

Can you make up for lost time?

Bumpkin



Doug Haynes and Gabe Wilkins

The Ozarks don't quite reach as far north as St Louis, or as west as Tulsa, or as south as Little Rock, or as east as Memphis. They are a place best reached by car or bus, and the drive is through dense, shady forests of sycamore, silver maple, sweet gums, and oak. Occasionally you'll pass scenic lakes created by electricity dams on the White and Black rivers. Many of the people you meet can proudly tell you the exact population of their towns, quoting numbers like "4,321" (Carl Junction), and "2,261" (Horseshoe Bend). Some other telling statistics: in the rural counties, the population is often 95 percent white, with per capita income around \$15,000 annually. Ten percent of residents might have a college degree. People in the Ozarks get married *and* get divorced at nearly double the national rate. The way to a better life does not necessarily involve moving north or south to a big city to get an education. Ozarkers don't have a culture or tradition of migration. They are as planted as the sycamores. Hardship is persistent and passed down like a surname. A better life, to them, means giving yourself over to the Lord and letting Jesus redeem you for your sins. The region is the epicenter of conservative Christian fundamentalism. Springfield, Missouri, was once dubbed "the buckle of the Bible Belt." Church offers hope where hope is hard to find. In this way, religion and poverty are interlocked as the constructive and destructive forces on people and their families.

The western descent of the Ozarks is anchored by a former lead-mining town of 46,000 people named Joplin, Missouri. Joplin is where Doug Haynes and Gabe Wilkins hail from.

Doug is Gabe's biological father, though for fourteen years, Gabe didn't even know that Doug existed.

There are parts of this story that make Doug squirm, parts that took him a year to completely own up to with me. For a long time, he's had to live with his shame, and the thing about shame is, it doesn't really wane. No matter how you might have redeemed

yourself – no matter how many good deeds you have stacked up to counterbalance what you once did – the shame of it is still scorching hot. The better a man you’ve become, the more godawful it sounds hearing what you once did. Once it’s out, you’d like to do nothing but crawl under a rock. Shame has dragged many a life right back down. For this reason, most men run from their shame and run from anything that might remind them of it. It is extremely hard to stand straight and own up to your mistakes and believe you still have the authority to discuss how anyone should live his life. So I respect Doug Haynes. I’ve come to respect him for a lot of reasons, but let’s start with this one: he has owned up to his mistake.

It happened when Doug was eighteen. He met Wendy at their Southern Baptist church group and fell for her instantly. She was getting out of a bad marriage, but wasn’t out yet. Both were very active in the evangelical wing of their church, which had prepared them only to avoid this very situation, not to deal with it. Doug was shocked when his friends – even his pastor – told him to pretend the baby wasn’t his, wasn’t his problem. This angered Doug. It bewildered him.

Since Wendy was not yet divorced when the baby was born, her husband was listed as the father on the birth certificate. That was just a convenience – everybody knew. Everybody, that is, but the boy. Wendy gave Doug more than a fair chance. They loved each other as much as two nineteen-year-olds can. Yes, they were young, and yes, the situation was chaotic, but she was willing to make it work. She wanted Doug to marry her. Doug worked at the cheese processing plant, which provided a steady paycheck but not enough upside to properly support a family. “I was just an Ozark bumpkin,” he said. “You know, *white trash*.” But by all accounts he was also a spiritually hungry young man and a fair observer of people, an otherwise good kid way in over his head. When Doug looks back at that time, he wishes there had been a stable man in his life to steer him right. That’s all it would have taken. His dad, a trucker, had died when Doug was nine. His mom

was protective of her son and didn't think Wendy was good enough for him. So Doug waffled.

Wendy put up with Doug's indecision for about two years. She let Doug play with the baby now and then, even let him take the baby out to the country one weekend.

"My heart wanted to be with Wendy and Gabe," he said forlornly, looking back at his inaction. "But there were a lot of people back then telling me that what we had done was simply not right, and the professed 'right' thing to do was to stop the relationship, not continue it. That was the atmosphere all around us. I did not think Wendy and I really had a chance of succeeding under those circumstances."

"For years I have blamed the people around me. But the truth is, part of me just said 'no thanks.' I didn't want the responsibility of real fatherhood and marriage. I was not able to step up to the plate. I only admitted this to myself recently. Saying it to you makes me feel really tiny. But it's important for me to be honest."

"Would you have married Wendy if not for Gabe?" I asked. "Was it taking care of a little kid that scared you off?"

"That's a fair question, but I have never asked myself that. I always thought of them as a pair, to tell you the truth. I still do."

Doug and Wendy remained friendly. Doug paid child support – it wasn't much, but it was the figure they had agreed upon. At church and at picnics, Doug watched the toddler grow into a little boy. It killed him to keep his distance, but he respected Wendy's reasoning – being a boy's parent is an all-or-none deal. Wendy wasn't going to let any guy break her son's heart by being an intermittent figure. Eventually she met another man and married him quickly, craving stability. At that point, she refused Doug's child support and asked Doug not to come around any more, per her husband's wishes. This sent Doug into a depression, which he hadn't seen coming. He thought he'd just been liberated from a load of problems. He figured he'd been cut free. Instead, he was saddled with regret and confusion. He kept slugging it out at the factory, cutting wheels of cheese into blocks for grocery stores. He

attended church every Wednesday night and twice on Sunday. He had a reliable job, and he had his faith, but his soul was in turmoil. Yet he did not see what he could do about it.

Several years later, Doug pulled into the parking lot of a convenience store outside Joplin. Wendy happened to pull up at the same time. She looked good, as always. Seeing her gave him a lift. Gabe sat in her back seat, playing with the window crank. He was six years old. His blond hair was trimmed into a page boy and he still had some baby fat.

Wendy had news for Doug. Her husband had signed up with the Navy. They were packing that day to move to Tennessee for basic training. When he'd completed it, they could be shipped anywhere. Her husband didn't want her in touch with Doug, so she would not write or call. She delivered this news tenderly, aware it was hard to handle. There was not a drop of animosity between them, just a gallon of regret.

"I guess this is it, then," Doug mustered. He stepped over to Gabe. "You've sure gotten big. I bet you're strong, too. Why don't you give me a big hug to show me how strong you are? C'mon, show me how hard you can squeeze."

Gabe, unaware this was his own father talking to him, believed Doug was an old friend of mom's that hadn't been around for a couple years. Being a polite kid, he stepped out, put his arms around Doug, and squeezed forcefully.

Doug held him back. "Yup, you're sure strong, all right."

Gabe climbed back in the car.

"Take care of yourself, Doug," Wendy offered. She turned over the engine and pulled out, heading in the direction of town.

Doug watched from the parking lot, his long lanky body wilting against his car, reaching a new depth of helplessness, wondering how it had come to this.

"It was hard to deal with," he recalled, his eyes wetting with the memory. "You see, I was never okay with not being his father openly, and in fact it still sticks in my craw that her first husband was put on the birth certificate. But at least during those first six years I knew where he was. Now, not only did my son not

know who I was, *I would never know where he was*. If I thought it was hard before, I was wrong. I had created my own hell.”

The absence of Gabe became a black hole. “Every single day, I wondered where he was, if he was happy, if he was safe. Had he had any bad accidents? Any health problems? Had he been abused or mistreated? Was he suffering in any way? Was he getting through school okay? Did he need me? Or – a very real possibility – was he better off without me?”

Seven years went by, but during those seven years the constant sorrow had a transformative affect on Doug’s life. Pain opened his heart and made him ready to learn. Realizing he was going nowhere fast, he left the cheese factory after eight years there, and at 27 began freshman college classes. He painted houses in his free time, pocketed fifty bucks a week manning the register at a convenience store, and bunked at his mom’s. He earned his bachelor’s degree in four years from Missouri Southern, but equally importantly, he grew confident in his own intelligence and competence. After college he drove a delivery truck for a year. That stiffened his resolve to keep pushing himself. By the age of 33, he had completed a year of law school at the University of Texas in Austin, and was beginning his second.

But he couldn’t study. He simply couldn’t concentrate. When he stared at the casebooks the words turned to jumble. He decided to clear his head by taking a walk. Being Texas, and this being early September with temperatures in the mid-90s, he went for his walk at the Barton Creek Square – a mall.

The mall was crowded. Kids of all ages were shopping for back-to-school clothes. Wait, what was that? In a herd of junior high boys, Doug saw a face – blond hair, green eyes, nose beginning to hook down – naw, couldn’t be. He stopped, looked again. Naw, he’s too thin. Doug shook it off and continued strolling. Gabe could be here, or he could be anywhere. Wait, there – nope. Getting out of that car, coming out of that store, face after face, so many faces, so many kids, so many voices, each one mapped to his memory of that 6-year-old boy in the back seat of his mom’s car. In every one of those kids, Doug saw *need*. They

wore their needs on the outside, as visibly as new duds. They needed confidence. They needed encouragement. They needed someone now and then to steer them right. It was welling up in Doug and he could deny it no longer. Every day for seven years he'd been looking in every young face that passed. It was absurd to pretend that he was moving on with his life, when he'd been on edge nearly every second. Walking through that mall in Austin, Doug became obsessed with the possibility – *what if he needs you? He's thirteen. What if he needs you right now?*

He had to know, and he had to know *now*.

It was time to own up to his life.

He composed Wendy a cordial letter, not wanting to cause trouble, just hoping to learn whether Gabe was all right. The letter eventually reached Wendy by way of her mother and sister. She wrote back from Jacksonville, Florida. At first she put up a front: Gabe was fine. He was playing sports and his grades were satisfactory. She didn't want him to know about Doug yet. But she offered her phone number, suggesting Doug call during the day before the kids came home from school. When he called, she was amiable.

Encouraged, he called occasionally, and he learned that chaos was brewing in Gabe's life like a storm coming up from the Gulf. Wendy's marriage was falling apart; she had three children now, and her husband did not really have a close relationship with Gabe. She was no longer confident in being able to provide a good environment for her son.

Wendy dropped hints to Gabe that she'd been talking to his birth father. "There's this guy ..." she would start in. Gabe had never asked about his biological father, and it had never occurred to him to ask. He considered his stepdad his father-figure and had called him "Dad" for five years. This guy Doug was a complete stranger. But Wendy very gently encouraged Gabe to get to know him, and Gabe grew curious. Everyone took it slow, unsure how to handle it, but that caution gave them time to get comfortable with the situation. One evening, Wendy telephoned Doug and said, "There's a boy here who'd like to talk to you."

“I remember my first words very clearly,” Doug narrated. “When I heard his voice, I said, ‘Man, I’ve been waiting for this day for a long time.’ He said, ‘Really?’ I think it surprised him to learn I cared. But it meant a lot to him. He was at an age where he needed someone to take an interest in him. On that first phone call, and every time thereafter, I never forced it. All the men who’d ever entered Gabe’s life were there because they were interested in *his mom*, not in him. I knew I was a stranger to him, but I tried to let him know that no matter how hard it got around that house in Florida, there was a man out here who cared about him.”

Gabe was skeptical. He was not looking for an emotional bond with Doug. But his parents were splitting up after ten years together, and that confused him greatly; Doug seemed to be the only guy he could talk to about it. The best thing about Doug was that he was wonderfully calm. He just listened.

Doug was invited to visit for Thanksgiving weekend of his third year in law school. It was not a tearful or poignant reunion at the airport. To Doug’s surprise, Gabe’s hair had turned dark and he was tall and thin. It took an adjustment to associate these brand new features with the telephone voice. They cooked the turkey together. Doug slept on the floor of Gabe’s bedroom. The next day they took Wendy’s car down to St. Augustine for the day. Doug could tell that Gabe was at that age when boys are choosing who to run with, who to be. He was losing direction, and he did not know where to turn because the adults in his life were pretty much at a loss, too. He needed someone who wasn’t drowning in confusion. Doug didn’t get through to Gabe that weekend, but their time together was peaceful and pleasant. The night before Doug left Florida, Gabe asked him for a hug.

They stayed in touch. A few months later, Wendy told Doug she was afraid she was going to lose Gabe to a bad road. She asked if she could send Gabe to live with him. “I had never crossed that line with her, never touched the subject, for fear of threatening her,” Doug remembered. “But I’d been thinking it.” He and Gabe discussed the possibility. Doug assured Gabe that he wanted to do it, but he believed they would have a better chance of success if

they waited until Doug finished law school. “Hang in there. I want to be in a position where I can be a real father to you.”

That summer, Doug moved to Colorado and undertook the bar exam. Gabe flew to live with him. They attempted to be friends, finding fairly generic things to do together. Partly because it was summer and he was fourteen, Gabe described it as “like a vacation.” Doug was unable to find a law firm to hire him, so at the end of the summer they moved back to Doug’s mom’s house outside Joplin. They lived on unemployment. Gabe had a slouchy, urban-smartass attitude he’d picked up on the streets of Jacksonville, and he clashed with Doug’s mom. It was a big adjustment for Gabe; even though Doug was trying to be a friend more than a parent, the rules of the house were a lot stricter than Gabe was accustomed to. The weather was similarly oppressive. Gabe admitted, “I didn’t really move there to form a bond with Doug. I just wanted to get out of the situation in Florida. I really missed my mom and sister. I tried it with Doug; it didn’t feel right.”

“The graft was not taking,” Doug recalled. “It was very apparent that biology was not enough to create a bond. I was a stranger. It was very stressful.”

After six quick months, the experiment was called off. Doug drove Gabe to Springfield and put him on a Greyhound to Florida.

“I failed,” Doug said. “I had the miracle of a second chance with my son, and I didn’t get through. I lost him.”

The day Gabe stepped onto that bus to Florida was also the last day Doug had any faith in the Southern Baptist doctrine. He’d been pulling away from his church for years, partly because he was increasingly uncomfortable evangelizing, pushing his views on others. He no longer believed that the Bible was the one and only word of God; he believed it was one of many very intelligent interpretations of how we transform ourselves into good people. Doug has always been a searcher of meaning, and since his mid-

teens he has tried to reconcile religious doctrine with what he felt in his heart. When Gabe left, Doug did not blame God or the Lord. It was in fact the opposite. He did not see God's hand in Gabe's departure – he saw his own hands. He felt personally responsible. His own actions led to this. His own choices. According to his religion, as long as Doug kept his faith, he was saved – he was in a state of grace. His life had been redeemed by Jesus, two millennia ago, through sacrifice on the cross.

But when Gabe left, that notion was unacceptable. It was absurd to consider himself *saved*, incongruous to consider himself *redeemed*.

It was time to redeem his own life – and nobody, not even Jesus, was going to do it for him. The only way to return to a state of grace was to ensure his son turned out all right. Doug could no longer trust his son to God, or trust his son to the poor example of other men, or trust that his kid would be all right because he carried Doug's genes. He was not going to leave something this important up to fate. Doug had let circumstance play too great a role in his own life and that of his son. He had let guilt and shame come between him and his purpose. Doug took a new vow, this one to himself: *whatever it takes*. The future would be decided by his actions today.

Doug took the Florida bar and hunted for attorney positions closer to his son. He called Gabe frequently, which was excruciating because Gabe's situation was spinning out of control in a hurry. While he'd been away, Wendy and her husband had split. To save money, she split rent on a place with another soldier in her husband's unit. They ended up involved. He liked to drink more than a little too much. He had kids, too; spouses and ex-spouses were forever fighting in the house. Gabe's sixteen-year-old sister had gotten pregnant. There were eleven people in the house, and Gabe's mom and sister were caught up in their own problems. Nobody made Gabe go to school. Nobody kept him from trying drugs.

"I realized I needed to get out of there," Gabe said. "Doug had kept the door open, always assuring me that if I wanted to

come back, I could. I realized that Doug was a decent guy. To hear that he was trying to move down to be near me – that he wasn't giving up – that kind of effort on my behalf was something I hadn't had, and it was something I needed. I called him and told him I wanted to move back. That was the first step to actually having a father."

Gabe moved back into Doug's mom's house in Missouri. They didn't know if they'd end up there or in Florida. Doug's mom quarreled with both of them. She wouldn't tolerate Gabe's mouthiness, and she was driven to anger seeing her son turn his back on their church. Doug popped down to Florida for a week to scour for a job, and when he returned Gabe was gone. Mom wasn't talking. Doug found him at a relative of Wendy's.

"I could see my mom's side," Doug said. "Gabe was a kid few would love, at a time in a boy's life when it's hard to find a lot there to love. My mom has a short fuse. He pissed her off."

His mother laid down her terms: Doug was welcome back but not Gabe. She wanted him out of the house. Doug was livid. (Their relationship has never quite recovered.) Doug went to Gabe and told his son, "We'll go live in a hole in the ground if we have to, but we're staying together. I have traveled too long a road to get you back, and nothing and no one is ever coming between us again. Whatever it takes. If that's what you want. We are a team."

Gabe did not hesitate. No man had ever said anything like that to him. "Yeah, that's what I want."

Despite having only unemployment for income, Doug found an apartment and the two moved in together. Gabe had his own bedroom. A month later, Doug finally found work, there in Missouri. They bought a black leather couch.

"That did it for me," Gabe said. "That triggered the bond. It convinced me to stick with this guy. He'd proven he really cared, proven he was serious. He was willing to fight for me. It meant a lot."

Doug struggled to steer Gabe onto a good path. Treating him as a peer had already failed. Yet Doug had only started to earn Gabe's respect, and Doug did not feel entitled to be an

authoritarian. It was a thin line to walk. He had to show consideration for Gabe's boundaries, too. So this time, there were no absolute rules. Doug tried to lead by example. He drank very little, and only in moderation, because Gabe had seen a lot of irresponsible drinking. When Gabe brought home D's and F's on his first report card, Doug made it clear that he wasn't mad, and he understood that in Florida nobody even made Gabe go to class, which wasn't permissive, it was neglect. Ensuring Gabe did his homework was a way of caring and looking out for his son, not being a hardass on a power trip. Gabe seemed to get this idea, didn't rebel, and responded quickly. Even though Doug was parenting by feel, on the fly, he believed that communicating carefully – making those little distinctions – made a significant difference when added up over time.

Gabe slowly found common ground with the new man in his life. One day they went to a car show. Doug suddenly saw his own stepfather at a distance, and pointed him out to Gabe. *You've got a stepfather, too?* Gabe asked. *I haven't seen him since I was fourteen,* Doug answered. *Should we go talk to him?*, Gabe offered. Doug returned, *No, he was kinda a bastard.* Doug's mom had married the guy when Doug was twelve. He was a drunk, and when drunk he would challenge Doug to fight. Doug never took the bait. Gabe realized he and Doug had very similar experiences of being fourteen years old.

Gabe also came to understand why his father had never married. Doug offered a variety of answers, but they always ended up with this logic: "I was afraid to get close. I didn't want anyone to take your place. I was always afraid if someone else entered my life, I would lose you forever."

They only had one big fight. Gabe was sixteen. Gabe had gone somewhere without telling Doug, and did so in a way that flouted the only principle Doug had – that they let each other know where they were. Doug went out hunting for him in his car. Eventually he found Gabe at a friend's and dragged him home. As they came into the kitchen, Doug explained why it was important to call, how they needed to work together. Gabe continued being a

butt and a smart ass, resentful of being yanked away from his friend's. Doug lost his patience. He grabbed Gabe's shirt, held him against the counter, and told him to respect whose house they were in. Gabe pushed back and the shouting match took off. Within a few exchanges, Gabe became enraged, and finally his real accusation came out, something he'd needed to say for so long:

"Where were you all those years! Why were you not paying child support!?"

"What!?"

"You heard me!"

"You'll have to talk to your stepfather about that! I *was* paying support. I *was* around. And not because some court ordered me to do it. I did so because it was the right thing. Then I was told to leave. Your stepfather wouldn't let me be in your life."

"That's not what I heard! I heard you didn't want me!"

"Is that what he told you!? I know your mom did not say that to you! She knows I was always a good man."

"I was never in your plans!"

"You were a surprise, but not a mistake! You mom and I loved each other!"

"Then where were you!? Where were you!?"

Gabe stomped upstairs. Doug fell on the couch and cried. Thirty minutes later, Gabe came back down and stood half-defiantly at the bottom of the stairs – a peace offer. Doug immediately apologized.

"I just want to be a good father, Gabe. I'm trying to be a good dad. I'm sorry if I'm doing a lousy job. Please, help me figure this out."

"I'm sorry too. I didn't know the facts."

"No, you've had a right to ask and you never have. I know I've hurt you by not being there. I can't change it and will never pretend I have. I'll always be making up for lost time. You not being in my life was entirely my responsibility."

Doug did not date while Gabe was in high school. He saw nothing inherently wrong with doing so, but he wanted to ensure Gabe had a stable environment after so long without one. He

wanted Gabe to know that he was all that mattered. They worked out together at the gym, and played tennis and basketball. Doug became a great listener. Gabe learned to talk to Doug about anything. He discovered that Doug was unlike other men – nothing Gabe did or said ever made Doug fly off the handle. One time Doug came home early from a trial in Fayetteville and found Gabe hosting a party. Doug took one look and said, “Oh. All right. I’ll be in my room if you need me.” Everyone slapped Gabe on the back. His Dad was cool! The party never got out of hand. Another time – later, when Gabe was eighteen, he got drunk and drove home, stupidly, whereupon he was slapped with a ticket for reckless driving. When he reached home he waited in his truck outside for an hour and a half, trying to sober up. Finally he dragged himself up the stairs to face Doug. Doug just put him in bed and advised some community service would be a good way to deal with the ticket. Doug understood that people make mistakes, and he trusted that his son was developing good judgment and using it most of the time. He needed to learn for himself what crossing that line felt like, and how the anxiety of being over the line wasn’t worth it.

A few weeks later, Doug was noodling on his guitar in bed when he heard Gabe come in with friends. Doug plodded downstairs and found two girls with Gabe. Doug made enough small talk to be polite, then gave them their space and headed back to his room. Later, Gabe came up.

“What’d you think, Doug?”

“Of what?”

“Of Jen.”

“She seemed nice. I barely talked to her.”

“No, man! Did you see her legs!?”

The eighteen year old was in love. Doug knew what that was about. He also knew how hard it is to turn young love into a stable adult relationship. He and Gabe talked at every turn – how not to be threatened, how to give each other room, how to tell the truth, how not to expect her to be the same as you in every way, how to take a break when you’re about to say something you don’t mean. Gabe married Jen six years later, and they’ve been together

nine years now. They own a fairly big new home on a cul-de-sac. She works for a regional bank, and he drives a delivery truck for Anheiser Busch, which is a better living than you'd suspect. They are in no rush to have kids.

For his part, Doug has worked as an attorney doing social security law and family law, and he's taught at Crowder College, and he's written grants for the United Way. He still lives in that same apartment he moved into with Gabe. He is still single, still careful. He is reading Taoism, from which one line resonates most: *the Tao guides without interfering.*

Doug and Gabe have a strong relationship today. They talk all the time; they're best friends, kindred spirits. "He's the best man I know," Doug said. "A man of quality and character. A better man than I was at his age, a much better man."

Gabe returned. "He has never judged me. He has encouraged me in everything I did. He has never forced preconceived notions on me of what a son should be like. He is happy for me to be my own original self. He mostly just listens. So the few times he does have something to say, it always means something, and it's always an influence on my decisions."

When pressed for how he did this, how he created such a bond with his son, Doug thought about it awhile and said, "All I did was provide a stable environment and a constant presence. The rest I let him figure out."

Both Doug and Gabe are observers. Neither is the first in a crowd to offer an opinion or make a statement just to hear his own voice. Their lives are quiet and contently so; the chaos in their past barely echoes anymore. Gabe is developing into an articulate person, but Doug is truly there. He's not eloquent in an oratorical sense, but rather, he chooses his words carefully to pin down exactly what he felt. Being a father by feel taught him this. The word "fortunate" comes up a lot. It's a privilege to have this relationship with his son, a kid he basically walked away from – it's beyond anything he could ever ask for. He considers himself a very lucky man. He's grateful to Gabe. He's grateful to Wendy, who encouraged Gabe to have a relationship with him, and who

has never lacked forgiveness for what happened when they were eighteen.

Not bad for a couple of bumpkins.

Redemption had come.

Doug reflected, “Most sons work so hard to earn their father’s respect. I worked so hard for six years to earn my son’s respect. When I finally had that – when I was worthy of his admiration – when I’d redeemed myself in his eyes – my whole life collapsed into a moment. It broke my heart. I *did* it. I managed to be someone he respects. That’s all I need.”

The week before I visited, Wendy moved back to town, and needing a bed, she took Gabe’s old room until she could get settled in her own place. That morning, she was gone before Doug awoke. A couple hours later, she walked back in wearing her new Wal-Mart uniform. It was her first day on the job, but nobody had been there to train her.

“She looked as good as ever,” Doug could not help saying. “She looked great.”

Gabe paused, and chuckled softly. He knew what Doug was really saying. “Doug, I figured out you were a one-woman man a long time ago.”

When I left Doug and Gabe, I hit the highway, hoping I might make it to Kansas City and thereby catch an earlier flight in the morning. I missed my son terribly. I wanted to tell him we were a team, and I wanted to tell him this in person. I didn’t make it to K.C.; I ended up in a \$29 motel by the highway, the kind where the royal blue carpets seem eternally moist. I sat on the bed beside my thirty pages of fresh notes and drank a half gallon of green Gatorade. You can get sad very quickly in a place like this, and I was in a lot of places exactly like it that year. But on that night I was not sad. I seemed impervious to sad. I had Doug and Gabe with me, as memories. I could not figure out why, exactly, they were sadness’s silver bullet. But I think it is this:

Every single man knows some version of what Gabe must have been feeling as a young man. We have all ached for a man to come along and prove he cared for us. We have all longed for a father who would just listen.

Women know this feeling too.

In a world that often obsesses on deadbeat dads and emotionally-distant fathers, many men *do* care, and when coached well, they can express their care in a very healthy way.

Something drew me across the country to Doug. I guess I just wanted to meet him, meet the dad who, to me, symbolized the great arc that we as a society are going through, as more and more men discover how to be emotionally present for our children. He had longed for a father himself, but he had walked out on his son, and then he'd discovered that he cared after all. He cared so much the pain broke his life into Before and After, and then he did something about it. He found his son and made good.