Coping is easier when it's not face to face.

Arthur never really thinks much about Dad. After all, Arthur only hears from him once a year (and that’s not even because Dad wants to talk to him. Dad wants to pick at Mum until she screams down the phone line and it’s before the divorce all over again).

Arthur hates it when Dad upsets Mum, so eventually he takes it on himself to answer the phone. There’s no shouting that way and Mum doesn’t lock herself in her room after and fume. It doesn’t matter if Dad belittles and condescends to him because he can’t seem to remember Arthur isn’t ten years old anymore. Arthur can take down a message just fine if he has a pen and paper handy. He knows he forgets things—that’s why he writes all the important things down.

Things aren’t easy for Mum with running the house and balancing all of MJN’s books. Speaking with Dad only adds to her stress. Arthur knows that he doesn’t really do all that much to help—he’s the steward and that’s brilliant, of course, but it’s not a real paying job. He’s not contributing anything at all.

Handling Dad is the least he can do. Mum doesn’t need to hear any of Dad’s sniping, so Arthur makes sure she doesn’t.

Later, when he rings off, it becomes a sort of ritual to retreat to his room so he can cry and scream
into his pillows where Mum can’t see or hear. He thinks about all the times before Mum shut herself in her own room and feels horribly guilty and just plain stupid for not picking up the phone sooner.

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Speaking with Dad doesn’t get easier as the years go on, but Arthur has found a way to cope. He doesn’t burst into tears mid-conversation and then desperately try to cover up his snifflies anymore. The second Arthur hears Dad’s voice go all deep and sharp he just sort of… shuts down. Everything goes a little dull, like he’s taken a step back or he’s dreaming in slow-motion, and then he doesn’t feel anything at all. He thinks not being face to face make the not-feeling easier.

The older Arthur gets, the quicker the not-feeling comes when he speaks to Dad, and the longer it takes for the aftermath to catch up with him. Sometimes, he can go for days without breaking down and until he finally collapses on his bed and sobs himself sick, he can nearly pretend that the phone call never happened.

When the tears have wrung themselves out, he’s left dry-eyed and completely knackered, and he wonders if someday the phone calls will just stop coming. He knows one way they would—probably the only way—but thinking about Dad dying isn’t… well, it’s a horrible thing to do, exactly the sort of thing Dad would do (“There’s a circle in hell for miserable bitches like you, Caro, and I hope you rot in it.”), so Arthur makes sure he never thinks about that sort of thing at all.

He buries his face in his pillows, concentrating solely on the not-feeling. When he opens his eyes again it’s the next morning and he’s lost an entire day.

He wishes he could have lost the sound of Dad’s voice instead.

~*~

No matter where Arthur is, he can pick Dad’s voice out of a crowd, and every time he does it sends lines of ice down his spine. Being in public places doesn’t make things better, it just means Dad will only raise his voice. (Arthur reminds himself he’s not a kid anymore—he’s older, bigger. He’s an adult and nothing is going to happen. The ice doesn’t go away and the not-feeling creeps slowly in.)

If he were smarter, Arthur would have turned and gone the other way. If could think… But he’s not and he doesn’t and when Dad rounds the corner of the duty-free, stops and sees him, all the air in Arthur’s lungs disappears.

“Well, son,” Dad says. His smile doesn’t touch his eyes. “Fancy running into you.”

Arthur opens his mouth, tries for words—he knows he should say something, needs to say something, but his throat closes tight and he gawps like a fish.

The corners of Dad’s mouth droop ever so slightly even though he’s still smiling and all at once the not-feeling gets crowded out by the sudden wet heat in Arthur’s eyes.

Talk, he tells himself. Say something. Anything. Talk!

He doesn’t. He can’t. The only thing he hears is Dad telling him what an idiot he is, what a failure, even though Dad hasn’t said a word.

“Bit old to be giving me the silent treatment, aren’t you?” Dad says, the beginnings of an edge sliding into his voice. “All this time and not even a hello? You got taught manners or didn’t they
Arthur manages a jerky nod, which he quickly changes into a shake because he wants to give the right answer. He’s not even certain there is a right answer. He doesn’t know.

He can feel the tears welling up in his eyes, feel the frustration rattling in his bones, the uncertainty, and all he wants to do is rush back to GERTI and hide. He wishes Mum wasn’t back home laid up with the flu because then he wouldn’t be a wreck if she were here because she would see and…

He drops his eyes to his shoes and wills the tears away. If he’s not looking, it’s not face to face, right… Not face to face, he can do that. He has done that. It’s fine. Everything’s fine.

“God Almighty, what are you crying about now?” Dad groans. “Your mother insisted on coddling you within an inch of your life and look at what good it’s done. All it did was make you soft in the head. You planning on wailing like a banshee when I say goodbye?”

Arthur knows exactly the kind of goodbye he would like to give Dad, but the words sit heavy on his tongue and he swallows them down.

If you don’t have anything nice to say, he reminds himself.

Someone is calling him name. He knows he should answer, know he should recognise the voice, but it’s already too much to concentrate on not falling apart. He doesn’t know it’s Skip until Skip stops beside him with a quiet, “Oh” and a tight, “Mr. Shappey.”

“At least someone in this outfit remembers how to give a proper greeting. Fancy that.”

Arthur knots his hands into fist until his nails cut crescent moons into the flesh of his palms.

“Though not all of us remember basic civility, it seems,” Skip grinds out.

Arthur sees Douglas’s uniform shoes edge into his line of vision before he hears him, feels Douglas curl his hand round the back of his neck and suddenly it’s easier to breath.

“Everything all right here?” Douglas says, even though Arthur knows Douglas can see it’s not. “Ah, Gordon, what luck meeting you here. Having another go at larceny or do you limit that to once a year?”

“Listen here, you.” The edge to Dad’s voice is sharper, the words louder. Arthur flinches, but he doesn’t hear what else Dad says when Douglas gently tightens his grip.

A moment later Skip lays a hand on Arthur’s arm, turns him round, and they start back the way they came.

“I know precisely what kind of man you are,” Arthur hears Douglas say to Dad behind them. The rest of his words, unfortunately, are lost in the noise of the terminal, but Arthur is inordinately proud of the steel in Douglas’s voice.

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The crew lounge is deserted when Skip guides Arthur in and sits him in a chair. The stuffing is coming out of the upholstery and the only thing Arthur can think of is a dissected teddy bear. Douglas leans against the doorframe pretending to look easy but instead only looking cross.

Skip drops into the seat beside Arthur with a sigh, slumping on his knees, with one hand raking through his hair and underneath his Captain’s hat. He lays his other hand on Arthur’s arm and
simply asks, “Are you all right?”

Arthur nods because he is, but even so, the tears run tracks down his cheeks. He covers his face, digging the heels of his palms into his eyes, and sucks down deep, shaky breaths. When Skip curls an arm round his shoulders to pull him into a hug, Arthur doesn’t try to stay quiet anymore.

“What did you say to him?” Skip asks sometime later.

For a second Arthur thinks Skip is talking to him, but Douglas answers instead.

“Just what was on my mind,” Douglas says. Arthur can tell by the airiness in Douglas’s voice that none of those things were nice.

Skip snorts. “No less than he deserves.”

“Oh, he deserves far less. Mostly a box six feet under so he can cosy up with the worms and the maggots. I imagine he’d view it as a coming home party.”


Arthur just shakes his head against Skip’s shoulder. “It’s all right,” he says, straightening up. His throat is just a tad scratchy.

Douglas smiles and runs a hand over Arthur’s hair. “Of course it is.”

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When GERTI is refueled and cleared to head back to Fitton, Arthur spends his time in the flight deck, trying to win a cut of the cheese tray and laughing at Skip and Douglas’s teasing until his face hurts. For the entire flight, he doesn’t think about Dad once.

Things are just as they should be.

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