

Diana Wichtel

Ben Wichtel: Daddy Mad Face and Daddy Angel Face

There were two sides to my father. I called them Daddy Mad Face and Daddy Angel Face. Daddy Angel Face was the one who would come home from work at his tailor shop in Pender Street, late on a still-light, Vancouver summer's evening, and enhance our standing with the neighbourhood kids by magically producing nickels and dimes from their ears.

On Sunday, his only day off, there would be sing-a-longs at the piano, at least until we were old enough to rebel. His self-taught playing style veered alarmingly towards the Liberace and his tastes were very catholic for a Polish Jew ' 'Cruising Down the River', 'You are My Sunshine', 'When Irish Eyes Are Smiling'. To my embarrassment but secret pleasure, he would sing 'Beautiful Brown Eyes' to me but his own clear favourite was 'Oh My Papa, to Me You Are So Wonderful', delivered by his daughters with what must have been a disappointing lack of enthusiasm.

Later in the day, there might be a trip to Stanley Park to feed the squirrels and visit his favourite: an ancient, bad-tempered emu. If he was in a particularly good mood he would declare, 'The sky is the limit!', a delicious phrase full of promise of a full-scale blow-out on hot dogs, plastic windmills and balloons.

He had brown eyes and a mole on his nose, just like mine. But in the conservative, Sunday-school-and-girl-guides precincts of suburban Vancouver, he was...different. We were reduced to uncontrollable fits of giggles by his strange, continental ways. He would carry a picnic basket on his head, one hand steadying it, the other on his swaying hip, while we screeched with hilarity and mortification.

I was always secretly impressed by him - his ease with seven languages, his ability to play any musical instrument he picked up, the way he would make a sewing pin all but disappear into his arm by flexing his bicep. ('You'll get blood poisoning,' my mother would wail.) He could make a hole in the end of an egg and suck out the contents raw.

As for Daddy Mad Face, I would go a long way to avoid an encounter with him. Not that he ever raised a hand. His one pathetic attempt to deliver a formal spanking reduced me to tears of laughter. And in the early years, if we felt like living dangerously, we would positively court his displeasure by making fun of his accent. 'What's going on in dat house?' he would demand, when we played up. 'Which house do you mean, exactly, Dad?' we would ask innocently. 'Sit behind the table!' he would order. 'Behind the table, Dad?' we would say. 'Do you mean, by any chance, at the table?'

His real anger was sudden, out of nowhere and completely terrifying. Normally a quiet, sometimes painfully shy man, his table-thumping rages left tea stains on the ceiling and, in later years, made me reluctant to bring friends home. For years I felt more comfortable in homes where the father was absent. Fathers were unpredictable.

My older sister, the adored first born, stood up to Dad and earned herself many lengthy banishments to her bedroom. I kept my head down and avoided trouble. Mealtimes were always the best and worst of times. My little brother, the adored and long-awaited boy, was exempt from criticism - 'we boys have to stick together' - but these always slightly formal occasions highlighted the degree to which my sister and I fell short of the ideal Eastern European daughter.

Mostly, my father ate his dinner alone. He worked long hours and we, and often my mother, too, had already eaten. So the table would be beautifully set for one - hors d'oeuvres of avocado mashed with hard-boiled egg, anchovies, and a small crystal glass for his one nightly glass of rye whisky.

We had a game we played when we were quite young. When Dad arrived home late on a cold, dark night, we'd make him go out again, first turning up his collar and mussing up his hair. Cast by us as some poor, homeless wanderer he'd knock at the door and we'd bring him into the warmth, take his coat and lead him to the table. It was a strangely satisfying ritual that I wanted to repeat over and over again.

We'd absorbed fragments of his life. How he was the youngest of seven, Benjamin, the favourite son. He delighted in telling us how he would never dare to talk back or sit in his father's chair and how he had to walk miles through snow, praying all the way, to get to school. (He had grown up the devout son of a Talmudic scholar, but thanks to the war or perhaps just a brilliant, sceptical mind he ended up a convinced atheist.) He told us he was so clever he had to teach the other children.

There was a picture of our grandmother, Rozalia, a dark, exotic woman with a stubborn wave of hair over her eyes, just like mine. She had been killed in a concentration camp. Dad escaped from a train bound for Auschwitz, leaving behind his mother, his brothers and sister - Lawrence, Henry, Fela, Tola - their husbands, their wives and their children. And, as I found out only a few years ago, his first wife. He and his Uncle Paul jumped from the train, rolled down a bank in the snow, and lay there waiting to be discovered. Miraculously they weren't and they took off into the forest.

Sometimes there would be stories to make us laugh or gasp - how, when hiding out, they pretended to have guns in their pockets and tricked some young German soldiers into bringing them food and the soldiers became their friends. They'd dig up raw potatoes and eat them dirt and all or make a hole in an egg and suck out the contents raw.

Years later I learned from my Auntie Mollie, wife of Dad's oldest brother Si who got out before the war, that they'd spent much of the time hiding in a box under the ground.

When I was about 13, the first documentaries came out. We sat in a room one night, watching footage from the Warsaw Ghetto. 'I was there,' said Dad. What was it like? 'You wake up in the morning and the person next to you is dead.'

Sometimes we'd ask questions that must have caused him a lot of pain. How could you leave your mother on the train? 'They would shoot you.' Why didn't you fight? 'They would shoot you.' Why didn't you all just run away? 'They would shoot you.' How can you be sure they are all really dead? 'I went back.'

He firmly banned us from having toy guns, until we nagged for long enough. Once, looking down the sights of a toy rifle he got for my brother, he remarked almost casually, 'I saw them shoot the breasts off a woman.'

Our wasteful ways enraged him. There was much sullen sitting over congealing plates of porridge. I once carried a hard-boiled egg around in my kindergarten basket till it rotted rather than admit I didn't eat it.

But he was also a softy. Delegated to taking me to kindergarten, he couldn't bring himself to leave me when - God knows what terrible memories the scene called up - I clung to him sobbing as the teacher tried to wrench me from his arms. He took me home. I could tell my mother wasn't pleased with either of us by the furious way she pulled on her stockings before marching me back again.

My mother, Patricia, was 29 and in Vancouver after the war on her OE when she met Ben. She was escaping a broken engagement to an American soldier and Kiwi boys whose idea of a big night out ended with throwing up behind the dance hall.

Dad was importing textiles and she went to work for him. He courted her with flowers, kissing her hand and smartly clicking his heels. It was all on. Mollie and Si came up from New York for the wedding.

Mum set herself to the task of having children, creating a warm and comfortable home and generally making it up to him. After a few culinary disasters - he was appalled by old Kiwi standbys like creamed tinned salmon and rissoles - a sort of hybrid cuisine emerged; meat and three veg with gefilte fish on the side. Jewish friends came to the rescue with recipes. It helped that Dad was determinedly not kosher. The first time Mollie and Si came up from New York to visit, Mum cooked a turkey. It was a bit on the dry side. Her hastily acquired skill with a baked cheesecake saved the day.

The early years seemed happy. There were Sunday brunches, with trips to the deli for matzos, smoked salmon and dill pickles. There were friends: Jewish, German and Dutch. The children were always fussed over and mercilessly teased. I blame my lifelong struggle with diets on one particularly rousing chorus of 'I don't want her, you can have her, she's too fat for me!'

Old Mr Tass and Dr Greenburg, bearing healthy treats of liquorice and crystallised ginger, would come around for games of pinochle. Family friend Uncle Harry offered to teach the girls Hebrew. Dad said no.

We had no real extended family in Vancouver, but there were what I rather unkindly thought of as Dad's lame ducks - people he brought home to stay, like the old mother of one of his friends. She stayed while she had all her teeth out. I walked by the bathroom as she was spitting up gobs of blood and for years couldn't eat raspberry jelly.

Later, things were not so good. Members of the family who had helped Dad had troubles of their own. Others who wanted to help were refused. We sold the house and moved. We sold the next house and rented. They came and took away the piano.

Then, when I was 13 and just beginning to get to know him - we had taken to having late-night talks about politics or books - he disappeared from my life. After some terrible times, my mother brought the three children to New Zealand and her large, Catholic extended family. My father was to follow but his mental and, we later learned, physical health was deteriorating. Contact broke down. Decades later, I heard from the New York relatives that he arrived there one night and ran through the house calling our names.

When I was 19, flatting in Auckland, we had a phone call to say he was dead in Canada. His children are still trying to find out where he died and where he is buried.

In the way sadness and silences roll down through generations, he became, for a long time, a part of another life that was mostly too painful to talk about. There was guilt. And anger, too, at the shattering of our life together.

In the years after we left Canada, I used to have a lot of dreams of the kind where you see the lost person on a bus or in the street but can never get to them in time.

Not that long ago I had another dream. This time, someone brought him towards me. He was lost and cold, his hair mussed, his collar turned up. He seemed not to know me. But then we embraced and he did. It was like a last chance to say... What? Goodbye. Sorry.

I woke up crying, happy, electrified with love. My father's daughter, I've never had much time for the supernatural, but, for a moment, I almost believed in spirits. Or at least that, in spite of all that is lost, love remains.

DELICIOUS CHEESECAKE

Base:

2 eggs

1 ½ cups crushed biscuits (wholemeal or wine)

½ cup sugar

½ cup melted butter

1 teaspoon vanilla

½ teaspoon cinnamon

Filling: Topping

250 g cream cheese 1 small can crushed pineapple (drained)

250 g sour cream

Mix together the crushed biscuits, melted butter and cinnamon. Line a medium-sized flan or spring-form pan with the prepared crumbs.

Mix the cream cheese, sugar, eggs and vanilla until smooth. Pour over biscuit base and cook at 180° C for 25 minutes or until the filling is set.

Remove from the oven and cover with the pineapple and sour cream, which have been well mixed together.

Return to the oven for 10 minutes to set the topping.

Serve chilled.

.....

DIANA WICHTEL was born in Vancouver, Canada, quite a few years ago. She came to New Zealand at the age of 13 and has worked as a teacher, a university tutor and a journalist. She lives in Auckland with her family and is a columnist for the NZ Listener and the NZ Herald.

Published in "Mixed Blessings: New Zealand Children of Holocaust Survivors Remember" edited by Deborah Knowles, 2003 Tandem Press