



## The Tent

*"The weekend before his fishing trip, Dad would drag the tent out to our front yard and begin to erect his beloved canvas and pole temporary home."*

My sister and I walked out of his apartment, arm in arm, with his words "I am the luckiest man in the world," still ringing in our ears. We had just said goodbye for possibly the last time. Dad held each of us close, and told us how much he loved us. He had come to terms with the end of his life. My sister and I had not. We were weeping openly before we got half way down the hall to the elevator--two grown women on the outside, two little girls on the inside, scared and agonizingly sad. My father was in the end stages of Parkinson's disease and, realistically, we knew that we probably would never again see him alive.

We got in the car, and began our journey which would eventually lead us to our separate homes in separate cities. But this day we were together, living in the same space, breathing the same air, as we recounted our lives with our dad.

We began our "do you remember when's" before we hit the outskirts of Santa Fe. Pretty soon peals of laughter replaced the tears. We couldn't tell one story about Dad without laughing. Our 6'4" father was big in stature, and just as big in personality. He always had a joke—most of the time off color, a little ditty mostly off key, or a story which entertained anyone within hearing distance.

He had a horrible memory for names and couldn't remember the name of his best friend most days. I have attributed my out-going personality to my dad. At an early age, I would be sent into a room, hand extended, saying "Hi my name is Cindy and yours is...?" This clever ploy was designed to elicit the name of the person for my father's information, without making the other person suspect that my dad could not remember their name.

But mostly what I remembered was my dad's enthusiasm for life. He had a way of making life feel uncomplicated, and "normal." Very rarely was there drama in my home. It took me many years to realize that our norm was really not the norm at all. And believe me, I have cherished and held tight to that "ab-normalcy" throughout my life.

My father was devoted to his family and friends alike. He was warm, he was kind and he was approachable. He was the type of dad that many of my friends wanted, but never had in their own home, their own lives.

I remembered standing in my front lawn one summer afternoon, a gawky 13 year-old, new to the world of "teenager." I was in my new mint green shorts, cute matching top, and just beginning to acquire the figure that every prepubescent girl dreams about. The croquet course was set and at the ready in our front yard. One of the neighborhood boys, on whom I had a major crush, came strolling up our driveway.

“Hey,” I said in my best flirty voice, “Wanna play some croquet?”

“Yeah, okay,” he hesitated a little. “Do you think your dad will play with us?”

A young girl’s dream date was thwarted by my father. My would-be boyfriend really wanted to play with my dad, not with me. It wasn’t just my neighborhood crush though; everyone wanted to “play” with my father.

I remembered my father and his fishing buddies’ annual fishing trip every Memorial Day weekend. The week before this much anticipated event took place was spent in preparation. My dad provided the “sleeping quarters” for him and his fellow fishermen. He had somewhere, somehow acquired a sixteen man tent. It was large enough for the ten-plus men who would inhabit it—but it was a veritable monolith to us kids.

The weekend before his fishing trip, Dad would drag the tent out to our front yard and begin to erect his beloved canvas and pole temporary home. Since this was the one and only time during the year that the “home” was used, it desperately needed to be aired out before the trip.

As the tent took shape, the neighborhood kids would show up—“build it and they will come.” They lined the driveway and front porch, “ooing” and “ahhing” as the tent grew taller and bigger. My beanpole father, dripping with sweat from the exertion of this laborious task, would shake his head at the PG-rated audience, as if in disbelief that they were there. Of course they were “there.” The Big Top was going up at the Charlton’s.

And then the directives to my mother would ensue. My father, on his way out the door to work, would instruct my mother.

“Don’t let the kids play in the tent.”

My mother, eyebrows raised to her scalp line, would sarcastically intone, “Yes dear. Oh and I’ll cure world hunger, bring about world peace and reconcile the national budget too.”

Dad would shake his head, the smile working at the corners of his mouth, and off he’d go. The minute the car left the driveway, the kid homing device would go off all over the neighborhood beckoning every child from 5 to 15 to our front yard. Tent games were about to begin. And every afternoon, my dad would arrive home from work, only to find the neighborhood kids and my sisters and me under The Big Top. He’d sneak up to the tent flap, stick his head in and growl,

“What are you doing in here?”

“Hi Dad, wanna play circus?”

Each kid would stop in mid-action waiting in hopeful anticipation of his answer. Because my dad was the biggest kid of all, chances were good that he’d join right in....or at the very least not kick us out of his rank smelling tent.

In all of his efforts to be authoritative and scary, he managed only to be everyone’s biggest and best toy. He could “yabba dabba doo” just like Fred Flintstone, and every time someone asked him how he was, he would say “Grrreat,” just like Tony the Tiger. He was silly and fun, and he was earnest and wise. Friends and family sought him out for advice and help. They borrowed money from him and paid it back. They admired him, they respected him, and they, just like his children, adored him.

Dad's love for nature was contagious. I can't imagine growing up in my household without noticing the buds on trees, the "greening up" of the vegetation around us, or the brilliant reds, blues and purples of the New Mexico sunsets. My sisters and I could locate the North Star, Orion, and the Big Dipper practically before we could recite our ABCs.

I remembered Dad waking my mom, my sisters, and me in the early hours one summer morning to witness a meteor shower. We all stood outside on our lawn, in the cool air, warm in our jammies and warmed by his love, as the cloud free, endless black sky exploded with magnificent celestial fireworks.

He taught me to fish, to ride my bike and to respect my friends as well as my enemies. He never spoke ill of anyone, and told me once when I was in high school and feeling pretty "high" about myself, and no doubt dissing someone, that kindness was the greatest attribute a person could have. I got the message without feeling put down.

He was a gift, I was blest.

My sister and I parted ways at the airport. She was flying home, and I was driving the short distance back to my house. We clung to each other crying as if the pain of losing Dad would never cease. Wiping our tears, I asked her if she was okay. She asked me the same, and then together we said, "I'm grrreat!"

I got in my car and headed for home to my own family. I wished my kids had had more time to spend with my father. But I knew in my heart that their education of this great man would not end just because he had. He is such a part of me, his stories, his figures of speech, and even his goofy jokes, that my children cannot help but be touched by him every day. And in the end, I know that they are as blest as I am.

When my father died on June 14, 2007, the world lost one of its best and brightest lights. The spectacular meteor show that I witnessed for 51 years simply faded away, never again to light up my sky. My tears fell on the upward curve of my lips; I was crying and smiling at the same time. I was lucky and I knew it, because there simply was no better man, no better person, no better dad.

**—By Cindy Charlton**