

THE SCAR ON THE TOP OF MY FATHER'S HEAD was a puckered-up jagged line, like a wayward tributary of a mighty river. Near the scar was a square indentation, a half an inch in diameter, that was actually evidence of a bayonet entry. When we were younger, he would tell us his story of escape from Basmakhanien station. Then, Father would pull up his pant leg and show us the other scar where the bayonet had also entered. He was, according to my Aunt Rebecca, a "Leftover of the Sword," a derogatory term used to designate a survivor of the genocide. In my father's case, he was someone forever haunted by memories of the dead and dying. I wonder now whether he must have felt guilt at having survived. Was that why he could never really enjoy life and realize how lucky he was with such a wonderful wife and loving children?

When we were growing up, his rages would come and go. Sometimes he would be so understanding and speak so softly and sweetly, like the father we always dreamed about. At other times he would be very critical of us all and beside himself with anger. I tried to understand, but could never discover the reason for this split personality. It made for a very uncertain existence because, from day to day, we did not know how he would behave. To me, he was the master and commander of the torpedo station, blasting those who loved and cared for him deeply, as we all did. But he continued to carve big chunks out of the good feelings we had for him, seemingly oblivious to how he was hurting us all.

However, in the midst of the oceanic turmoil of our daily lives, there were islands of respite and happiness. In the 1950s, besides the family gatherings around the television set, my father and I would watch the Friday night fights together. We would cheer on our favorite boxers, among the greatest middleweights in boxing history: Carmen Basilio, Florentino Fernandez, Benny "Kid" Peret, Kid Gavilan, Rocky Castellani, and Pierre Langlois. We very much enjoyed our boxing nights and the camaraderie we shared.

After her operation in the early 1950s, Mom organized a camping trip to Clear Lake, California. While there, Dad pitched a tent and Mom cooked on a little camp stove. We kids had an absolute blast, exploring the environs, meeting new friends, and creating memories. My teenaged brother caused a sensation at a rock-and-roll party, dancing with a much older woman, much to the delight of my sisters, Janet and Lucy.

Most of the time Dad sat around bare-chested, catching the rays of the sun and seemingly at a loss as to what to do. We pleaded with our mother to please, please tell him to wear an undershirt, as he was so hairy. It was positively embarrassing to look at the long, luxurious hair growing out of his back.

This leads me to our trips to the San Francisco Zoo during that same period in our lives. Every other Sunday, or so it seemed, Dad would announce, "Let's go and visit our relatives at the zoo." By that he meant Monkey Island. When we got there, we would stand by him and observe "our relatives" grooming one another, or watching us, or tending to their young. There was absolutely no doubt in our minds, after seeing our father in the flesh and in full hairy mode, that those tiny, playful creatures on that man-made island across the moat from us were truly our relatives.

Another favorite place to visit on Sundays was Playland at the Beach. At that time, it was a ramshackle amusement park, now long gone but fondly remembered. Dad would head for his favorite gambling concession, while we children and Mom were left to our own devices. That was no problem. We got on rides, went into a house of mystery and enchantment with mirrors that distorted our bodies and faces, rode a slide that went on for a mile, sat on a large spinning device that would turn ever faster as we would fly off, rode giant tea cups, or climbed into racing cars and drove mercilessly while bumping other vehicles. It was a lot of fun! One memorable afternoon, Dad even went on the roller coaster by himself, just for the experience. We would swear, later, that he looked positively green as the roller coaster inched its way up to the heights before its speedy descent.

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