

Memorial Remarks

Whenever I attended one of my Dad's events, he would introduce me then provide the audience with a useful means of telling us apart. "I'm George Deukmejian," he would say, "the Good Looking One." Wikipedia calls this disambiguation, but it always seemed like bragging you'd lost the lottery.

A few years ago, my father reprised his *Gorgeous George* routine. It didn't go so well. We were in the State Capitol with my five year-old daughter, Anna. We were upstairs looking at the governors' portraits, when a young tour guide approached with her group.

"Hello," said my Dad.

"Hello," said the tour guide matter-of-factly.

My father had seemingly stepped from his painting, yet neither she nor her people showed the least bit of interest. Somehow, they didn't recognize him.

The guide started her talk: "This Governor's name, I just can't pronounce. I mean, look at it. Can you blame me?"

"Hey Dad," I whispered, "This doesn't happen to Schwarzenegger."

My Dad stepped forward.

“It’s ‘Deukmejian’,” he volunteered. “He was quite a good governor. Not bad looking, either. You don’t see the resemblance?”

My Dad winked at Anna.

An old woman from the group hobbled over.

She eyed my Dad then squinted up at the painting.

“You might be related,” she said, “but that fellow in the picture’s a lot better looking than you.”

“I’ll tell the artist,” said my Dad.

“If you don’t mind now...” said the tour guide.

My father shrugged.

“Don’t feel bad,” I said. “No one remembers Coolidge either.”

We turned to leave. He put his arm around my daughter who was snickering.

“What is it, Anna?” he asked.

“Grandpa,” she said, “you weren’t really Governor were you?”

“It isn’t like you think.” I grew up telling people this when they asked what it was like to have your Father in the public eye. His face was familiar, yet he was often misidentified. Over the years, people mistook him for Mr. Rogers; Joe DiMaggio; Michael Dukakis; and once, in *Vogue Magazine*, for a tuxedoed industrialist sitting across from one of Murdoch’s wives. My father bore the

faux pas with patience and good humor. He was a serious man, but one who had the humility and honesty to laugh at himself. Please keep this in mind as I share with you a few pages from the family album.

But first, I want to thank you for coming. Our family is grateful for your caring and friendship, for your kindness and generosity. So many of you have sent love and condolences and have helped us pull together this celebration of his life. Please forgive me for not naming you individually. So that your buns don't fall asleep, they have limited my speaking time to about ten minutes. This said, I want to convey our family's deepest gratitude to the caregivers who looked after my Dad in his last days. With steadiness, experience and calm, they helped us see him across that final threshold while respecting our privacy and our grief.

A number of you have quietly asked how my Mother is holding up. She is not one to wear her heart on the outside, yet I know it's been difficult. She and my Dad were married sixty-one years and shared both a public and private life. She put her whole person into the support of his ambitions and well-being. And in those legislative years, when he was gone during the week, she spent untold hours raising alone three truly awful

children—well maybe two. I know she mourns, and I know her life is changed. But she’s a strong woman...*like a linebacker*, and I ought to know: *these buns* will never fall asleep again; they haven’t felt a thing since the spanking of ‘73.

So here’s a story, a true story, to allay your concerns. A few weeks ago, we had a family funeral for my Dad. His urn had been delivered to the house and we—my Mom, my Wife and Kids—were squeezing into a rented Kia, getting ready to leave for the church. At my mother’s request, I picked up the urn. It was big and surprisingly heavy.

“What’s he got in there, the Lincoln Town Car?” I asked my Mom.

My mother stood at the Kia door and surveyed the interior.

“It’s going to be a tight fit,” I said. “If worse comes to worst, Sarah can drive and I can sit on your lap...”

“Put your father in the trunk,” she said.

It was like a scene out of *Goodfellas*.

You expected to find a shovel, some rope, and a length of pipe.

“Are you sure?” I replied.

“And be quick about it,” she said.

I went to the trunk and put in the urn.

“Don’t blame me,” I said to the urn. “This wasn’t my idea.”

I returned to the driver’s seat.

“Well?” she said.

“Well,” I said, “he’d rather ride up front, but all things considered...”

We started the drive. She knew the way. She gave me directions. I did as I was told. Everything was going fine until I came up hard on a turn. “No, here!” she said. I hit the brakes. There was a thud behind the back seat.

I could hear him all the way up in that heavenly cloud cream: “What the Sam Hill’s going on?”

“Go back there and make sure he didn’t get out.”

“Me?” I said.

I went to the trunk. He’d moved around a bit but everything looked okay.

I righted the urn.

“Hey Dad,” I said. “Sorry about the rough stop. That lady up front’s giving directions. I think you understand. God knows you blamed her for talking every time you missed an off-ramp.”

I shut the trunk and returned to the front seat.

“He didn’t give you any problem?” she said.

“Well, over the long run, I’d have to say there were times...”

“Move it,” she told me.

We pulled into the church parking lot. My sisters and their families were there.

We got out of the car.

I took the urn and tucked it under my arm.

She pulled something out of her purse.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Take this,” she said, shoving two envelopes into my palm. “Give one to the priest and the other to the organist.”

“What about the District Attorney?”

“You’re pretty talky for a bagman.”

She made it through the funeral, my Dad’s on the mantel, and everyone got paid.

So, to those of you who expressed concern: Clearly, she’s running the family now.

When the Godfather falls, the Godmother rises.

Growing up, my parents tried to shelter us from life on the far side of the private/public divide. But it wasn’t always possible. From the beginning, my sisters and I shared our Dad and Mom with the demands of their public life. When Leslie, Andrea and I were very young, our father would commute to Sacramento. At the end of the workweek, he would return to his Long Beach District with a small paper bag of candy for us kids. That night, he would tuck us in and tell us a bedtime story. These

stories had slipshod heroes with funny names and odd talents. Years after hearing these tall tales, I was in Sacramento and met a longtime lobbyist. He introduced himself and I thought: Why does that sound so familiar? Then it hit me: This guy had the same name as a character from my bedtime story. He was the hero whose principle talent was the ability to get under your skin. When I got a little older, I realized my Dad had populated his stories with people from the political sphere. This explained the fellow whose mantra was “I didn’t see that” and a cookie jar called Shrimpscam. We were too young to get it. It was his private joke, one that he never let on.

For a fellow who loved that elusive double rainbow called *Peace and Quiet*, my Dad sure picked the wrong line of work. He was finely attuned to disturbance. He hated the sound effects in kung fu movies. Whistling. Speed bumps. Short pants on older men. The practicing of amplified instruments. Unfamiliar hymns.

The great irony was, once he left office, my Dad would walk around saying: “Don’t sweat the small stuff.” The first time I heard this, I nearly spit out my milk.

“Are you kidding,” I said. “You made a career out of sweating the small stuff.”

“No, no, no,” he replied. “That was somebody else.”

Among his sources of domestic irritation, I was perhaps chief. I never saw the greenside of my allowance. I lighted my screen on fire burning toy army men. I told my sister she was going to be deported. I jumped off my Aunt's gas meter and broke the supply pipe. My father, he had this radio voice—deep and authoritative—but when he got mad, it sounded like the Old Testament God had come unglued. He seldom swore. He didn't need to. He was a master of euphemism. I was showered with the Lord's praise: "God Bless It!" he would say.

In my defense, he wasn't a modern, hands-on dad. I was reminded of this the other night, showing my children a family film he had taken with his Super 8 camera—Fellini in a plaid bathrobe. This was the mid 60s. In the scene, I'm about a year old. I'm on the floor by the Christmas tree. I've got a live electrical cord in my mouth and am gumming my way down its length. With parental doting, the camera follows. There's actually a lot of tension in this scene. It is only when I am about to bite into the juncture of an extension cord that the cameraman abandons his shot. There is no sound, but one distinctly hears: "Gloria!"

On another occasion, my sister Andrea had aroused my Mother's ire. I don't know what she did, but I'm glad she got caught. Gloria instructed George to give gentle

Andrea a corrective spanking. She then retired to the kitchen. In the next room, my Dad sat my Sister in a chair, gave her a lecture conspicuous for its volume and brevity, then proceeded to administer the spanking—to his own knee. This is where he got that phrase “soft-on-crime” judges.

My Dad would often seek out a poolside retreat from his worldly and familial trials. When we were little kids on vacation, he would take us into the shallow end of the hotel pool. There, to our delight, he would dive down and mime a man sitting in an easy chair, turning on the evening lamp, opening up his paper to review the day’s news. Peace and quiet, his rarefied companions, even there at the bottom of the pool. Unfortunately, he had to surface.

One summer, years later, my friend Garrett Ashley, was staying with our family in Sacramento. He and I were in the guesthouse, which had a window with a view of the yard. When the weather was nice, my Dad would take his briefcase and sit outside. Alone in his chaise, he would sometimes roll up the sleeves of his t-shirt. With his 1950s horned-rimmed glasses and exposed arms he resembled Bowser from Sha-Na-Na. One hot day, sitting alone reading the bills, he decided to take down a raft and cool off in the pool. Garrett and I had been closely

observing all this from the guest house, and there was only so much you could take.

“Look at that,” I said to Garrett. “I think he’s asleep.”

“It looks like it, huh,” said Garrett.

“We should do something.”

“*You* should,” said Garrett.

“I ought to cannonball him, don’t you think?”

“You ought to,” said Garrett.

“It’s a good idea?”

“It’s a great idea.”

I snuck out of the house. I crept around the pool. I climbed up on a rock and let it rip.

They say my Dad despised foul language. They say he never swore. Well, as he tumbled from that raft and his insular Tahiti, he likened me to the male offspring of a stick-fetching house pet. “*What the Sam Hill.*” Indeed.

Peace and quiet. It was tough for him, even in his own house. One night, a woman called the residence. My Dad answered the phone. She was desperate.

“Harold,” she said, “I miss you so much. I just want you to come back. We can work it out. We can be good again.”

“Uh, Lady,” my Dad said politely, “there’s no one here by the name of Harold. I think you have the wrong number.”

“Harold,” she said. “Don’t you say that. Don’t you dare, Harold.”

“I’m serious,” he said, “This isn’t Harold.”

“Oh my God,” she said. “What happened to you, Harold? You used to be so kind. You used to make me feel so special. Who am I even talking to? It’s like you’re someone else.”

Now my Dad didn’t go around boasting he was the Governor. If someone didn’t know, he didn’t usually tell. But every once in a while, you had to show the cape.

“Look,” he said. “I’m sorry for what you’re going through—really, I am—but I’ve got to tell you something now.”

“What is it?” she said softly.

“First of all, you’ve got the wrong number, okay? And second of all, I’m not Harold. My name’s George Deukmejian, and I’m the Governor of California.”

“Oh ho ho,” said the lady. “You’re low, Harold. I mean *really*, Harold? How can you even come up with that?”

There was no escape. You got to a point and realized, if life’s a great straightaway then peace and quiet is just around the corner. It drives some people into the desert. It drives others out to sea. Still others take solace in animal companions. There’s that famous

line: *To his dog, every man is Napoleon.* The problem was, to my Dad, every dog was the Duke of Wellington. To put it another way, my Dad had trouble loving dogs. It was probably my mom's fault. She started with a rabbit, our first pet. "I know he's not going to like it," she thought. "But he's not here, and I've got to entertain these three awful kids. What the hell. I'm going to get it." So she brought home the rabbit. My Dad had a nickname. They called him "Corky." And that's what she called the rabbit. It didn't work. They had nothing in common. My Dad liked shish-kebob and light opera. Corky the Hare preferred leafy greens and chewing on phone wires. Next she brought home a beagle. It howled. It was worse than the rabbit. It was worse than the sound effects in a kung fu movie. "Whose dog is this?" said my Dad. When that first beagle seemed lonely, she got another, and when those beagles had beagles, we had a trio. They were outdoor dogs who found their way in. The problem was, they had fleas. And not unlike a few editorial boards, those fleas let my Dad have it.

One day, he was riding to work. His security driver was in the front seat. Periodically, he'd check the rearview mirror. One minute my Dad would be there, the next he'd disappear. This happened a few times, and it piqued the driver's interest.

“Governor,” he said. “Is everything okay? What are you doing back there?”

“I’m scratching my God Blessed ankles. It’s those God Blessed dogs. They’ve got God Blessed fleas!”

“I’ll tell you what to do,” said the driver, undeterred. “Get a couple of flea collars and buckle them around your ankles. That’ll fix it.”

For all my Father’s love of peace and quiet, the last place you’d expect to find him was at the Demolition Derby at the Dixon County Mayfair. But one year he went, and in the evening, took his seat in a packed stadium with an eager crowd. The jalopies had assembled in the dirt. The drivers were revving their engines and counting their teeth. Before my Dad could settle in, a track announcer spotted him and jogged up the grandstand. He was wagging a microphone linked to the public address system, and when he arrived, he thrust the mic in my Dad’s face and said:

“Governor, what do you think of our Demolition Derby?”

“Well,” said my father, “It sure beats the opera.”
In Dixon that night they cheered.

Far from the grandstands of public life, my Dad was a quiet, private man. At home, he seldom talked about

his work and he seldom discussed his past. His parents, who were poor, instilled in him a belief in a future of possibilities despite the usurpation of their own. Whether by their influence or his own will, my Dad developed a strict code of behavior and adhered to it with discipline and faith. This could sometimes make him unyielding and difficult. However, the tenets of this code were rooted in fairness, and that fairness guided him and informed his humility, his integrity and his probity. In his treatment of others, he showed us the respect due, regardless of a person's background or station. This was who he was, not an act put on with an eye toward accolades or approval.

On election night in 1982, my father left the hotel where he'd been watching the returns with the race still undecided. It was late, and he took his family home. His wife and children went to bed, and he sat watching the vote margin narrow. My sister, Leslie, couldn't sleep. She got up and went into the TV room. She found him there in the dark and sat down next to him on the couch. He was tired but composed. He wanted to win, he told her, but it was okay to lose. In the end, it was more important to look back on what you'd done knowing it was good and right than to claim a victory that had cost you your decency and principles. THANK YOU.