

# That One Thing

## A seaside porch on which to listen and remember

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Ever since my father died in March, I find myself in two places at once. My body might be in my car barreling up I-95 to visit my mother, but my mind is rattling around the hallways of my childhood, poking my head into the kitchen during our annual fish fry with dear neighbors or eavesdropping on the dubious laughter emanating from a story-swapping session on the front porch. My father is always there.

When I walk down the real upstairs hallway in my house, I practically walk into a photo of the first-floor porch at my parents' beach house. The rafters are in shadow so you can't see the mildewed and peeling paint that my Dad would scrape and repaint every summer. His ratty, wooden swing is so lovingly lit by the morning sun that it's all glow and no grunge. The rocking chairs ease back as if they expect visitors any minute, and the gingerbread and spindles frame the porch's window on the world and wind. A bank of purplish clouds hovers over the ocean that I know is there in the distance, but it is only a glimmer.

Decades before this photo was taken, and years before this porch was his porch, my father knew that was where he wanted to be. And though there's not a soul visible in the picture, my father is everywhere there.

My parents always took our family to Cape May, N.J., for summer vacations, back when it was a doddering, scruffy beach town that time forgot and Nor'easters remembered, long before it re-emerged as a swanky Victorian gem with a colorful cachet. We'd stay a few days in cramped motel rooms or guesthouses until we graduated to staying a week or two in ramshackle rental houses.

In early 1965 when my parents were looking at rentals, they thought they had a deal on a decent place, but when they came back from lunch to sign the contract, the price had gone up \$100. According to family lore, that's when my father, thinking he'd been cheated, fumed, "I'll buy a house in Cape May before I pay that!" My poor mother, with five children under the age of 10, likely wasn't in the mood to commence house-hunting just then, but that's what they did.

It's easy when you want only one thing, and my father wanted the house with the porch he'd long admired. The fact that it wasn't for sale didn't dissuade him. Without ever setting foot on the porch or peeking inside the windows, he told the agent to offer the out-of-town owners \$19,000. It boggles the mind now — a beachfront, three-story, Victorian — but it boggled the mind then, too. How could they afford it? How could they afford to furnish it? And who knew what was inside?

In my father's house there are many rooms, the Bible says, but it forgot to mention that my father painted every one of them, never failing to drip paint on his newest pair of shorts and every pair of loafers, and my mother took care of everything else. Long before outdoor rooms became a trend, that porch was my father's favorite space to be. He liked to have something in his hand when he was out

there — a paintbrush or scraper, all too often a cigarette, a book, a drink. But mostly what he had on hand were stories: pirate stories, meeting-our-mother stories, Civil War stories, crazy contractor stories, skipping- school stories, driving-his-mother-berserk stories, shipwreck stories.

He was a collector of books, coins and stamps, but his stories and the way he told them are what I value most. When a natural storyteller rocked alongside him and traded yarns, it was the best, and over the years so many came and went like the comings and goings of the tide. It was wonderful sitting on the steps listening in. If you told him the house was beautiful and you told a good story, you could stay quite awhile. If you liked listening to his, you hoped you'd get invited back. And if you liked to paint, you would.

The night he died, my father worried he'd been an absent father, and I just looked at him incredulously and laughed. This from a man who never had a father, never knew one thing about him except that he wasn't there. My father had such presence.

It's going to be tough to walk up those porch steps this summer and not see my father reading on his swing, and when I lean against the railing, I'll feel at sea not hearing his voice rumble, "You shouldn't do that." It's hard when you want only one thing — to sit on the porch with him again and listen, but still, more than anywhere else, that porch is where I want to be.