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My Two Dads

A year to the day before my dad died, he and my mom had flown from Baltimore to visit me in San Francisco. They stayed with me in my Victorian flat for a week. I'd moved away four years earlier and they'd never mentioned visiting, but I was happy when they decided to. I invited a dozen of my mostly gay friends for a potluck, and everyone loved meeting my parents. No surprise to me. For months afterwards, they'd tell me, "Your dad was great," even though he did very little but sit quietly. That was the thing about my dad — you wanted to like him.

My previous writings about Dad, although not inaccurate, feel incomplete, and I want to remedy that. When I write about my parents, Alfred and Philomena (Al and Phil), Mom usually takes up more ink. There are reasons for this: she had the more dominant personality; she ran the house, made sure the bills were paid, and made most of the big decisions; she was more vocal and dramatic.

My parents had four children, and our lives largely revolved around our dad's alcoholism during our childhoods. Dad was the villain and Mom was the saint who held the family together without much help. Dad's misfortune of succumbing to alcohol made our lives hell for many years. Our mom not only worked full-time, but had to take care of us kids, sometimes single-handedly, and also deal with her sick husband. She was the mediator, the superwoman, with the patience and love of an angel. That was the story when we were kids, but as we age, the black-and-whiteness of it goes to shades of gray. There was much truth to that scenario, but life, and people, are more complex than I knew. I don't know how we all got through it, yet it feels almost like another family's story now.

When cancer rapidly took my dad at age 68 in 1995, it was unfair; his life was ending after it had, against all odds, gotten to a better place. Rushing back to the East Coast, I got to the hospital just hours before his breathing stopped and the color drained from his body — an astonishing experience.

While Dad didn't live long enough, Mom lived too long and ended up in assisted living, having lost most of her memory and physical dexterity — exactly what she'd feared most. In the time since we all grew up and moved out, Dad has gone up in my estimation and Mom, down. Also not fair, but he couldn't go much lower, and she couldn't realistically remain a saint. What's odd about dead people is that they continue to change, and it's very much in human nature to either gradually sanctify them after death or take them down. Given enough time, they eventually end up somewhere in the middle where they likely belong.

It's amazing what 50 or 60 years can do. What I could not have predicted about my dysfunctional childhood is how matter-of-fact it has become. Painful memories come to mind, but they've lost their ability to stop me in my tracks. And do I really want to be the 66-year-old man kvetching about his dad? Life was certainly hell, and I'm a product of that

hell; I can still be the small child who fears he deserves nothing, whose existence itself is a burden to everyone, and who cannot ask for help, but that belongs to no one but me now. Dad threw things a handful of times. Maybe I picked that up from him. I didn't know how to process bad behavior in adults, and only with great effort do I mostly succeed in avoiding my tendency toward ugly behavior, inherited or not.

Both my parents came from large families. Dad's resided 200 miles away in New York, and while we saw them on occasion, Mom's family overshadowed them by being local and loud. When asked about his past, Dad would mostly keep silent and shrug his shoulders. There was also very little of his in the house, so in a weird way, it didn't flesh him out as a human being. Only one framed photo from his side of the family — a small oval of his parents on their wedding day — hung on the wall. On his dresser was his transistor radio and a leather box with a few keepsakes — among them a two-headed nickel and a tattered photograph of him with his one sister. A saxophone and two small canvases he'd painted, clues to creative aspirations in his youth, collected dust in the attic. He didn't have a tool bench or his own den, so maybe he needed an escape.

The alcoholism obscured his more attractive qualities during those earlier decades, so between that and the fact that he was a reserved man, our knowledge of him was spotty at best. His parents had five boys in eight years, then one girl, seven years later, then my dad, three years after that. Four of his brothers had left the house before Dad was even ten. I wish he'd told me what that was like for him. His mom called him "Allie," sometimes in front of us. He didn't like that. A handful of stories from his childhood came out over the years: sometimes he couldn't take a bath because there was a live eel in the tub for dinner; he was given a pair of roller skates which some kids stole right off his feet; his mom would make him fried egg and pepper sandwiches for school lunches, and by mid-day the bag would be all greasy, which embarrassed him.

My parents met in the late 1940s in cinematic fashion — working in New York City's Flatiron Building. He was designing clothing labels and she was a secretary. Mom had moved there for much of the '40s with a friend (and yes, I wish I had more information about those years), but moved back to Baltimore with Dad to raise us kids. That first job showed Dad's artistic streak. He was good with his hands (when they weren't shaking), and when we were little, our mom had him wallpaper a few rooms. She'd also buy pieces of raw wood furniture for him to finish. He'd sand them down thoroughly, then apply the stain and the shellac, taking pride in his work, but the talents he did have were overshadowed during the worst years. He was not scholarly, but had street smarts and was knowledgeable about things like racetracks, sports, and cardplaying.

When we were younger, it wasn't all bad, but a constant cloud hung over us. We never discussed the elephant in the room, but in our hearts we knew something was seriously wrong, even if we had no language for it. I remember some of my childhood fondly — certain holidays, being taken to the zoo, summer picnics — but we walked on eggshells, hid out a lot, or took our unnamed frustrations out on each other. Dad was not what you'd call a functional alcoholic — his demeanor would change, he'd become more defensive and unreasonable, and he couldn't walk a straight

line. On the many nights he came home well after dinnertime, we'd watch as he'd weave his way to the TV room, full dinner plate in hand, surprised that he never once dropped it. Once he settled in, we'd breathe a sigh of relief and stay out of his way. His employers saw the detrimental affects of his lunchtime cocktails but never fired him for it. If his substance abuse was the result of some trauma, he never spoke of it.

There were distinct chapters in all of this. Up until I finished first grade, Mom worked night shift because daycare was unaffordable, and Dad took care of us solo in the evenings. He apparently did a good job, but being the youngest, I recall only snippets of those years. When Mom switched to days, she and Dad were suddenly home together on weekday evenings, and overnight, they began to fight constantly and loudly. Dad soon began taking refuge at the bars after work. That was the pattern until one by one we kids moved out. Life seemed a bit better by then, but it was mostly because we were no longer living there.

Gradually, I began to think of my dad as two distinct people: the selfish alcoholic who tore our family apart, and the loving, talented man underneath the disease. If he'd left us, as our mom asked him to during the worst years, or if he'd died young, he'd risk being frozen in time as a one-dimensional villain, but he remained constant, in his way, so given that we had to suffer through the traumatic earlier years, it's a gift that we got his later years as well, because we got the chance to appreciate and spend time with the second man.

Around 1980 we got an unexpected period with our good dad. I was in my early twenties. He had been having severe stomach pain. The doctor informed him he had a serious ulcer and that quitting alcohol for six weeks was necessary for it to heal. His previous sober times had never exceeded a day or two, far too short to make the impression that six weeks did, and to our collective pleasure and amazement he became a different person. We were also impressed by his will power. It was a revelation, and we secretly wished the doctor would recommend he stop drinking permanently. That didn't happen, and life went back to what it had been. The ulcer recurred some years later during which we savored the same six weeks of sobriety and calm.

Another change beginning roughly around that time was his choice of alcohol. He cut back on the hard liquor and drank mostly cheap beer — Pabst or Blatz. We were never sure why, but certainly were not going to ask. It resulted in his being mildly inebriated fairly often, but the stumbling, passing-out, ugly episodes decreased, making rational, pleasant interaction with him more frequent.

He was also laid off from his job around then, a blessing in disguise, because after enduring six months of stressful unemployment, he found a more satisfying, less aggravating position that he kept until retirement. Soon after that he became a grandfather — a role he loved. He lived long enough for his four grandsons to interact with and remember him, and one of them called his granddad "my favorite adult person ever."

After college and some traveling, I moved back in with Phil and Al for several years while working. It was just the three of us, and most nights we'd watch *M*A*S*H* reruns or an old film together over dinner. What

had been very unlikely in prior years was now possible partly due to Dad's improved behavior.

When my parents' 25th anniversary came up in 1974, our mom stated emphatically to anyone who asked, "We are doing nothing because there is nothing to celebrate!" Nobody questioned her. By the time their 40th anniversary rolled around in 1989, however, she was pleased when we four kids threw them a nice big party. And by the time Dad died in 1995, we were grief-stricken, something I would have previously thought impossible. After so many fraught years, the fact that our parents actually found some reasonable companionship was astounding.

Even during his bad years, he was often well-liked by folks outside the immediate family, much to our surprise. Mom's three brothers always made sure to chat with him, and he joined softball and bowling leagues with them. Upon his death, several people said, "Your dad was funny," which was news to me, but other dads mostly sat in the background, so the fact that he was engaged perhaps stood out. During my high school years, when friends came over to pick me up for a film or a party, he'd make some dumb joke that those close to him were totally sick of, but that they would laugh at.

When I was ten, Dad took me on the bus to Baltimore's old Memorial Stadium for my first Orioles baseball game, but that was rare one-on-one time with him. As a rule, we were distant, and the harm he caused stood out more than anything else. I could not understand why he wouldn't quit drinking or at least talk about it and seek help, but he was extremely shut down. His story was not an uncommon one — young husband, saddled with four children, hates his job. Alcohol defined him for many years and did a near-thorough job of concealing the rest of the man. He felt cut off from his family, which he resented immensely, apparently in denial that substance abuse was mostly to blame. He didn't want to be the center of attention, but also didn't want to be snubbed. As we children grew up and forged out on our own, and his disease and its effects miraculously took less precedence, our relationships him with at long last had a chance to grow.

When we refer to our dad now, it's only to acknowledge his dumb jokes, or a task he was good at. His later, better years made it possible for me to blame him less and love him more. Have I forgiven him? Do I understand alcoholism? I have no idea. What I do know is that as each year passes, I feel his pain more, I understand him better, and am less actively affected by the associated distress.