

Dad vs Dad
by David Johnson

I was just wrapping up my ethics lecture for the day when I noticed my good friend Dr. Stephen Bennett peeking in through the closed door's window. I nodded slightly to him in acknowledgement, and he waved, waiting outside until I was finished.

As the students were gathering up their belongings, and a few had already left, he walked in through the now open door. I went over to greet him, and he asked if I had any plans for lunch. I told him that I would like to go, but that I would need a few minutes, because as usual, a small line of students had begun to form, waiting to speak with me after class about various issues. He understood, of course, and said, 'Oh, no hurry' and moved over next to the door to wait.

As I was walking back to the lectern, where the first person in line was waiting, I turned over my shoulder and asked how his weekend had been, to which he positively beamed, and said, 'Oh, it was great. Really busy, but great. We were laying carpet all day on Saturday, and my dad put us all to shame. 73 years young, but he got on his knee pads and he was down there on all fours the whole day.'

Dr. Bennett practically worshipped his dad. I mean, it is great that they have a good relationship and everything, but sometimes it got a little old. Nevertheless, I smiled politely, knowing that I would have to humor him. 'Yeah, I know what you mean. My dad is 71, and you should hear about the kind of stuff that he does. He goes outside to work when it is 40 degrees below zero, but do you think my mom can get him to wear a stocking cap? Nope. He just wears the same old cowboy hat that he always uses. Sometimes I don't know how he does it. They are some tough ol' birds, aren't they?'

He looked at me quizzically, cocking his head to the side, and then said, 'Well, I don't really see how that makes him tough. To me, that just doesn't seem very smart. He could get frostbite, or maybe even hypothermia from doing that.'

'Oh, come on! He's been doing it for years. The cold doesn't even phase him.'

He just kind of shook his head and gave a slight shrug, but didn't respond. I could tell from the smirk on his face, though, that he was still judging my dad. It kind of ticked me off that he would never give my dad any credit. He was always bragging about how great his dad was, but whenever I said anything about mine, he would just shoot it down. Even if I said that both our dads were really tough, he would still find some way of putting mine down. This was so typical.

Nevertheless, I tried extending the olive branch once more. 'Alright, well get this then. I am not even kidding about this, I am totally dead serious, I swear. This one time, a few years ago, my dad moved a refrigerator all by himself. I am super dead serious.'

‘What? That is crazy,’ he scoffed. ‘I don’t even think that is humanly possible.’

‘No, it is. I mean, he didn’t pick the whole thing up, or anything, he just tilted it and then walked it over by balancing it on the corners. But once he got it over to the pickup he lifted up the bottom and slid it into the back all by himself.’

‘Oh, well that’s completely different then. I mean, if he didn’t even pick it up, then that isn’t really that big of a deal.’

What a punk! I couldn’t help it, this was really irritating. ‘You didn’t even think that it was possible to move a refrigerator by yourself just a second ago, and now you’re saying that it isn’t even hard? Come on, man.’

I think he could tell I was irked, so he gave in a little bit. ‘Alright, fine, but why didn’t he just get someone to help him?’

‘Because he doesn’t need help. He is just that awesome.’

He looked away, and I think he kind of rolled his eyes a little bit, but I couldn’t tell for sure. ‘Okay, well, he is lucky that he didn’t give himself a hernia or a bulging disc or something.’

I had to smile at the way his shoulders were drooping a little in disappointment. He would never admit it, but I knew I had him on this one. I just grinned triumphantly. I wasn’t even going to dignify that with a response.

Finally he said, ‘Well I didn’t realize that we were allowed to go back a few years. Did I ever tell you that my dad used to be a fireman before he retired?’

Practically every time I talked to Bennett he told me that his dad used to be a fireman. Now I had to fight to keep from rolling my eyes. Enough with the fireman thing, already. I get it! I said, ‘Yeah, I think you might have mentioned it a couple of times. I know, firemen are pretty tough.’

‘Yeah, they have to be in really great shape.’

I couldn’t help it, I had to scoff a little bit on that one. ‘Well . . . I mean, really good *aerobic* shape.’

‘What is that supposed to mean?’

‘Nothing.’

‘No, seriously, what do you mean by that?’

‘Nothing. I’m just saying that I don’t think that is quite the same thing as moving a refrigerator all by yourself, that’s all. That is pure power. My dad is more like a powerlifter than a marathon runner.’ I did feel a little bit bad for saying this, but it was a distinction I had wanted to make for some time now, and hadn’t had the heart. But truth is truth. I decided to throw him a little bone to soften the blow, though, and added, ‘But you know, marathon runners are sort of tough too, in their own way.’

‘Firemen have to carry people out of burning buildings. You don’t think that takes strength?’

‘Well, they might occasionally have to carry out a cat, or maybe a baby or a little kid, but if it is an adult they would get other firemen to help. I’m sure they wouldn’t want to get a bulging disc or anything.’ I know, I know, I just couldn’t resist!

He was kind of mad now. ‘So you’re saying that you don’t think conditioning matters at all?’

‘I didn’t say that, it is just different.’

‘Well what about in boxing? Usually the boxer with the best conditioning is the one who wins.’

I couldn’t figure out exactly what he was trying to imply by that, but I thought I should set the record straight. ‘Well, I don’t know, maybe. But if boxers were allowed to tackle somebody then it wouldn’t really matter very much, would it? My dad wouldn’t box with someone, he would just rush him, put him on his back, and then it would be over in one or two punches.’

‘Oh really?’

‘Really.’

‘So what you are really saying is that your dad cannot box.’

‘No, he can, he just chooses to take them down and pound them instead, because boxing is really lame.’

‘So your dad is a wrestler? What, is he Hulk Hogan or something?’

‘Hulk Hogan? Where’d you get that from? He isn’t even tough. My dad could kick Hulk Hogan’s butt.’

It was like I had committed blasphemy. His mouth flew open in astonishment and he could not even fully process it for a few seconds. Finally, after he had regained some composure, he said, ‘Hulk Hogan still lifts weights you know. He is still in very good shape.’

‘Yeah, well I bet he does not move refrigerators around all by himself to stay in shape, though, does he.’

‘Well, I’m sure he could if he wanted to. He is huge.’

‘No he couldn’t! My dad throws bales of hay around like they are nothing.’

‘Lifting hay bales does not make you as strong as lifting weights.’

‘Says who?’

‘Modern exercise science, that’s who.’

‘I would like to see where it says that.’

‘Fine, I’ll look it up and show you sometime.’

‘Good, why don’t you do it now?’

‘I will.’

While he was trying to look it up on his smartphone one of my students tapped me on the shoulder and said, ‘Um, Professor, I kind of need to go, but I just wanted to talk you about my essay. I -’

‘Yeah, just give me a minute.’ I waved her off and turned back to him. ‘So did you find it?’

‘No, I haven’t found the answer for that specific question, because I haven’t had enough time, but it is common sense.’

I just laughed, and so he gave me a really dirty look. ‘There is no way that your dad is tougher than Hulk Hogan. That’s just ridiculous! Hulk Hogan beat up the Sheikh, and the Macho Man, and even Andre the Giant.’

‘Oh, come on, man.’ I just shook my head and had to turn away in disgust. Sometimes it was downright embarrassing that I called this man a friend. ‘The Sheikh? He had sharp-toed shoes. That’s it. Without those, he was totally screwed. And the Macho Man? He wasn’t tough at all, so I don’t know why you are bringing him up.’

He was flabbergasted. ‘What are you talking about? The Macho Man was awesome!’

This hero worship stuff was starting to get really annoying. I figured I needed to burst his little bubble, for his own good, of course. ‘Yeah, well if he was so macho, then why was he running around in ballerina tights all the time?’

‘What? Those weren’t tights, they were spandex. You can’t hold that against him, they all wore those.’

‘Hence, my point. My dad could beat up any man who walks around in ballerina tights and frilly little cowboy boots, no matter how ‘roided up he might be.’

‘Well what about Andre the Giant then? Hulk Hogan beat Andre the freaking Giant!’

I shook my head no. ‘Not when he was in his prime.’

He considered that for a moment, and his face fell. Reluctantly he said, ‘Yeah, I guess probably nobody could have beat up Andre the Giant in his prime.’

I nodded. ‘Yeah.’ We both stared at our feet. It was a hard thing to admit, but a person has to be reasonable.

Finally I said, ‘But he doesn’t really count, though. And I betcha my dad could beat up any of the other wrestlers.’

He seemed relieved, and said, ‘Well if your dad could beat up Hulk Hogan, then mine could beat up Rambo.’

‘Pssssshhhh, WHATEVER!’ I said. ‘There is no freaking way! Rambo was a Green Beret. You don’t mess with those guys.’

‘Yeah, well, so what? My dad was a firefighter, and you don’t mess with them either.’

‘Oh, pleeeaaassee!’ I just had to shake my head all over again. ‘So your dad was a freaking firefighter, it’s not that big of a deal. Rambo could have been the best firefighter in the history of the world if he would have wanted to be.’

‘No, I don’t think so. He didn’t have the training.’

‘Well, he could have gotten the training, just like your dad did.’

‘Well my dad did it for 30 years, and now, even after he is retired, there he is, out there helping pour concrete, and laying carpet, and doing all kinds of things people in their 70s aren’t supposed to be able to do.’

I sighed. There was just no reasoning with someone like this. ‘Yeah, when he isn’t napping.’ I know I shouldn’t have said that (at least not out loud) but I was frustrated. Of course he was immediately offended.

‘What is wrong with napping? What, tough guys are not allowed to nap? You don’t think Rambo ever took a nap the whole time he was in Vietnam?’

Apparently it was a pretty sensitive issue for him, and I must have really touched a nerve. I could have laid off, but instead I decided to press my advantage. ‘Well, I doubt he fell asleep in his soup the way your dad does.’ (Now I was super glad that he had told me that story.) ‘Call me crazy, but I think Rambo was too busy blowing up tanks with those awesome exploding arrows and flying helicopters and cauterizing his own wounds and finding all sorts of cool ways to kill those dirty Russians to have time for naps.’

‘I thought you said he was in Vietnam.’

‘He was, but somehow he always ended up fighting those dirty Russians who were the ones that were really behind it all.’

‘Well I never said that he would take a nap while he was supposed to be fighting bad guys, I just meant that he might have taken one on his days off.’

‘What are you talking about? It was a freaking war! There were no days off. What, you think everybody clocked out on Friday and went home for the weekend?’

‘Well you would have to have some breaks, or you would get really burned out.’

‘Oh, you think! So, you’re telling me that somebody could get burned out on war? Well, how insightful. Maybe that explains why he was a freaking nut case when he got home! I guess he was just stressed, and in need of a vacation!’

‘Alright, alright,’ he put his hands up in surrender, ‘geez, calm down. Why are you shouting? Listen, don’t get mad about it, I’m just saying-’

‘I’m not mad, can we just drop it?’ Oh, I was so mad. Stupidity can be so irritating! But then I looked around the room and everyone was staring at us. So I said to him, ‘Listen, maybe we should just talk about this outside.’

And the students went ‘Oooooooooohhhhhhhhh!!!!’

Oh, that one got me. I had to chuckle a little, in spite of myself. Those little troublemakers, always trying to start something. ‘Oh, stop it!’ I told them. ‘You know I didn’t mean it like that.’ I shook my head at them, and grinned at Dr. Bennett, giving him that ‘Those darn kids!’ look.

But he just looked right at me and said, 'Yeah, you better not have.'

Wait, what? What was that supposed to mean? Was he serious? I looked at him quizzically, but his face revealed nothing.

Finally I said, 'Well, anyway, I guess I should get back to this,' I indicated the students waiting in line, 'so that we can be going here in a few minutes.'

'Yeah, I've been standing here waiting for you.'

Was he irritated? I couldn't tell for sure, but I kind of thought he might be. 'Listen, I'm sorry, but don't you remember what Rambo looked like when he snarled at people? If Rambo would have snarled at your dad like that he would have crapped all over his Depends.'

'He so would not have! How can you say that when my dad ran into burning buildings to save people?'

'Yeah, but that is not really the same thing, though.'

'Whatever. I bet you couldn't do it, and I don't think your dad could either.'

'Yes he could have, if that would have been his job. Nobody is tougher than a cowboy. You think someone like John Wayne couldn't have been a good firefighter? Give me a break.'

'You think your dad is John Wayne?'

'No, but he likes John Wayne because he was a real cowboy, and a very talented actor.'

He started laughing. 'I can't believe your dad has a man crush on John Wayne!'

'He absolutely does not, that is not what I said.'

'Is your dad a wannabe? Does he dress up like John Wayne, and look at himself in the mirror and stuff? Or does he just wish that he could be John Wayne's sidekick?'

'You're twisting my words around. He dresses like a cowboy because he is one, that is all. And my dad would be nobody's sidekick. They would be co-equals. They would be the two toughest ranchers in the whole country and they wouldn't like each other at first because they were both the toughest, but then they would have to work together to defeat the big greedy rancher with all the hired gunfighters who was trying to steal everyone's land, and they would beat him, and all of his hired guns, and they would become best friends by the end, after they had whipped the bad

guys against impossible odds, or, you know, impossible for anybody except the two of them, teamed up. It would be the greatest Western ever made.'

'That actually kind of sounds like every Western ever made.'

'Nuh uh. Some of them are about cattle drives.'

'Oh, pardon me.'

'Well, I think it would be a great movie.'

'Huh.' He sounded skeptical. 'I had no idea your dad was so awesome.'

'Well, I don't usually like to brag about it, like some people I know, but . . .' I shrugged, and then grinned good-naturedly.

He grinned back. 'Yeah, I guess I really underestimated him.'

'Hey, don't worry about it, apology accepted.'

I turned back to the students, but just as I did so, he nonchalantly added, 'Obviously your dad must be really strong if, you know, he can lift up your mom.'

I froze and then turned back around very deliberately, not quite believing what I had just heard. SERIOUSLY? I shook my head, 'You did not just say that. You did not just go there.'

But a broken chorus of voices from all around the room, roughly in unison, assured me that yes, he did in fact just go there. Most of them were not my students. Those in line were, but the others had already left, and the ones in the seats were waiting for the next class. I searched their faces in earnest, one by one, looking for answers, still reeling from the shock and pain, and still not quite believing. 'He couldn't have.'

Ta' Shaun, who was standing in line, asked me, 'Are you really going to take that from him, professor?'

I looked from him, to Bennett, and said coldly, 'I don't know, Ta' Shaun. Maybe I should teach him some manners. What do you think?'

Ta' Shaun replied gleefully, 'I think you should professor, I think this chump needs some manners!'

No more playing. It was time to take this fool down. 'You know what I heard, Bennett?' I yelled. 'I heard that yo momma is so fat that she gotta buy sunscreen by the gallon!'

The students were loving this. They let out an ‘Oooooohhhhhh!’ and some of the guys were looking back and forth at each other laughing. Ta’ Shaun even gave me five. I was killing it. Suck on that one Bennett.

He looked like someone had punched him in the stomach. He yelled over the noise, ‘She is just frugal, she likes to buy in bulk, that is all!’

‘Yeah, just keep telling yourself that’ I scoffed.

I saw his teeth clench and his jaw muscles working back and forth. He looked like he wanted to kill me. Finally, he said, ‘Well yo momma is so fat that when she goes sunbathing volunteers come try to roll her back into the ocean cause they think it is a beached whale.’

The class howled with delight, and Bennett raised his arms up like he had just won an Olympic medal or something. Somehow or other a chant started up of ‘white whale, white whale, white whale . . .’ I was glad most of them were not my students because these people were kind of a bunch of idiots.

Once that obnoxious chant had died down, I said to him, ‘Yeah, well I heard they had to ask yo momma to stop strippin’ cause one time she broke the pole.’

By this point the students were utterly delirious with joy. Ta’ Shaun was laughing so hard that the people next to him had to prop him up to keep him from falling over. Lots of the guys were high-fiving each other. Some of the girls tried to pretend like they weren’t laughing, but they were. I always knew these people were smart, they just needed proper mentorship. I had guided them back into the fold. Now they were chanting my name, which very well could have been the highlight of my life. If I would have died at that moment I would have felt like I went out on top.

I did feel a little guilty for saying that one, though. Don’t get me wrong, it was totally worth it, but I’m sure Mrs. Bennett was a nice person, and I wouldn’t want anyone to think that I have something against those who are excessive gravitation challenged. Truthfully, it wasn’t really even directed at her, it was just about getting to him, and I think I did.

He said, ‘Well yo momma is so fat that when she went skydiving everybody thought it was a solar eclipse.’

Oh, snap! That one actually wasn’t terrible. I knew I had to think fast. Expectations would be high, and I could not disappoint now or my new found popularity would become a thing of the past. A hush finally fell over the crowd. Some of them leaned in expectantly as they waited for me to respond. Bennett looked defiant, like he was saying ‘bring it on’ with his body language. Well, I did. ‘Yo momma is so fat that her farts have aftershocks.’

A cheer went up from the crowd again, but before they could really get going Bennett started shaking his head ‘no’ and put his hands out at his side in mock confusion. Once the noise subsided a bit, he said, ‘That doesn’t make sense. I don’t even get it.’

‘Oh, whatever. Don’t give me that.’

‘No, I don’t. Explain to me how that would work.’

‘Oh, just shut up. It’s an exaggeration, of course, but yours was too.’

‘Well, at least mine made sense.’

‘No it didn’t. If she was fat enough to block out the sun then how did they get her into the airplane in the first place, dummy? You know what, I’m done with this. If you are too stupid to get my jokes, then just forget it.’

‘Oh I got what you were *trying* to say, it just didn’t make any sense.’

He was really pressing me, and he would not let it go. I hated that about him sometimes! ‘Listen, you can’t analyze this stuff that closely, alright. It is not someone’s doctoral thesis, it’s just a joke. Geez!’

‘So you are admitting that it does not hold up under careful scrutiny, then?’ he shouted shrilly.

So I was just like, ‘I think you really need to shut up.’

And he was like, ‘Why don’t you make me?’

And I was like, ‘What if I don’t want to? I don’t have to make you if I don’t want to. You can’t make me make you if don’t want to make you.’

And he was like, ‘What?’

And I was like, ‘Man, you really are stupid. You don’t even understand plain English.’

So then he says, ‘You know what, I think I am going to eat lunch by myself today.’

So I was like, ‘Fine by me.’ And then after a second I added, ‘Good thing you aren’t going to lunch with your mom, or there wouldn’t be any food left for you.’ Heh, heh. Pretty good one, huh?

And then he goes, ‘You are so immature.’

And so I said, 'Yeah, well you are such a pooppy head.'

And then, probably because he couldn't think of a good comeback for that, he just sighed, shook his head, and started to leave. But he stopped right before going out the door, and said, 'Oh, and by the way, my dad could totally kick your dad's butt. Just sayin'.'

Well obviously I could not just let that go. I don't know how any reasonable person could have. So I ran over and yelled out the door, 'Hey, you better take that back.' But he just ignored me and kept walking. So I caught up to him out in the hallway and I grabbed him by the arm and spun him around, and said, 'You are not leaving until you take that back!'

But of course he wouldn't. He tried to pull his scrawny little arm away from me and keep walking, but I wouldn't let him, and that was when the pushing and shoving started.

We were nose to nose, screaming at each other. Or, I guess to be more precise, it was nose to forehead because he was a little taller than me. I had to look right up his big beak at some massive, out of control nose hair. It looked like a rainforest up in there. I politely mentioned that perhaps he should trim it, and he said something shameful back to me that cannot be repeated. The students had formed a ring around us and they were chanting again, 'Fight, fight, fight, fight . . .' I tried to control myself, but he kept sticking his big ugly finger in my face. So I snapped. With a primal scream I put my nose in his chest and drove him to the ground in a near perfect form tackle. I'm sure my old football coach would have been very proud.

We were a writhing ball of middle-aged ferocity. I got him in a headlock and gave him a really nasty noogie. He was screeching about it, but he managed to get a fistful of my hair. A few well-placed punches to the midsection with my free hand made him let go, but I still had to fend off his attempts at a leglock while trying for the choke out. That was about when the cops came and broke it up. The students booed them lustily. It is a shame, because I was totally winning. Ta' Shaun said word on the street is that they broke it up because somebody had money on Bennett, and they knew I was just about to get him. He said he bet on me, though. Smart man.

After I made bail, we both had to go talk to the dean. I still don't know why I even had to go when clearly he started it. He said that he would drop all the charges if I would just admit that his dad could beat up mine. I told him he could stick it. I'll die first.