is your main takeaway from this whole experience?**

This entire experience has given me a little more insight about myself and the power of vulnerability, especially in men. Because of how society expects us to behave, it's easy to feel isolated in our struggles. However, by sharing our experiences, we can connect with others and form stronger bonds. Writing this play forced me to confront my fears and doubts about sharing my personal experiences, which aided in my personal growth.

### **Do you think you will continue writing plays?**

In terms of whether I will continue writing plays, I am certain that I will. This experience has motivated me to continue writing and exploring the human condition through storytelling.