

5th Storyworth: What Were Your Grandparents Like?

I don't really have any memories of my father's Dad, Louis. What I know of him is actually based on much I learned later when I had an adult child of my own. It turned out he was a bigamist, and I don't mean an Italian Fog ;-) Since his existence pre-dated computerization and the internet, unlike today when pretty much EVERYTHING is tracked from cradle to grave, he was able to live as two people almost simultaneously, and it was not until after the fact that my siblings and I became aware that we had blood relatives about whom we had been completely unaware.

The name Holzer means "Woodcutter" in German. So it was not ultimately a huge surprise to find someone named Woods as the second family he had parented largely after he had produced my father and his four sisters with my Nana, the name by which we knew Catherine Holzer, with whom I had lots of fond memories. But more on her soon. Her husband had been involved in broadcasting, radio specifically, and for whatever reason felt he needed a double life. In fact, PBS had a Masterpiece Theater series with a LOT of parallels, including my own confusion to this day about my Granddad, called "Mrs Wilson", a role actually played by Mr Wilson's real granddaughter, which I recommend highly to help explain what is still confusing to me.

Nana, on the other hand, was a most gracious woman who lived in a high rise apartment in the Bronx, and although we did not visit her as much as my Mom's parents, she was always a smiling face when we were there. I often wonder just what she might have known of my Granddad's double life and chose to keep from us. Nana was different in most ways from my Grandpa and Grandma Drout, which is how we knew my Mom's parents. Nana never had much wealth to share, but she was always good humored and loved to laugh. I don't think she ever learned to drive, nor ever needed to, because of ready availability of mass transit in NYC. She would always have baked goods and sweets for us whenever we visited, and I'll always remember her fondly.

My Grandma was a harder person, but a sympathetic assessment of her life as I knew it would certainly explain much of that. Both she and my Grandpa had worked as civil servants; he as a Fireman and she as a clerical and administrative person. And she was clearly the "manager" of their household, which had to have been hard, having gone through the Depression raising three kids, two of whom had polio. My Mom was a late arrival, and we think had been a complete surprise to them. But she also became the person who assured their later years were comfortable, although some of what I am aware happened can explain why I see my Grandma as a harder person than my Grandpa. Because of that I am glad they passed in the order they did, because my Grandma seemed to never really appreciate my Mom, and her will had essentially overlooked my Mom almost entirely. It was ONLY because my Grandpa outlived her that Mom's memory of them was not tarnished, I am sure. Grandma wanted it all to go to her grandchildren, and there were nine of us between my Mom's six and my Aunt Mim. But Grandpa changed all that immediately after Grandma's death, which was his recognition of my Mom's support for them in later life. Of that I am most proud of Grandpa, though that was far from "only".

Grandma always seemed pleasant enough, but could snap in a heartbeat. I think she might have actually been bipolar, but have no real reinforcement for that idea. It is just a gut reaction. They had a house in the Bronx, and they both lasted to well into their nineties, with my Grandpa making 96 when he passed. Since they had both retired as civil servants, they beat the statistics on pensions by a TON, for which I've always viewed them as ultimate winners ;-)

With my Aunt Miriam (Mim) having lingering physical effects from the polio, and my Uncle Dan wearing braces like FDR all the life I knew him, they had to have hard lives. Dan only married for the first time VERY late in life, and he never had kids. Aunt Mim had three. I will write more about them later herein. Whatever, I think I got much of my creativity from wherever Dan got his. And although the Drouts were absolutely of Irish extraction, Dan somehow showed where my German tech skills came from ;-)

Grandpa had risen through the ranks to become a Fire Chief for NYC, no small accomplishment, while the fire wagons were still horse drawn. In fact, it was a matter of pride for him that, as he told us, from the age of 16 he could harness and run a team of eight horses to pull one. I might be able to identify a horse ;-). Just a matter of what era each of us grew up during, although I am sure my Grandpa could have fixed most cars on the side of the road, at least until computers started running them ;-).

He was the Fire Chief at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in NYC where a number of young girls were killed jumping from the ninth floor because there were no other choices. I thought of them when I watched the people jumping from the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on 9/11, who had to have known their fate just like those poor girls. Thankfully, as with those girls, their deaths were not in vain, as they led to strict building codes requiring external fire escapes and safety-release doors, just as the Twin Towers led to constructing center elevator structures which can not be breached even by flying an aircraft loaded with fuel into the building. Sadly, and my Grandpa had spoken about it, a B-25 Mitchell flew into the Empire State Building in bad weather, but they hadn't learned enough from that.

I really liked my Grandpa, Dan. Whenever we visited, he would give each of the kids a shiny quarter, then tell them to keep it to use as a financial lesson. I think most of us did ;-). He referred to Grandma Miriam as "Booie", an obvious term of endearment between the two. I know my Mom loved them both, but I could be forgiven for wondering whether her relationship with her mother had not been a strain from day one, since she was born after her siblings were teens. And Grandma was always civil, but rarely seemed "loving" as I might have expected of any mother with her child. I think the wills episode is the most telling indicator.

Through it all, though, and maybe to a fault, my Mom would do everything possible to help them, which included driving two and a half hours each way with kids in tow to assure they got to doctor's appointments and the like. Grandma barely acknowledged her. But she was clearly the "manager" of the household, so Grandpa's will reflected HER will rather than HIS, at least until she passed and her possessions became HIS to dispose of as he wished. So I respect him highly for recognizing both that she had done poorly by my Mom, and that there was ultimately a LOT he could do about it with the short time he lived after her passing. Theirs was very much like many older couples, where the two seem to feed off each other for sustenance, but almost immediately after the first passes, the second succumbs as well. That happened with them as well, but not before Grandpa arranged to take good care of my Mom as his expression of appreciation for all her efforts for BOTH of them.

I really did not have a lot of interaction with Aunt Mim, nor her husband Roy. I saw them as similar in terms of dominance to my Grandparents, but I am afraid their children were not as well adjusted as my siblings turned out to be, as if THAT is ANY kind of "compliment" to them. I think the less I say further about them the better, but I must acknowledge my cousin Dan, who helped me by loaning me the money my parents could not provide so I could complete Clarkson for my BSME. There has always been some doubt about the evidence of his demise – he was found hanged in his cellar, but practiced climbing as well, and had a loving wife and son, to whom I repaid all his help and then some. With the opportunity to mention him a little here, his namesake, my Uncle Dan, was a great personality who was ALWAYS thinking of ways to make his life easier. He eventually owned three BMW Isetta cars, which were little more than covered motorcycles. But their unique feature was the front, which opened like a clamshell, and thereby allowed him to sit on the floor, then pull himself up to the driver position, where the steering and hand controls swung into position by closing the front. When he passed, my Mom lobbied his wife, Marie, who did not drive, to give me the cars. But she "could not part with them", so they became cat boxes in her yard, and were destroyed, much to my sorrow. I will NEVER forget HIM ;-).

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