
Posted on Fri, Jun. 13, 2003

In the Mix | Every father a 'Big Daddy'

By Dan DeLuca
Inquirer Columnist

In the 1997 movie *Affliction* - an anti-Father's Day flick if there ever was one - a towering James Coburn looks down at his son, played by Nick Nolte, and barks: "Everything you know comes from me."

It's a pretty frightening declaration, considering that Coburn's character is a monstrous drunk, up there in the annals of evil fathers in film and literature with Robert De Niro's stepdad in *This Boy's Life* and Mikal Gilmore's brutally abusive father in *Shot in the Heart*. When Nolte kills Coburn and lights his body on fire - after telling him "I love you, too" - we feel the son is entirely justified, considering what he's been through.

I bring up these big bad daddies because patrimony - the idea that no matter how far we run or how we try to fight it, a great deal of what we know, and who we are, comes from dear old Dad - is also at the heart of the subject at hand: a self-published book by Big Daddy Graham called *Last Call... Remembering My Dad* (Smile Books, \$11.95).

Graham is an unlikely literary memoirist. The longtime local comedian is a sandpaper-voiced presence on sports-talk radio station WIP-AM (610), not an outlet renowned for its sensitivity. But *Last Call* is a short, sweet surprise. It's an anecdotal recollection of his father, Al, a Lithuanian American blue-collar, beer-drinking West Philadelphia guy who worked at the Navy Yard and never said too much and, when he died in 1977, left next to nothing behind.

Nothing at all, in fact, as Graham writes, other than a deck of playing cards that came with a box of Dutch Masters Cigars, a Father's Day gift from Big Daddy more than 30 years ago. "Not a book or a record. Not a watch or a ring. Absolutely nothing," Graham writes. "The only proof of his existence at all is this set of Dutch Masters Playing Cards. Occasionally I play solitaire with them."

What *Last Call* is really about is a son trying to retrieve some part of his father - and thereby, some part of himself - before it's too late, and gone forever. "I realized that the few memories I had of him were becoming very cloudy," Graham, whose real name is Gudonis, writes in his intro. "It dawned on me that soon there was going to be a good chance that I wasn't going to remember anything at all about him."

So Graham started to fill a notebook with one-page memories intended as "proof that he even existed at all," and in the process, unpretentiously encountered some sizable ideas. "I hope some day my kids read it," he writes. "My dad has been dead their entire lives and is there a chance that this book about a man they never met would help them know me better? Is that even important?"

Though he can recall ever having only one real conversation in his entire life with his father - it was basically about what a pain Mrs. Gudonis was, and son told father to lighten up - Big Daddy's father's legacy still sneaks up on him, when he catches himself yelling at his daughter as she plays softball, just as his dad did to him at Little League, or when his itchy posterior reminds him of all those cheap back-scratchers his father was always breaking.

But though they both spent too much time in dark bars looking for something they couldn't name, I can't say that Big Daddy's father and mine, who died in 1990, had that much in common. Al Gudonis fought in World War II in the Battle of the Bulge; my dad spent the big one at Army desk jobs in Mississippi and Utah, and, legend has it, sent his shirts home to my grandmother to be cleaned and pressed. (We DeLucas are all mama's boys.) Big Daddy writes that he never saw his father dressed in a suit and tie, while my dad, Camillo, was a man about town rarely seen without a white shirt, red tie and clip that bore the same nickname found on his vanity license plate: Duke.

But *Last Call* rang plenty of bells for me anyway, and gave me an excuse to get sentimental about the one subject that sons allow themselves to get sentimental about. I loved the part about how much Graham's father loved Frank Rizzo, for instance. "When he died, I felt like a little part of my Dad died again," Graham writes. For my father - who would

have turned 79 today and also celebrated his 51st wedding anniversary with my mother, Jane, on his lucky day, Friday the 13th - the analogous politician of dubious virtue was Richard Nixon, whose face still adorns the showerhead in the bathroom at my mother's house in Ventnor, N.J. Nixon's death, along with Frank Sinatra's, let me know that Duke was really gone for good.

Last Call is a slim volume - it takes maybe 45 minutes to read. But it's earned a spot on my short list of crucial stuff such as Philip Roth's memoir *Patrimony*, Bruce Springsteen's "Independence Day" and "My Father's House," the *Godfather* movies, Loudon Wainwright 3d's "Father and a Son," and Larry Brown's novel *Father and Son*. Not to mention all those Sinatra CDs. Stuff, that is, that makes me think about Duke, and who he was, and how much of what I know and who I am comes from him. Is that even important? You bet it is.

Contact columnist Dan DeLuca at 215-854-5628 or ddeluca@phillynews.com.