

A SHIFT IN
FOCUS

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A SHIFT IN FOCUS

On the Father's Day following his father's death, Jeff discovered that the focus of Father's Day had shifted.

For over twenty years, Father's Day had been at his house, with his father as the guest of honor. His mother was alive for most of that time, and Aunt Susan, and his older twin brothers and younger sister came over with their families to an overflow barbecue in his backyard.

He guessed he should have known that with his father gone all that would change. But he hadn't thought about it, and so it came as a shock to him when his son Carl called to tell him that this year the barbecue was moving over to his house.

"We all decided," Carl said. "Dave, Jenny, and me. You've been the host for a generation. Now it's your turn to be guest of honor."

"I don't mind -" he started to say, when he should have said, please don't. But Carl cut him short.

"It makes sense, Dad. We're going to rotate it. This year my house, next year Jenny's. And then Dave, whenever he gets a big enough place. Time for you to take it easy."

"But will you have room? I mean for Uncle Wally and Bob and Aunt Jean and all their families and kids' kids?"

"They're not coming, Dad!" Carl said a bit derisively. "They came for Grandpa. What would they come for now?"

Of course! Jeff thought, angry at himself. How stupid! Why would he have assumed that the only change in Father's Day would be that his father wouldn't be there?

Just to be sure, he called Jean to ask her what she was doing for Father's Day.

"We'll go out to Dad's grave in the morning," she said. "It's so nearby. And then Ken's dad is coming over. And Pat and Amy and their kids. I guess we'll be eight."

"We're going to Carl's," Jeff said.

"That's nice. The burden shifting generations. That's very nice."

"I guess," Jeff said.

"What's the matter?"

"I'll miss having us all together."

"We'll get together!" Jean said, as though chiding him for the thought. "We don't need the excuse of parents to get together."

But of course they did, Jeff thought as he hung up the phone. He knew he would have to be the one. Some summer weekend he'd invite everyone over. A new tradition. A Father's Day barbecue without Father's Day. Otherwise it would be just weddings and funerals.

It was the same story with Wally and Bob, except that Bob said what the other two probably felt.

"We're going to miss Dad terribly and all that," he told Jeff, "but Father's Day is going to be a lot less hectic without having two fathers to see. Edna's father is losing it, and it'll be nice just to go over and see him for a bit and not have to run down to your place. Not that I didn't enjoy seeing everybody, but it wasn't so convenient all those years having to go all the way down there. If you know what I mean."

Yes, Jeff knew what he meant. Like the father, the barbecue had been mostly an inconvenience. And the demise of both was mostly a relief.

But for Jeff, it had been a labor of love. One that he was finding it difficult to relinquish.

His wife Anna, whose own parents had died years earlier, was, as always, perceptive and blunt. "What it means," she said, "is that your father is really dead. And that takes some getting used to."

Indeed it did. Having nothing to do for Father's Day, nothing to plan, nothing to think about, left Jeff fidgety, like someone forced to sit for hours on a bench in an empty room. Nothing felt right. It was as though he had something important to do and couldn't remember what it was. Except that he knew what it was.

On Father's Day he and Anna took the cheesecake she had baked and the big bowl of fresh fruit he had cut up and drove over to Carl's house, which was about a half hour away. Dave was already there helping set up, and Carl said that Phil and Jenny and the kids were on their way.

"Just sit down outside," he told them as he relieved them of their contributions. "The kids are dying to see you. Everything's under control here."

Carl's wife Cindy looked busy in the kitchen with the hors d'oeuvres, so they just waved to her as they went out the back door into Carl's capacious backyard. Their grandson Spike and granddaughter Thalia were on the plastic swing set and squealed for them to come over.

Anna squeezed Jeff's hand. "Not so bad being a guest, is it?"

"It seems ..." Jeff searched for the word.

"Empty."

"You'll get used to it," she said.

While Jeff was pushing Thalia on the swing, Jenny and Phil arrived with their two kids, who came racing to the back.

Soon the four children were a self-sufficient swarm, and Jeff sat down on a folding chair with a can of beer. Anna had gone back into the house with Jenny to help in the kitchen ("It isn't Mother's Day," she pointed out), and Carl, Phil, and Dave were engaged in young-manly conversation around the grill. Which left the guest of honor momentarily on his own.

He briefly contemplated wandering over to the grill but stayed where he was, fighting off the peculiar sensation that he had died, and that life was going on without him.

As he watched the children race around the yard, it was as though they were his children, and

Wally's and Bob's and Jean's, and he was putting the steaks on the grill and sitting in that chair simultaneously, but at the same time was in neither place, was watching with his father's eyes from somewhere beyond this world, was one with his father, both of them the same person watching from nowhere as the children, going backwards, turned into him and Wally and Bob and Jean.

"You OK, Dad?" Dave asked, coming up from behind him and putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, yes, yes!" he said. "It's such a lovely day!"

"It must be hard to get through this first Father's Day without Grandpa."

"You miss him a lot?" Jeff said.

Dave nodded, taking a sip of beer. He looked at the children taking turns on the sliding pond. "It's like he's here, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes," Jeff agreed. "It's like he's here."

"I miss the others, too," Dave said. "Uncle Wally and Bob and Aunt Jean and all my cousins. We used to run around your backyard like that."

"And I used to run around Grandpa's," Jeff said. "With Uncle Wally and Bob and Aunt Jean and Billy and Nancy and Brenda and Vicky and a whole lot of other people we don't see anymore, haven't seen for years and years."

Jeff felt his voice trail off into memory, and for a moment the two of them just watched the children play. Dave put his hand back on his father's shoulders, and Jeff sat next to his grownup youngest child and felt the world move on.