

*Winner of
The Will C. Jumper Competition*

ASHBY

*by
Elizabeth S. Schabel
S&H Senior*

When I was in first grade, the teacher asked all the children to say their father's names for her records: "Bob . . . Peter Jack Tom. Uh, teacher, can I talk to you alone. Ashby," I whispered.

You know, I can't remember ever kissing my father. But I can remember him saying to me nightly, "Li-zee-bethie, come here and let me give you a nice, cool kiss."

My father was a wonderful mixture of intelligence, extravagance, wit, and compassion, with a bit of anger thrown in. His familiar "gray-flannel-business-suit-Monday-through-Friday-attire" shifted down to a "white-shirt-bow-tie" for week-end casualness. Hairs "seven and eleven," as my mother had dubbed his sparse locks, were always slicked down. I can still see him standing, left hand tucked behind him in his belt, right hand holding a weak Old Fashioned in his S-etched glass, by the kitchen sink, pouring out his business tales with an excited voice, while my mother tried to pare potatoes around his body.

"Ashby, can't you move?" she'd ask, and he'd reply, "Oh Margreet, you know I couldn't do that."

If I concentrate, I can hear him pecking out "Moulin Rouge" on our big, black grand piano with its chipped ivory keys. He played the piano just like he typed—with one finger. Once in awhile, he would sing, much to everyone's dismay.

He loved politics. “Li-zee-bethie, you and I are going to write to Rockefeller tonight.” “Li-zeebeth, I’m going to write the president about that.” He would, too. And, he would anguish over these letters.

During one campaign, he taped a picture of Rockefeller across our living room picture window. He boasted that he had the biggest Rockefeller poster in Buffalo. My mother hated that picture. Not only was the room dark for the whole campaign, but she missed the beautiful fall colors out that window. When she complained, he just said, “Aw, Margreet, have a heart.”

His wit was contagious. When our dog, who he had named “General Wellington Smith” had been barking, he would stare fiercely into the dog’s soft brown eyes and say, “You can be stuffed, you know,” or “Tomorrow morning, the sausage factory for you.”

When he introduced my mother, he would add, “I met her in the steel mills—she has a strong back.” Mother would just say, “Oh, Ashby Smith,” in an exasperated voice.

Dad worked for Beech-Nut Lifesavers Corporation, and he always brought the “coffee-babyfood-peanut butter-gum-life saver” business home with him. Our dinner table talk consisted of his tales: “Watch out for a collar button in that peanut butter, Li-zee-beth. A fellow fell in the vat last week and all that was left of him was a collar button.”

Sometimes he struck a serious note. He hated to fire a man, and the pain showed on his face and in his voice as he spoke of the one facet of his business that he disliked. He always tried to point the individual in another positive direction, and many came to thank him later.

The men who worked for him really loved him. How else could he have persuaded Gene Raith, a burly German babyfood salesman, to paint the four high peaks of our house while Dad stood safely on the ground?

Dad tried to help my mother, but he never quite knew how. Because he traveled all week when we were young, he always offered to take the kids on Saturday afternoon, so Mom could rest. What he really did was to drop us all off at the movies while he went to his office. He never knew what movie

we saw. One Saturday, when I was about eleven, I sat with my four little brothers and sisters through two showings of "The Man with the Golden Arm."

Dad hated to be alone. "Margreet, come here a second." No matter what my mother was doing, she would have to come running. "Li-Zee-bethie, come ride with me to the post office." For some reason, his business letters always had to be mailed that very night, at the main post office. This was a long ride, especially when we lived in the Cleveland suburbs.

Dad was purely a spectator sportsman. "Come on, let's go to the Browns' game," he'd say to me. I remember him crouched before the television on a Sunday afternoon, slapping his knee and laughing as Haystack Muldoon squashed his opponent on "fake" wrestling. He loved Roller Derby. "Margreet, you gotta see this," he'd say.

He was always proud of his presents. One Mother's Day, he presented my mother with a scrubbing bucket, equipped with rollers so she could wring out her mop. "Margreet, how's that bucket?" he would ask her. Once, he gave her a chrome kitchen stool with a yellow vinyl upholstered seat, so she could sit down while she pared her vegetables.

We chose our presents to him judiciously. He loved chocolate. So did we. So we always bought him Russell Stover assorted chocolates for his birthday and Christmas, and he always hid them in the same place—underneath his crisply ironed white shirts. We would gradually sneak the entire bottom layer of chocolates from the box, while he slowly worked on the top layer. He never said a word when he discovered the empty second layer and he continued to hide his chocolates in the same place.

New cars were a mark of Dad's extravagance. Every two years, he would drive home the biggest, blackest Buick they made, and it was always a surprise to my mother. "Oh, Ashby Smith," she would moan. Years later, after I had married, Dad would say to my husband, "Come on, Frank, let's go look at some new cars." When Frank graduated from college, Dad took him to look at cars—they drove home a new Barracuda. Again, my mother moaned, "Oh, Ashby Smith." Dad beamed. Frank wondered how he was going to pay for it.

When we were young we always lived in big cities. Dad wanted us to be able to breathe fresh air and run through open fields if we wanted to. So he bought five hundred acres of beautiful land in Central New York State. We spent our summers there. Dad started to buy cattle, so we could watch things grow and produce. He also wanted to make enough money to send five children to any university they wanted to go to.

He had names for all of his cows. He kept computer records of their milk production, bound with a leather cover; he pored over these records in his spare moments. I can see him standing with that book spread out on the big, black piano, saying, "Margareet, look at that. Arabella's production is up."

His exuberance with this farm was really his downfall. He spent money on it, but he never seemed to make any from it. He was only a weekend farmer. Gradually, his Old Fashioneds became stronger and more frequent. He lost some of the twinkle in his eye. But he never lost his sense of humor.

One Christmas, when banks were hounding him for payment of loans overdue, he formed the "1475 Corporation" to right the family fortunes. He took the name from our address: 1475 Maple Road. Family meetings were called after dinner, all through the holidays. "Margreet, you be vice-president in charge of correspondence. Li-zee-beth, you be treasurer." Everyone had official sounding titles, right down to the two-year-old grandchild. How we laughed as we made huge sums of money, on paper, amidst the dirty dinner dishes, crumpled napkins and half-burned candles.

That same Christmas, Dad had a heart attack. He was in the hospital for six weeks and spent several months recuperating. He lived just two years longer.

The last time I saw him was the night before his second, and fatal heart attack. Frank had just bought a Honda trail bike. I can still see Dad, riding off down the street behind Frank, in the burgundy plaid shirt he always wore, hanging onto Frank with one arm and waving with the other.