

A CUP OF
COMFORT[®]
for
Fathers

Stories that celebrate
everything we love about Dad

Edited by
Colleen Sell

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Avon, Massachusetts

For my extraordinary father,
Albert Sell

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Love and Money

In the top dresser drawer where my father kept his socks and underwear, he also kept an envelope of money. A white letter-sized envelope, not sealed, not folded, not hidden. In fact, to reach into the envelope you needed only to open the drawer a few inches, and there it was right in front—an envelope of money held in place by a pile of underwear, a necessity among necessities.

The envelope never held much money. Some singles, a few fives, a couple of tens; I don't ever recall finding a twenty or anything larger. On the other hand, I don't ever recall finding the envelope empty.

It took some years for me to realize that this whole business of having an automatically replenishing envelope of money was unusual. My friends got an allowance. The difference between the envelope and the allowance was clear if one of my friends

(Johnny Belbin leaps to mind) came up a few cents short during a Saturday afternoon trip to McDonald's or Burger King or Kentucky Fried Chicken or Chicken Delight or Arby's or the Pancake House or Tom's Grill or the Fish Keg, or we could forget the meal altogether and go right to Dairy Queen for double-dipped cones or hot fudge brownie delights. And these were just the choices within walking distance. The point is that these ritual out-for-lunch excursions were central to my childhood, and by the time I was nine or ten years old, I fully appreciated a basic fact of life: you need money to eat. What I didn't fully appreciate is where that money came from. How did that automatically replenishing envelope really work?

My dad was never one for fatherly lectures or long-winded explanations. He preferred funny stories, jokes, something with a clever closing line. Around this money-envelope business, he and I had a little routine in which I'd say, "Dad, I took some money today from the envelope, but I didn't spend it all. Do you want the change?" He would put his hands on his slim hips, shake his head, and say, "No, keep the change. Invest it wisely in real estate."

That is exactly what he did . . . invest wisely in real estate. Metropolitan Structures, where he worked for over thirty years, built, managed, and/or

financed massive commercial developments in Chicago, Baltimore, Boston, Houston, Los Angeles, and Montreal. My dad's successful career was no doubt a source of great vitality and joy and pride for him—a genuine triumph, especially for someone who, right up to his dying days, could easily drink a fifth of whiskey a day.

This can't be glossed over: my dad was an alcoholic. Some family members prefer to say he just had “an unusual relationship with alcohol.” Fine. But throughout my childhood, there was always a bottle by my dad's side of the bed, and many nights I watched him sit on the edge of the mattress and take a few gulps before lying down and then, in the morning, a few gulps before standing up. There was also a bottle in his desk drawer at work, and I still remember how, when he came home in the evening, I would eagerly climb onto the kitchen counter to reach the bottle in the cabinet. As the youngest of four sons, it was a big day when I could read the label myself—Johnny Walker—and pour a nice full glass (was it eight ounces?) without spilling, leaving just enough room for two cubes of ice.

An alcoholic, yes. But my dad never (almost never) became sloppy drunk and was truly never—absolutely never—abusive in any way at all. So one

way to understand the drinking is to say that it simply helped him deal with life. It helped him function, helped him stay calm and cheerful and focused on what mattered to him most: the envelope held in place by the underwear.

My dad grew up in the poverty familiar to so many first-generation American Jews, and this central fact of his life is captured by one particular story. It's the 1930s, the middle of the night, and my dad, about ten years old, is woken up from a deep sleep and told to be quiet and to pack his things quickly in the darkness because the family is moving to another apartment. Yet another apartment. Every couple months, there was yet another apartment. They would move in the middle of the night—taking their old clawfoot bathtub with them—because they hadn't paid the rent.

Given this childhood trauma, it is little wonder my dad ended up in the real estate business and that my family had the same Evanston, Illinois, address for thirty-two years. But before achieving his rock-solid steadiness, my dad had some pretty rough-and-tumble times. He wasn't just a drinker—he was a fighter too.

For example, although he never saw combat because of a medical discharge, he volunteered for the paratroopers because he thought it would give

him the best opportunity, as he once put it, “to go to Germany and kill Nazis.” Apparently, he was particularly handy with a gun, so when he got out of the army, he took a job managing a South Side Chicago hotel with the upscale name “The Bennington.” It served mostly people who had just been released from jail. As hotel manager, my dad wore a gun on his hip, another in an ankle holster, and carried a sawed-off shotgun when he went back and forth from the hotel to the car.

In our own house, there was only one time when my dad took out a gun—when my Aunt Charlotte, who suffered from schizophrenia, brought home a man who was drinking and shouting and keeping the kids awake. As the story goes, when he was told to leave, the guy broke a bottle and came at my dad with the jagged edge. All of this occurred before I was born, but I remember my dad telling the story with this particular coda: “You never take out a gun unless you’re ready to use it, and you never use it unless you’re ready to take a man’s life.”

No surprise—that fella left the house.

It’s also no surprise that my dad took the police exam and considered a career with the Chicago police department. He would have been a good cop, I’m sure, and though he had only a twelfth-grade education, I like to think he would have success-

fully climbed the ranks. Lieutenant? Captain? Police Commissioner? Who knows.

My dad did climb to the position of general partner with Metropolitan Structures, which eventually became affiliated with Metropolitan Life Insurance. By the late 1960s, when I was a little boy, all of the guns were gone and my dad had a fancy office on a high floor in the Illinois Center One building on Wacker Drive, with a view from his large picture window of Michigan Avenue and the Wrigley Building and the mighty Chicago River famously flowing backward away from the Great Lake. It was magical—all of it, the river, the view, the office, the whole Oz-like world of money, power, and success.

I once asked my dad how to respond when other kids asked me, “What does your dad do for a living?”

He answered without a moment’s hesitation. “Business,” he said. “Tell them that your dad is a businessman.”

So I told them. But I could only admire my dad-the-businessman from afar . . . until I was in my mid-thirties and, through an incredible series of coincidences, I landed a freelance writing job working for a New York communications firm hired by an Australian conglomerate that happened to be buying 56 billion dollars worth of U.S. real estate assets. The result was that I spent two days in Chicago

interviewing people my dad had worked with for twenty-five years. Some of these Chicago businessmen made the connection right away, and as soon as they realized they were being interviewed by Ben Levis's son, they couldn't answer my questions thoroughly enough and practically took me home with them for dinner. Others never made the connection, and I never said anything. My dad wasn't one to drop names, so it didn't seem right for me to drop his.

But there was one time when I couldn't resist name-dropping, couldn't help pointing out that I was somehow special because I was Ben Levis's son.

To appreciate this incident, you need to understand that as a hungry freelance writer in New York I had accepted this assignment without knowing anything about the real estate business. For the first few weeks, it was great fun calling my dad from hotels in Dallas or San Francisco or Boston or L.A., and telling him that I'd had another full day of interviews with various real estate hotshots in which I'd asked questions and taken notes and now I needed to please know what the hell all this means. My dad would patiently explain the business jargon and prep me for the next set of interviews, until, finally, it was time for the Chicago trip.

It turns out that one of the people I was going to interview was someone my dad knew well but

didn't particularly like. A "momzer," he called him, a "shmegege," a "putz."

When it came time for the interview, sure enough, the man was pompous and abrasive, and I was, at least initially, grateful that he failed to make the connection between me and my father.

But then, as I was leaving his office, the guy said in a self-important, patronizing tone of voice, "Well, young man, you seem to know a great deal about all of this—the proliferation of real estate investment trusts, the recent trend toward securitization, the broader implications for the financial services industry. Where did you go to business school?"

It was a delicious moment. I remember taking my time as I said to this momzer, this shmegege, this putz, "I didn't go to business school, but my dad is Ben Levis."

And so it goes that I will always be grateful for the chance I had to appreciate my father's world, his work, that which made possible the automatically replenishing envelope of money. And I think I finally understand—now, today—the secret to that envelope. It has to do with something so obvious to me right this minute that I could kick myself for not getting it before. It's right there in the strange overlap between the language of money and the

language of love: the way we talk about interest and securities and trusts and bonds.

And we know that money is somehow tender.

I never had a chance to talk with my dad about this overlap of language. Some insights, I guess, just come too late. But if he could hear me now, I would tell him: "I get it, Dad. I see how that envelope business really worked. It wasn't filled with money. It was filled with your interest, your trust, your bond. There was, in fact, nothing in that envelope at all but your love—a love that was never, never, never withheld. And now—well, now, Dad, it's time to say goodbye. I know how you always appreciated a good closing line, so I want to leave you with this one, by Thornton Wilder: 'There is a land of the living and a land of the dead, and the bridge is love, the only survivor, the only meaning.'"

—Walter B. Lewis