

THE STORIES WE TELL OURSELVES

By Leo Cardez

I was a loser. Growing up I was a below average kid, unremarkable in every way, much to my parents dismay--especially my father. I lived fearing I could do nothing right and always carried the idea that I wasn't doing enough by my dad's standards. That I wasn't enough.

My father was a hard man. Five feet six inches of old school Latino machismo with a Napoleonic complex, like a mean Chihuahua. He criticized everything I did or tried to do. I learned to avoid him and the first chance I got I left. The day after my seventeenth birthday I joined the Army. Although, looking back today, I am not certain I was aware of what and why I was doing it.

We all have stories in our past we're holding onto, tragic plot lines that seem to run through everything we do. The more we believe them the stronger and more real they become. Like the story I told myself: that I was inherently bad or inferior; that nothing I did was right. These types of feelings fester and slowly infect every aspect of our lives and worse, no amount of success can help you heal. Trust me, I tried.

I became a decorated veteran, college grad, and successful business executive. I thought rising to the highest ranks would prove to everyone--especially my dad--that I was worthy and had value. Unfortunately, no matter what I did, what I accomplished, I felt a deep emptiness. I tried everything to

fill it, even drugs. I soon found there is not enough cocaine in the world to fix an old story that says you're not enough. To make matters worse my new reckless lifestyle was catching up to me.

DEFCON 1. I was arrested and looking at six to fifteen years in prison. My father came to the county jail to bail me out. When I saw the disappointment in his eyes it tore my guts out. We spoke for hours on the drive home. I told him I knew I had let him down yet again. He was angry, but quickly shifted to speak about his love and admiration. I felt thirty years of pain and shame well-up in my chest. As I sat next to him, still unable to make eye contact, I felt the tears start streaming down my face. I begged for his forgiveness. He simply took my hand in his and whispered, I love you son.

This began the kind of father-son relationship I had always dreamed of. He shared in my highs and consoled me in my lows. We spoke often and with every conversation I realized I had wasted so much time being scared and angry at him that it had clouded my perception. Now, I could finally see him. He wasn't a mean Chihuahua. In fact, everyday, I saw more of his love and kindness. He was a nice Chihuahua.

It strikes me that behind every trauma we endure there's a core story we tell ourselves. Things like, I'm not good enough; I don't deserve love. As long as these stories exist we find ways to perpetuate them. There's a funny thing about these stories though, they tend to crumble under examination.

I painted my dad as the enemy, but thanks to that car ride home I found

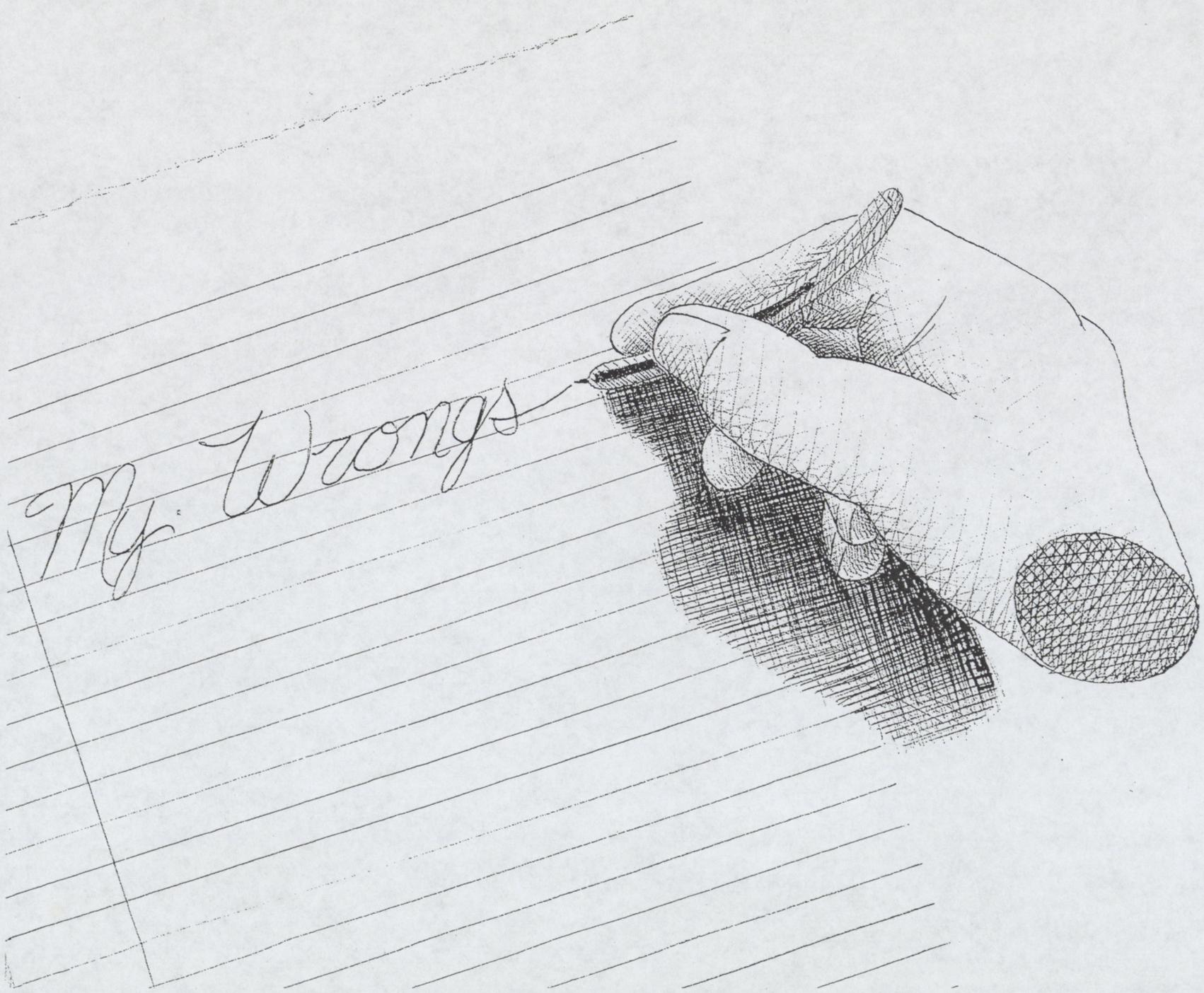
the story I'd been carrying around for all those years was proven untrue. My father did love me and if that's true, maybe I'm not so terrible. Now he's my best friend. He has demonstrated his love in every conceivable way. He lifted me up after my conviction, undoubtedly saving my life.

I became less angry and started treating myself better. That critical voice in my head that I had always identified with my father was replaced by a kinder voice telling me I was okay. Now, here of all places, I have become the kind of man he could be proud of. I've worked as a G.E.D. tutor, volunteered to teach yoga to special needs inmates, and am writing a book that I hope can help others endure what I have survived.

Last Father's Day I wrote him a card sharing my feelings of deep appreciation and love. The next evening I had a dream of us from my childhood. We were washing the car and he was playfully chasing me around with the garden hose. It had been buried deep in a secret chamber of my subconscious and I knew that it meant I was free to let go of the old story.

I have re-written my story and although I am still stuck in prison, I am living a life better than I could have ever imagined. Letting go of the old internal narratives of who I thought I was has allowed me to see and live my life with newfound hope and purpose...and that's the best ending anyone could ask for from their story.

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My Wrongs