

My Father Is Howling at the Leaves

My father is outside raking the fall leaves from the grass, and howling. It's a long, loud wolf howl, sure to carry to the end of the cul-de-sac and beyond. In a few minutes he will grow bored of this activity and find another which might be more annoying, like lying in the driveway, pounding at the cracks in the asphalt with a hammer. This is particularly irritating to his least favorite neighbors whose house overlooks the driveway, and is therefore, immensely satisfying.

He has been so successful in his attempts to harass these poor people that the authorities have been called in several times, to no avail. One night my father awoke to a strange thwacking sound outside his bedroom window. He got up to investigate and saw the neighbor standing on the rock pile he had erected between their yards. Moonlight reflected off her white nightgown and big hair. He said there was a wild look in her eyes and she was screaming, while she repeatedly bent down, grasped stones and hurtled them at his favorite pounding spot. He chose a prudent course of action, for a change, and stayed behind the drapes, watching with glee. The next morning he picked up all the rocks and threw them back in her yard.

Dad lives for the shock factor. He is a tall, big-boned man with a barrel chest and a huge belly. His hands are so large, when one of my girlfriends found his ring on the table, she picked it up and remarked, "Wow, what a pretty napkin ring." The first time he met my husband he pulled him into a bear hug, right up against that big belly, and kissed him on the lips. I was reminded that no warning can sufficiently prepare someone for an encounter with my father. I think he prided himself on being a suitor test. *He's gonna really have to love you to put up with me.*

When I was a kid, I endured endless teasing about my crazy father. I was sure he did insane things just to cause me problems at school. He used to irrigate our pastures (located in

full view of an interstate highway and a mile from my school) in his underwear and rubber boots, causing people to call and report him to the local sheriff. The sheriff tried talking to him about wearing socially acceptable irrigating attire and my dad said, “It’s my land; I can dress how I want.”

I’m sure my father’s bizarre behavior is what inspired me to become a psychotherapist—a vain attempt to understand and fix him. He was never interested in the endeavor; I rather think he prefers his madness. I must say I’m grateful to my dad for engaging me in the mysteries of the human psyche. Over time I’ve come to appreciate people’s idiosyncrasies. They are the spices of personality, that which endears us to each other and teaches us to love someone in spite of themselves. Let’s face it—people are just a whole lot more interesting with all their funky little quirks.

We are all enigmas in one way or another. My father is no exception. As well as he loves irritating those around him with insane behavior, he is generous and kind-hearted. He would give his last dollar to a homeless person. When I worked the early shift at a psychiatric hospital, it was my father who got out of bed and warmed up my car, scraping ice from the windshield, so I could see. As a young girl, I raised orphan lambs in our basement. It was my sweet father who gave them their midnight bottles when I was too sleepy to get up.

Dad taught me courage and confidence. He believed me capable of tasks I would never have attempted, had it not been for his faith. Once we were working near the barn together and he said, “Here, take this stick and go check the calf that was just born. The cow’ll probably charge, so just plant this between ‘er eyes if she does.”

He handed me a sturdy stick and went in the barn. I walked out to the cow and calf standing in the pasture a couple hundred yards off. As I approached, the cow became

increasingly nervous and pawed the ground. I remember fighting down the fear, the urge to turn tail and run. But I couldn't let my dad down. He thought I could do it, so surely I could. I kept walking towards the calf. Finally, the mother couldn't stand it anymore and charged. I was about seven-years-old and, let me tell you, that cow looked ENORMOUS. I took a deep breath, grasped the stick and shoved it between her eyes.

I'm not sure who was more surprised, her or me. She stopped in her tracks and bawled her shock. I sidled over to the calf and examined it, keeping a wary eye on her and gripping my stick. She returned my guarded gaze with one of her own, keeping a safe distance. Satisfied with the health of the calf, I strode back to the barn, while she hurried over to check her baby.

My dad was still in the barn. I guess I'll never know if he sneaked a peak at my little adventure. If he did, he never let on. I told him he had another perfect calf, and we continued with our chores.

Over the years, he taught me important life lessons: when a horse throws you, get back on right away; girls can muck stalls as good as boys; hard work won't kill you; it takes a certain amount of toughness to survive in this world and not get knocked over; messing with people tells you a lot about their character. Even though there have been many years in my life when I didn't understand him and wanted to change him, I can't deny what a gift he's been to me. I've finally reached the point where I can embrace all that he is, and smile when he howls at the leaves.

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