

Dad's Dogs
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Looming granite bulldogs took over the city when my father left it. Hunching in the corners of playgrounds, standing brazen on city-street corners, frothing frozen mid-woof amongst the throngs of schoolchildren. They were stoic and scattered, instillations of art and wonder that seven-year-old me longed to climb atop and claim. Built by the city, the canines served to unite and glorify the city in which my father was born: Athens, the home of the Georgia Bulldogs. These Cerberus-like statues were placed in an Athens, Georgia, that my father no longer knew.

I was born in Athens, just like my dad, but I spent more time there in the years following than he did. Childhood there could not have been sweeter; I remember romping through the cool woods behind my house and taking day trips to the city, always easy days that passed by in shades of sepia and smiles. I loved Athens, craved every downstairs, alleyway, two-turns-and-a-drop hidden store there was, and clutching my mother's manicured hands I vowed to seek them all. Memories of navy lanterns, blue and fluorescent, stiff cardstock folded into seven-pointed stars, danced like the lantern light itself across my vision. I remember the city feeling empty at times, even though I still deem it the city of "good vibes," where no malice was ever felt among the streets housing new-age bookshops and tiny courtyard coffee brewhouses. In contemplation I came to realize the emptiness was the presence of "Daddy" turned "Dad" turned "Father"—pleasantry dropping with each year that passed.

My father's past presence was felt in the district of Winterville, sleepy houses and red-dirt plots where the trailer and rickety shack of my countless cousins sat and rotted. I hated going to those parts of Athens, where the flattened carpets in the houses were more dirt than cloth and

the whole cul-de-sac smelled like a melody of week-old grease. Couches that longed to devour me in their overstuffing, static masking soap operas I was never interested in seeing anyways, mutts and wood and stagnancy. The only thing that shone like a beacon of light to my small wide eyes was the fish tank filled with odds and ends instead of water, and all the possibility for light and life it held. It *must* have been the same when Dad was growing up here, I thought, but when I called to ask him only my message got through. He travels now, works odd jobs, and sometimes he is just too on-the-move to pick up the phone.

I wonder how Dad felt when he looked up at the not-quite skyscraper building laced daintily in ivy and felt the leaves of solemn birch trees crinkle underfoot for the first time. Was Athens the same for him? Was it the same Athens where the streets looped and intersected like the spaghetti I could never finish and the teachers all had short hair and smiled honest and wide when teaching us our colors? Where people smiled when they passed you on the streets and strangers made fast friends while their dogs sniffed each other? Where every weekend the blacks and crimsons (outlined in white) flew vibrant from car doors and tailgates and faces and every surface the colors would stick to, the whole city on the edge of its seat, roaring for gametime? Was Athens magical and easygoing and full of light and love, warmer even than a hug for him too?

I know my father left his mark on Athens. He is responsible for the rust-tinged brick that lines the streets these days. He “laid it himself!” Now when I visit Athens I don’t do much more than analyze the brickwork; I can’t help but stare at it in a search for him, for the old feelings I got from Athens, and I wonder if this is the reason I have the bad habit of walking with my head down. A contribution: he left me there, to grow up smiling in a city that loved me back, a place where I thought of family and longing and love above all else. When I think back now to my

favorite bulldog statue, I think not of the stoic black marble one on Beaverdam Road, but of the contained chaos of the one covered in rainbows of handprints. I'd press my palms to the cool stone and imagine the larger prints were my father's, and that we made our mark on Athens together.