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In California my three children learned to deal early on with a volatile dad and a put-upon mother. Today, their father long dead, only the youngest still resides in the golden state; his brothers dispersed to other states while I myself live in yet another one. In June 2021, with Covid abated and families vaccinated, all of us gathered for a reunion in the home of our Californian, his family, and their yellow lab, as we did ten years earlier in another son's California home. Everyone was rushed then, unlike this time around. During one leisurely afternoon I asked my boys—now dads in mid-life—what they remembered of the family they once were.

“I grew up scared,” said the first brave soul, “and so insecure, it sticks with me even now. To this day I don't trust myself to execute something I'm expected to do, even when I know full well I'm capable of it—simple things, like arranging reservations at some joint for a party of six. I know I can do it, but . . .” he shrugged.

“Sometimes it takes me several tries to get out of a parking lot,” said another brother, “and my wife reminds me we've been there before. How come I don't remember where to direct the car for the exit?”

“I have trouble with expectations also,” said the third. “I get so frustrated I start to scream. My family thinks I'm yelling at them, but I'm not. I'm angry at the situation. At myself.”

On visits to their households I witnessed how the families reacted when a paterfamilias lost his temper, sometimes over something I'd done or said, other times over something a spouse or child had done or said. One time the cause was a painting he'd inherited, which the spouse wanted to move from the living room to the hallway. I couldn't believe how violently my son reacted. Did the spouse understand her husband's fury was directed at the change, not at her? I don't think so.

“Dad used to get so furious,” said one of them, “it scared me to pieces. He might be working on something and wanted me to hand him a tool. He'd say, ‘I need a 5/16th inch socket’ and expect me to find it pronto. I was too young to know you could eyeball sockets by their size, like, 5/16th is a little under half an inch and a little over a quarter inch. I had to read all the sizes to find the one he wanted. It took forever.”

“Same here,” said another brother. “It would have been nice if he'd explained the things he knew that he expected us to know. He had such a short fuse! One time he hit me over the head with his crutch.”

“He smashed my boombox,” said the first speaker. “I bought it with my own money. Couldn't he have said, the music's too loud, tamp it down?”

Although I had brought up the subject and anticipated some (perhaps uncomfortable) responses, I was stunned to learn how deeply my sons' childhoods affect their lives even today. The evening before, in a backyard with a swimming pool and miniature citrus trees, the three got

out their instruments, an acoustic, an electric, and a bass guitar—they skipped the drums for the sake of the neighbors—and made music as they did in high school and college. One belted out Johnny Cash and the others followed, sometimes harmonizing. Another began Van Halen; his brothers improvised or looked up the chords and lyrics on a laptop. Even the dog had a good time.

I have speculated why the removal of my son's painting from its prominent place was so upsetting. Was it because he first encountered the artwork in his dad's law office? I imagine the paintings they own today remind the boys even now of a dad who had it together professionally, not yet tilted toward the bipolar condition that was to ruin him. At one time Darold was doing legal work for an artist with a studio in nearby Solvang who, at outset—hoping, no doubt, one of our clients might buy one—brought us a number of stunning paintings, framed exquisitely by her husband. We displayed them in the reception area where I had my desk along with our part-time secretary, and the assistants of the two lawyers who shared our building.

Every time, after I finished word-processing a contract or last will and they signed it with Darold, the couple removed a price tag, saying, "This one is yours now." When the artist inherited an estate in Arkansas, the couple left California, and they bequeathed the rest of the paintings to us. On dissolution of the law office, the artworks journeyed to the boys' one-time home, where they languished in a cluttered garage while in the house a man wandered at the end of his journey, aimless and lost.

My sons differ in age, profession, and musical taste. They do not share the same religious or ethical convictions. They have clashed over politics. Yet they regularly get together over Zoom, weekly if they can do it, sometimes monthly. They have yelled at the spouses and children who sat at attention that night, yet the love of song draws them one to the other. And it was this basis that allowed the men to disclose, when prompted, the pain and confusion of their early years that confound them even now. In childhood these dads tiptoed on eggshells, forever trying to forestall an eruption. I told my sons I was sorry I failed to protect them back then.

"You couldn't help it," they said. "You were on the receiving end yourself."

True, but children in distress invariably hope some adult will have mercy and deflect the fury directed at them.

"Dad was an odd mix of working-class know-how and college learning," said one.

"He knew all sorts of things," said another. "We learned a lot."

"He pulled himself up by his bootstraps," added the third. "He made us care about education."

"When I lose my temper I see Dad in myself—and I hate it," they confessed, one by one, careful not to allude to my own post-traumatic parenting style.

“Remember how anxious he used to get when it came time to go somewhere?”

“He had a lot of health issues,” said another. “Maybe he associated leaving home with falling ill, like when he had to go to the hospital because of the polio.”

“You may be on to something,” I said. “It’s true, all his life your dad suffered from ill health. It had to do, I think, with the trauma that preceded the polio.”

Darold’s childhood was disfigured by his mother’s conflicts. He was an unwanted pregnancy, and she let him know often enough, “It was your father’s fault.” She wanted no further truck with babies; they already had two boys ages fifteen and seven. Early in his young life, he told me, Darold repeatedly heard his mother accuse his dad of having caused the pregnancy. Add to that his father’s smoldering resentment at God and the polio with which the Almighty struck his six-year-old—for the father’s sins, he believed—and you may fathom the man our little boys knew.

How does a child who grew up with self-doubt handle the challenges of parenthood? What kind of father has that little boy become who tried so hard to please a dad who only yelled at his efforts? The insecurities borne of those “Helping Dad” episodes have stayed with my sons; however, they originated in their dad’s—and their mother’s—childhoods.