

In praise of fathers: *A son thinks of his dad as Father's Day approaches*

By MICHAEL ROWE
Feature Writer

Michael Rowe reflects on his relationship with his father on the occasion of Father's Day.

When I was very young, we lived in Beirut. My father was a diplomat, attached to the Canadian embassy. This was before the war and its carnage, and my earliest memories are of a city that made good its claim to be the Paris of the Middle East.

On weekends, we would make trips to the mountains and ride the cable-cars along a serpentine path to the summit. Usually we would be together as a family, but I remember one time, somehow, my younger brother and my mother were in one car, and my father and I were in another. I remember being in his arms and laughing with him as we watched and waved at my mother and brother who somehow didn't seem to be having as much fun as we were.

My father picked me up in his arms, and for a moment I pressed my face to his sweater. I smelled a cedar drawer, Old Spice after shave, that warm father-smell and I remember thinking I am safe.

As the cable car swung from side to side, and the snow sparkled on the Lebanese mountains, my father held me tight in his arms. I pressed my nose against the frosted glass of the window and made a pig face in the mist of my breath. And I thought, *nothing can get me, 'cause I've got my Dad.*

That's what fathers are for. I have never felt as safe or as secure as I did in that moment. Ever. And I remember it as though it were yesterday.

My father was never anyone's idea of a shrinking violet, or one of those puffy suburban men who scurry home from work, then vanish behind a newspaper and slippers till dinner is ready.

At 16, he lost both of his parents within a year of each other, to cancer. He was one of the first graduates of the Ryerson radio and television program, and subsequently worked as a radio journalist in Fredericton, Sarnia, Ottawa, and Kingston, Jamaica, where, it would seem from his press clippings, he was something of a matinee idol.

He met my mother, a vacationing American schoolteacher, in Bermuda. After three days of whipping around the island on his motorcycle, they decided to get married. Then it was off to Holland for a couple of years with Radio Nederland, during which time he was befriended by a Canadian diplomat who advised him to enter the foreign service. He went back to school, doing a degree at the University of Toronto and earning a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to study at Northwestern University in Chicago. Then, back to Ottawa and External Affairs.

By the time my brother and I came along, we were all bound for Beirut, my father's first diplomatic posting. It would not be his last. My brother and I would grow up in Havana, Cuba and Geneva Switzerland as well as intermittent stints back home in Ottawa. Consequently, "home" became wherever my parents were, and it was remarkable stable, too, considering the mileage.

The eternal struggle between fathers and sons made itself manifest in our household just before my early teens. It's difficult to say just who declared war on whom. If you asked my father or I, you'd probably get two wildly divergent answers. My mother would probably go and make coffee for a couple of hours, and my brother would go downstairs to watch television. Forever.

The outcome, however, lasted into my early 20s. Whatever my father wanted, I wanted something else.

Each developed an uncanny ability to provoke the other through tones of voice, and I seemed to have inherited his ability to mimic. I freely admit that I would not have wanted to



Writer Michael Rowe is shown here with his father Alan, a retired Canadian diplomat, at the Canadian embassy in Beirut in 1965.

raise me, but, to be fair, my father was not the sort of man to back down from a confrontation either. It was hardest on my mother and brother, though, and so at 15 I was packed off to boarding school.

In the wilds of Manitoba, I missed my parents a great deal, and looked forward to Christmas, Easter and the summer I appreciated them more during the four years I was away than I had up till that point. But we still fought bitterly when I was home.

I had begun modelling locally in Ottawa at 16, and by 18, I had worked in Montreal and Winnipeg as well. As I had met with some success, after high school graduation I took off to Europe and was tapped by a Paris agency which got me some work while I was there. My modeling was always a bone of contention with my parents, especially, it seemed, with my father, who was afraid I was going to drop out of school. The thought never crossed my mind, but I interpreted their concern for my future as a terrible lack of support for what I wanted to do, at least then.

Living in the shadow of my father was painful for me while I was trying to assert my independence and find my own worth. Much in the way a drowning person fights off (and sometimes

drowns) his rescuer, I rejected my father's advice and took his suggestions as roadblocks.

When I left modeling at 20, and was away at the University of Toronto studying English, the wounds on both sides began to heal. But slowly. When I announced my decision to pursue a writing career, my parents took it with something approaching cautious relief.

When I first began to publish, the old anger rose up again when my father suggested I wasn't earning enough. Lyvid, I fired off a letter to him requesting, not at all shyly, that he back off from meddling in my professional life. Then, I sat back and waited for the reply, with all the old familiar exhilarating dread.

When it came, I was baffled. Far from the condemnation I was expecting, the letter praised me for speaking to him directly, and without losing my temper. He said, in his letter, that he was pleased that I had "gotten (my) dander up" and spoken my mind. I was surprised. I had always assumed that I made myself perfectly understood by him, and that he had always resented what I said and felt. For the first time, I was able to separate, a little, the father with the booming voice, the disciplinarian, from the man who wrote me the letter.

After a five-year stint with the Canadian Consulate in Seattle, Washington, my father retired with my mother to a small house near Nanaimo B.C.

I moved to Milton with my dogs, and rented a big red house on a shady street and settled down with my writing. I moved to Milton to find a quiet place to work on my book, and fell in love with the town. He moved to B.C. with my mother to celebrate a life well lived, and all the living they had yet to do. In a funny way, we are both home.

I went to visit my parents shortly before Christmas last year. I found my father at peace, in a way I had never seen before, except maybe on that day in the mountains above Beirut. "It's good to be out of it all, Mike," he said.

These days, he finds his joys with my mother and their dog, with visiting friends. They travel with their trailer. It's a far cry from the glittering world of embassy cocktail parties and political intrigue, but it's a lot more like my father. The glitter wears off after a while, with age, and what's underneath is what you're left with.

One day, I was going through some boxes of my things in the garage, with my mother. My parents saved everything of mine, and I wanted to take some of it home with me. I found a Christmas card he had written to me the year I was working in Paris. I had to double check it, because what I read in the brief note inside was a simple message of support, and a validation of my search for my own dreams. There was nothing of the domineering authoritarian father figure I had carried with me for so long, in my mind and in my heart.

My mother showed me their wedding pictures for the first time. I saw a carefree, laughing man with his stunning young bride. He looked like me. The expression in our eyes is the same. And as I watched the distinguished former diplomat cutting his acre of grass on the tractor, it suddenly wasn't so hard to see him on a motorcycle under the hot Bermuda sun with my mother.

On the day that I left them to return home, my father received two congratulatory letters, one from External Affairs Minister Joe Clark, and one from the Prime Minister. He just shrugged them off and said, "Oh, Penny, put them away."

The funny thing is, he meant it. And as I said goodbye to this man whom I've known longer than any man I know, I saw that, all along, what I wanted more than anything was to be like him. My greatest fear was that I never could.

With any kind of luck, someday I will.



Winners

At the annual review of the Milton Branch of St John Ambulance awards were given to Amy Bateman (left) and Andrea More. Miss Bateman has her name on this First Aid Plaque and Miss More's is on the award for home care. The review was held last month at the Gordon Alcot Arena, Georgetown.

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MILTON DISTRICT HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY

ANNUAL FLOWER SHOW

Saturday June 17th
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Flower Display 9:30 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Judging 11:00 a.m.

At the circle by the Food Court