

My Father's Troubles

A memoir of love and madness.
by Nicholas Dawidoff



My first memory of my father is of leaving him. For months, he had been unhinged, experiencing hallucinations so powerful that he

communicated with dead squirrels. Then he began hitting my mother, and not long after that she decided it was time for us to go. It was raining steadily when my mother, my younger sister, and I drove away from Washington for the long ride to our new home in New Haven, Connecticut. I was three. At a certain point, I remember seeing the water streaming down the car window and deciding that the sky was unhappy, too.

During the next several years, I made a couple visits to Washington. When I was six, my father took me to the National Zoo, where he got angry and walked away from me. Only by running along after him was I able to keep him in sight. He went up a sloping walkway, and I followed until, finally, he slowed enough for me to catch him. My father didn't look at me, but he let me follow two steps behind.

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Later, when he was living in New York, I'd occasionally stay overnight with him. Once, when I was nine, I was in bed in the back room of his cramped garden apartment. My father was sitting next to me, and he wanted to tell me about his encounters with Italian prostitutes. I managed to put all the details out of my head except for a description of a Roman bordello decorated in red velvet. Over the years, every time I entered his apartment I expected to see the red velvet.

After I had finished college and moved to New York, my father asked me to meet him one day at the Yale Club. I was talking with him in the middle of the lobby, when, suddenly, his eyes looked strange and he began screaming at me, telling me – and the cocktail-hour throng – what a horrible person I was. I ran out of there. Some nights, I'd arrive home to encounter my father standing in front of my apartment building, waiting there to let me know what a pathetic excuse for a son he had.

At Manhasset High School, on Long Island, Donald Dawidoff was the valedictorian of the class of 1952, a member of the National Honor Society, and a varsity athlete who starred on the football and lacrosse teams with the future N.F.L. Hall of Famer Jim Brown. My father was also a French horn player in the orchestra

and the jazz band, and an editor on the school newspaper. His classmates voted him "Most Likely to Succeed."

At Harvard, he was admitted to the select History and Literature program, and one year, in lacrosse, he finished among the nation's leaders in assists. A photograph of him making a graceful feed appeared in *Sports Illustrated*. But life in Cambridge became too much for him. In the spring of 1955, when he was a junior, there were some troubles with a girlfriend, and he was given the first bad grade of his life. Then, one morning, he saw all around him huge faces with green ears. He began giving away his possessions – all of them, right down to his watch. My grandmother has always described the telephone call she received that week from Harvard with the same words. "Mrs. Dawidoff, come get your son," she was told. "He's crazy."

My grandparents did what they were told, and arranged to take him to a sanitarium in Connecticut. A few months later, my father returned to Harvard, and completed his degree cum laude. He then spent a semester at Harvard Law School, but did poorly and left.

That summer (by then it was 1958), my father took a job at a camp in New Hampshire, where he met Heidi Gerschenkron, the daughter of a Harvard economics professor. In July,

my grandfather – Donald’s father – died, and Donald went to pieces. It took him a year to recover. Then, in the fall of 1959, he went back to law school – Yale this time – and returned to Heidi Gerschenkron. They were married the next year. By 1962, he was working for a prestigious firm in New York and he was a father – my father.

One day, he came home from work and confessed to my mother that a partner in his law firm had told him he was “a lame horse, and I wouldn’t keep a lame horse in my stable.” So we moved to Washington, where my father went to work in the Office of the General Counsel of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Shortly before my sister, Sally, was born, in late 1964, he suffered a complete breakdown.

Many years later, my mother told me what it was like to watch her husband fall apart. It began with non sequiturs. Friends would be visiting, and during a conversation about politics my father would offer a comment that made it clear he thought they were discussing a George Bernard Shaw play. Soon the hallucinations returned. He believed that everybody was talking about him, and that rodents in the yard were giving him special instructions. He grew violent. My mother says I couldn’t eat. My sister wasn’t

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sleeping. Fifteen months after Sally was born, my mother put us in the car and headed back to New Haven.

When I look at snapshots of my father and me as a young boy – in one I am sitting in a red fire truck, my father crouched behind, his arms circling my shoulder – I am always surprised by how happy we seem. “You were crazy about him,” people tell me. Since I didn’t see much of him anymore, I tried to compensate by spending time with his photograph. I would sit in a rocking chair and stare at his handsome bald head for hours.

In 1970, my father abruptly quit his government job, moved back to New York, and opened his own law office. Once a month, on a Sunday, he’d ride the train up to New Haven. He always took Sally and me to the International House of Pancakes for lunch. That was my father’s effort to inject a sense of the quotidian into the relationship, his attempt to be a

normal dad. In fact, these visits had the quality of a long-distance love affair. Each one came after such a lengthy interlude that they felt like occasions, not ordinary life.

Back at the house, he could be a lot of fun. He invented a belly-tickling game called “So it does that, does it?,” which I liked a lot, and he gave me a nickname, Rascal, that suited me fine. Like many children from immigrant families, my father was devoted to the English language. He was fond of puns and worked them out in elaborate ways. After Zbigniew Brezinski got a job in the government, my father’s response was to ask me what a jailed national-security adviser was. “I don’t know,” I said. “A Zbig in a poke.” Dad collected unusual nomenclature the way some men amass stamps or coins. When the basketball star Lew Alcindor changed his name to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, my father was ecstatic at the possibilities. “Say it, Dad, say it,” I would plead, and he’d grin and repeat the name again and again for me, lingering on the hard vowels like an auctioneer.

In a beautiful tenor, he sang American folk songs like “The Ship Titanic” and “Deep Blue Sea.” Abstract art made sense to him, and so did American Indian paintings. He liked bespoke suits, and Paul Robeson, and Mel Ott. My father was

a lover of elegance.

There was a period when my chief interest lay in road construction. One day, my father took me to visit the Leonard Concrete Pipe Company, in Hamden, Connecticut. On the way out, I somehow persuaded him to buy a souvenir for me: a three-foot section of concrete sewer pipe. I have no idea how we got the thing home, but I know that when my mother saw Dad and me on her porch with it, she directed us around to the cellar entrance, at the rear of the house. As my father, the pipe, and I went by, our nosy next-door neighbor remarked, “Now I know why she divorced him.” I recently visited my mother in New Haven and went down to the cellar. The pipe was still where Dad and I had left it.

When I was eight, he took me to my first baseball game – a Mets-Pirates contest at Shea Stadium that went into extra innings. My mother and sister were camped out at his apartment, waiting to take me home, and, as the hours passed, I worried about upsetting them, but he said they would understand, explaining that real fans stayed for the whole game. And so we did – all fifteen innings. Many years later, I realized that it was one of the few times he ever tried to impart wisdom to me. Usually, it was a babysitter, a family friend, or my father’s younger

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brother, Robert, who taught me how to catch a ball, ride a bike, knot a necktie. As I got older, I always had male friends close to my father’s age. I notice now that I chose men who were successful, intelligent, and, almost invariably, bald.

There were times when I’d observe other father-and-son relationships and long for them. Then I’d become angry and sullen. During a summer vacation, my mother took me to the Baseball Hall of Fame, in Cooperstown, and as I walked around the little village, looking at all the boys with their fathers, I felt diminished at having come to such a place with my mom.

One night when I was thirteen, Dad called while we were eating dinner. When he asked my sister how she was, Sally replied that she’d had a bad day. “You come by that naturally,” he said. “I’m mentally ill.” Sally hung up and told us, “Dad says he’s mentally ill.” I can’t remember that evening at all, but my mother says that this disclosure upset me terribly – “You cried and cried for months.”

With that exception, nobody really talked with me about what was wrong with my father. Family members made vague references to my father being “in the hospital again,” but that was it. He saw many psychiatrists and was given

prescriptions for all kinds of antipsychotic medications, but they never seemed able to decide what the problem was.

In the early years, both of my parents had made an effort to shield Sally and me, but things were different after I got to be old enough to go in to New York unescorted to see him. As my train pulled into Grand Central Station, I never knew which Dad would be meeting me. He always looked the same, but his speech was often not lucid, his behavior erratic. When he got into altercations with people we encountered on sidewalks or in restaurants, when he told me things I knew he shouldn’t – he liked to describe new women he wanted to “lay” – when he suddenly lashed out at me, I didn’t know what to do. Your father is supposed to protect you, and mine was scaring the hell out of me.

Many times, I told my mother I

didn't want to go to see him, but she never made our visits optional. On the appointed Sunday morning, before she put us on the train my mother would call around New York to get reassurances about what kind of shape he was in, and, as far as I know, nobody ever told her, "Don't send them." Even as a small boy, I was bothered by the idea that he was my responsibility, and not the reverse. As I got older, I saw that it was a moral obligation to spend time with this person I had begun to loathe.

My father stopped making child-support payments a few years after the divorce. At home, in New Haven, there was so little money that we drank powdered milk and never ate out, except for a trip to Burger King once a year. My mother slept in the living room. The sound of her struggling to open the convertible sofa made me want to grow up fast. My father tried to work, but the few clients he managed to recruit in New York he often lost, not because he was incompetent but because he couldn't tolerate the pressure of a case or get along with anybody or stay healthy. People would say to my grandmother that maybe Donald ought to try something a little less stressful, but my grandmother had arrived on New York's Lower East Side from Eastern Europe speaking

no English, and became one of New York's first woman lawyers. The prospect of her son the attorney working at a lesser job made her say, "For this, he went to Harvard?" My father felt the same way.

My grandmother became my father's primary source of income. When he took me to a hobby shop to buy model soldiers for my birthday, I knew that my grandmother was paying for them. The same was true the year he took Sally and me on vacation to Maine. Still, I would hear of the new car he intended to buy, and about the savings account he would soon be opening up for college tuition.

Holidays were always hard. One Thanksgiving, when I was in high school, he showed up dressed as a rabbi and carrying a New Testament in both hands, outstretched like an offering. As he made his rounds, his hands violently shaking, everyone just said, "Hello, Donald, Happy Thanksgiving." Each time he approached me, I studied the fibres of the rug fabric. When he finally left, a great-aunt collapsed into an armchair with a huge glass of gin.

Some years, there were two Thanksgiving dinners. Early in the day, Sally and I would meet him at our grandmother's for turkey. Then, in the late afternoon, he'd go home, and the three of us would head off

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for the real party. We never told him that we had other plans, but he must have known.

After one upsetting visit with Dad, my mother asked me if I had read Virginia Woolf’s novel “Mrs. Dalloway.” I hadn’t. She told me about Clarissa Dalloway and Clarissa’s acquaintance, Septimus Smith, who is mad and constantly destroys life – “makes everything terrible” as his wife, Lucrezia, says. My mother showed me the part where Septimus lolls on a bench in Regent’s Park and gazes at the clouds, the leaves, and the trees that he believes are signalling to him. Then my mother looked at me and said, “You don’t do that, Nicky. You don’t distort things.” She never completely convinced me.

I didn’t talk about my father with anybody. I hoped people would assume that I just didn’t have a father. I was sure that if anyone knew of my background I would be as ostracized as he was. I was also terrified that what had happened to him would be my fate as well.

I tried in every possible way to be different from my father. I felt antipathy for everything I associated with him – from the city of New York to lacrosse to womanizing. I made sure that my laugh sounded nothing like his. He urged me to read his favorite novel, Ford Madox Ford’s

“Parade’s End,” but I ignored him, feeling that, if I read it, somehow he would rub off on me. When I finally did read the book, I discovered this memorable line: “It is probably only God who can, very properly, devise the long ailings of mental oppression.”

My father had manic will and drive, and when there was nothing else he could do he wrote. For a while, he concentrated on legal prose. In 1973, he merged the two great preoccupations of his life by publishing a book, “The Malpractice of Psychiatrists”; it was the first important analysis of the legal responsibilities of psychiatrists in relation to therapy, medication, hospitalization, suicide, and shock treatment. That my father could have risen from the abyss to write an accomplished legal treatise seems to me miraculous. It is a singularly detached work; nowhere is there any sign that the scholarly lawyer who is

holding forth in such a disciplined way about “the utility for law of the nonscientific character of psychiatric evidence” may have been drawn to his topic through his own madness.

My father also wrote articles for law journals, letters to the editors of periodicals and newspapers, fragments of a novel about his childhood, and thousands of personal letters. While I was at college, and for years after, he wrote to me frequently, copiously, and with varying degrees of sanity. I could always tell when he was getting sick just by looking at the way he had addressed the envelope. The handwriting would shift from cursive to print letters. As his condition declined, the printed words would grow smaller; eventually, they became almost microscopic. Weeks of silence followed. Then one day an envelope from New York addressed in a booming scrawl would be waiting in the letter box, and the cycle would begin again. When he was healthy, his way with words made him witty. When he got sick, he quite literally lost his wits and the wordplay went out of control. He punned compulsively, and said things that were grandiose, lewd, bigoted, and cruel. Then he misplaced words, lost track of their meaning, forgot his own name. Finally, it all turned completely incoherent and he

sputtered into collapse.

At some point, I started throwing his letters away without opening them; I have kept only a few from the hundreds that he sent me, and they are among his tamest. In late April of 1983, he wrote to me at college: “Thank you very much for inviting me to your baseball games. I have wanted many years to see you play, and I hope the weather is good.” The odd thing about that letter is that there had been no invitation. I had suffered a knee injury and couldn’t play baseball anymore that season. In June, he sent me a postcard. The last line was a non sequitur: “I’ll have shells and sugar.” I had no idea what that meant, nor did I know why my father, who usually referred to himself as Dad or Daddy, and whose name was, of course, Donald, this time signed off by writing, in a very clear hand, “Regards, Dan.”

In his letters – the coherent ones – he could be just as deluded about the two of us, and even now I don’t know if it was the power of love or the power of illness, or both, that made him write letters of the sort that he sent me on September 4, 1982:

So good talking to you the other day. You sound strong, mature, and interested in me. That gives me a big thrill for I am very interested in you. You know, not every father is blessed with a son (and a

daughter) who love him. Fathering a son, especially a fine young man like you, creates a special joy in a man's heart. It is not just generation, though that is important too. It is more the unspoken bond that exists. This is a rare and magical thing and I treasure it. You have always made me very happy. I am loaded with affection for you. But now to these elements is added your growing interest. It makes me feel very humble.

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The surfeit of letters made it difficult to get much distance from him, but there were times when I began to believe that I was growing more relaxed. Once, I even told someone about him. My friend Ingrid and I had gone for a drive in New Hampshire; I remember exactly the grade of the hill we were climbing just outside the town of Greenfield when I finally confessed all. Afterward, I felt so pleased that she knew my secret and that she still cared about me. Years later, Ingrid told me that I'd spoken in such a cryptic way that she hadn't understood a thing I was telling her.

After college, I was offered a good job at a magazine in New York. It gave me pause to go to the city where my father lived, and I worried that I might not be able to handle it. When we got together, something always seemed to go awry. He came to a New York Press League softball game

one afternoon in Central Park, and he was thrilled when I hit a home run “for me,” as he put it when I came over to him afterward. With a flourish, he pulled out a bottle of champagne and made an event out of the day. I was embarrassed; he was overdoing it. Then I realized that it was a real occasion for him: he'd finally seen me play. I walked him back to his apartment, and I noticed that something was missing. A photograph of me in my Harvard baseball uniform, which I'd presented to him a few years before on Father's Day, wasn't there. It had gone the way of everything else I ever gave him. He'd given it away to a stranger.

“He's a sick man, he can't help it, he's not himself,” my grandmother would say, and I'd nod. That was always the hardest thing about having such a troubled father: because he was unwell, he wasn't accountable for anything. It was the illness talking,

not him, and I had to forgive him.

What made me continue to see my father was the knowledge that what he did to me every month or two could not compare with what the cyclones inside his skull were doing to him every day. Even at those times when I was running in a panic out of the Yale Club, or lying exhausted on my bed after a gruesome telephone conversation, I thought about what it must have been like to be a young man of such intelligence, talent, and promise, and to have it all washed away; and then to confront this person formed in your own image, and to look at him beginning to make his way in the world free of the impediments that had knocked you down.

By this time, I knew that my father was always comparing us – our looks and intelligence – and I used to hate that, but in a way he was doing only what I had been doing for a very long time. My father was a negative example for me, and I formed myself in terms of him. There was an absurd element of anticipation in the way I handled my life. Through my twenties, while my friends were trying different professions, going to graduate school, having affairs, and falling in love, I was usually single. From the age of twenty-two, I kept a savings account for my future children's college education, in which

I deposited thousands of dollars. I felt I wasn't entitled to fall in love until I'd proved I could handle the long-range responsibilities that came with it. Later, when I began to have serious relationships with women, I tried to be the perfect boyfriend – generous and devoted. It never occurred to me that my self-sufficiency was making it hard for other people. A woman I went out with for a few years told me recently, "You were so loving and sweet to me, but you were always slipping out of my grasp."

In 1991, my father came to my grandmother's house for Thanksgiving. During the meal, there was a lengthy conversation about Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill. My birthday is at the end of November, and after we'd eaten our turkey my grandmother brought out a cake. My father burst into a loud chorus of "Happy Birthday." Curing moments of celebration, my father often wandered off into puerile or antagonistic terrain. Sure enough, instead of "Dear Nicky," he sang "Dear Stupid." His second verse concluded with a crescendo: "Stand up! Stand up! Stand up and show us your ugly face!" I rolled my eyes and blew out the candles, and we resumed our discussion until my father suddenly recalled that one of the boys my sister had dated in

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college was black. In a sudden fury, he glared at my sister and warned her not to marry “a nigger.” Then he snarled the same instructions at me. I asked him not to talk that way. His eyes gleamed with anger and excitement. He said it again: “Listen, if you ever marry a nigger don’t expect me to show up for the wedding.” I got my coat and left. My father followed me out of the building, calling, in a soft, almost keening voice, “My son, my son,” as I walked away.

Those turned out to be the last words he ever said to me, because after that I decided I couldn’t see him anymore. I let everyone in my family know my intentions, unlisted my telephone number, and hoped for the best. At first, every time I came home I half expected to see him waiting for me in the foyer. I learned later that someone had given him my address, but he never came.

Hating my father had been as unsatisfying as loving him, but once I had made him invisible I found I could begin to admire him. The reason my father had been such a successful lacrosse player was not that he was unusually gifted; he was a plodding runner in a fast game who tried harder than the others. When the Harvard lacrosse team took showers after practice, there was always one member of the squad

missing. That was Donald, out on the darkening field, running extra miles by himself.

I don’t know how many breakdowns he had, how many new prescriptions he submitted to with all their devastating side effects, how many times he put all his possessions out on the curb, how many months he spent in mental hospitals, but through all of it he regained his hope over and over. It had taken real courage to return to Harvard, the scene of his public breakdown, and to get through every day of his life. My father never stopped telling people how good the future was going to be. On one level, he was spinning fantasies, but on another he was merely saying that nothing was going to make him quit.

In 1995, I was told that he had been taken to the hospital for emergency open-heart surgery and that his recovery was in doubt. Family members urged me to go to

him. When I hesitated, my grandmother said I was “inhuman.” I didn’t know what to do. Since my father hadn’t been a father to me, even here I found it hard to be a son to him.

I did go. When I walked into his room, he was unconscious and heavily sedated. My sister began talking to him: “Dad, Nicky’s here.” His eyes opened. Through the haze they seemed to fix upon me. They looked baby-blue and hostile. I shifted my glance and spoke to the EKG monitor. “Dad, I hope you feel better,” I said. When I got home, I pasted my hospital visitor’s pass into my diary. I was sure he was going to die.

He survived, and I continued not to see him. I frequently thought about him in oblique ways; when I saw movies in which fathers and sons were central characters, I would find myself overwhelmed. Father’s Day for me was like Valentine’s Day for the brokenhearted. It would catch me by surprise every year, and I would slump.

On the morning of November 3, 1999, I was finishing breakfast when my sister rang my doorbell. She said, “I have something to tell you. Dad died last night.” A massive heart attack had thrown him to the floor of his apartment and killed him. He was

sixty-five.

We went over to my grandmother’s house, where my father’s sister, my Aunt Judy, sat with me on the couch. She watched me trying to be stoic, and she pulled me into a big hug and said, “Nicky, for God’s sake, child, let it out.” And for the first time since I left Washington in the rain, thirty-three years before, I began to sob for my lost father.

A memorial service was planned, and I knew that this would be my last chance to introduce my father to the people I love. I set out to write a eulogy that was both kind and true – that told how things really were with us. I described his struggles with mental illness and the things he hadn’t been able to do. I also wanted to show that there was a way in which my father had always loved me, and I searched for a way to explain it. I kept coming back to the last eight years, when we’d lived in New York together, and how he’d let me alone. I had the sense that this was a great gesture on his part. If my father had never been what I’d wanted him to be, in the end he had found a way to take care of me. That seemed eerie, a father expressing his love for his son by avoiding him, but I believe it.