

Bus Stop

My father died in 1989. The bus arrived and took him away. Not in the realm of reality, of course. The bus came for him in a dream a few years later.

On that morning we stood in a line waiting. Guide ropes kept our column to the width of just a single person. Dad loomed ahead of me and I must have been a child, because I could not see much around his large bulky frame. The air turned cold, very cold. Despite the wind whipping around us, the smell of confections and the exhaust from tall buildings told me we were on the Busy Corner in Utica, my home town. But in the dream I couldn't see much of my surroundings.

A bus pulled up. Its door opened and the line began to creep forward. I began to trust that soon I'd be inside the comfortable womb of a heated conveyance. As we neared the curb I saw a rudimentary gate consisting of two horizontal boards that were now open to admit passengers. I didn't know why, but each person stopped at the gate for just a second, even though it was open, before climbing the steps into the bus. Dad shuffled up to the two boards and stopped, then moved forward.

Now I remembered where I had seen this hesitation at the gate. In church the priest and altar boys stopped for a second when crossing from the aisle through the railing onto the chancel of the altar. Almost like knocking on

heaven's door.

I stepped up to the gate. It slammed closed with a vicious *thwack*. I became angry and scared at once, but something deep in my soul prevented me from trying to scoot under the boards or crash through them. I did not want to be left there alone.

"That's my Dad," I shouted, to no one in particular. "I have to be with him."

My father stopped, turned and retraced the three steps he had advanced beyond the gate.

"I guess this is it, then," he said. "I'll see you when you get there."

"Why can't I go with you?" I cried.

He shrugged his shoulders. Good old Dad always accepted what was expected of him.

He reached out, but was too far away to touch me. He turned and walked to the bus. He climbed the stairs and soon became invisible to me. The bus pulled away. I scanned the windows, straining to see him. When I didn't, I hoped he was demanding the bus driver come back for me. But Dad was never a very demanding person.

Now first in line, I looked up and down the street. Traffic increased as I stood there. A furniture delivery truck from a local department store edged toward me as it came near the curb, bumped up over it and sped past on the sidewalk. The truck's rear view mirror sliced the air above my head as it coursed its way south for fifty feet and dropped into Bleecker Street, where it made a sharp right turn and sped west toward the Hotel Utica. I felt exposed. Since he no longer stood in front of me, the large form of my father ceased to cast a shadow of protection over me. And eventually his influence would begin to wane.

I was disappointed in the dream to be on my own, but I never for a moment doubted his best intentions and hope for my success, his love for me. As I stood waiting for the next bus, my thoughts roamed through the life Dad

and I had together. And at my young age in the dream, I found myself wondering why he had stopped kissing me.

At age 4 or 5 I'd sit down on his lap and kiss him on the cheek before going to bed. I can still feel his rough five o'clock shadow and smell the soap he used to wash up at night before coming home from work at the newspaper. And I remember the evening he put his hand out to stop me and said. "You're a big boy now, we should shake hands, not kiss." So that's what we did. At ages five and thirty-seven, we shook hands before bed each night. I didn't care about the kiss, I missed the closeness and the smells.

And he never said he loved me. It wasn't a phrase someone from his stiff-necked Irish background was allowed to use. I wondered if he believed you could only love God, and if so, what did he say to my mother? He was not a hard man. He was gentle and long suffering. He was humble and he was certainly pure, or at least took mighty steps to be so. He instructed his boys to lead pure lives. We were never allowed to see a movie indexed by the Legion of Decency beyond "A - Morally UNobjectionable."

After the night we began shaking hands, he never gave me a hug. Today I and my wife and adult children hug all the time and say we love each other. That phrase ends just about every long distance telephone call from the kids. "Love ya, Dad, Mom." This has come about because when the kids were in early high school, a time when they would have rather kissed a dead walrus, I forced them into hugs and I always said, "I love you." I don't remember how many years, but it probably took a few before they returned the sentiment. They may have been in their last years of college. But I never gave up. I had come from a family that certainly loved one another but showed no outward expression of it. I didn't want to produce another family with the same

handicap. I didn't want my children standing on a bus stop some day thinking I'd never told them I loved them or allowed them to hug me.

In his last year I was able to tell my father I loved him. It seemed to make him uncomfortable. About six months later, as he lie in Faxton Hospital at the very end, I wanted to repeat it, but I did not. I wish I had. And kissed him, too.

As for the dream of the two of us at the bus stop on the Busy Corner, I don't remember how it ended. I guess I'm still waiting there. It seems such a long time since he climbed aboard and disappeared into his bus to heaven. In the years since I have built a good life, and I believe a spiritual walk that worked for me. It was seeded by my father, and made with God's grace and my own travails and insights, plus the inestimable help of everyone who ever touched me, whether they casually brushed by me or married me.

Each of us reaches the head of the line in life when parents and mentors pass beyond, leaving us to stand more exposed to the world than we did before. We get used to it. We learn to trust our own insights and judgments. We get on with it. We grow up. We grow old. One morning we'll look down the street and see the bus coming our way.

"I'll see you when you get there," he said. I hope it comes true.

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