

*Jeffrey M Feingold*

**The World of Tomorrow**

THE AIRPLANE WAS HURLING RIGHT AT ME. I thought I was a goner. My life began flashing before my eyes. The many things I would miss. I'd never ask Molly Finkleblatt to the prom. I'd never grow up to be Batman and save my nana from Jewish mobsters. I'd never live to fulfill my destiny. (I had only the vaguest possible sense of my destiny, but I knew it was supposed to have something to do with greatness). I was six or seven years old that day so very long ago, standing with friends on the sidewalk in Boston just outside my family home. We were all looking up at the sky. There, on the porch of the top floor of the three-floor apartment where my family lived, stood a colossus: my father, the inventor, casting his homemade airplanes down at us like so many thunderbolts cast to earth by Zeus. I felt a woosh of hot summer air as the plane grazed my right ear before crashing to the ground next to my new suede Hush Puppy shoes. Yes, a fiery death missed me by only inches! "Launch another one, Dad," I hollered up at the man in the sky. A few moments later, a huge paper B-52 came barreling right for the tip of my friend Wolfgang's nose. There's no way he was going to survive this one!

That was my dad. He was born to invent. Born for greatness. He was first generation American; his father having come to Boston from Russia. My grandfather had a little five-and-dime store in Boston. That was his life here. But not to be the life for his son. No, my father's head was in the stars. He knew every star in every constellation. While other kids had ten speed bikes, Dad had ten telescopes. He was born for space. But when he was still young and full of starry night dreams, before I was born, tragedy would tether his feet to the ground. His mother had terminal cancer and was sent from hospital to die at home. Back then, there was no hospice, and relatively little thought of palliative care. What did they have back then, after all? Some morphine. Still, she would often wail in pain throughout the night. This caused anguish my father grappled with for the rest of his life. This was all before I arrived on this lonely planet, and to this day I don't know the full story. But what I do know is that after her death, my father put aside his heavenly dreams and instead worked in my grandfather's store. Family was everything. So his hopes for college were set aside. But still, he managed to become an inventor. Not just paper airplanes. He learned electrical design. For many years he worked for a firm that did only one thing, one incredibly specialized thing. Designing prototypes for display at world trade shows, such as the "World of Tomorrow" display at the 1967 World's Fair in Montreal. The World of Tomorrow! What was it like, I often wondered as a kid? And for my whole life. I could only imagine it. Later, when I was ten, my parents bought their one and only house, and growing up, my dad's basement was full of these World's Fair inventions. Cutting-edge, futuristic things most people would hardly dare to dream of. Things only read about in science fiction novels. Or seen on science fiction TV shows back in the days when programs were all in black and white. Extraordinary, mind-blowing inventions most Americans could hardly imagine. Inventions such as the "Auto-Dialing Telephone." Yup, that's right, my dad invented it. And as a little kid, I played with it in the basement. It was one of those heavy black desk set phones, like the kind

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Spencer Tracey used to call Katherine Hepburn in the old black and white movie, "Desk Set." Or maybe she used it to call him. Either way, there was a slot at the top of my father's invention. Into this slot one would push a credit card size piece of plastic. This card had vertical columns, each with ten little round tabs. In each column, one of the tabs would be removed, leaving a hole, representing one of the digits in a phone number. When the card was inserted into the phone slot, the phone would then dial the pre-programmed number, slowly pushing the punch card back up through the slot into which it had been inserted. All of this took about five painfully long minutes - longer than it would take to just dial the number with your finger using the rotary dial on the phone. And yet, I always imagined the gasps of awe as folks from across the world stood staring at the space age auto-dialing "World of Tomorrow" telephone. "How could it be? How does it work? It's from the future! What genius has invented this miracle?" Duh, folks, it was my dad! THAT genius. The same one who later invented the first music box controller, which synced lights to music. It had a little fancy knob controller on top with a thin circle of gold leafing around it. Loved to play with that one! And a hundred other brilliant things I grew up with playing in the basement.

My mother and father didn't hold on to things forever. And the basement full of inventions somehow eventually disappeared. Oh, how I wish I had that phone today! How I wish I could pass it on to his granddaughter, my only daughter. But my parents just didn't understand the value of keeping things. Just once, they planned to have a yard sale. Looking through the things they were planning to sell, I came across the Seder plate we used for family Passovers while I was growing up. "You can't give this away!" I exclaimed to my dad as I held the silver plate, remembering so many now dead relatives who had gathered with us for Passover's past. "Why, it's not worth anything," he responded, "it not real silver, it's just silver plate." "I'm not talking about monetary value," I said, "but this is the Seder plate I grew up with. Someday I'll have my own children, and this would be something I can give to them from their grandparents." A pause. And then, "well, you can have it if you want it, but it's not worth anything." He just didn't understand the concept. But I went off to the Navy, and then to college, and somehow the Seder plate disappeared. If only in my youthful foolishness I'd comprehended the importance of securing it.

And today, I do have children. My father died a year before my oldest child was born. How sad I am not to have some of his inventions to pass on to them. They never met their grandfather. He was gone before the miracle of their births. He has vanished, as have his creations. The things he invented or owned could not replace the man. Not the silver of his Seder plate, nor the gold leaf on the top of his music controller. Silver and gold cannot replace the absence of a doting grandfather. But perhaps they could have been touchstones, somehow connecting his grandchildren to the purity of his light and love. I don't know. I just know all is lost.

Unlike my parents, I have saved boxes full of memories for my kids. Shoeboxes full. The stories written by them in second grade. The pictures of dance recitals. The wonderful essays they wrote across their early years. But as I whirl threw the September of my years, I've wondered, what else can I leave for them? And so, I've been writing essays. Essays about leaves

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from my family tree, from their tree. So they might, however indirectly, get to know those who came before them. It is my hope that they feel that some part of the past - of their past - has been reclaimed. Life takes the things one loves away, bit by bit. Like my father before me, I may not be here in their world of tomorrow. But someone will remain. And now they will know his story. And mine. And part of theirs.