

## **The Day My Dad Died**

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When my father died, I had to finish the cheese he started. His fridge became my fridge and still sits in my kitchen opened daily for snacks and feeding the cats.

When my father died, I inherited his fountain pen with which I still write. My father's handwriting was different from mine but the similarities constantly grow greater.

When my father died I had his telephone cut off. After his death, I inadvertently dialled my father and took a row of pips in my ear. My childhood nickname was Pip but never pip-pip-pip.

Before I cut my father's phone off, I rang his answering machine and listened to his voice. The voice that so often shouted at me, and any other ranks, with utter self-belief began to falter: "I cannot come to the phone right now - but would like to return your call". Of course you would but I take it you cannot come to the phone right now.

My father died on the third day of The Test Match against the Indians. The England batsman, Graham Gooch, was part-way through scoring a personal best of 333. He made another century in the second innings, although that was after my father died. How anyone like my father could die during a Test Match defies description. It smacks of heresy, bad form, renunciation of Englishness, not waiting for the result.

After my father died, I had to scratch his name from my address book. I also had to dump his address books on the bonfire since the majority of the entrants were already dead. On the other hand, I saved his passport from the flames because it had not expired, a quality I wished to encourage.

After my father died, I found a list of things to do in the event of his death beginning "Phone the bank" and ending "On no account retain a solicitor - you can do the Probate yourself". I therefore passed happy hours showing his Death Certificate to clerks in places like Peterborough.

After my father died, the Inland Revenue sent him a tax rebate which would have cheered him greatly. In fact, I can see now that this was another reason why he might have relished death. On the other hand, the cessation of his pension payments would have cut him with sharp grief. At one point, they even thought they'd paid him post-mortem.

After my father died, I incurred improbable expenses. There was a Death Registration fee of £14 and £4 for postage. There was a funeral with the "Okehampton" coffin - not the cheapest, contrary to his will, which I defied with glee, at £1,118.49. Catering costs were £136. Probate fees just £353. After careful negotiation, tax on the estate came to £7,283.80. Drinks and flowers were £150; car hire £105.66. The officiating vicar got £34.50; the officiating doctor got £17 more. All this had to be found out of my personal current account. You must spend before you can inherit, I should warn the world.

After my father died, I had to pay his optician £10 for mending glasses which were burned in a coffin. A glint of mica for the twinkle in his eye.

After my father died, I was billed £8.64 for two pairs of socks he would never wear. In his wallet, I found a £20 cheque payable to my son, dated but unsigned. Contrary to illusion, you never get to "put all your affairs in order" - this is what children are for.

My father really killed himself. He had coronary disease which needed either an angioplasty or a triple bypass. My father waited on the NHS to receive his treatment (endlessly) even though he could have used his private health care plan that formed part of his pension. My father was afraid of the knife but equally afraid of too much life. When his family died, so did he - and my mother's end was the beginning of his. The children naturally felt guilty for leaving home - me at 19; my sister at 30-something. When she got married, I remember, my father lost his voice so he could never be said to have given her away.

Before my father died, my cousin who lost his father when he was ten, rang to say they thought I wasn't visiting my father nearly often enough. I explained the experience of being a nephew was probably different from that of being a son. "I see my dad as often as I can", I said. As a father, my father was a wonderful uncle.

The war did damage. My father went to shoot Germans in Egypt. He returned a lifetime later to greet his four-year-old daughter. She coped with my birth nine months later by sticking pins in me - an early sibling experiment in acupuncture. My mother withdrew from independent householder to subordinate housewife. My father dealt with his post-traumatic stress by never wanting his children to grow up. He managed to remain married, unlike thousands of other demobbed soldiers, but Hitler's war did for us too.

Dad's answer was a simple life. Forget the awfulness of broken torsos in British tanks, just borrow your children's childhoods and plant runner beans. It was never clear who was supposed to be the grown-up. We bathed; he played. We slept; he carried on reading our storybooks. I knew his puns embarrassed me at 10 - all bathos, as it were, at bedtime. On the other hand, I adored his alliterative saga "Wibbly the Wolf", also "Eddie the Elf", but was aware of mother proffering tea and rival company below. She stood no chance in the narrative flow.

Later, when I stopped kissing my father ten times on the lips each night and started to smile insincerely instead, he was stymied by the complexities of ageing. How could unselfconscious, magical beings like us stoop to low cunning? How do Peter Pan and Wendy grow seasonally adjusted? He never understood why we couldn't let him join in our playtime again.

So he wooed us with food, magnificent home-grown bribes, a lost boy high on tuck. He spent energy in garden and kitchen providing feasts which my own kids recall with disbelieving awe. They forget the price - woe to the unpunctual and unhungry. As one meal began, another was discussed, my father moving from trencher to freezer. A life-cycle of digestive worship three times on Sundays. He always complained he was hot when swallowing piles of pud and gravy scoffing plates of beef with four veg, plus mustard, horseradish and artery-dissolving gobs of salt. It killed him in the long run. Death by menu.

From being a vigorous gardener and walker who managed a complete tour of Cornwall's cliff paths (quite vertiginous in places) at 70 my father became a shuffler who lost puff up a three degree incline at 71.

One morning at two am, he had a massive heart attack. I was told what had happened by the hospital at seven. I asked if I should come and they replied "Not yet". They changed their tune at nine and Anne and I were there by 11. His face was contorted with the effort to breathe which was his sole physical purpose. The rasps were hideous and it was impossible to tell if he could understand his situation or communicate in any way. His eyes seemed to look at you but also to be miles distant. We found it hard to choose our voices - whether to speak slowly and emphatically as if to a child, or in the tough fashion of our rumbustious family. I remember looking out of the window at my car for mental relief. Things stayed the same till one pm when I went to make a phone call from the vehicle. All I remember is I was over-cheery.

On return, his case had worsened. We were concerned no one appeared to be attending. Just then, the consultant arrived with a bevy of medical students and said in an over-loud voice: "This is Mr Hodson, we've done this and that and as you can see he's now holding his own."

I piped up that I thought things were far from stable and perhaps the case should be reviewed, especially since my father had just died. "I think you just lost your patient, doctor". My smart quips faltered and I told the entire group to leave the room. My father's life was finished.

My mother's brother David, the local politician, arrived. He'd always been my favourite uncle. The one with whom I'd stayed most as a child. Marching down the corridor towards me he uttered a municipal metaphor: "This wasn't on the bloody agenda". I could have kissed him for this. My anger broke in furious tears.

After my father died, he received Christmas cards for the next five years, from persons identified only by their mysterious Christian names. I keep his ashes on the dresser and am glad to have him nearby but silent. I talk to him from time to time and he doesn't talk back. We get on better these days.