

Perfection

I was taken to the orphanage on Christmas night. We had started off for supper at Aunt Sue's, making our way over almost deserted roads. Dad drove us through the dark, the tires crunching on frozen snow as the old Ford slowly pushed beams of yellow light ahead of us into the grey emptiness. I was already missing the Christmas toys I'd left at home, but was hungry for the cold turkey sandwiches my aunt served each year.

My ten year old big brother was in the front seat and I was in the back, the normal arrangement to keep us separated when we got tired and grouchy toward the end of a long day. I asked Dad at least three times what was under the old blanket covering the large box beside me, but he didn't answer, except to tell me to leave it alone. Halfway to Aunt Sue's house, Dad abruptly turned the car left up a long steep driveway, surprising my brother and me. In a few moments we came to a tall brick building, blackened with age. Above us lights shone from dozens of windows, all against a black sky holding a billion stars. Before I could say, "Where are we?" my father hopped out of the car, reached in back, grabbed the cardboard carton and, laughing, threw the blanket over my head. I pulled it off just in time to see a box full of gaily wrapped Christmas presents carried up the steps of St. Joseph's Orphanage. I admit being disappointed I wasn't getting one more present on that festive day. Selfishly, I felt the same way each year when we made the delivery. I suppose I should have been happy on those Christmas nights to not be dropped off with the gifts.

My father had a big heart. In addition to the city's orphanages, he had a life-long devotion to the St. Vincent de Paul store for the needy in Utica. My brothers and I would joke, "Hide it, or Dad will give it away to St. Vincent's!" As teens, we cornered him and made him promise he'd check with us before taking anything down to the store. Sometimes, he made assumptions about what we boys no longer needed. He was the tidy sort, unlike his sons. I have to say my Dad was a pretty selfless man. He was grateful for everything the world provided him,

working all his life, scrimping and not saving much, preferring to give it away.

More than just money, my father often gave his time and his help. At the newspaper, he worked with a young fellow named Don, whose wife suffered from post partum depression after the birth of twin girls. One afternoon, at wits end, she put the babies down for a nap and wrote a note saying it was either her or the babies. She didn't want to kill them. Don found her body when he came home from work. He couldn't imagine how he would care for two girls and had thoughts of following his wife to her grave. My father spent each evening with Don over the space of a few weeks, helping with the infants. Dad sat listening to the young father cry it out as he slowly got some courage back. Years later, Don told me my father saved his life.

As Dad got older, he began to show a few flaws in his character. The man I thought was perfect turned out to be human. As I gained in years, feeling splendidly faultless myself, I noticed his shortcomings more than mine ... until I survived my own children's adolescent behaviors. Anyone who raises teenagers and still feels above reproach just wasn't listening.

As he grew more philosophical, I felt comfortable asking him where his sense of giving came from. I thought he would deny it or, if not, he'd mention his religion or maybe a mentor from long ago who had influenced him.

Dad took a moment and then answered me. "My father," he said. "He was a very generous man." This surprised me. From what I knew of Grandpa, he would not have often set a good example.

I have sometimes wished my heart was a big as my father's, but I seldom compared myself to him. We were two different people, and besides, I would have lost. He set a good example for his sons, but he wasn't perfect, and that allowed me to not expect perfection of myself. I sometimes walked in his footsteps and other times a good distance to the side. But I hope to have set an example a few times in my life. Those who live with me have seen my warts. So did my Dad, but he laughed and threw a blanket of love over them.

David Griffin copyright 2008, 2012

The Windswept Press
Murrells Inlet, South Carolina

www.windsweptpress.com