

“G-Man”

The first time I ever saw my dad cry, I was eight years old. It was Father’s Day. I had made sandwich boards out of construction paper tied with yarn and placed them over the backs of our two unwilling toy poodles, Muffy and Paddy. One sign read HAPPY FATHER’S DAY! The other announced PRESENTS ON THE COUCH! I opened the door to the bedroom where he was sleeping and shoved in the message mules with clear instructions to prance in front of him. Instead, they immediately scurried under the bed and ruined the whole grand parade. I don’t remember the present I gave my dad, but it made him cry. This fascinated and scared me at the same time. I had never seen my father cry before. I didn’t know he could. Whenever I cried, he would hold me, and I would breathe in his scent, a mixture of Aqua Velva aftershave and Brylcreme. His brown eyes would meet mine, and he’d stare into a miniature version of his own face. I felt safe. But he seemed too big for me to hug him like that, so I didn’t know what to do. Finally, I asked what was wrong. “You make me so happy,” he said.

I’ve seen my dad cry only four times since: when I was 16 and planned a surprise birthday party for him, when my mother died, when I got married, and the last time in the middle of dinner while he was telling a story about work. That time he cried the most. Each time this took me by surprise just like the first time. He seemed to be caught off guard too. It’s rare to catch an F.B.I agent with his guard down. “Cry” is perhaps too strong a word since he only let one or two tears spill over before quickly wiping them away. It was an uncomfortable moment contained in one metronome tick, both of us

immobilized not knowing what to do. Then it was over and we both pretended it had never happened.

Growing up, I knew my dad was an F.B.I. agent but I had no idea what that really meant. For me, in the 1970s it meant that I was never to give out our unlisted phone number, and, if ever asked what my father did for a living, I was only to respond, “He works for the government.” If pressed for more details, I was to exit the conversation and report to my dad who was asking. Sometimes I egged questioners on just so I could run to him with important information. It made me feel important too. I had no idea that his picture was on the Black Panther’s hit list underscored with “off the pig,” or that numerous death threats had been made against our family. I used to look forward to car rides with my dad where we’d play a fun game of testing his exacting memory. I’d pick a car, any car in traffic or one that had recently passed us, and ask for its license plate number. He could rattle off make, color, year, and plate numbers with Rainman-like proficiency. “Okay, how about that blue one, two cars back on the right?” I would challenge.

“You mean that 1968 Volkswagon? That’s baby blue - not just blue – baby blue. JKZ693,” he’d slam-dunk.

My dad loves cars and still owns the first one he ever bought: a 1955 red T-bird convertible. He’s as loyal to people as he is to cars and more loyal yet to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The biggest mistake you can make with him is to question the Bureau’s integrity. Years ago when my husband, then my boyfriend, first met my father, he thought it would be a good conversation starter to ask about the Kennedy assassination. “Was it a conspiracy?” Allan asked. “I mean that single bullet theory

seems like a stretch, don't you think?" My father's facial muscles twitched. His eyes flashed at me then back to Allan. They grew small and fierce. I resigned myself to the fact that I really didn't like Allan that much anyway since he wasn't going to live very long.

"Let me tell you something," my father said slowly and deliberately, "I know the guys who worked that case. Their work is impeccable. If it weren't for the media trying to get ratings, nobody would be asking all these stupid questions that have no merit." Every year since then Dad's Christmas gift to Allan has been a book about the F.B.I. with the inscription reading, "To the skeptic, L-D." L-D is as close as Dad gets to saying I love you. When I tell him I love him, he responds with, "Ditto."

On Thanksgiving 1971 he left for work just as the turkey was being served. Some guy named D.B. Cooper had hijacked a plane, the first ever hijacking in the U.S., and he just had to go and do it at Sea-Tac airport in Seattle. My dad was assigned to the tarmac that night where he sat in position tense and ready, rifle perched. He waited for the order to sharp shoot the airplane's tires. It never came. But I didn't care about getaways or guns or ransom money or hostages. I cared that my turkey was served in chunks because my mom couldn't carve it.

I never liked the scruffy beards he grew; they hurt when I tried to kiss him goodbye. He would be gone for weeks at a time although he would never say where. Once I overheard him telling my mom he was going to the World's Fair in Spokane for a month. A fair for a month! "Pleeeese can I go with you? I promise I won't get in the way!"

“You want to go with me, huh? You don’t think hanging out with your old man would be boring? I’m not very much fun, you know.”

When he finally returned home, I asked him to tell me about the fair. He said that Helen Reddy had sung the National Anthem and she’d forgotten the words. “Can you believe that? What a disgrace! How can she forget the words to the National Anthem?” From then on I made sure I knew the words to the National Anthem, and my father detested Helen Reddy. In fact, she nearly bumped Jane Fonda from the head of the list of people not to mention around my dad. He was pro-Nixon but anti-gun, hated protesters and long-hair druggie hippies, thought both Muhammed Ali and Howard Cosell were wacos, didn’t think Sonny or Cher could sing, but both needed haircuts, and he never liked the Kennedys either, especially Teddy. None of them, however, received the contempt my father harbors to this day for Marlon Brando. And it was Marlon Brando my father was talking about the last time I saw him cry.

The TV news murmured in the background as we sat down to eat dinner. I was home for two weeks, making my annual visit from the Midwest. This year was special because I had brought my newborn daughter. Dad and I were sitting together, just the two of us at his kitchen table where he normally eats alone. The baby slept beside us on the floor, nestled in her carrier. My father’s attention was grabbed by the pictures of two men on the TV screen. “I worked with one of those guys,” he said and stopped eating the meal I had fixed him. He stared out the window at Puget Sound lost in thought, his memory as pristine as the blue sky. I looked over at the TV but didn’t immediately recognize the men by face or name. The newscaster continued with her story while

another man's picture filled the screen. This time I knew instantly who it was: Leonard Peltier. In 1975, he was convicted of murdering two F.B.I. agents execution style.

"I know you worked with him," I replied quietly. I put my fork down too and waited. He sat slightly slumped in his chair. I had noticed on each consecutive trip home that his 5'9 frame seemed to be shrinking. His skin was leathery tan and freckled. At 74, he now had to wear a baseball cap in the sun to protect his bald head. He almost never talks about cases he worked, even though he's been retired for 20 years. As an adult, my curiosity has grown and I've tried to ask him about being an agent.

"Ah, you don't want to know about all that stuff," he said.

But the Peltier case just won't go away because Leonard Peltier keeps coming up for parole. The Native American lobby supporting him is strong and loud. It usually gets national media attention triggering the F.B.I into a full-force letter writing campaign to block a new trial. It's the one case my father actually talks about, especially when it's in the news. Once though, I pushed him hard for details. "You want to know? You really want to know exactly what happened?" he said, his voice growing louder. "If you really want to know, then you can read every detail." With that he got up from his living room chair and walked over to a closet. Floor-to-ceiling shelves were lined with boxes of files. I had always known the closet held personal papers, but to this day, I do not know the contents. Someday, I thought, it will be my job to sort through all that. Within minutes he had produced a 20-page document. "Here," he said, handing me the papers, "this should answer your questions." At the top of the first page was printed: IMMEDIATE DISTRIBUTION TO ALL CURRENT AND RETIRED PERSONNEL.

It took me a second to figure out what I was reading. Dad had given me a copy of a letter written by then F.B.I. Director Louis Freeh to Attorney General Janet Reno, urging her to deny Peltier's most recent appeal to commute his sentence. By the time I had finished reading the first two pages, I knew what so upset my father. *Jack R. Coler and Ronald A. Williams were fatally shot shortly after they were attacked by gunmen in South Dakota in 1975. Investigators later found more than 125 bullet holes in the agent's cars.*

My stomach felt queasy and my heart raced. I knew my father had only pulled his gun once in a 25-year career, but never fired. *Evidence developed by the government showed that the murderer walked to where the two agents were bleeding and crippled from their wounds but still alive. Coler was unconscious. The murderer stood over him and fired two shots into Coler's head at point-blank range. Williams also was shot at point-blank range, apparently while on the ground kneeling as he tried to shield his face with his hand. It later appeared to investigators that Williams was trying to surrender.* When I had finished reading, I looked at my dad and said, "Okay. I understand now." He responded with a nod.

Leonard Peltier's name didn't come up again until the night we saw his picture on TV. "I had him!" Dad said, his eyes still focused out the window. "After he shot those agents, we lost him for a long time. Finally we tracked him to Bainbridge Island in Washington. We were just waiting to make our move when the boss pulled the plug on our 24-hour surveillance because it was costing too much," he shook his head in disgust. "By the time I could return to the scene, Peltier was gone. That's when I put out the

APB. Nobody was supposed to touch him, just notify the Bureau,” his voice drifted off. I picked up the next part of the story.

“And that’s when the Deputy Sheriff in Oregon was shot? When he tried to pull Peltier over anyway?”

“Yes.” He grew silent again, shaking his head. After a moment he added, “The APB said armed and dangerous.”

“I know. You put out the warning.”

“And you know who gave Peltier the motorhome he escaped in?”

“Yes, Marlon Brando owned it.”

“Jerk.” That’s about as bad as my father’s language gets. But he can say it with alarming venom. I picked up my fork to start eating again because that was the end of the story as I knew it. Dad was still staring out at the water. “Then I had to go to court to try and protect my guy, but I couldn’t protect him,” he continued. Pain began pooling in his eyes. What? What was he talking about? My body went numb. I was 35 years old but inside I felt eight again, seeing my father cry for the first time. I looked away then forced myself to look back at him.

“You had to go to court to protect what guy?” I pressed. He heaved a sigh.

“After the shootings, I got an informant on the reservation to help us build a case. I promised him - I gave him my word that his identity would be protected.” Dad paused, swallowing hard. “We always used code names, but when I turned in my report, I had to name our informant, which I did in the cover letter. It wasn’t supposed to go any further than my boss. But, somehow that cover letter got filed with the report. It was a clerical error,” he said, tears streaming down his face. “So, through the Freedom of Information

Act, Peltier's lawyers found him out. That name never should have been released. I tried to block it in court. His life was ruined. There was nothing I could do," he choked out. His head dropped. "I didn't anticip...I gave him my word," he was pounding his fist on the table.

My eyes blurred with wetness as did the man sitting next to me. It was like watching a Polaroid picture develop in reverse from clear colors to white, murky nothing. I desperately wanted to fan it to see the picture return. I had never known my father not to have the answer, not to be in control through his meticulous account of details. He was a plan-C kind of guy as deft as a boxer who anticipates three jabs ahead. But, he had been hit in the stomach and defeated by a clerical error. He was human.

"Who was your informant?" I asked, as if finding out the name would tell me more about my father. "How was his life ruined?" Dad sat silently shaking his head. The witness had shut down.

Waaaaa!" My daughter's wail ripped through the kitchen.

"Gee, I forgot she was there," Dad said, relieved. With two quick swipes, his tears were gone. Yet for an instant three generations had been crying together in shame, and love, and hunger.

"It's time for her bottle," I said reaching down for Gabby. "Do you want to hold her while I get it ready?"

"Sure," he said. I transferred Gabby into his outstretched arms and he gently cuddled her to his chest. "Well, hello there little one," he said. Her body wriggled in response. She looked up at him at her own brown eyes. Then my tiny daughter let out a

belch of a 14-year old boy. Dad and I looked at each other startled, and then burst out laughing. “Geez!” He was smiling.

“Here, I can take her now,” I was still laughing. Back in my arms, Gabby eagerly latched on to her bottle and began sucking. “Grandpa was just telling us stories,” I said to her, but looking at dad.

“Ah, you don’t want to hear about all that stuff anymore.”

“Yes, dad I do. I really do. Tell us more.”

