My Deadbeat Dad & The Court Where I Lost Him & What God Told Job

by Emily Elizabeth Richards

Volume 1: The Fowls of the Air

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Dedication

Are you seeing this, Amity? Can you believe us?

My father said these are the best moments in life, when you catch sight of yourself and think "I can't believe this is me."

Can people change? He was like me at our age, a ghost in high school. He pictured ways to step in front of a bus so he wouldn't have to step in front of AP English and read his book report on Silas Marner.

My mother says his mother wouldn't let him see his father; that was always his problem, and why he wasn't good for me. Then she did the same to me. How smart is that?

He told me two of those best moments for him, times when he stepped onstage to applause from a standing-room-only crowd. One was at IBM where he met Ned's mother, the other in the North Tower of the World Trade Center, the old one, where he met my mother. For a year he led some kind of three-month training for a hundred-plus people on Friday nights.

ME: Training for what?

HIM: Well, listening, you could say. People don't always hear themselves, the way they tell their story and yours.

ME: That's it?

He laughed.

HIM: OK, tracing your troubles to yourself, so maybe you can do something besides gripe at them.

ME: Yeah yeah. You told my mother that one?

We laughed.

HIM: You should have seen her then.

ME: Maybe YOU should have seen her then.

Can people change? He said your idea of yourself is a shelter you build around yourself and then decorate.

EO Wilson says that's too optimistic. You can't just start clean and build from nothing. You start from a long history of genetic and cultural evolution for your species and yourself. Like if you're riding a mountain bike from the mountains to the sea. It's not a big boulevard along a burbling stream. You can't just ignore the ragged jagged slopes under you, not for a second.

I think my father knew that. He gave me my first EO Wilson, on how to be a scientist.

If you can't remake yourself, he would say, remake the moment, the moment you step out of yourself.

Is this our moment, Amity?

I don't know who I would be if you hadn't talked to me that first year, at the start of fifth grade, after my mother moved me here from our first house and I couldn't tell my father where.

Near the end of fourth grade, that May, my mother seized me from my cousin's wedding. She was invited too, of course, but for weeks she didn't answer and then she surprised us. She brought two men with guns and badges to the bride's house at dawn.

I had been rehearsing all week to lead the procession that morning. Instead my mother pulled me down the sidewalk by one elbow and locked me in the back of her rental car. I never usually cry but this time my breathing was heaving so bad I couldn't talk. They started some other way that morning, I don't know. I haven't talked to any of my father's family since.

We moved to your town the morning of my father's birthday, July 4th, and I didn't see him again until my birthday in late September, one hour the night of my tenth birthday, upstairs at the courthouse an hour from here, on a school night.

The next day is when you and I first talked. It was still the first month of school. I didn't know anyone. The rest of you had always known each other. The teacher yelled at me for not listening. The principal asked me what was wrong and I shook my head without looking up. I still don't know. Maybe I thought the teacher was talking to you guys, not to me.

You found me at recess, away from everyone, pretending to read The Power and the Glory. I was already this ghost, the kind of ghost that tries to stay invisible by not looking at anyone. I thought you would vanish if I didn't look at you. Nope. You wouldn't let me push you away.

We didn't know then, but we both lost fathers in Family Court, in hearings we only heard about. It was a long time before I told you anything more. You talked about your father and I just listened.

My first summer in your town I got a call from a lawyer the court gave me. She sounded like the Blair Witch Project but I managed to croak out that I wanted to live with my father. Her voice went hard and she cut us short and never called back. I think she told the court that we shouldn't be allowed to talk, my father and I, except

with an armed guard. That's crazy! Someone was crazy, her or me or someone. Something had gone all wrong. Was everyone crazy?

But you start to wonder about yourself when your own lawyer turns against you. Was she saying he was harmful for me and a danger, the person I learned the most from all those years? And if I wanted to be with him then I must be just as harmful and dangerous? Can you be harmful and a danger to yourself? Would you even know? For a long time I didn't trust myself to speak up or even show people the look on my face. Could I trust anything I used to know or care about?

Turns out you knew about visitation. Visitation is when a ghost comes. Guards bring it. Pretend you don't know the ghost, the guards warn you, or they might take him away and never bring him back. The guards stay between you and listen. You're only allowed ghost talk. You can't talk about anything outside of that room, or before or after that hour, only Chinese Checkers. You don't know until too late, but talking ghost talk turns you into a ghost.

Can people change? They can fade. Something inside can die. I wish you could have known me before, Amity. I don't think anyone will see that Emily again, outside of here.

We were at our best together right before the end, weren't we? Remember how we did Al Pacino and Russell Crowe from our favorite movie, The Insider?

ME (complaining): Pacino wasn't so pushy.

YOU: Russell Crowe wasn't such a wuss. He was a fighter. He went after the tobacco industry on national television.

Remember our favorite scene? They're all milling around on the lawn of that hotel on the gulf, with long black cars and motorcycles everywhere, everyone standing back and giving Russell Crowe time, Dr Wigand I mean, and he's just staring out to sea? Then he shakes his head and glances around for Pacino?

RUSSELL CROWE: I can't seem to find... the criteria to decide.

We laughed every time. You said I talk just like him. I think too much.

RUSSELL CROWE: It's too big a decision to make without being resolved... in my own mind.

Pacino waits, but Russell Crowe is stuck.

PACINO: Maybe you can't do this thing, Jeffrey. You know?

RUSSELL CROWE doesn't turn.

PACINO: Maybe things have changed.

RUSSELL CROWE: Yeah? Like what?

Russell Crowe's wife left with their two girls. She couldn't take it anymore, with the tobacco company threatening their healthcare, the police raiding their home, everyone whispering at their school.

PACINO (confused): Since, uh...

RUSSELL CROWE (looks to sea): What could change?

PACINO looks down, confused.

RUSSELL CROWE: Fuck it. Let's go to court.

We said that line dozens of times. We even made the motorcycle sounds, where someone calls across the lawn "Dr Wigand would like to start now" and six motorcycles fire up and pull into line, and look back for the signal, and lead three long black cars onto the gravel of a two-lane road towards a storefront courtroom in lower Mississippi, then a studio at CBS one Sunday night, live, across all the big and little places in the country, everyone going quiet to hear.

I showed you my father's software right after I got into Science Research, at the end of our freshman year. You had high hopes for it, but it only showed us how different we were.

You called it the name he used: Gaps. It's for investigators. It tracks the points you need to prove and it tracks what you don't know. It tracks documentation you need. It tracks witnesses and persons of interest by time and place and credibility. It figures alibis and windows of opportunity and travel times by time of day. It suggests more witnesses and sources. It hammers out an official story, with a percentage likelihood attached.

YOU: It's like Law and Order!

ME: Yeah, that's the problem. It's like TV, not like court. Only TV can afford trials anymore.

YOU: We got a trial.

ME: Did we?

At the end of our freshman year Ms Primolevi picked me and six others for her new three-year Science Research program. You research one project for three years and get college credit for it. In Science Research you don't just memorize the discoveries of past scientists, you test your own hypothesis against your own evidence. I would use our court case. This whole big thing started out as "Bad Science in the Legal System." Ha! Might as well study Bad Science in Palm Reading.

My hypothesis: evolution finds law useful in some unknown way. We would wait forever for law to cure yellow fever or build a Panama Canal, yet we give law the last word on every last thing in our lives. Why? Law may be some kind of primitive pre-science, a stone-age axe, but somehow natural selection has preserved it

from extinction. Why? Can evolution go wrong? Any more than gravity can? Then why hasn't evolution turned to science for remedies, and left law behind in the dusty shards of pre-history? There must be a reason.

My father hoped Gaps would make college money for me. I looked into Gaps where he built and tested it and found complete records of our court case, most of which my court ignored. Who would want his amazing software after he lost our case worse than almost anyone?

You wanted me to go back to court with this. For myself, for you, for all the girls like us, hundreds more every week in courts all across the country.

YOU: Don't you see what this means? You're Strider. You know, Return of the King? Aragorn? This is the sword reforged. The armies of the dead will answer to it. The monsters of Mordor will flee from it. Your father appealed your case three times. We have everything we could possibly need. Just pick up the sword.

We laughed.

ME: I don't know. Remember Zoltar, the fortune-teller in Big? In a mechanical box? You turn his crank and out comes the rest of your life on a little white card?

We laughed.

ME: Can you ask Zoltar for another card if you don't like the first one? What would that tell you about Zoltar?

YOU: They didn't know the story. They didn't want to. They got everything backwards and didn't want to start over.

ME: They'll want to start over now?

YOU: You're older now. They have to listen this time.

ME: Do they? Can you turn Zoltar's crank again, five years later, for a different card and a different life?

YOU: If they were wrong!

ME: How can they be wrong if they have guns? You live by their little white card or else.

Russell Crowe went to court, you reminded me.

Only as a trick, I said, to get his story to the public.

To you, Dr Wigand was the tobacco scientist with boxes of company memos and lab reports from inside the cigarette makers. For years everyone asked the wrong question: do cigarettes kill? Big Tobacco just shrugged: "We just don't know. There's no good evidence." Dr Wigand had the evidence for something worse. Cigarette makers jack up their profits by jacking up the danger of cigarettes; by adding chemicals that make cigarettes more addictive and more toxic.

You wanted to warn people away from Family Court. Is Family Court hazardous to children? I came up with a better question. Are children top priority at Family Court? Or do various other parties and interests come first, and profit whether children gain or lose? Is that court a court or a place where officials can sweep along by treating everyone like children? Does secrecy protect children there, or protect the court and its sticky web of shadowy interests? "We just don't know. There's no good evidence." What sort of court answers the way Big Tobacco did? Or is that court a Potter's Field for children we didn't care enough to know?

We could go to Madison at AP Journalism, you thought. Madison could use my case for her project without using my name, and help all the girls like us. I did some numbers and came up with ten million kids who've lost a parent in Family Court over the years, in three thousand counties across the country. Some woman on TED said seventeen million. You wouldn't need these numbers, would you, if all those kids were walking around missing one leg instead of one parent?

Madison was writing about Phantoms of the Law: all the made-up people the law pretends to protect but does not hear from. Babies, unborn babies, God, sex workers, children, the community.... The law makes endless use of made-up people who cannot give a statement of their own and cannot be questioned. What leverage, right? If your made-up people can topple actual people on a scale of one to a dozen and one to millions? Archimedes: Give me a phantom, empty of anything but blamelessness, and I can turn your living population upside down. Can anything but law put a limit on law and its soaring aggrandisements of itself?

I disappointed you again, sorry. Madison's AP Journalism advisor, Mr Cionte, said they couldn't use my story unless the source (me) would go on the record. We should have known. Remember that Watergate movie, where the editor is always wailing for a source who will go on the record?

YOU: Some Russell Crowe you are. "I can't, my mother would kill me."

We laughed.

YOU: You're that guy in Da Vinci Code, when they're shooting at him on the street and he tells the woman "I have to get to a library, fast."

We laughed.

YOU: You think you're above revenge but actually you're just not up to it. Instead you have an endless string of high-flying excuses.

We didn't laugh. Science is where I hide from the world, you meant. I wonder. You could be right. I have always wondered.

We were fighting the last time we talked, near the end of our junior year. No, we were past fighting. You had given up on me.

We hadn't talked for a while. I was going away for a week, for my step-sister's wedding in Puerto Rico, and I had been busy helping. I had big news for you but I thought I should save it for afterwards, when we had time to think it out. I had found a new community expert for my final year of Science Research: Madison's father, the big appeals attorney. His kind of lawyer puts the court and the judge on trial, he laughed. He had things I could read and people I should talk to. One was the top lawyer who told my father Yes, we could turn our case (and our lives) around, de novo, but it would cost upwards of six figures, the kind of money my father no longer had. Wonder who gets all that six-figure money? Money that might have gone to some child's school years and college? Who collects that kind of ransom while the law looks away? Does anyone but Zoltar get a better future when he gets six figures for his little white card?

When I got back from Puerto Rico I couldn't wait to tell you but you were gone. You had disappeared without a clue. See if I go to another wedding all my life!

A policeman wanted to ask me about you. Just me, without my mother around. My mother was furious at me, though they wouldn't let her say why. I was already starting to guess.

The detective showed me a report you had given Madison about my court case. When you disappeared the police discovered it and showed it around, to your mother and my mother and the principal and everyone.

I could forget about college money, my mother said. She was done with me. After all she had done for me, when my father never helped us a bit, not a penny.

You knew how this would play out, didn't you? You were doing Pacino's last trick from The Insider, when he's down to his last move, when CBS won't broadcast Russell Crowe and his testimony, and Pacino goes to the New York Times with the story of cowardice at CBS.

I figured you would be back any day, once you flushed me out of hiding and left me nothing more to lose. You would be back and we would do all this together.

A year later this thing is done, everyone has graduated, they're heading off to college, and still no word from you.

It's not fair, is it, movies can have music but books can't? Because I keep hearing those eight notes from Empire of the Sun, the eight then seven the boy sings.

My AP Advisor Mr Cionte had students reading this at the college where he went, sending us comments and questions all year, while we could still fix things. But every day for fourteen months I asked what you thought, Amity, from the week you disappeared.

You always told me to think bigger but not this big, right? All the people I read, one leading to another, back across centuries, farther and farther from our day. The Wilsons, EO and David Sloan. Robert Sapolsky. Tolstoy. Yeshua. Job. I wasn't hiding this time, I don't think, just chasing something different than we thought. Right?

Can people change? Something comes back to life in you. Something new comes to life. But Amity, are you seeing this?

I'm writing this last of all but I could go on like this forever. It's already too long for a dedication, I know. Way too long. Remember the Pinocchio guy in the movie AI, the Mecha boy who keeps trying to be a regular boy like all the other boys but instead outlives them all? At the end of ages that Blue Fairy from the deep comes back and gives him the only thing she can: she brings his mother back for one last evening. The hours tick away and the boy talks eagerly to keep her alert, to keep that loving light in her eye. Finally though she yawns and wants to close their bedtime book. He knows but she doesn't: what closes now does not open again, ever, the book or her eyes. Why can't I close this book? I've gotten good at goodbye, haven't I? And don't want this goodbye to end.

I see now you saved me, Amity, that first year my mother moved me here. For a long time I didn't talk to anyone but you. I don't know who I would be now. I would never have started anything this big. Thank you for never giving up on me all the times you could have. I hope I have not let you down. I hope I have come through for you this time, for everyone like us.

To Maeve "Amity" McMorrow, wherever you are.
Watch for her, please, and show her this.
Amity, please call? Tell someone you're safe and well?