

# More Stories!

Forum

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## Just Dad

By Kelly Reale

Do we ever really know who our parents are? The older I get, the more I glean. But, there remains much mystery and that's probably as it should be. Understanding what makes these people tick – these people who held such sway and such absolute power in my early days – is both humbling and scary. So, on this, the occasion of my father's 43<sup>rd</sup> celebration of Fathers Day, I've chosen to reflect on the man that I know, although surely not the man in his entirety.

My earliest memories of Dad are of him reading in a chair in the corner of our living room. This is also a fairly recent memory – different house, more gray hair, but roughly the same pose. I hold a very special memory of Dad like this from when I was about 3 years old. I had just taken a bath and changed into my nightgown. It was Christmas Eve and Mom told me to go downstairs to kiss Daddy goodnight. I remember descending the stairs slowly, holding on to the hem of my nighty. I remember noticing the gleam from the Christmas tree lights, which was located just under the open stairway, as it reflected off the tip of my nose. As I came down the stairs, I saw Daddy sitting in the light green velvet chair, lamp on, legs crossed, reading a book. When I think of peacefulness and absolute safety, this is the picture that comes to mind.

But, Dad wasn't always peaceful to live with. Unbeknownst to me at the time, my father was fighting many demons throughout my childhood. Later, I would become aware of some of this. At the time, though, it was simply normal to expect unpredictable moods from my father. I don't dwell on these erratic moments much, because I realize now how little they had to do with me and that they never

really reflected my father's truest, best self. On the other hand, there are neuroses that become part of any family's sub-culture and my family has its share. Dad's fixation on maintaining and refurbishing our very old home is legendary in our family stories.

Picture a 13 year old girl, having just finished taking a shower. Not a wall in this wonderfully and lovingly refurbished home is square and the tub surround doesn't exactly fit snug in all the corners. The girl exits from the bathroom, a vision in sea foam green terrycloth. Anyone with teenage girls would know she's used 4 towels to dress herself for the 12 foot walk down the hall to her room. As she opens the bathroom door her father is bounding up the stairs yelling "Jesus, the whole damn house is going to rot! Did you even close the shower curtain, Kelly? There's water coming down in the kitchen for Pete's sake! Go get dressed and get your brother – we're going to have a family lesson on how to take a shower!"

*A family lesson on how to take a shower?! In case you didn't know, it involves a series of three strategically placed hand towels (not bath towels or wash cloths for goodness sake). They are placed *flush against the wall* in the father-determined locations. Following this, you *seal* the opening by making sure the curtain sticks to the shower wall (you may have to wet it first) and position the shower head *just so*. Of course, you limit yourself to a 7 minute shower (did I mention I was 13?) in which you run around the tub frantically looking for the trickle of water, hoping rain fills up the well before tomorrow's shower.*

Despite the seesaw emotions in our house – which I doubt are all that different from anyone else's upbringing, by the way – the longest-lasting memories are the gentlest ones. Indulgently letting me listen to all his albums in the den. His heart-to-heart with me in 6<sup>th</sup> grade about the importance of doing well in school and the freedom it could bring. His worried drives to the emergency room following each of my many broken bones and open wounds. Patiently teaching me to drive a car. Standing in the back of the church on my wedding day. Holding my baby daughter, his first grandchild, in his arms.

I know that Dad is many things to the people who've been in his life – a son, a brother, a best friend, a first boyfriend, a husband, a mentor – all slices of a multi-faceted life. But, to me, he's just Dad.

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