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The battle Dad lost

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DOVER, N.H. — When I was a child, my father had an office in the room next to my bedroom. It was, it turned out, a temporary office. So much of what my father planned and dreamed and tried seemed temporary or unfinished.

But there was a year that he planned to return to writing full time, planned to write a book and feature pieces for his old employer, the Chicago Tribune. On many nights, soon after he put me to bed, Dad would return to his office in the room next door, and I would hear the clacking of his typewriter and smell the smoke from cigarette after cigarette.

I found the sound of the typewriter annoying. It frequently kept me awake and, out of boredom, I would bury my face in my pillow, or under my pillow, and sing. We were both busy composing, my father and I, in adjacent rooms. He would eventually hear my muffled singing, and the typewriter would stop and my door would open a crack.

"Go to sleep, Bruce," he would say gently.

"Stop typing, Dad," I answered, and it made him laugh.

He stopped typing for good some years later and the room next door was converted into a den and the nights went back to silence.

Many years after that, I began to clank away on the same typewriter late at night in a room next to the bedroom, but in another house a long way from the one in Chicago where I grew up. I became a writer, though my father never knew it. He died long before the first few articles were published.

But I still go back to those nights when the typewriter talked and my father tried to keep a few dreams alive. There weren't many years like that. He drank and drank until it dragged him down and finally silenced the typewriter for good.

There was a cult of drinking among the newspaper reporters of the old Chicago school, and some of my strongest memories are of evenings spent with my father at the Boul-Mich, a bar across from Tribune Tower, where chain-smoking reporters in wrinkled shirts would gather every night to tell stories about some politician on the take, or the gruesome results of a local plane crash.

These were drinking stories, and, while I listened, I sat on a barstool next to my Dad and drank bottle after bottle of a soft drink called Squirt. I thought then that, more than anything else, I wanted to grow up to be like those men.

When Dad died, the Tribune eulogized the passing of one of its own, a man who for many years worked the city crime beat for the paper and was an occasional feature writer; born to a well-to-do Winnetka family, divorced husband of a well-known Chicago television personality, and survived by two sons.

The obituary didn't say anything about the alcoholism that finally killed him, of course. But I suspect the survivors of the old crew from the Boul-Mich knew, and maybe shook their heads and remembered the old stories Charley would tell over the open mouth of a glass of Scotch.

When Dad died, I remembered those stories and thought them all lies.

That was 10 years ago, and in the years that have passed since then I have come to realize that the pain and the torment and the humiliation I felt when my father slipped into hopeless alcoholism did not die with him, as I hoped it would. I have learned to miss him again, especially when I sit down late at night in front of his old Royal typewriter and take up the trade that kept us both awake at night years ago in adjacent rooms.

I have finally forgiven him.

And now I regret that we never had the chance to exchange manuscripts and favorite books, and dreams of bylines in the big magazines. I miss the pride he might have felt if he could read what is written here.

But in another way, a much less predictable way, Dad is still here with me. He is with me every time I drink a glass of wine or Scotch or his favorite vodka and lime, every time I slide up to a bar to tell a story, and every time I see myself in the mirror and see the same broad forehead, the same dark eyes, the same shadows that framed the face of that young writer in the photographs I keep of Dad during his Tribune days.

This is the curse of the sons and daughters of alcoholics. It is the haunting feeling of our own vulnerability to the disease. And we are in danger when we are able to dismiss it simply as a dead ghost of a past we'd just as soon forget.

It is good, I think, that we live the rest of our lives a little afraid.

Maybe it's that fear that has brought me back to this old typewriter, to peck away at painful memories, and to try — through the writing — to understand the loss of a man who could give me a rose bush on my 21st birthday, and then drink himself to death before it had a chance to bloom.

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