

The Friendly Giant

My father was a prince among men, but to me he was a friendly giant who ruled my life with a mighty hand. Back then, giants figured prominently in our lives. Fairy tales often portrayed them as ominous figures who skulked furtively around on the prowl for young children who they would then capture and take away to dark hiding places, never to be seen again.

My dad wasn't that kind of giant. He was kind, funny and at ease with the world. The giant in him was that of a protective soul who stood high above me as I moved through my childhood en route to answers to all things mysterious and beyond my reach. If not for dad, I might have swerved off the winding path of adolescence and become lost forever. As CEO in charge of my life both of us had a job: mine was to get into heaps of trouble, his was to try and keep me on the straight and narrow. All the while my mother looked on, fearful of what might become of me had it not been for my dad, her husband, who managed to keep our family in reasonable working order.

I coined the name "giant" early on when dad and I first began playing a game that involved our own version of hide and go seek. Next to my house was a vacant lot, a place where the grass grew tall and weeds sprung up as high as small trees. Wildflowers punctuated this spot and bees took up residence inside sunflowers that stretched in the afternoon sun. Bramble bushes with sharp thorns made navigating among this forest a challenging feat, and we who dared to play among this enchanted jungle often returned to the world outside, slightly scathed though none the worse from the experience.

It was here that my friends and I often ventured: a place where fantasies took hold and we could be whatever we wanted as we played out our varying roles of princesses being caught by dangerous men or innocent victims being tortured by villains who showed no mercy. And then there was dad, who became the giant to us all as he counted to ten while we ran for cover wherever a secret hiding place presented itself.

"Fe, Fei, Foe, Fum," he would call out in his large voice, "I smell the blood of an Englishman," as Patty, Ruthie, Jane and I scurried for shelter amidst the damp, green summer days of our youth. We giggled uncontrollably as my father crept along in his big shoes, the earth turning under his soles to find us children who, if caught, would reach their demise in ways unimaginable.

But seldom were we caught because we always outsmarted the giant. The closer he came, the faster we moved, crawling on our hands and knees on the earth's floor until the giant, fed up and tired, abandoned his post and returned to his cave: our house.

It was in this lot next door that my friends and I sat hidden away from the oppressive heat, eating Mallomar sandwiches, pried open and stuffed with peanut butter that we had wrapped in cloth hankies. There, we bemoaned our fate, feeling that life was so unfair because in only a few weeks we would be forced to go away to overnight camps and be separated for two months.

“Keep the lot safe,” I would tell my father when he and my mother brought me to Grand Central Station to embark on a summer of clean air and tall pine trees deep in the Adirondacks. If it were up to me, I would have preferred staying home. Come late June, I bade goodbye to my pals, the lot next door and to the giant who promised to keep his eye on things until I returned.

One August in the mid-fifties, I arrived home and everything had changed. A family had purchased the lot next door and was due to start construction of their new home in mid-October. I marked that moment as the beginning of the end of my youth as I knew it. No more secret meetings with the gang. No more Mallomar sandwiches. And then there was the giant: my father who was forced to resign from his post as the scariest man alive.

Between the times I had reached adolescence and was moving toward adulthood, life became more complicated – more mercurial. Boys of various shapes and sizes came upon the scene, and the giant surveyed them all and liked few. My mother was more accepting. “He seems like a nice buy,” she'd say, while my father lifted his head above the newspaper and said: “now there's a kid who won't amount to a hill of beans.” In short, the giant had become critical and judgmental, and I the rebellious teenager gave him a constant run for his money.

I always felt like a daughter-in-training who could never quite get it right. The giant was on constant watch. The more I strived for independence, the more chances I took, the more I explored and failed, I felt I was disappointing my dad who expected great things from me, while I stepped over myself at every turn, driving him and my mother a little crazy.

“Don't settle for mediocrity.” He'd say, and those words still buzz in my head. Back then, it seemed like a tall order. To a child struggling with her own identity, mediocrity seemed the easy way out, the less tiring approach to life, but dad expected more. Even now, when I've raised a family and have grandchildren, I am still trying not to be mediocre. Sometimes, I even make the grade, and although I didn't know it then, he accepted me more than I ever accepted myself.

My dad, the giant was a wise and gentle man who could scare the wits out of me when necessary, and warm my heart as no one else ever could. Above all, he was a wonderful father and I judge other men by the legacy he left behind.

As Father's Day approaches, the many moments of our years together are a blur, but one memory still tops the scene: it is a summer afternoon long before the big house next door was built. The lot stands abandoned and untamed. I am ten years old and my knees are skinned from hours of crawling away from the giant. Patty, Ruthie, Jane and I hold our hands over our mouths so as not to laugh. I am hidden in the underbrush when I hear it: "Fe, Fei, Foe, Fum." I have been discovered. The giant and I lock eyes. He pauses. I am frozen in place. Just as I am about to be discovered, the giant turns away and trudges on, pretending not to see me. My life is spared.

Even now, older and wiser, that grand moment resonates still. I savor the momentary power I had that afternoon as it was the only time and the only place, crouching there in my earthy make-believe world, that I would ever again be able to put one over on my dad.