

## **An Empty Legacy Cannot Tell a Lie**

Sometimes we live too hard. We eat too much, drink too much, take too many drugs. Sometimes we get in trouble, we hit bottom or we break down from our hard living. But the majority of us don't die from it. We are built, as humans, abuse what God has given us, to learn our limits of what our bodies can stand. But we don't keep going, we don't discredit the warnings and die, drop dead, keel over.

That's not my experience with the people in my life today, which is why I have a hard time understanding why it happened to my father 28 years ago.

I could explain the exact circumstances surrounding my coming into this world or I could leave most of the details out, and tell you selections that will support my idea: my childhood was perfect. My grandmother would agree with me, however since she is dead, there goes my one credible witness.

When I was a child, my mother was busy. I could tell you she was busy because she left my father when I was only one, to move up to New Jersey with an infant and a rowdy kindergartener to live with her parents until she could afford to buy her own house on her school-teacher salary. Maybe she was busy because my father passed away when I was four because of his crazy hippie lifestyle down in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Maybe she was busy because of my sister passing out drunk on the high school football field where my mother found her at 11pm covered in her own vomit. My mother might have been busy because my sister had her marijuana dealers steal our bicycles from our garage to pay her debt.

I won't tell you if any of that is true. You might judge me. Or my mother. Or my sister. My sister and my mother are my closest, nearly my only, family and I don't wish

to shed a negative light on them. Instead, let's just all understand that my mother was officially "busy."

I had just turned four years old when it happened. My father, Chris, had sent me a large Raggedy Anne doll from New Orleans where he lived in a commune in the Garden District. The doll was larger than I was. In the three years before that, he had sent me a psychedelic, stuffed talking piano that said things like: "Ain't I a gr-and piano", and "Watch my finger trip over the keyboard!" He had sent me a large, red flannel stuffed pig with six little piglets that snapped onto her belly. I didn't understand who sent these gifts.

I had only met him once, maybe two times in the three years since my mother moved my sister and I up to New Jersey to live with her parents. When he picked me up the Easter before, when we had gone down to visit him, I cried because I didn't understand who the strange man was who was picking me up and talking to me.

Because my mother was "busy", I spent a lot of time with Grandma. I also spent a lot of time with my grandfather, "Grandfrank" as we called him. My sister – before she became the wild child of the family – could not pronounce "Grandfather." She heard Grandma calling him Frank, she combined the two to create our family's best-loved and best worn nickname: Grandfrank.

My sister tells me of her trips down to visit our father when she was 6, 7, 8, and 9. She tells me that he'd just disappear for days but that she thought nothing of it. Since he lived in a commune, there was always someone around to take care of her. She enjoyed his friends. She says he had a different girlfriend for every night of the week but she wasn't allowed to mention any of the other girlfriends in front of any of the girlfriend

(girlfriends) they were with at the moment. (Previous sentence is a little cumbersome)

The girlfriend she liked best was the one with the swimming pool in her back yard.

I was a chubby kid. Picture a chubby fifth grader, ridiculed for this same defect by her schoolmates, wolfing down large quantities of Ritz crackers, sharp cheddar and RC Cola before stuffing herself into tights and an ill-fitting leotard, then pirouetting across the dance studio with the other girls. They were all skinny and so eventually they went on to toe shoes. But I stopped dancing altogether.

My father was 32 years old. I am currently older than my father ever was. I find it hard to believe he was younger than many of the men I know today. He is younger than most of my boyfriends have been. I look at men at the last age he achieved and I marvel at how healthy they appear, and I marvel at the difficult living his body must have been doing.

Some nights, my mother had late “parent’s meetings” for my sister’s new expensive lock-down boarding school, so I would stay at my grandparents’ house until my mother picked me up. Those were good nights, because I really enjoyed Grandma’s boiled chicken, mashed potatoes from a box and turnip greens turned gray from overcooking. After dinner, I would go upstairs to pretend at homework and watch the television. Later, after Grandma passed out, Grandfrank would explain my math homework to me, and then we would have ice cream. My grandfather was from Alabama, and he had a favorite saying: “If it doesn’t have cholesterol, it’s not fit to eat,” so he would pour heavy cream on our mounds of ice cream. Then we would play Parcheesi or Dominoes until my mother showed up.

Grandma made me take ballet lessons until I was in eighth grade and she always picked me up from school in her blue '69 Oldsmobile Omega and had a snack in the car that resembled the yearly food supply for a small 3<sup>rd</sup> world nation.

It is no secret that my father was a drinker. All of the men in his family were. And he smoked pot, which maybe is no big deal. I don't know what else he did. LSD? Maybe. I remember when I learned that he did LSD, I was 17, and still quite naïve. I was horrified. Now, I think it is quite probable and expected.

On days that I didn't have ballet, I went to my grandmother's house to have what she called "tea". She played up the English ancestry bit so much that I actually believed that our lineage had something to do with her penchant for milky tea and shortbread. She didn't eat, but I did. I had a pile of shortbread in front of me and she sat across the table with her tall glass of medicinal-smelling gin. She hemmed and hawed until Grandfrank came into the room and scratched her eczema-ridden back. I loved her so much from across that table.

My mother let me read the autopsy report before she lost it amid her important papers. It said that his spleen, which was supposed to be pink, was brown when they looked at it. His liver was three times its intended size. My mother says he was sick for weeks before he keeled over on his motorcycle. She says that for a month before he died, he would call her, telling her he was sick, but unwilling to go to the doctor's office.

My mother recently retired last June. She has a lot of time on her hands nowadays. These days, I bring Chinese food to her house at least once a week. We are good friends, now.

She buys me things I do not need like pantyhose and hummus and lemons and asks me how to lose weight. We enjoy each other's company.

For as long as I can remember, I have been incredibly sensitive to pain in my stomach. When I was in second grade, I was afraid that pain in my stomach meant I was pregnant. In third grade, I thought it meant I had cancer. I couldn't go to the doctor for this because that would only confirm my suspicions. I am 32, now. In one year, I will be as old as he ever got. As old as he was when he died. I have pains in my stomach these days, too. I wonder if he was just predisposed to his spleen becoming infected. I wonder if it is genetic. I have stopped drinking coffee because it is the strongest chemical that I have taken in to my body and I am afraid what it will do to my organs. I don't want to die yet.

Sometimes my mother asks me what my favorite childhood memory is. I usually try to change the subject. When that doesn't work, I tell her about the time Grandfrank taught me how to skate on the frozen puddle that covered most of his backyard. Or the various trips into the museums in New York with Grandma. Or going to the grocery store with my grandparents on Friday afternoons where I found my freedom as they let me put anything I wanted into the basket. Invariably, my mother asks me if one of my favorite memories wasn't playing Barbies with her or playing with my dolls under the clothes rack while she shopped. I feel bad, but I can't tell her that those are even among my memories.

Two years ago, my Aunt Susan invited me down to visit her family in Virginia for a weekend. On the Sunday morning before I was to leave, we sat at the kitchen table and talked about my father while we were still in our pajamas. My father is always the topic when we are together because he is the big white elephant when I am with one of his siblings. Aunt Susan tried to tell me everything about him, every funny story and every

sad story and every memory she could remember. I could tell the pain was packed inside her too tightly for her to recall too much without cracking herself wide open.

She told me about him waking up the rest of the people in the commune by going out onto his balcony that looked out on the courtyard early in the morning with his banjo. My father played the banjo. He would play the beginning of a song and yell out “I’m up...now you’re up!”

His family had moved around a lot when he was growing up. Panama City, Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia. My aunt said that when he was going off to college, his mother told him to call when he got homesick. He replied tersely: “Who’s got a home?”

My father’s mother, Gran, often told me that Chris was all arms and legs as a baby, that he was always squirming. That was why she never held him as a child. She said that his clothes never fit him right, or at least not for long. He was the black sheep of the family.

My Aunt got up from the table. She left the room and came back with a medium size, dusty, worn-out cardboard box. She put it on the table in front of me. It was a box of treasures. Things that belonged to him, writings of his, and clippings from the newspapers he worked at. His I.D. card and passbook from when he was a merchant marine at age 18. A letter from J. Edgar Hoover to his boss about the wonderful job he did on his story covering the F.B.I. A postcard from Allen Ginsburg, thanking him for sending him the copies of the pictures and the copy for the article my father wrote about him. A letter from Norman Mailer thanking him for his interview.

I comb through the clippings of his newspaper articles he wrote for the Picayune and the Orlando Times. He is not writing about himself, but other people. I have

pictures of him on a movie set dressed in a top hat and morning coat, ready to help a friend with his low budget film. He looks like Abraham Lincoln from a distance.

My mother once bought him a travel typewriter. There are sheets of paper with messy typing on them. Pages of conversation, taking down every word anyone said in the room. From the way the others were talking, they were drunk or high and the pages covered a long period of time. At one point, he is in a truck, writing about being in a truck and what each person is saying. It is dated six months before he died. Meta-non-fiction.

Whoever this man was, this man I call my father might as well be Norman Mailer, Allen Ginsberg or J. Edgar Hoover, because I know as much about these famous people as I do about my father. Less, actually, because I can read biographies about the others. As for my father, I know nothing at all but the scraps I can piece together from the hearsay of relatives, and a few pictures worth a few thousand words. What I don't know of my father is still greater than what these documents and conversations can ever tell me.

My mother and I have come a long way together. Now we talk on the telephone every day, and we take turns missing Grandma and Grandfrank because they aren't with us any more. They were probably perfect, just like my mother has always been, and just like my childhood was. Perhaps my father was perfect, too.