My Father's FBI File

Author(s): Ralph Keyes

Source: *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 70, No. 4, Johnny Appleseed and Other Legacies (Fall 2012), pp. 731-741

Published by: Antioch Review Inc.

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7723/antiochreview.70.4.0731

More Legacies

My Father's FBI File

BY RALPH KEYES

Like so many fathers in the 1950s, mine lived on the outskirts of our family. He worked a lot, traveled at times, and didn't have much to say when home. Mom was the parental parent. She discussed our day, put Band-Aids on our cuts, and oohed and ahhed over our finger painting.

During the summer Dad would occasionally dig out his flat old baseball glove and play catch with his three sons. Sometimes he'd drive us to a park for a picnic. My brothers and sister and I once took turns tickling our father as he dozed on the sofa. Without opening his eyes Dad made a game of trying to catch us with a swooping hand as we screamed and giggled and dashed out of reach. But that sort of thing is rare in my memory. I just don't remember a whole lot about Dad during my childhood. To me he felt present but not accounted for.

Tall, skinny, stoop-shouldered, my father was a genuine ninety-eight-pound weakling. His soft-spoken, deliberate manner made him seem better suited to teaching college students than protecting his family. A son couldn't even imagine saying about him: "My old man could whip your old man!"

This wasn't what I had in mind for a father. What I had in mind was a guy who took up more space. Someone who could hit home runs. Stare down the bad guys. Handy with a hammer, handy with his fists. I wanted a model; someone to emulate when it came time to stick up for myself. I'd been hoping for Superman, but had to settle for Clark Kent.

A single episode stands out in my memory as an exception to Dad's mild-manneredness. When I was seven we visited a museum

---

This essay expands upon the author's introduction to *Sons on Fathers* (HarperCollins, 1992).

that had a driving simulator. My older brother and I couldn't wait to try it out. But a pot-bellied guard pushed us aside, saying we were "too small" to get behind the wheel. He then escorted a shapely blond to the seat we'd been denied and showed her how to shift gears. My father went over and talked to the guard. Dad spoke in such low tones that I had to strain to catch his words. I thought I heard him say, "There was no need for you to be so rude to my children." That was a shock. My dad! Sticking up for his kids!

I don't recall this sort of thing happening very often, however. Mostly what I recall was feeling that being my father's son made me easy pickings for little Lex Luthors. A Quaker convert, Dad had embraced pacifism after Hiroshima. To me that looked like passive-ism: letting life have its way with you. Not his second son. My childhood focused on becoming the man my father wasn't. This was not just a matter of being the two-fisted son of an anorexic pacifist. Since my father was chronically late, I tried to be on time. Dad moved slowly, I moved fast. He spoke softly, I spoke up. And, of course, I fought whoever challenged me. The world had to be shown that at least one of Scott Keyes's three boys would put up his dukes. This meant I lost a lot of fights. But losing fights seemed like a small price to make the point that I was no pushover; like my dad.

That point got made. I reveled in the many times pals complimented me on not being a sissy like my father and my brothers. Fighting was only part of it. There was also shoplifting to be tended to, school-skipping, and carousing late at night.

One night during high school I knelt before our toilet bowl emptying my stomach of beer. Dad stood by in his bathrobe. He speculated that I probably had "a touch of the flu." Today I doubt that my father really believed this. His words more likely were an act of grace. At the time I thought he was a sucker.

My mother was a different matter. She seemed onto me. Mom and I fought our way through my adolescence. During one argument our words grew so heated that Mom said she just didn't *like* me. Nothing like that ever happened with my dad. There was no apparent hostility between us. We never exchanged words. Our relationship wasn't that active. I wish it had been.

As I emerged from adolescence and took an interest in current events, our relationship picked up a bit. Now we could discuss Adlai Stevenson's political prospects, or the plight of Negroes in Mississippi. In time we settled into a genial relationship if not a close one—

more like cordial boarders in a rooming house than father and son. For years the most vivid image I had of my father was of him reaching out to shake hands when I'd come home to visit, always keeping an arm's length between us. Of course I stuck my own hand right back. I might have wanted him to be different, but I also might have wanted to be different myself.

The evidence of my father in me was becoming unmistakable. As an adult, I could no longer be counted on to be on time. Friends asked me to speak up. Fighting each and every challenger came to seem more absurd than essential. No matter how hard I'd resisted the inevitable, there was little doubt who I was becoming: my father's son. To understand myself I first had to understand him.

In letters home I told Dad that I'd like to get to know him better. During my next visit he followed me about the house recounting one story after another from his childhood. Dad told me about being raised by a destitute single mother who sometimes switched his legs until blood oozed. He said wearing trousers to school that she'd repaired with different-colored patches made him feel like a circus clown. My father told me about delivering scores of newspapers before sunup during high school, and how he'd tried unsuccessfully to publish stories under the pen name Winfield Scott. After high school he'd hitchhiked around western Pennsylvania and West Virginia on behalf of the Literary Guild, checking into hotels knowing that he could check out only if he sold some book club subscriptions. At one point Dad's boss suggested he travel to State College, home of Pennsylvania State University. "Them professors might buy some books," the man said. My father took his advice and ended up enrolling at Penn State, paying his way by waiting on tables, tending furnaces, and continuing to sell books.

After college, during Pittsburgh's devastating 1937 flood, Dad did relief work for forty-eght hours straight before collapsing on a Salvation Army cot. Even though he was willing to fight Nazis during World War II, the Army concluded that my father's 6-foot, 125-pound frame was too frail for military duty. Instead he became a civilian air raid warden, donning a white metal helmet while making sure no light was escaping from residents' windows during blackouts. Later he picketed a barbershop that wouldn't cut the hair of black customers, then had his hair cut by a barber who would. After congratulating this barber, he was told, "What are you talking about? I don't cut niggers' hair." My father had picketed the wrong place.

Why was he telling me these stories I asked? Dad said he was just trying to let me know him better, as I'd requested.

Watching her husband talk with their son this way was hard on my mother. That role used to be hers alone. By tradition she was my parents' spokesperson. Mom dealt with this dilemma by taking charge. "Why don't you two guys go off by yourselves and talk?" she'd say heartily when we began a conversation. "You know, 'father and son.'" We did anyway.

One story Dad told me was about visiting his sister Leida in St. Louis as her marriage collapsed toward the end of World War II. Leida had married the man their mother chose for her, not the one she loved, and eight years later was suffering the consequences. While my father was there, Leida argued violently with her husband. Dad tried to intervene. His brother-in-law took off his glasses and challenged him to fight. Years later I found among Dad's papers an account he'd written about his confrontation with Leida's husband: "At this moment he was trembling and clenching his fists. I replied that this conversation wasn't doing anyone any good, that I had not come to St. Louis to become involved in a fight but neither was I running away from one. My sister begged me to go home, saying that he had a gun and a knife in the house and that he would kill me. I told her not to worry, that I could take care of myself." As Dad later told me, taking care of himself involved finding his brother-in-law's gun after he'd gone to bed, breaking it down, and hiding the pieces.

I got better acquainted with my father in the course of our conversations, but not half as well as I did by poking about in the records of his life that are now stored in our basement. Along with softspokenness and an indifference to time, another trait Dad passed along to me is a reluctance to throw anything away. Just steps below our dining room are trunks, cartons, manila envelopes, file folders, banker's boxes, and shopping bags stuffed with documentation of my father's life, and that of his packrat mother, Edith. This family archive includes Dad's draft card, neatly inscribed "4-F" in fountain pen ink. The letters he regularly wrote Edith while selling books are still tucked into envelopes with return addresses such as *The Traveler's Hotel* in Grove City, Pennsylvania, *The Buckhannon Hotel* in Buckhannon, West Virginia, and *The Madeira Hotel* in Morgantown, West Virginia. Stories written by "Winfield Scott" have come to rest in our basement, along with pictures of my father in the black and white gown of an Episcopal choirboy and a scrap of notebook paper on which was scribbled in a

schoolboy's hand, "I tried to be a good boy. Good-Boy."

This note was written about the time Dad's mother left his father, Sherman Keyes. Dad was four, his sister eight. Eventually their parents divorced. Sherman then started a sand and gravel business, married a cousin, and raised four notably normal children. Since Edith hadn't consented to the divorce she told her children that their father was living in sin in an incestuous relationship with his cousin.

Perhaps if his father had been around more when he was a boy, Dad might have become a more assertive, possibly even a punctual adult. But would he have gone to college? Only one of his four half-siblings did. Not that Sherman opposed the idea. Higher education just was low on his list of priorities. "Some of us have to use our backs instead of our heads," Sherman once wrote his son Scott, on the letterhead of his *Builders Supply Company: Shovel Excavating, Washed Sand and Gravel*. Edith, on the other hand, was determined that her two children get the higher education she lacked. Both of them did.

During a meeting of Penn State's Social Problems Club that Dad chaired, a voluptuous young honey-blond sat down beside him. Having her big blue eyes gaze up at him so raptly destroyed my father's concentration. His club duties seemed beside the point. "My speech to them," he later wrote, "was it boggled? What did I say? What does it matter? All that matters is that you sat next to me, and life was flowing from you into me."

These words are excerpted from a "novel" my father wrote when he was twenty-eight. It actually is a thinly disguised memoir. This typescript is now archived in our basement. Like its author, the book's protagonist is a poverty-stricken product of a broken home who travels about selling book club subscriptions. Eventually this man enrolls at Pennsylvania State University where he takes up with a sultry bohemian from Philadelphia who's come to a meeting chaired by him. After the meeting ends, the young woman sticks around to chat a bit with the meeting's chair. She'd heard he was interested in Plato. So was she. Might she borrow his copy of *The Republic*?

In real life this was eighteen-year-old Charlotte Shachmann, known to her friends as Chet. From that evening on, Scott and Chet were inseparable. They must have been a striking couple: she short, ethnic, gregarious, he tall, WASPy, reserved. By the time I knew my father he was balding and slouched. His resemblance to George

McGovern was noted by many. In his twenties, however, Dad looked more like Gregory Peck. His long face had neatly chiseled features, even eyebrows, and thick dark hair that edged down his forehead in a neatly etched widow's peak.

Since he was nearly a foot taller than Chet, Scott had to bend low for their first kiss. Later he described that kiss in his "novel":

> You slipped into my arms as if God had with exquisite care fashioned you for them, so perfectly were we embraced; and our lips met. And you brought my face down and kissed my eyelids, caressing my face until once more our lips found each other. Never, if I live through a thousand incarnations, will I forget that moment.
>
> On Sunday nights, when we used to go to the Sandwich Shop for supper, I wonder if you know the utter delight it gave me to walk in with you, to sit across the table from you, to be with you; the thrill of pleasure; did you feel the same way? When you were reading to me, often I never could follow the sense of the words, lost in the rapture of watching you, your lips forming the words, words and lips that I soon would smother with my own.

Dad's manuscript is filled with lovestruck passages such as these, supposedly excerpted from his protagonist's journal. Over time, however, the man's entries shift in tone. They become obscure, evasive, abstract—concerned more with Adolf Hitler's rise to power than the sweetness of his girlfriend's lips. In the denouement, she returns his class key.

> If your kiss had brought me delight that first afternoon, what shall I say of the last kiss, when you seemed to press your whole soul into mine; and sat for a moment in my lap, stroking my hair; then, with a little choking in your throat, unclasped the chain from your neck, slipped the key into my hand, kissed my forehead, and, starting up from me, ran quickly up the stairs into your room and locked the door.

The novel's protagonist then moves to a distant city, where he wanders the streets in despair, half-hoping a car will run him over. This mirrors my father's life. After leaving Penn State, he succumbed to Edith's pleading and joined his mother in her dreary Pittsburgh apartment. There she lectured her son by the hour about how he could live his life better. Dad later told me that the many years he'd spent tuning out his mother's hectoring made it hard for him to pay full attention during any conversation at all. While sharing quarters with Edith he spent as much time as possible drinking beer in a tavern across the street.

Unbeknownst to him, Chet was mired in her own travail. After graduation she'd gone to New York to study social work, learn guitar, act in plays, pose for artists, sell *The Daily Worker*, and write poems

in the tiny walkup studio where she lived alone. There her depression mounted. Three years after she returned his class key, Chet wrote Scott to ask how he was doing. Scott wrote right back. A few guarded exchanges followed. Scott then sent Chet his novel with its unmistakable passion for her. She responded with some thoughts about the book's narrative structure. He said he loved her. She asked what love is. He reminded her of their Penn State passion. "Don't forget," she replied, "that our love was a compound of music, Plato, youth, and a poverty so gay no wealth could even compare with it. . . . I'd say it was about perfect and deserves to be handled no more than a rose pressed in a book would be, lest the leaves fall apart."

That's how their exchanges go: his passionate, hers circumspect. Dad's letters are signed, "Love, Scott," Mom's "Goodnight now," or "That's all," or simply, "Chet." Dad raises the topic of marriage. Mom changes the subject. Dad proposes. Mom demurs. Dad presses for a response. "Yes, let's go ahead," Mom writes. The next day she apologizes: "I wrote 'Let's go ahead,' being tired of indecision, and forgot to observe that it sounded flat." Her response was honest. Dad's was blinded by passion. He saw only mutual fervor in their renewed relationship. Scott wrote Charlotte's parents to tell them about "the deep feeling that exists between Chet and me." They set a wedding date. Mom suggested postponing the date. Dad tore up her letter and returned the pieces. Two months later the two were husband and wife. They spent the next forty-two years together until Chet died of lung cancer at sixty-six.

It wasn't always easy. In addition to the stresses and strains of any marriage theirs had a tense political backdrop. In 1951 the Federal Bureau of Investigation received an anonymous letter from State College, Pennsylvania, where my father taught economics at Penn State. Apparently a neighbor of ours, this tipster thought the FBI should investigate the many meetings that were taking place in our home. His typed letter was signed "A Patriot."

This letter was only one of several the FBI received alerting them to the political activities of my parents, Dad's in particular. I discovered this after submitting a Freedom of Information request for any files they might have gathered about my father. Eventually, a two-inch stack of documents showed up in our mailbox. Its contents covered nearly two decades, from the early 1950s, when Dad was active in

Pennsylvania's Progressive Party, to the late 1960s when he was being considered for a United Nations consultancy.

The most intriguing material in my father's FBI file was a write-up of an agent's extensive interview with him in 1955. My father had told this agent that he would be happy to discuss his own political views and activities, but not those of anyone else. While denying that he'd ever been a communist, Dad admitted that there were occasions when he might have cooperated with communists. His major concerns, however—as a Quaker and a pacifist—had to do with world peace. Later he reviewed the agent's report of their conversation and confirmed its accuracy. He refused to sign this document, however. The man it portrayed seemed thoughtful, candid, and courteous. Reading the FBI agent's report half a century later made me proud to be its subject's son.

To celebrate their fortieth wedding anniversary, my siblings and I brought our parents back to Philadelphia, where they were married in 1938. As usual, Mom's exuberance dominated our gathering. Dad said little, though he was clearly pleased to be feted. Both told us repeatedly how they'd courted, broken up, got back together, then married almost spur-of-the-moment in the chambers of Philadelphia's mayor.

Dad was retired by now. Retirement agreed with him. As an economist and city planner his favorite topics of conversation had been things like regional development compacts and the need for coordinated national planning policies. Such topics interested his children about as much as grain futures in Saskatoon. On reflection, I'm not sure how much they interested him. Because soon after he retired from teaching at the University of Illinois, Dad put his planning books in storage and began writing poetry. In addition to composing and reciting poems he took long trips with my mother and sister in an Airstream trailer, became a Democratic precinct committeeman, and spearheaded a successful drive to save a historic building from the wrecker's ball in Champaign. Best of all, he relaxed. My father seemed to be enjoying himself. If his career never particularly inspired me, Dad's retirement did. Yet the change was so stark that it concerned me. Didn't he miss the work to which he'd devoted most of his adult life? Not really, Dad told me. He was proud of what he'd done, but happy to let it go. Even as a young man he'd wanted to write poetry, but became a city planner to make a better living and—this surprised me—because planning felt

more "masculine" than poetry.

It became hard to remember that I had once thought of my father as bloodless and spineless. The mildness I'd once mistaken for passivity now looked more like quiet self-possession. Also integrity. Dad did nothing for effect, partly because this would have violated his sense of honor, partly because he simply didn't know how. My father lacked guile.

After Mom and Dad visited Philadelphia, that city's right-wing mayor Frank Rizzo sent them a small replica of the Liberty Bell with a congratulatory letter. I'm sure Rizzo's staff mailed dozens like them every week. Nonetheless, Dad wrote Rizzo—with whom he could not have agreed less politically—to thank him for his thoughtfulness. At one time this would have struck me as pretty pathetic: thanking a Neanderthal like Frank Rizzo for his form letter and tacky souvenir. Now it impressed me. My father had the grace to thank someone he considered a political pariah for a small gesture that touched him.

Rizzo's little Liberty Bell is now part of our basement archive. So is a small box housing my parents' wedding rings. A few years after Mom died, Dad gave me those rings with trembling fingers and some choked words about how much they'd meant to him. My father must have told me a hundred times about the day he met my mother in 1932. As he repeated again and again, "I fell in love with your mother that day and didn't stop for forty-eight years." When Dad told me this, his vocal chords usually seized up. This happened to him a lot. While discussing something he cared about deeply—world peace, poetry, his wife—my father's voice tended to tremble. I suffer from the same affliction. According to Dad his father did, too. He thought this voice-trembling trait might be genetically linked. Perhaps it is.

As much as I missed my mother, the best years my father and I spent together were the ones after she died. Partly this was because we now could talk directly, with no intermediary. Partly it was due to the fact that without Mom's effervescent personality as a buffer, Dad became more outgoing. He took part in poetry slams, usually the oldest poet participating. He bought a microphone-equipped boom box to prepare for these readings. After concluding that the vegetarian cookbook *Diet for a Small Planet* had ruined potluck suppers at the Friends Meeting for Worship, Dad broadened his social circle. He made new friends of both sexes, but women mostly (his "in-group" my father called them).

He began to date. Dad bought a statue of a nude man and woman embracing and displayed it prominently in the living room of his apartment. Next to that statue he placed *The Joy of Sex*. Dad confided that he hoped this little display might suggest to female visitors that he was not your average septuagenarian Quaker.

My father called me often now, to discuss his writing, ask what car I thought he should buy, and whether he ought to remarry. Our relationship came to feel like friendship. Its key lay in Dad's genes. The fact that he lived to the age of eighty-two allowed us to pass through perilous seas and end up—he old, I middle-aged—as close companions on a safe shore. In our final years together, I was comfortable enough in my father's presence to simply sit with him in silence. Although Dad was always several inches taller than I, he shrank so much in later years that we were able to share clothes. The first time he passed along some undershirts to me, it felt good to wear them: the fit and the idea.

During the final years of his life my father grew frail. When he came to visit us in Philadelphia, I thoughtlessly took him for a walk around our neighborhood. At one point he stumbled and fell. After Dad returned to Illinois, I called his doctor to ask how long he had to live. The doctor laughed. "Your father should have been dead ten years ago," he said.

Even though he didn't watch his diet or get much exercise, my father had a crafty approach to staying alive. What Dad did was create several projects he wanted to see through. Most involved poetry: self-publishing chap books, giving readings, producing tape cassettes. In the most ingenious ploy of all Dad began studying the year 1000 in preparation for a book he planned to write on that topic for publication in the year 2000, when he'd be ninety. He missed by only eight years.

After calling to tell me he had bladder cancer, Dad quickly added, "I'm not going to worry about it. If I'm going to go through this wonderful experience, I'll have to take it as it comes." During our next conversation Dad sounded weak. My brother Gene left his home in Nova Scotia to look in on our father. From Illinois Gene told me that he was clearly dying. Dad's oncologist said that if I planned to come see him, I'd best come soon.

When I arrived in his hospital room, my shrunken father was barely visible beneath the bedcovers. His grayish-white skin was pulled as taut as an apple's skin over his skull. Dad's chin was covered with tufts of white whiskers that the nurse had missed when she

shaved him. He had a breathing tube in his nose, an IV line snaking up one arm. Beneath his pale blue hospital gown was a puffy white diaper. Dad looked at me with wide-open eyes. He tried to say "hi," but couldn't. Instead, Dad took my hand and kissed it. His whiskers grazed the skin on the back of my hand. Over the next few hours Dad gestured several times that he wanted to hold hands. There was no time left for propriety.

During her rounds, the oncologist said, "Your doctor told me you were a tough old bird, Scott, and he was right." Dad seemed to nod and smile a little at that.

Gene and I read newspapers and magazines while keeping our bedside vigil. We took turns holding Dad's hand. Sometimes each of us held one. Often we held a magazine in one hand, our father's hand in the other. We took four-hour shifts around the clock, writing out a schedule: Ralph, 12–4; Gene, 4–8; Ralph 8–12; Gene, 12–4; Ralph, 4–8; Gene, 8–12.

Nurses scurried in and out, to change Dad's diaper, check his IV, test his blood pressure, do inhalation therapy. Toward the end Dad began pulling off the inhalation mask. I wondered if he was trying to tell us that it was time to let nature take its course. The most distinct thing my father said during the week I was there—on the last day of his life—was, "I can't go on like this." That message was very clear. I wish I'd heeded it. I wish I'd responded, "You don't have to, Dad." But this didn't occur to me.

A nurse dropped by who knew my father from a previous stay in the hospital. The nurse told us how much she thought of him. "A real gentleman," she said. This nurse later had to change Dad's diaper and check his blood pressure. As she did so, Gene and I stepped into the hallway for a breather. A few minutes later the nurse called us back. Dad had died in the midst of her tasks.

"He's one we'll remember," she said.