

Grandpa's Nose Ring

By Matthew Dunn

It all started with an innocent comment from my thirteen-year-old daughter, the complete and utter collapse of the world as I knew it, that is. At least *she* claims it was innocent. Looking back now, I'm not so sure.

You see, I am a devoted believer in the phenomenon known as the Freudian slip, those little errors in a person's actions or speech that are believed to be caused by the unconscious mind. You know, like when your wife screams out another man's name when she stubs her behind on the seat-less toilet because you left the seat up, rendering it a dangerous household hazard? (Her first husband you suspect, though she claimed at the altar to have never been there before.) Well, I'm the guy who arrives at that service an hour early, sits in the front pew alone with the hymnal clutched brazenly in my hands, hanging on every sermonized sentence. God has a purpose for us all and I am convinced he carefully injects meaning behind each word we utter, no matter how deep into our dark, depraved subconscious the well-meant bucket drops to retrieve them. Teenagers are no exception. In fact, they may be the reason for several of the footnotes attached to the rule.

"Oh my god, Dad! You shouldn't talk, you're the most tribal person I've ever seen!" Alyssa exclaimed.

Ok, so it wasn't a subversive subliminal attack. It was the straight up, in your face, storm the beach variety, but that's not the point.

I had just given our lunch order to a Darth Vader wannabe and was pulling up to the pick-up window when the shockwave hit me—a rolling tremor that shimmied up my spine, rattled a cracked, silver filling I'd been meaning for months to have my dentist replace, before settling into my soon-to-be quivering hands. I didn't fully realize it then, but my normally serene and well organized wires had

just been crossed and the not-so-short, short circuit was about to begin. *The first spark is only the beginning.*

Handing a twenty dollar bill to the cashier, I looked like a nipple-starved baby—my mouth was motoring but nothing was coming out. I wanted to say ‘thank you,’ or ‘have a nice day,’ or something witty that would make both her and my daughter giggle, but instead I ended up fodder for the smoking employees during break-time out by the dumpster. “Yeah, you think you’ve seen some weirdo’s? I had this pervert today who thought I was his mommy.”

To this day I can’t understand why the poor girl didn’t slap me and insist her manager throw me out of the place. *Perhaps because I had sped away before she could give me my change or our drink straws?*

With one eye in the rearview mirror and the other on my fork-tongued daughter, I rejoined the mechanized race to who-knows-where and was gliding across the interstate with a sleeve of warm, soothing fries between my legs before my vocal cords resurfaced.

“What...what did you mean back there?” I asked nervously. The thing is, I already knew. So why then did I ask, you ask? As I said, the short circuit was well underway, but I was in denial. You know denial. It’s the river that separates reality from the fantasy world where we spend most of our time even though there’s a sturdy bridge with our name on it, with plenty of open toll booths. *I hate paying tolls.*

“Nothing,” she replied with a smile—her mother’s smile—the very smile that had induced my suckling semen to leap from their sanatorium in the first place, screaming like commandos as they plunged into the parental abyss. Now, here it was again, controlling the testosterone within me—lynch mob testosterone that wanted to go *Mommie Dearest* on her ass like my father would have, instead of a coherent *Father Knows Best* as my psychologist assured would “pay dividends down the road.” She knew she had crossed the line *and* crossed a wire, but exhibited no shame, and as I dutifully drove

down the yellow brick road to that afternoon's Oz—Alyssa's fifth soccer tournament of the summer—searching for solace in a microwaved hamburger, I began to question if it wasn't *her* name on that dividend check.

Three tentative bites in, I heard the siren.

“Do you know why I pulled you over, sir?” The policeman said.

“Not really,” I said cautiously. I then tried to make eye contact with the guardian of justice, but I couldn't. The early afternoon sun was too bright and as I squinted out my window, an aura of sunlight surrounding his towering frame, I attempted to shade my eyes with my license and registration, fearful he was using the sun as a weapon, blinding me into submissive citation acceptance.

“You were traveling at over eighty miles an hour,” the officer replied. “That's fifteen over the limit.” He then took the proof of my existence from my hand and examined it. “You folks are from New York,” he said nodding his head.

“Da...yeah, aren't you?” I thought, but didn't say.

“Well, you're in my state now. And no one from New York speeds in *my* state.”

“You're state?” I mumbled.

“Vermont,” he said with far more disdain than I wanted to hear in that moment.

As it turns out, while I was counting to ten thousand to settle my nerves, I overshot our destination and had just crossed the state border when the by-the-book half of Starsky and Hutch pulled us over. (“In Vermont, when you cross the line, your nuts are mine,” I could swear he was rapping as he sauntered up to the car.) Men can marry men and women can marry women in this sliver of a state, but I couldn't go two miles without getting a four hundred dollar ticket stuffed between my cheeks. *See if I ever go skiing there again.*

I read the ticket as the officer mounted his motorcycle and sped away, expecting to scratch off an asterisk-identified, triple-the-penalty bonus for the lucky out-of-staters selected to play their game.

Fortunately, there was no *real* surprise in what I read, only a sticky mess to clean up. Kind of like a box of crackerjacks.

After pounding the steering wheel, I tried to recall the nation's multi-colored map that had been plastered over 101 television channels during the last election. If memory served, Vermont was a red state—a Goddamn, bible-thumping, stick-your-government-nose-in-my-personal-liberties, conservative red state. Or was that New Hampshire? Christ, the two looked so much alike it's no wonder I could never get them right in my high school geography class. At least the Dakota's helped you out with the North and South labels. Differentiating Colorado and Wyoming was a bitch too, but I digress...

At this point, my daughter was shaking her head in either glee or disgust—I wasn't totally sure which—but since I had only reached two hundred and thirty-seven in my tension-cleansing count, I concluded the former and snapped.

“What the hell is so funny?!”

Vexed, she just leered at me as if my nose was melting. Then, to punctuate her irritation, she slurped a mouthful of ice from her cup, turned her head toward the window and started crunching. Ice munching—my Achilles heel! The very sound conjures grisly images of my long-departed Uncle Harold's blood frosted lips and severed tongue after his annual, holiday glass eating exhibition went horribly wrong. A pious teetotaler, it's ironic that in the end, it was the bottle that finally got him.

“Stop that!” I ordered.

“What?” She replied.

“You know what—that crunching. You know it irritates the living hell out of me.”

“How am I supposed to know that?”

“Maybe because I've told you a thousand times?”

Reluctantly, she spit it back into the cup, one cube at a time for dramatic effect.

“Thank you,” I said. *One small step for Dad, you giant leap for Dad-kind.*

I put the car back into gear and went searching for an exit ramp or a service road to make an illegal U-turn, whichever came along first. I resumed my count, confident that by the time I was back in the comforting arms of my home state that my pulse rate would be back to its normal level—twenty beats per minute higher than my doctor recommended for a man my age. *He didn't have a teenage daughter. Enough said.*

“I'm sorry I snapped at you,” I said.

Alyssa shrugged.

Ah, the shrug. Now I would get Phase Two. The silent treatment. It's as if they're preprogrammed at birth, feed coded mission instructions through their mother's umbilical cord like some secret agent. *The name is Bond, Jessica Bond and I'll have you in a straight jacket by the time I'm seventeen, so don't bother to resist.*

“You're not talking now?” I asked. *I wanted to be sure.*

She shrugged again.

To be fair, I think I need to back up a bit and retrace the steps that brought the two of us here—to this stalemate, for those who walked in late. I was at the breakfast table analyzing the Yankee box score as I did every morning between April and September (and sometimes October, if the Babe was working his magic,) when Alyssa walked in wearing a piece of jewelry where, in my opinion, jewelry is not suppose to be worn. The Bronx Bombers had gotten clobbered the night before so my mood was already a little off, kind of like their hitting and pitching.

“What's that in your nose?” I asked testily as I folded the newspaper neatly and set it aside.

“It's a nose ring,” she said. She acted like it was nothing, which only added fuel to the fire my beloved Yankees had started.

“A nose ring?”

“Well, a nostril ring really. If you want to be particular about it.”

“I want you to take it off, is that particular enough for you?”

My directive fell harmlessly to the floor, like a puffed cheese ball hitting armored steel.

“Why?” she said as she collected the articles of her own morning ritual—a bowl, a spoon, a carton of milk, and a box of Rice Krispies cereal. She then sat down across from me and went to work, the bludgeoning silver loop laughing at me while her bowl chirped that annoying cricket song.

Why? She had asked. That was a good question. The answer, strangely, was not at my immediate fingertips and as I dug for it, I retreated to the refrigerator for an orange juice refill, cursing the entire Yankee lineup as I poured.

I then sat back down, armed now with something far more penetrating.

“Because I said so,” I said.

It didn’t even slow her chewing.

“And I’m sure your mother will agree with me,” I added.

“Who do you think pierced my nose?” she replied.

That bitch! I wanted to say, but didn’t. I immediately felt guilty for the thought, wishing my wife were there so I could apologize. But she was off collecting bottles and cans to support the rebuilding of our town’s Senior Center, which had recently burnt to the ground after the Hayes sisters, Gladys and Mildred, left a lit joint unattended in the coat closet. Gladys claimed it was for her early-stage glaucoma, while Mildred conceded she simply enjoyed getting high, adding on a CNN video clip that she was pushing ninety so she didn’t give “a rat-ass” what anyone thought about it. Judging by the news coverage at the scene, the two sisters hadn’t been the only ones sneaking a drag that day.

“When did she do that?” I asked indignantly.

“This morning,” Alyssa replied. “While you were in bed, possoming.”

“Excuse me?”

“Pretending to still be asleep so Mom would take the dog out.”

You little..., I thought. But she had me dead to rights. I had been playing possum and now I was paying the price. *The women had taken revenge by ripping a hole in my little peanut's nose.*

“It was Grandpa’s, you know,” she said. “I found it when we were cleaning out Grandpa and Grandma’s house over the winter. There was a picture of him wearing it when he was young. When he was in college, Mom thought.”

Alyssa’s grandparents—my parents—had died several years before, passing within hours of each other. As soon as my mother said goodbye, my father gave my wife and I a smile and followed. They’d lived long, happy lives and were ready when their time came. I was not as ready, needing two years to muster the courage to put their affairs in order. Cleaning out and selling the house I had grown up in was the most painful part. Some old memories—good and bad—just don’t fit into moving boxes.

“Why haven’t I seen this picture?” I asked.

“Mom thought you’d freak.”

“Freak? I never freak,” I insisted, as my stomach began to crawl up my throat. “Why would she think that?”

“Because you’re an ultra-conservative, middle-class, married white male with an energy efficient car, a closet full of Dockers, a four-year old cell phone and the Bible on CD *and* who for God knows what reason, gets his hair cut twice a week.” She then sprinkled some sugar on her cereal.

I just stood there with my mouth hanging open, praying my intestines didn’t fly out. My little peanut was gone, murdered by the strange creature sitting in front of me.

“Grandpa was a rebel,” she added between spoonfuls. “Mom says that’s why you two were never close.”

And I was the one who couldn't wait for her to start walking and talking. I should have cut her tongue out when I had the chance. The necessary instrument *was* right there in the delivery room in case she'd been born a boy. Again, I felt guilty for my evil thoughts.

If only her words had been false, I could have banished her to her room with a clear conscience. But it was true, my father and I had been cast from different molds. He was an adventurer, and I was, well, a guy who invited his barber to summer barbeques. I can still remember wondering as I grew up if I had been adopted. The hospital records, next of kin affidavits and blood tests proved I hadn't been, but when your dad asks you to help him break in his new Harley and you say you can't because you promised your mother you'd go the Farmer's Market with her, you're going to look for hard evidence.

As I stared disbelievingly at the reincarnation of my father, I recalled reading somewhere that a person's ancestral gene pool—eye color, athletic prowess, breast size, appetite for used collectibles and the desire to bedazzle one's body with jewelry—sometimes skips a generation. It appeared that my father's had flipped me the bird and skipped right past, jumping my innocent daughter like a horny frat boy.

It was that exact Animal House image of an inebriated and braless Alyssa being fondled that pulled a Titanic memory from the depths of the don't-ever-think-of-this-again section of my brain—the day my father coerced me into joining a fraternity at college. As it turns out, I *had* seen that picture before.

“Yup, that's me, son,” my father had said. At the time, he was trying his best to bond, pulling from his wallet the old photo of his college self wearing a logo emblazoned sweatshirt and the infamous nose ring. “My frat buddies and I thought it would be a cool way to symbolize our brotherhood,” He explained. “You know, like a blood oath. Everyone else was getting tattoos, but we wanted to be different.”

Horrified at the prospect of spending the next nine months in the ten-by-ten cell with two other guys, I had only half-looked at the black and white flashback. But now I remembered it, along with Ken and Kenny, my first-year college roommates. Ken was tall, skinny and smelt like an old shoe. Kenny, on the other hand, was short and fat, but he smelt great, gnawing on hard peppermint lozenges continually like a cow chewing its cud. (If it weren't for the disturbing images of my Uncle Harold that he inspired, I could have lived with crunching Kenny all four years.)

My father assured me *fraternizing*, as he called it, would make the whole college experience more fun, not to mention provide a steady parade of pretty girls. Well, you can take the boy out of the Farmer's Market, but you can't take the Farmer's Market out of the boy. By the second semester of my freshman year, I quit the fraternity and moved off campus, renting a garage loft from an elderly couple who made organic candles from their home. After converting their basement into a workshop and setting up a storefront on eBay, they did quite nicely. In fact, last I heard they were going corporate with an initial public offering of one million shares at ten dollars apiece. Not bad for a couple of seventy year olds in tie-dye tee-shirts. Had I been more astute with a higher tolerance for animal waste, I could have gotten in on the ground floor.

"Your Grandpa wasn't really a rebel," I said to my daughter. "More like a free spirit."

Alyssa shrugged.

"Anyway, I remember why *he* wore the ring. The question is: *why are you?*"

"I don't know," she replied. "Lots of girls are wearing them."

"Lots of sluts, you mean," I retorted.

"Wearing a nose ring doesn't make you a slut, Dad."

Maybe not from where you're sitting, but from here it looks slutty, I thought. "Wait a minute," I said, recalling a recent episode of 60 Minutes that exposed a high school where girls wore colored

bracelets to broadcast sexual accessibility. “The ring isn’t a symbol of your virginity, is it? And the boy who pulls it off gets to sleep with you?”

“Gross!” she grumbled. Her spoon then did a belly-whopper into the bowl of rice-littered milk, spraying white droplets all over the table. “That’s sick!”

“You *are* still a virgin?” I asked as I went for the paper towels. What can I say; it just sprang from my mouth like that slimy little creature from the guy’s stomach in the Alien movie.

Alyssa retrieved her spoon, served up another bite and shrugged.

You little... my thirteen year-old, Rice-Krispie-eating daughter was fucking with me. As I cleaned up the spill, I decided that I wasn’t going to let her off easy like so many times in the past.

“Who are some of the other girls who are wearing them?” I asked, thinking I might be able to expose Mr. Big, or in this case, pubescent Ms. Big.

“Just my friends,” she said. She was smiling now, clearly enjoying my angst. “Mom said that all the boys in Grandpa’s fraternity wore them. So, the popular girls decided to do the same thing.”

“The popular girls?”

“Me and my friends.”

“You refer to yourselves as *the popular girls*?”

“We are,” she replied matter-of-factly.

The alpha-male, protect-your-offspring-at-all-costs alarm bell began to sound. Virginity alert! Virginity alert! “With boys you mean?” I managed to ask above the ear-splitting wails.

Another shrug shook my footing. I took a deep breath and prayed for reinforcements. Where was her mother when I needed her the most!?

“So, let me see if I have this straight,” I said. “The girls you hang with are know as *the popular girls*, signified by the nose rings you all wear.”

“Actually, the other kids call us ‘The Pops.’”

“The other kids at school acknowledge the title?”

“Sure, just like we call them by their names. The Stoners, the Jocks, the Preps, the Nerds, the Rappers. Come on Dad, you’re not that old.”

I have to admit, I was astounded by this disclosure. My recollection of high school might be a bit murky, but I’m fairly confident that while some less-than-complimentary labels were tossed occasionally at a few of our classmates, we never formally adopted any of them. At least not the way the graduating class of 2010 appears to have done, ratifying each as if they were new states to the Union. *Or did we?* Another spark popped.

Anyway, that was along time ago and I, for one, had grown beyond those childish ways. *Hadn’t I?* Spark, spark...

“Can we talk about this later?” Alyssa then asked. “I don’t want to be late for my game.”

“Ah...yeah I guess,” I answered weakly. I was still wandering the halls of my old high school, searching for my locker.

After thirty minutes of mind-numbing highway and deep reflection, I decided to utilize another parental tool suggested by my unmarried and childless psychologist to get that Goddamn ring out of my little peanut’s nose: negative assimilation. And if that didn’t work, I’d make something up, like a wild story about how I saw a kid die once from an inappropriate piercing. Hey, all’s fair in love, war and parenthood.

First, I had to make it appear that I was changing the subject; lull her into thinking I was just making conversation; an interested father engaging himself in his daughter’s life.

“I ran into your Global Issues teacher the other day,” I said pleasantly. “I don’t know if you knew this already, but he and I went to Cornell together.”

“Mr. Gallagher?” she said, nipping at my bait. “He always looks like he just crawled out of bed. His pants still have store labels on them and he smells like an old shoe.”

That was Ken. I wanted to tell her more about the legendary idiosyncrasies of my old roommate—cement the hook—but I had no desire to be brought before the PTA. Not again. So, I held my tongue.

“Anyway, as I was saying, I ran into him at our monthly alumni dinner. That’s where you’re Mom and I went last Friday night. He was telling me that your class has been having some really interesting discussions about Iraq and all the problems over there.”

“I guess,” she shrugged.

“You know what I find interesting is that most Iraqis belong to one of the one hundred and fifty or more tribes that have existed for centuries. Don’t you find that fascinating? And from what I’ve read, most of them are more loyal to their tribe than they are to their national government.”

Alyssa didn’t respond, but she fidgeted ever so slightly in her seat, turning her body a smidgen toward mine, an encouraging sign and about as much as I was going to get. Having a conversation with my daughter really was a lot like bass fishing. I keep throwing out my lure while she remains hunkered down in a thicket of submerged branches knowing that sooner or later my line will get tangled and I’ll cut my losses and go talk to her mother. I think she enjoys watching me change bait again and again, each time thinking this will be the one to draw her out. But fisherman are patient fellows, or stubborn and stupid, and I am no exception. *Maybe a rubber, glow-in-the-dark worm?*

“Historically, they have alternated between accommodating central authority and defying it. When they like the regime in charge they fall in line; when they don’t, they don’t. The problem is, there are so many tribes, there is always a few who get relegated to the kid’s table. And just like at Thanksgiving, everyone wants to sit with the grown-ups. Consequently, the fighting seems to go on and on, generation after generation.”

I thought my analogy was brilliant, but all it garnered me was a nod and a modest “Hmm...” It was time to weave in Plan B: lying for parental profit.

“Speaking of tribal warfare, I was reading in Newsweek, or was it Time? I don’t remember, but it was an interesting article profiling the Iraqi tribal culture. They’re heavy into symbolic garb, like robes, tattoos and jewelry.” (I was going to say nose rings instead of jewelry, but that would have been too obvious, don’t you think?) “In fact,” I continued, “the reporter reported that tribe members are gun-downed everyday, targeted by the silver-plated adornments that differentiate one tribe from another.”

“I’m not taking it off,” she said, shaking her head. “So, if the Nerds decide to bust a cap in my ass, then you won’t have to schlep me to my games anymore, will you?”

Damn, if my hook wasn’t hopelessly impaled in an old, rotted tree trunk. And did my little peanut just use the phrase, “bust a cap in my ass?” *Where have you gone, Tipper Gore, a father turns his lonely eyes to you...*

“I wasn’t implying that you should take it off,” I said, back peddling. “I was merely pointing out that by consciously setting yourself apart from the general populous you’re bound to make some enemies. Especially, if that image infers that you are better than everyone else. I mean, *the popular girls*? That’s a little condescending to the rest of the girls at school, isn’t it? They probably all hate you. And if the majority of the girls in school hate you, how can you legitimately refer to yourself as the popular girls? It doesn’t make any sense to me.” Hey, when your line gets stuck, you start tugging...and swearing...and tugging...and swearing.

Alyssa turned her head and looked at me uncomprehendingly, like a cow at a passing train. And that’s when she hit me. Not literally, but with a blow so low, I could have performed a self-vasectomy right then and there had I had a bottle of Jack Daniels and a sharp knife.

“Oh my god, Dad! You shouldn’t talk, you’re the most tribal person I’ve ever seen!” Alyssa exclaimed.

So, that’s how it all started and brought the two of us to our current impasse, the *you-just-don’t-get-it* purgatory I’ve come to know all-to-well since my daughter’s birth thirteen years ago.

Fueled by sugar-coated chicken nuggets, and the knowledge that freedom from the grip of her old man's SUV was almost upon her, Alyssa broke her silence when she saw the athletic center in the distance.

"You just don't get, Dad," she said. "What does your sweatshirt say?"

I knew what it said, but I looked down at the maroon lettering emblazoned on my chest anyway. "Cornell," I said.

"And the hat?" she asked.

"It's a Yankee cap," I replied. "Come on, you know that. What's your point?"

"My point is that you just don't get it."

Now I was the cow watching the passing train.

"How did you vote in the last election?"

"Democrats," I said proudly. "Across the board. Those Republicans have got their heads so far up their ass..."

"And when Wal-Mart wanted to put in a superstore on that old vacant farmland on the north side of town, who was the guy screaming at the town meeting, telling them to build it somewhere else. I believe the paper quoted you as suggesting they find a 'lower-class town to erect their eyesore.'"

"Have you seen those stores? And the traffic, have you seen how much traffic they create? Not in my town, not if I have anything to say about it."

"You sound just like that cop." Alyssa said. "*You're in my state now.* How tribal is that? I hate to be the one to break it to you, Dad, but the two of you could be twins."

The sparks were flying now, like a 4th of July fireworks show. I *was* tribal, right down to the tidy-whitey Jockey shorts I'd religiously worn since my first solo throne dismount at age three and a half. *How had it happened? When had it happened?* I had no answer, only a lit fuse running up my

spine headed straight for my ego, or id or whatever that thing was that Freud said defined us. I could sense the clock ticking, the countdown to a nervous breakdown. Ten, nine, eight, seven....

And then, a completely different thought doused it all out. She had been watching and listening to me her whole life. After all these years of thinking she'd been ignoring everything I said and did, it turns out she was archiving every snippet. So what if she was now throwing the whole pile back into my face like a custard pie? She knew me better than I knew myself. And damn, if my cute, adorable little peanut wasn't also a smart and savvy young lady who knew how to state her case. She didn't get that from her mother, I can tell you that.

As I watch my young daughter leap anxiously from the car and race toward where her teammates—her tribe—had gathered, I couldn't help but notice how pretty she looked in her nose ring.