

## A TOAST

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I think about him every morning, so why not share his story?  
The one that begins with 'he wasn't quite right' and ends with 'he was killed.'

In the middle there are a lot of other biting highlights:  
He was raised by church ladies because his mother was institutionalized.  
He joined the Navy even though he couldn't swim.  
He watched a man die in his driveway because he froze and didn't call 911.  
He brushed his teeth incessantly but only showered once a week.  
He mixed used batteries in with new batteries because...  
you never know, they might come back to life.

He had a collection of used paper towels hidden behind the breadbasket –  
I would tell my children 'Don't take a napkin from Papa! I'll bring you a clean one.'  
He logged dates on all his consumables so they were rationed correctly:  
jars of Miracle Whip, cleaning supplies, tubes of toothpaste, sleeves of saltines.  
His gas mileage books are poetic works of art, with dedicated entries that span decades.

The dates he wrote on razor blade cartridges were impossible to decipher, tiny and smudged.  
I misread this once when I borrowed his razor and peeled up a flap of skin from my shin  
to my kneecap. I still have that scar. And I also kept a can of his shaving cream dated  
from September 1 - October 13, 2012...one day before he died.  
He got 41 shaves out of that can; he could have squeezed out at least a dozen more.

My dad left me with many gifts: patience, ethics, a good metabolism, easy joy and, yes –  
a penchant for paper towels. He loved music and I inherited that as well. He actually built  
his own 'surround sound system' in the living room before you could buy one. The stereo  
shared a wall with my bedroom and at night it would vibrate with symphonies and operas,  
a loud but lovely lullaby.

But the memory I cherish most is this one, because it's the reason I start each day with him:  
his recipe for toast. He called it the 4-3-2-1 method. Pop four pieces of bread into the toaster,  
dial set at level three for exactly two minutes and then slather with one tablespoon of butter per slice.

This last part is critical and unfortunately where most people will drop the ball - sometimes through no  
fault of their own - like opening the butter dish to see it's almost out, there's just a little blob cowering  
on the tray, looking worse for the wear but maybe you can stretch it out...

The 4-3-2-1 method is best BECAUSE of the butter. Do not mess with this perfection.

Here's where my memories really kick in because this ticks all the boxes, a combo of sight, smell, and  
sound, so take note: the butter must be spread carefully into *each corner of the toast*. Right up to the  
edges, not over, not under, just...everywhere.

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Once on a family vacation, we snuck a video of my dad in the kitchen. The video starts 'dark' and someone offscreen says, "Let the buttering of the toast COMMENCE!" - setting the scene. We hear the butter knife raking over the toast again and again, so much toast and so many corners. Scrape. Scrape. Scrape. Smooth at first, then crunchy, crunchier, crunchiest as the butter makes its pilgrimage (yes, it's that sacred) over the dry surface of the bread. Then the image comes into view and my dad sees he's being filmed - he lets loose his tremendous laugh and proudly announces 'there's enough for everyone!'"

I am lucky to start my mornings with my dad, to remember him with my toast and coffee. He was a happy man, and he was a simple man. 'Spectrum' wasn't a word used back then but he was on it. OCD, ADHD, probably some autism and even savant syndrome. In later years, I offered to get him help but he didn't see the need - or more likely, he didn't recognize it like the rest of us did. "I made it this far," he said. And he had. He built a beautiful life and - more than anyone I've ever known - he could find joy in just about anything.

He started in a small life in a small town. "Churchy" is an understatement. He grew up on a church compound, one square city block including the church itself - magnificent in the European style, dark with mahogany and light with stained-glass windows of colorful Jesuses - and an elementary school which my grandfather founded, and also a parsonage where he lived with his dad and sometimes his mom. This holy Trinity of three buildings constituted his first 13 years. An old family friend said he didn't think my dad left that block until he went to junior high, about a mile away.

But sheltered served him well. After high school he joined the Navy, met my mom, worked hard, cared for his parents, sang in the choir, threw a few bowling balls, showed classic cars, landed a job with the federal government, raised three daughters and truly gathered friends at every turn.

Let's see, we know he 'wasn't quite right' and we know he was a toastmaster of sorts, that he pieced together a happy life...what are we missing? Oh yes, he was killed.

Typical in his time, my dad picked up any job he could find.

Pumping gas at the station got him promoted into the garage, where he repaired cars.

A wizard with mechanics and electronics, he worked in the hulls of ships and planes while in the Navy.

After his military service, he took advantage of the housing boon and had many jobs with building supply manufacturers.

Ultimately, he found his fit as an electronic technician with the Federal government, a perfect job for this highly focused tinkerer. Tubes and wires, connectors and dials - very intricate and sensitive - they generally don't like people and especially don't like to be touched. They are called resistors for a reason! They have their own language, and my dad spoke it, too.

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He anchored himself to his job. Monday through Friday at the crack of dawn, he'd shuffle into the kitchen to make his lunch. A sandwich, usually with the olive loaf no one else would eat and always heavy on the Miracle Whip (but measured!). A baggie of chips and a handful of store-brand sandwich cookies. He'd arrange this in his black metal lunch box with the precision of an electronic technician who is already looking forward to noon.

I heard the shake of his keys as he gently locked the front door, trying not to wake his little girls. This followed by the great roar of his 1968 Mustang warming up in the driveway just outside my bedroom, violently loud like a jet flying down Elmwood Avenue, the headlights blinding through my window and trailing off as my dad leaves 'quietly' for work.

All his jobs had one thing in common: asbestos. My dad was exposed at every turn, unknowingly. That is to say...HE didn't know it, but the industry certainly did.

He was diagnosed with lung cancer at the age of 75. There's no cure for Mesothelioma, but you can buy a little time. Dad got five years. A week before he died, we'd all been together for his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday party at a favorite Chinese restaurant. He wore his red Hawaiian shirt to be festive, though his eyes were anything but. After dinner, we each took a cookie and read our fortunes, which – in retrospect - was clearly flirting with disaster. My dad's read: 'You will receive money from an unexpected source.' We just quietly packed our to-go bags and drove home.

**Did he complain?** Never.

**Was he afraid?** Very.

**Did he sue?** Wouldn't you?

**Was it worth it?** What's the price of a husband, a father, a papa, a friend?

A tinkerer, a singer and savant. What kind of price can you put on this man who shared a smile with everyone he met, who found happiness in the simplest of things?

Before he died, he met with each of us and we made promises to him that we're still keeping. When I sat to talk, he was wearing a track suit I'd never seen before – a classic velour pair of loose pants and zipper jacket from maybe 1982 – in a medium brown, from head to toe. I said, "Where the heck did you get that outfit? You look like a TURD." He joked "Well, I feel like shit so it kind of works, doesn't it?"

I offered to make him some toast. He raised up his bushy eyebrows as if to question 'do you know how?'

I brought in a perfect plate of four, and we each picked up one buttery piece of toast and clinked them together like glasses of champagne.

Cheers, Dad. See you in the morning.