

Thomas Francis Jeremiah Donovan, aka, DAD

Forty years ago today, my dad died (10/8/1982). He was 63 and my mom was 61 and she never remarried and never dated. I was 17 years old, had just started college. My dad was well known in the Montana town where I grew up. He was a high school math teacher, notorious for the way he whacked the slate chalk board with a yard stick that often sent chunks flying off the board and sleepy kids flying out of their seats. He had sayings that everyone knew that I won't repeat and that I wish he'd never said. He had a reputation as a drinker that was mostly deserved, though I think kids liked to embellish it and repeat it to each other and to me and my siblings as a way to knock old Tom Donovan down a peg. I always hated that. Trust me. We knew who our dad was.

My dad liked to sing in the halls of the high school and he was an excellent whistler. His smile was radiant and he walked full, one hand in his pocket the other swinging by his side. He was big and formidable but could be tender and kind. While merciless with some students, he was so patient with others and wanted them to learn math, to not smoke grass on the corner, and to at least learn how to balance a checkbook. We had a dog, Puppy, who Dad loved and who loved him back. Puppy was a free-range dog and would cross the highway and six blocks to the high school to sit on the hood of Dad's truck under the window of his classroom. During lunch, Dad went home and ate a sandwich and watched *All My Children*.

During his first year of retirement and his final year of life, he drove my sister Mary Pat to have chemotherapy in Missoula several days a week. He and my mom were also planning their big move to Lake Havasu City, AZ. The last summer of his life, he golfed and played cards with friends. He also had a series of TIAs, or mini-strokes. He didn't like doctors but finally went. Hamilton, Missoula, Seattle, and finally to the veterans hospital in Salt Lake City. My brother stayed with him there for a month while they worked on getting a team of doctors together to do the surgery to remove the plaque in his carotid artery. During that time, he regaled the other vets with his stories--drinking, fist-fighting, growing up in Anaconda, running around Butte, the way he dodged the Battle of The Bulge in the cellar of a french farmhouse. In that month, he became beloved at the VA hospital. He was a great story teller. He had that gift.

The Docs finally removed that plaque and he seemed to be recovering. But he coughed in the night, probably from sleep apnea and a lifetime of smoking (Camel Filters or Tarrytons). The sutures slipped and he had a massive stroke. He lost consciousness and never recovered. It took my family a week to gather there. My first ride on an airplane was to SLC. I was so scared and lost, I forgot to pack underwear. I sang *The Way We Were* to him by his bedside. I hope he heard me.

Hard to imagine, forty years. I wonder what he would have been like, how he might have mellowed with more retirement. He loved his grandkids and I'm sure he would have loved my kids as well. He was trying to quit smoking and lose weight and stop drinking so much Budweiser. And the real London Bridge was calling to him and mom. They just needed to get me graduated. They were so close.

For me, the day after he died was one of the hardest days of my life. I came home to a town full of people who thought they knew everything about my dad but they didn't know the half of it.

And he wasn't there and he never would be again. I felt like I'd lost the ground beneath my feet. It took time to recover. And I lost time recovering.

I'm going to butcher this quote from Edwin Arlington Robinson's *Tristram* that I've been thinking about over the last month for a lot of reasons. But the idea is this: How do we measure and weigh these lives of ours? Whatever it is that fills life up and fills it full, it is not time. Years are not life. Was it enough? It was enough and it was all there was.

Anyway, here are some pictures of my dad when he was young, when he was drafted, after the war with my mom and some of their buddies, and the last picture I can find of him, from June of 1982, fishing with my mother's brothers and a nephew. Lucky us, I think, that we did know him. Lucky us, I think, that he did shine his particular light on us when the mood struck him. Be kind to the ghosts out there, folks. They leave behind memories that the living still carry.



