

Maureen Coleman

Close Observations of a Distant Father

Almost as far back as I can remember my dad was in and out of the hospital. There were a variety of health problems and a number of surgeries; totaling roughly 13 hospitalizations in 12 years—some long, some short. He was steadfast in his desire to continue living as he always had and would draw the lines as to which treatments he consented to and which he didn't; allowing him to maintain some sense of control over his deteriorating body. He survived scares with his heart, skin cancer on his left forearm, and a disease that affected his brain and was usually not caught until after death. In between all of those issues, he lost a toe, then a foot, then one leg, then the other; each loss of limb coming with its own oozing-puss, foul smelling infection. His kidneys had started to fail, but he refused dialysis. He seemed to be unstoppable, a sort of unbendable steel or unbreakable wall. Because of all this, the debridement surgery scheduled on the below-the-knee stumps that were left after losing his legs seemed like a minor occurrence, but my dad seemed to know something that everyone else didn't.

The surgery went off without a hitch. He was moved from the recovery room to the post-operative unit on the 5th floor, arriving there alert and oriented. He smiled and joked with the nurses and was a pain in the ass to the phlebotomists who would wake him up for blood sugar checks and lab work at all hours of the night. In a

serious tone, he tried on numerous occasions to talk to me starting out with things like, “I want you to know something” or “Your mother is going to need help” or “I’ve got this feeling that,” but each time I cut him off saying, “Stop talking. Right now. Your implication is that you’re gonna die and that’s not happening.”

The day after surgery, he became incoherent at times and would drift into a deep sleep-like state. The doctors came and talked to my mom. They told her that his body was not clearing the anesthesia given for his surgery. She was a nurse and knew what that meant. She called my sister, Marion, and me, beckoning us to the hospital. By the end of the next night, my dad was completely out of it, talking nonsense in a slurred voice whenever he wasn’t lying there unconscious.

At one point I grabbed him by the shoulders, tears streaming down my face, and shook him violently; repeatedly screaming for him to wake up and telling him that I loved him. For just a second and for the last time, he opened his eyes and with a perplexed look on his face he stared at me rather incredulously and said, “I love you too, Mo.”

Then the unsinkable ship sank, the unbendable steel bent, the unbreakable wall broke and he was gone.

I sat quietly on a stool at the island in the kitchen and watched my dad as he stood at the stove checking on the Lit’l Smokies making sure there was just enough maple syrup on them to make the mini-hotdog imposters taste good. “As good as they’re ever gonna be,” he muttered under his breath. He went to the refrigerator and pulled out the deviled eggs that my mom had whipped up for him before going to work that night. Next he put the chips, dip, cheese, deli meat, and rolls out. The final step was the most important to him as it included the essential ingredients required for a successful poker game: spiced rum and Coke.

It was about 7:00 p.m. when the other players started showing up. This card playing Motley Crew consisted of Kenny, a close friend/longtime gambler who eventually lost his house because of his habit; my Uncle Louie (who wasn't my "real" uncle); Dave who was a family friend/my dad's anesthesiologist; Charlie, who was about 6'8", 280 lbs. with hair down past his ass and an inability to not give me a big squeeze when he arrived, which despite his imposing appearance was always welcomed and enthusiastically returned; and finally there was sometimes a man named Tim whom my dad knew from baseball card shows and who couldn't pass up any chance he had to tell people how impressed he was with me because I knew what the pituitary gland was when I was in 4th grade. They started their evening the same way they always did: picking at the food and making drinks. By 8:00 p.m., they had all taken their designated seats and placed their money in front of them in rows by denomination like players gearing up for a long game of Monopoly.

Following their settling-in routine, the first cards were dealt. The bets were always minor, but the laughter ringing throughout the dining room where they sat huddled around the table was major—especially my dad's. He loved when this small clan of wannabe poker pros assembled together for a night of camaraderie. Like reckless rebellious teenagers, all of them held the understanding that they would break the rules they were given by the women in their lives—"Jimmy, I mean it, no smoking in the house!" "Louie, you better keep your shit together and stay away from the liquor!" "Charlie, don't you come back here if you lose all that money!" By roughly 10:00 p.m., I'd still be posted up by the island in the kitchen, watching intently as they threw back drink after drink before upping the antes and lighting yet another round of cigars to add to the smoke that hung heavy and gray all around them before slowly creeping out the now open windows into the cool night air.

The games were friendly, but filled with biting sarcasm.

“Screw you, Jim! I had to wait a half hour for you to decide to fold. So, if you’re gonna take your sweet ass time, then I’m damn sure gonna take mine.”

“Take all the time in the world, Louie, but know that it’s gonna end the same way: you losin’ all your cash!”

This small group of friends was so in synch with each other and each added something to that table, but it was my dad who brought the most vibrancy to the room. It could have been the liquor or perhaps the relaxed atmosphere but as those nights wore on, his endless jokes and teasing seemed to shine brighter and roar louder at that table than most days.

“Come on, Kenny, just bet already or do you need to go remortgage the house again first? You better not be laughing, Charlie! We all know if you don’t lose your money at cards you’ll piss it away on junk that’s gonna make you a ‘fortune’ one day!”

For just a little while, it was as if there was no diabetes, no pain. His personality, beaming smile and the sparkle in his eyes combined to be his ace up his sleeve and with a simple sleight-of-hand he was always the winner at that table.

My dad was an old school Irish guy from the Bronx who had a work ethic like no other; sometimes even holding down four jobs at a time like when he was a shipping/receiving supervisor at a local lumber yard; drove a truck for Polar Cup selling Italian ices; aided a private detective firm by participating in fake thefts from department stores in order to test their security; and had a booth at a flea market where he sold overstock and rejected items from shipments, which he purchased from contacts made through his shipping/receiving job. At some point he must have realized that his mouth and strong attitude would continue to get him in trouble at

times and so he decided to become his own boss; eventually owning two bars in New York by his late thirties. The one he held onto the longest was the Pot Belly Pub where there was a sign on the wall that always read “Free Drinks Tomorrow”. It’s also where my mom met my dad. Seven years after divorcing his first wife and marrying my mom, my parents ended up in Virginia where my dad eventually opened a new business—a baseball card store. My dad hired friends and family to give them their first crack at working. He would take the oddballs and misfits that came in under his wing; giving them jobs anywhere from cleaning the display cases to sorting cards in an effort to help give them a sense of purpose, something he knew everyone needed in their lives. To make use of and some profit from the pinball machines he purchased from one of these nonconformists, he organized pinball tournaments with cash or merchandise prizes. He sold single cards, plaques with everyone from Mickey Mantle to Bo Jackson displayed prominently as their centerpieces, gold/silver/bronze replicas of cards that came with certificates of authenticity and sealed sets of cards from Topps and other manufacturers. Even though he would talk and laugh with anyone who came in, he wouldn’t put up with any bullshit, which is why those sealed sets of cards from Topps became an issue on some random Saturday.

I was standing behind one of the display cases sorting cards as instructed by my dad that day when a man walked into the store, milling about for a few minutes while other customers listened to my dad describe how to take care of their cards. Once those customers left, the man who was walking around looking for nothing, came up to the counter and started a conversation that couldn’t be taken back and was most likely cause for regret for years to come.

“Hey buddy...you think it’s ok to rob people? Because that’s exactly what you did to me and you’re fuckin’ wrong if you think I’m not gonna do something about it!”

In his typical fashion when confronted (yes, there was a typical fashion due to the aforementioned mouth and attitude), my dad smugly tilted his head, crossed his arms, and smirked before he responded, “Why don’t you go ahead and tell me what the *hell* you’re talking about?”

The man went into a high-pitched rant about how he had bought a set of Topp’s baseball cards from my dad and that all the “money cards” from that set were missing. Not getting much in the way of a response at that point, the man screamed,

“Don’t you think about tryin’ to bullshit me neither! You *know* what I’m talking about.”

My dad turned around and took down another set exactly like the one the man had supposedly purchased and calmly explained to him that the sets came sealed from the company and if he had a problem with what came in that set, he should call Topp’s directly.

This was clearly not the answer the man was looking for as he immediately launched into a diatribe filled with veiled threats and expletives. Other customers had filtered in and were cautiously walking around the store, occasionally stealing glances at the exchange taking place between my dad and the irate customer. My father stood firmly in his place behind the counter, never flinching or gesturing in any way beyond an amused half-cocked smile until the man finally shrieked, “I’m not leaving this goddamn store until you do what I say and give me my money back!”

With that, my dad’s smirk disappeared and his arms unfolded as he walked around the counter towards the irrationally angry man who was still screaming, “What?! You think you’re going to intimidate me? Huh, big guy?! You think you’re tough!?”

By now my dad was in front of the customer and an icy glare had overtaken his otherwise vibrant green eyes. Then that boyishly mischievous smile returned to his face and he grabbed the man by the back of the neck,

dragged him to the front door which he flung open with one hand while simultaneously throwing the man through the doorway with such force that the former shit-talkin' redneck tripped over the sidewalk and fell into the middle of the road. Before closing the door and allowing the man to scamper off with a severely bruised ego, my dad yelled, "No, you piece of shit, I *know* I'm tough."

My relationship with my dad was complicated. His health had been in a state of decline since I was eight. He was often irritable, in pain and obsessed with the idea that he would be dead by fifty-eight because that's how old his own father was when he died. It was at least in part because of this obsession that he purposely kept all of his children at arm's length. He felt that if he never got too close to any of us it would be easier for us when he died. I tried and tried and tried over the years to get to know him, but was constantly pushed away with heart-breaking insults and belittling comments.

It became clear to me at an early age that my dad saved up his largest doses of being angry, bitter, mean, vulgar, and violent especially for me. The emotional pain this dance with him caused me was only amplified every time I heard someone say that the real problem with our relationship was that my dad and I were too much alike. That comment, like the one that my father and I were oil and water and therefore just could not mix, did nothing in the end, but get me as pissed off and angry at the world as my dad.

When I was around 12, my dad and I got into an argument over nothing I'm sure, but the scene that played out set the stage for a war between the two of us that lasted for the better part of a decade. I'll never remember what it was that started that fight, but I do remember that because our arguments were happening so frequently I felt well equipped to handle the sparring with words that was unfolding. Little did I know when it started, I was not yet even close to a worthy opponent; the true extent of how drastically ill-prepared I was

became clear at the end of our exchange. I concluded my showing by storming up the stairs to my room when I heard him say in a measured tone, “Maureen, let me tell you something.”

I spun around on my heels at the top of the steps and looked down at him defiantly.

“I’ll piss on your grave when you die.”

All expression left my face and I stood there shell-shocked, while he turned and walked away.

My mom would often remind me that my dad was in constant pain and I should try and understand how that affected his mood and reactions. My ability to feel empathy for him waned every day because he was an insufferable asshole. Our fighting over the years intensified, but up until I was 16 it had never turned physical. There was always a prelude before the outburst of screaming and yelling, offering my sister and my mom an opportunity to retreat to other areas before it came. By 16, I felt that I had grown into that worthy opponent that I was not when I was 12, but again in an unmistakable fashion, he proved me wrong.

I had just gotten a bowl of cereal with my sister and we were heading back upstairs when I heard my dad faintly call my name from the basement. Before I could swallow the mouthful of Fruit Loops down and respond, he was upstairs. I was a little stunned at his sudden act of agility in getting up the stairs that fast, but quickly became transfixed by the look in his eyes. It was like that of a caged rabid wild animal. I don’t remember if he said anything before he grabbed my throat because I was mesmerized by the unexpected rage and violence that stared back at me. I know now after a few emotional and painful discussions with my mother the particulars of what was going on while I was frozen in that trance—terrified, unprepared and helpless.

My mom was in the driveway unloading groceries when she heard a commotion coming from inside the house and came running into the kitchen to see what was going on. When she stepped into the room, she was

confronted with the scene that I was lost in: my dad holding me up by my neck, feet not touching the floor. I remember seeing her come through the door out of the corner of my eye and hearing her screaming at him, although I don't remember what she said. Then he let go of me and I fell into a heap on the floor. My mom dropped to her knees beside me as I was coughing and gasping and then as abruptly as he'd come, my dad headed back to the basement; sneering, snorting and slinking off, cussing the whole way down the stairs.

My dad wasn't always a good father, but despite that there was really no question in my mind that he loved us; always wanting to know more and more about our day-to-day lives as he grew older, but never giving up much information about his own past. Perhaps he thought it didn't matter or no one usually asked because of his aversion to providing personal details, but it always seemed to take him by surprise when his youngest, me, would approach him in the garage while he sorted sports cards or in the kitchen while he cooked one of his famous breakfasts and ask an endless barrage of questions about his life. This especially rang true when my fourth-grade self approached him one morning asking questions about his favorite things: favorite food, favorite movie, favorite color, and eventually favorite song.

“Hmm... favorite song. That brings back memories. My favorite song is ‘Riders in the Sky.’ Guy named Vaughn Monroe sang that back when I was kid. Damn, I haven't heard that in *ages*. Doubt I could even find it anywhere now.”

Most likely, he thought this conversation was made up of the mere frivolous ponderings of my elementary mind. He had no idea that everything he said, even then, became central to my life. Every bit of information I was able to pry from his mind was a way for me to get to know him even while he tried to keep his distance.

About a month later, it was Father's Day. The evening would be spent just like every other Father's Day—a nice meal with the whole family at his favorite restaurant which changed every year, but also stayed the same (he was a real sucker for buffets with not-the-best-but-not-the-worst food). My mom picked my sister and me up from swim practice and we met him at his store. He hopped in the car and started the beginning of what would have been his dramatic retelling of the day when my mom quickly shushed him, telling him that I had a special surprise this year. She pushed in the cassette tape and cranked up the volume. As the deep, mellow voice of Vaughn Monroe filled the car, I stared at my dad without taking a breath, just waiting for a reaction. He smiled and said in a softer voice than I'd ever heard him use, "I can't believe it."

I leaned forward and kissed his cheek as a tear fell from his eye.

Much by his own doing—eating boxes of powdered doughnuts and drinking 2-liters of soda in one sitting—my dad's body was slowly deteriorating from the effects of diabetes. He was angry with himself, his loved ones and the world almost every day. His mood swings kept everyone on edge, but didn't stop us from loving him. My mother was constantly saying, "I hate that we have to walk around on eggshells, but that's just how he is."

As the years passed and the sickness spread to the point of lost limbs and failing organs, he spent most of his days in the basement that had been remodeled to be handicap friendly after his second amputation surgery. The remodeling resulted in a practical apartment with an entryway into the house that didn't require stairs. His prosthetic legs and willpower left him perfectly capable of handling the stairs most days, but then there were other days, days where the stumps that never healed oozed with infection and kept him wheelchair

bound. Even on those days though, he put on a brave face and would tell us he was fine before getting frustrated by our concern and yelling, “Leave me the hell alone!”

At night when the house was quiet and dark and he had removed his prosthetic legs, he would lie in bed and drift off to sleep to the sounds of the TV. When he slept, he lay perfectly still occasionally letting out a snore. Each night he was able to sleep—really sleep—a peaceful look would creep over his face and make it evident that for just a little while he was able to escape the cold, hard, everyday world in a way that only dreams can provide.

He didn’t know that most nights there was someone watching him. I couldn’t help it. I would stand in the hallway with my head peering slightly in the doorway for five minutes, ten minutes, an hour or however long was needed to comfort me in knowing he was still there, still alive. If his breathing slowed even for a few seconds, I would want to go shake him awake or bring him back to life, I was unsure which it was, but I never did.

Nights when he couldn’t sleep, my ritual was interrupted in an almost wordless exchange. He would see me peer into the room and say, “I see you there and I don’t know what you’re doing, but just come in.”

I would sheepishly round the corner into his room and then stand staring at him. He would offer up a half-crooked smile and then motion with his hand for me to come next to him. I’d crawl into the king size bed and snuggle up to him. He would spend the rest of the night flipping through the channels while I lay there with my head on his shoulder.