

The Old Man Who Reminded Me of My Father

purpleclover.littlethings.com/relationships/8883-old-man-who-reminded-me-my-father

by Amy Paturel | Saturday, October 13, 2018



When I headed outdoors on a warm Friday morning in September with my three sons, I wasn't expecting to feel anything more than the physical high of getting outside for some exercise. The boys rode their bikes and scooters up and down the hills, while I ran and walked beside them, frequently reaching for one kid's seat or another to keep him steady.

As we rounded the corner on Carousel Lane, the street that runs parallel to our home, I heard the whizz of an electric saw—a man was trimming tree branches in his front yard. As we got closer, I watched an elderly man put down his saw and take a respite from the 80-degree heat in the shade of his garage.

The resemblance was uncanny. He looked like my dad, who died four months before to the day.

Was I hallucinating? Was I so mired in grief that I could see my dad all around me?

I remembered the cold mornings when my dad rose before dawn to take me ice skating. The dance recitals he sat through for my sister, cheering wildly any time she appeared on stage. The weekend gymnastics meets that robbed him of Sunday night football. Amidst the flurry of activity—first school activities, then husbands, children and family obligations—he faded into the background, stepping into the limelight only to pull one of his signature pranks.

"My wife keeps telling me I should hire someone to cut this tree," said the man, breaking me out of my mental time machine. "See that overgrown bit at the top? I missed it last time. I have a 12-foot ladder, but I'm old. My fear is getting the best of me."

I gazed up at the tree's overgrown hedges perched above us. I would have been afraid to go after them at 43.

"I agree with your wife," I said.

While we exchanged pleasantries, I dissected his features. He had a full head of hair, thin but fluffy white and parted on the side like my dad's. His light green eyes looked like the color of wild grass on a bright sunny day. And his mischievous grin reminded me of the twinkle in my dad's eyes.

"You've got your hands full," he said, as the boys rode circles around me.

I learned his name was Hollis. He'd worked as a lawyer in the medical arena. He has been married for more than half a century and his wife has dementia. After years fielding legal complaints about nursing homes, he couldn't bear to relinquish his wife to one. "She's here," he said, "on in-home care."

Hollis served in the Marine Corps—my dad was in the Army—and he grew up as a Minnesota farm boy in a small town with no running water. He talked about his work, his life and how—when he's feeling good—he walks all the way down to Commerce Street and back up the hill.

That has to be six miles, I thought, and the route back is ALL uphill. This guy is just like my dad!

Everything about him felt familiar. His daughter, Susie, was born in 1971, just like my sister, Shannon. He bought a motorcycle to mark the occasion. I spotted it in the garage behind him. "Susie's vying for it," he said, "because I got it the year she was born."

"Susie sounds like my sister," I said.

In addition to Susie, Hollis has two sons. My dad had three daughters.

Max asked when we could go home, Brian pouted on the sidewalk and Jack barreled down the hill on his balance bike while I shouted after him to brake with his feet before he careened into a tree.

I felt like Hollis could have told me stories all day, about his work, his life, his family completely oblivious to my three children swirling around us—just like my dad.

Then, starting to take an interest in the saw, Max, 6, piped up: "How old are you?" he asked.

"85," Hollis replied. "Do you know how old that is? Older than dirt."

I felt a chill within the heat. That's something my dad would have said.

He appeared as my dad would have been at 85 had medicine not robbed him of his life at 79. Doctors said a valve replacement surgery and double bypass would give him another 10 years, maybe more. But three months after surgery, infection infiltrated his heart and his newly replaced valve began spewing bacteria up to his brain, causing multiple strokes.

The repeated assaults on his system transformed him. Once a prankster, poet and fitness enthusiast, he sat motionless in a bed or chair unable to spoon his own food. For months.

When I got home, I yearned to see Hollis again, to soak up the energy of this person who somehow made me feel like my dad was with me—if not in body, at least in spirit. So, I whipped up a batch of oatmeal cranberry cookies, the kids drew pictures for our new friend and I called my husband, Brandon.

"I need you to do something for me," I said. "I need you to trim a neighbor's tree."

I'm sure he thought I was insane. I don't even ask him to trim our own trees! I hire a handyman. Yet, he didn't hesitate. He knew this request was nonnegotiable.

When Brandon returned from work, we walked to Hollis's house, cookies and pictures in hand. Jack rang the bell and Hollis came to the door in a black, button-down shirt with tan dragons dancing across it—something my dad would have worn. Something my mom would have said looked ridiculous.

Before we parted ways that evening, Brandon asked Hollis for his phone number, so we could arrange a time for Brandon to trim his tree. Hollis gave him a business card and the two of them talked while I, once again, chased our offspring.

I didn't look at the business card until we got home. When I did, my breath got caught in my throat.

Hollis Dyer.

Dyer? That's my dad's mom's maiden name.

After a conversation with Hollis and some Ancestry.com sleuthing, I wasn't able to spot a direct relationship, but the facts suggest we could be distantly linked (say back to the 1500s or before). Hollis's dad was one of 14 children. "All of the women were tall," says Hollis, recalling an aunt who was a 6-foot-tall model in Nebraska. My maternal grandmother was 5'9" or 5'10."

I'm sure Hollis isn't as intrigued by these coincidences as I am. I'm sure he's not analyzing them and studying my picture online. But, he didn't lose his dad four months ago, either.

Somehow this chance meeting—and a potential link to my dad's lineage—comforted me. Hollis gave me a glimpse of who my dad might have become. A chance to be present, to listen even when the world is spinning around me at dizzying speed. A chance to feel my dad's presence inside of me as I stepped up to help someone in need—just as he always had while he was breathing.