

The Visit

Spontaneous. It's not a word that would immediately spring to mind when describing my father. In fact, to my knowledge, the only spontaneous thing he has ever done, was to announce to my mum that he was taking her on a trip to the garden centre at the weekend, (which, incidentally, was three days away) and was going to treat her to a cup of tea and a scone in the cafe that was there. "How does that sound?" he had asked, enthusiastically. I think he was more excited about the fact that he had arranged something with less than a week to go, than he was about the actual trip.

"Ooo," my mum had replied, with more than a hint of sarcasm. "We don't half live life in the fast lane us, don't we love?"

But that was my dad all over. Every event in his life needed to be pre-planned and organised, with no detail left to chance ... probably something to do with his time in the Armed Forces I suspect.

So, given the man's propensity to be anally retentive about certain procedures, you can go some way to imagining my surprise when, ten years ago, he decided to pay an unexpected, fleeting visit to my home. Nothing pre-arranged, nothing *pencilled in* the pages of any metaphorical diary or highlighted on a calendar, just an unannounced, *spontaneous* visit.

Now, don't get me wrong here. I was extremely glad to see my old man that day, especially as I hadn't seen him for quite some time ... a result of life so often dictating the run of events ... though I have to admit, that I was a little dumbfounded for a while.

Yet, as out-of-character as the visit was, it was a visit that would change my outlook and indeed my perspective on life, forever.

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Father Bear was a stockily built man standing over six feet tall, with hands the size of shovels and a heart of gold to match. He also had a presence about him that brought an unusual amount of respect from others. He didn't ask for this respect, he didn't seek it, but it came nonetheless.

At sixty-four years of age, he had the look of a man ten years his junior, which he frequently put down to a lifetime of loose women and good whiskey; ironic really, seeing as he was completely teetotal and still very much in love with the woman he had married many, many years beforehand.

His thick head of black hair had only just succumbed to the passing of time, showing a few highlights of silvery grey that my mum classed as looking 'very distinguished'. The same, unfortunately, could not be applied to his dress sense, which regularly consisted of a checked shirt, a more than slightly worn cardigan and a pair of ill fitting jeans; an ensemble that really didn't impress mother too much.

"You look like the oldest child in the Barnardo's home," she had sighed, with an air of dismay.

“I think I look quite rustic,” he had stated, in a meagre defence.

“Try not to think Peter,” my mum had replied, quickly. “It really doesn’t become you!” It was as dry and as coarse as it was funny.

My parents had a great rapport going on between them that, although very tongue-in-cheek, was of great entertainment value when used within earshot of myself and my two brothers; which was quite often. Now, I suspect that there are many families in this great nation of ours and indeed the world over, that hear similar conversations around their homes or at their dinner tables ... the one’s where dads adopt that *woman-know-your-place* tone whilst mums counter this effectively with a, *why-are-men-so-stupid?* attitude ... but this was the banter that *my* parents shared and I have no doubt in my mind that this is what kept their love for each other, as strong as it was since the day they first met.

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I sat staring at my dad for a while, thinking that for some reason, he was looking a little bit different. I couldn’t pinpoint exactly what it was that made me think that way but there was definitely something about him that was out of the ordinary. But what? He was the same man with the same hair, the same face and the same build, yet ... ?

And then, as if sensing my silent conundrum, he opened my eyes to the glaringly obvious.

“What is it?” he asked, checking himself over. “Have I spilt something on my suit?”

And thus, the blind did see! For my dad, the staunch purveyor of all clothes non-fashionable, was actually wearing a bloody suit and a very smart suit at that.

“I’ve only just noticed what you are wearing,” I said, laughing at my own, silly oversight. “Nice threads there, Pop!”

My dad smiled, opened the left hand side of his jacket and pointed to the label inside. “Hugo Boss,” he announced, proudly. “And actually older than you are, believe it or not?”

I was genuinely impressed and I told him so. He seemed to like that.

There again, despite his constant intent to wind my mum up with his regular choice of wardrobe, he really did brush up well and again, I told him so. He seemed to like that too. “I’ve still got it son,” he quickly proclaimed, which made us we both chuckle.

After a few moments of shared laughter, his expression suddenly changed, adopting a look that I had come to know as his *just about to give advice* face. It wasn’t a look that worried me too much but it was my cue to sit up and listen to the man’s pearl of wisdom.

“What’s troubling you?” he suddenly asked, softly. It was a question that I wasn’t expecting him to ask, especially as I thought that I had kept the emotions of my subconscious, securely locked away ... for the time being, at least.

“Nothing,” I answered quickly, though far from honestly; well, I didn’t want to ruin this rare visit from my dad with personal tales of woe. Besides, my current angst wasn’t life threatening, just a build up of everyday problems that needed to be overcome and probably would be ... eventually.

My dad stared at me for a while, with a warm smile on his face. “One of the great things about being a parent,” he began. “Is that you get to know your offspring inside and out. Oh, you might think that we don’t know *everything* that goes on in your life but for ninety-nine point nine per cent of it, we really do. And that includes the first time you tried

a cigarette or alcohol ... or the time when you were caught playing *knock-a-door-run* and received a telling off from the local Bobby!”

I felt myself reddening at the last bit, wondering how the hell he knew about that?

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I was nine, maybe ten, years old at that time and knock-a-door-run was the usual pastime of choice for almost all the kids of my age. There were no such things as PlayStation's, Nintendo DS' or any other computer games in that era and any portable telecommunication device, could only be found in the hands of William Shatner during a TV episode of Star Trek. The great outdoors and the imagination of children, was where it was at in the '70s and a little bit of tomfoolery from local kids, was a given. Knock-a-door-run was exactly that. As the name would suggest, the idea was to knock on a random person's front door (never a close neighbour or somebody who knew your parents; no way Jose!) and then run for your life, causing the recipient of said high jinx, to open their front door and find nobody there. Yes, it was annoying to the person on the receiving end of the prank but to us ten year olds, it was absolutely hilarious. Not so funny when you get caught and handed over to the local area policeman for a telling off though. And my God did I get a roasting.

I remember making two promises on that day; one to the policeman, who told me that he wouldn't tell my parents if I promised not to do it again and one to myself, to keep the promise that I had just made to the policeman. As far as lucky escapes go, that was right up there in my top ten, as a verbal bollocking from a copper was a million times better than a slipping from my dad.

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My dad raised his eyebrows and my face radiated a crimson glow, when I learned about his knowledge of my childhood anti-social behaviour. “Y'see,” he pointed out, chuckling. “You kids aren't as clever as you think!”

I chuckled along too, more so I think because he referred to me as a *kid*, like I was still a child ... I was thirty seven years old for goodness sake.

And then he said something that amazed me even further, begging the question of whether he had actually taken up mind reading as a hobby.

“Yes, you might be thirty seven,” he bizarrely concurred. “But from the moment you were born, to the day that I die, you will always be my child!”

I smiled at his sentiment, suddenly feeling a welcome, secure warmth, develop inside me. It was like, no matter how old you get, no matter how life pans out, your dad will always have your back. And that was nice to know.

“So,” he continued. “Now that you know, that I know my sons like the back of my hand, are you going to tell me what's on your mind?”

I looked at my dad for what seemed like an eternity, wondering how I could possibly put together, in logical sentences, exactly what it was that was troubling me. I mean, how could I explain that, every time I successfully managed to complete a DIY project, or prepare a tasty meal, or messed up in someway or got a new job or a new girlfriend or just needed his expert advice, I always got the urge to pick up the phone and speak to him.

How could I explain, that not one single day went by without me wishing I had done things differently and told him how much I actually loved him, instead of letting him hope that I did? How could I explain, that it really wasn't life's events stopping me from visiting him or mum, was it? It was just down to my selfish laziness and the misguided thought that the status quo would never change. And how could I possibly explain, that the mask of joviality and normality I wear for all to see, only serves to hide the tremendous sorrow that I feel inside? But the most important and hardest thing for me to put into words, would be to explain to my dad how I wish that I could have been a better son and made him feel as proud as he had made me feel, being his son.

I didn't know how to say these things but it seemed I didn't need to; because my dad already knew.

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When it was time for my dad to leave, tears began to track slowly down my cheeks as I really didn't want him to go. I told him that I loved him and he smiled, telling me that he loved me too, which was good. And then, my dad was gone.

Ten years ago, my dad came to visit and although it was relatively brief, it was a visit that would change my outlook and indeed my perspective on life, forever.

Sixteen years ago, a week after his sixty-fifth birthday, my dad passed away.

THE END