

The Write Touch

YOUR THOUGHTS, YOUR STYLE, OUR FINISHING TOUCH!

Dad

Probably since the age of thirteen or so, I have thought that my father's life story would be excellent fodder for a novel. He was a man who was the product of his times— to him certainly, the best of times and the worst of times, and yet he was extraordinary in so many ways. He completed only elementary school, and so was self-educated: a voracious reader—but only of non-fiction. He was remarkably clever about a number of things, and yet remarkably obtuse about others. His unique blend of talents allowed him to make and lose several fortunes...but material wealth was only important in the happiness or comfort it could bring others, For himself, money was immaterial. My mother liked to say that as long as he had a comfortable chair and a newspaper, the rest of the world could fall down around him. On several occasions, it did.

Dad was a middle child in a family of seven children. He was born in St. Catharines at the end of World War I, and raised during the Great Depression. He learned early to live by his wits—and his fists, if necessary-- in the succession of small Ontario and Upper New York state towns to which his mother dragged the family, in quest of a better life, and one step ahead of the rent collectors. I am sure that his days as a young adolescent, pulling barges with his brother, Jack, on the Welland Canal, would have been a seminal, transformative experience in the novel I did not write. He drove trucks, hauling just about everything, and then began a succession of businesses, ideas, and schemes that seem outlandish in today's retail climate, but were regarded by his children. ...and probably to a lesser degree by his wife...as just “what Daddy did.”

He met my mother through mutual friends when he was twenty-three. When he showed up at her door, she was quite smitten by his good looks, she told us, but he kept one hand in his pocket most of the time. He did this because it was cold, and he was embarrassed that he only had one glove. He pulled it off with panache, though. Michael Jackson had nothing on my father! My mother married her dreamer and schemer in her Aunt Rosie's Manning Avenue living room on December 15, 1940, and drove to Niagara Falls for their honeymoon.

When I was four or five, I began to sense that my father was not quite like the fathers of my friends, men who were often tailors, or butchers, or maybe pharmacists. My father, you see, had a bug collection. At least, that's what my big brother called it. I called it a butterfly collection, and it both fascinated and repelled me. This was the way my father made his living in the very early fifties—he traveled to fairs and shows to exhibit the collection. He would be gone for two or three or four days at a time, and he would often come home with a treat for his children. For me, it would usually be something pretty, not something edible; a pair of slippers—with bells on them-- or maybe a doll. Fifty years later, he reverted to this behavior. The trip this time was to the mall. There was no occasion. He bought me a pair of earrings, because he felt like it, and they were pretty. Thanks, Dad.

My father would brook no disrespect for my mother, ever. Though there was no one to teach HIM table manners—he told us that mealtime when he was growing up was pretty much a free-for-all-- his children were never allowed to pick up a fork before my mother sat down at the table. When I was four, I once proudly flung a question at my mother that I had picked up in the playground. I asked her if she was “stupid or something.” My mistake was asking it in my father's hearing (though he was hearing impaired, he heard that!) I learned painfully—and indelibly-- that references to stupidity were inappropriate in the presence of the queen of his heart.

I was a shy, sensitive child who had a fairly miserable adolescence. Though my father was often not insightful about the effect that his words or thoughts...blurted when freshly formed...might have on others, he seemed to have an uncanny instinct about my emotional temperature. I can remember walking by the doorway to a room where he sat reading. He would look up as I passed, put down his paper without a word, and open his arms to me. I would nestle there for comfort, and finally, silently, go on my way again.

