

STONEWALL BABY

Happy Father's Day

Musings on a father barely known and children barely imaginable from the new frontier of gay domesticity

by Will O'Bryan

So June is here, and I've yet another birthday to look forward to. They're beginning to rack up at a phenomenal rate. While 28 may not seem ominous to others, I'm sure I had a quasi-mid-life crisis during the winter.

As a matter of fact, I'm not even young enough to get into a Brother to Brother young men's meeting. Ouch. Maybe I can just settle into my rocking chair and chaperone a nice boys' tea dance—if only I can stay awake.

Everything is making me feel older this year. Father's Day is right around the corner. It will be my second since my father died. I feel my own mortality. It makes me think about having children myself, as I no longer am one, and I wonder what my father has contributed to my psyche.

My father's background was working-class, upstate New York, Irish-Catholic. It was an environment he wanted badly to escape. That's why he married my mother. She was the product of a pretentious, Swiss background and wanted something a little less stuffy.

Dad's desire to improve upon his own background was obvious around the house. It was he, not Mom, who taught me how to set a beautiful table including dessert forks, coffee spoons and well-folded linen napkins. He was no queen, but he liked formality. His military career allowed him to prance about in striking, stiff uniforms with a chestful of medals; white, green or navy, depending on the occasion. Though he hardly pranced. He moved more like a tank.

Of my parents, only he hit me, but only he ever asked for a good-night kiss. And when I told him I was gay, long after the divorce,

his only comment was that I should still have children. He then suggested I go about the task by marrying a bisexual female "swinger."

Somehow, despite his shortcomings as a father, he was a proud one. While I can't recall him ever telling one of us four offspring that he was proud of us, he often admitted that being a father was one of his great joys. We held a spot in his heart close to Pabst Blue Ribbon beer and W.C. Fields movies.

My happy memory of my father is crossing streets with him when I was tall enough to reach his mid-thigh. He would hold out his pointer and middle fingers as though he was about to make the Boy Scout oath. My little hand would wrap around those two fingers and I'd feel safe as we crossed together.

I inherited his old passports, a copy of *Cabaret*, some photos from Vietnam and a few other odds and ends. It's his advice to have children that haunts me, though.

When I figured out I was gay—when I was 12, roughly—I assumed children were out of my future. But today, when I see other gay men and lesbians building families that include more than cats, dogs and lovers, I realize I was being short-sighted. I'm left wondering what kind of father I would make.

Odds are, my child would be straight. What if he turned out to be an anti-intellectual jock? After

the natural hate that comes with puberty, would he still hate me? Would I embarrass him?

I can reluctantly imagine my daughter hesitating before bringing her fiancé home to meet her parents. Would I understand, or would I be militantly vocal, threatening not to pay for another semester of college?

My imagination also takes happy turns: my daughter's first home run or Sadie Hawkins dance; watching my son plant a tree or write a poem.

My friend Chris, a lesbian whom I've known for more than a decade now, is hellbent and determined to have a child. She's not insistent that it be my sperm, but it's my family jewels she's got her eye on. I feel bound to oblige.

These aren't the things I thought I'd be pondering when I sat alone in my teenage bedroom imagining my gay future. I thought I'd be worried about what to wear to Fire Island beach parties and what body hair would eventually surface and need to be waxed. But I've turned out to be not nearly as flamboyant as I'd assumed I would. I've never waxed anything; I planted a garden instead. I don't have whips and handcuffs in my closet; I

have dogs. I'm not tanned, and my hairline is receding. I can imagine myself a father more easily than I can imagine myself a go-go boy.

So here I sit, again following my life's parabola from one Stonewall anniversary to the next. Chapters are closing and opening faster than I can absorb them, and life continues to be fascinating for this gay man.

Some things have followed their foreseen paths. I'm working, I'm fairly settled, happily gay, and in a loving relationship (though I never could've foreseen that my particu-

lar Mr. X would grow a ponytail and start lighting patchouli incense to mark every hour).

And the world has changed. I remember staying up late just to watch Geraldo Rivera's report on "homosexuals" on *20/20*. At 13, I knew I was one of them, but I didn't know the party would slow down. I didn't know our fight would take us to this respectable place that would allow me to alter my future in ways that would've previously seemed taboo. But it has.

Despite Geraldo Rivera, lesbians and gay men have pulled conventional wisdom into their own domain. I don't need Rivera to tell me about my culture. I'm living and molding it as are all good citizen queers. We've made the world a much different place than we thought it might have been.

I can only hope that we won't become bourgeois. I'll be certain that hasn't happened if someday I can sit on Pioneer Courthouse Square with a baby stroller cocooning the child of my future imaginings and be confronted by a big topless bulldyke with a lavender mohawk and a pierced nipple. (In my future, I can't imagine anything so archaic as women still having to cover their breasts on sunny days.) She'll lean over, take a look and fawn. Then she'll wisely and slyly ask if the little tyke's mother is single.

Maybe there are happy Father's Days in store for me.



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