

Of fathers and sons

by James Matthews

My son once found a colourful marble in the loose sand of an Iqaluit school playground. Pretty sure it was one of those Cat's Eye marbles prized during games in the dirt when I was a child. I remember there were luminous yellow and warm orange ribbons inside the marble. It became his treasure.

I still see him in his Thor cap and Spiderman windbreaker, big blue eyes wonder-widened. Showing me the treasure he'd found. His arm outstretched toward me, and he looked at the treasure in his palm. The child's cheeks. Light fine hair from under his cap.

Thor was his favourite Avenger then, and I still hear how he'd mispronounced the name as Thorn. He used to choose a toy before bedtime, and he'd sleep with that car, action figure, or pieced-together bit of Lego. I'd often nod off next to him while reading a book or telling made-up stories about a giraffe we'd named Jerry. Or bits of fabricated family history, like how his uncle Chris was found as a baby floating down the Humber River in an old boot.

The boy is 20 years old now and in university. Says he wants to be a writer, and I heard my own father's voice from my mouth when I cautioned the lad about the folly in choosing to hitch his wagon to writing in an age when nobody reads. Other than social media offerings, anyway. But it seems nobody reads books anymore.

That look of wonder and pride stayed with me, an image that visits me in the moment before sleep when I'm typically touched by such memories. A moment is a minute, or it's an hour. And years seem to be eye-blinks when you're watching children become adults. Moments arranged become a life. A generation arrives as another generation passes.

A measure of a person is the people they leave behind. It goes more toward identity than professional and social metrics, the attained levels of education, and even the numbers on ATM bank slips.

The calibre of people you've influenced, how you've helped them become the people they are, speaks about you when you're gone. It's one of the ways a person is more than the soup of chromosomes and blood and bone.

My son was so pleased with a treasure uncovered from the tundra dirt. My memory of that softens a contrary disposition that's been stoked by the world's ways over the many moments between then and now. Poets and writers flail around in the murk of metaphor and simile to describe a treasure like a simple marble in playground sand.

I have my father's name and more than a few of his mannerisms. I can't say if I've ever gone to him with a Cat's Eye marble with luminous yellow and warm orange ribbons inside. He'd remember if I did. But he died in July.

How many fathers get to save their son's life, I wonder. He did. Just by being there, as he had been many times in my life. Specifically and actually, he saved me from a hypothermic death in the cold Arctic October water of the Sylvia Grinnell River in Iqaluit.

He wasn't even supposed to be there. About a decade ago, that was, and he showed up unexpectedly. A friend of mine, the guy I named my son after, the son who found the Cat's Eye marble, offered my father a few weeks' work. My dad retired from teaching high school. So he bounced between Ontario and Nunavut, where his sons and grandchildren were.

I can't yet talk about the details and circumstances of the river. Other than to say my father saved me that October before the ice had completely set at Sylvia Grinnell's mouth to Frobisher Bay.

The cold was brutal then. And there has been something of it during the months since Dad died.