

His Zeyde's Shears

By Adam Elliott



His Zeyde's shears. These old things.

My father was born May 28th, 1929, a little over three months before the stock market crash that amounted to the economic collapse we now refer to as “The Great Depression.” My father had me later in life, at the age of 57. When he passed away in 2017, I was 31 years old. Growing up, a lot of my friends in the school yard would see my father arriving to pick me up and say something akin to “your Dad looks old enough to be your Grandfather.” They weren't wrong.

One of my earliest memories as a human was of a young boy coming up to me on one of those afternoons and saying: “Your Dad is old.” “So what?” I replied. “He's going to die soon,” the boy said, before running off. As a five-year-old, I wasn't completely aware of the magnitude of this interaction or how it would affect me later in life. It wasn't until I was older did I fully realize how that interaction marked the beginning of an inherent fear of my father's mortality, a fear that would plague my relationship with him until the very moment he passed away. And then, it was gone.

But it wasn't all for naught. At some point along the line, that fear of my father's mortality organically grew into a fascination with his life. I wanted to learn everything I could about my father, and while perhaps my drive was rooted in fear and worry, it was cushioned with nothing but love and admiration for the man he was.

Growing up, I had the great pleasure of spending time in my father's studio at his office on Madison Avenue, where he was the Art Director of an advertising firm. At this point in his career, shortly before retirement, he worked in Intimate Apparel. Alright, I'll say it. He was a bra-and-panty man! Some of us New Yorkers may remember highway

billboards and advertisements plastered over busses in the early 2000's for "The X-Bra," which was the first bra invented with the sole purpose of adjusting one's desired cleavage. My Dad ran the ad campaign on that one.

As a young boy, it was spending those afternoons in his studio where I learned the most about my Dad. For one thing, he did all his campaign layouts by hand. Whenever I asked him why he refused to use a computer (what all the younger creatives had begun relying on), he shunned it for the cardstock and foam core and spray adhesives, the aromas of which I will always associate with him. He knew technology would only render his tools obsolete, the pencils and measurers and erasers he held in his hand with the kind of reverence you would a dear friend. My Father adopted the carpenter's old adage: "Measure twice, cut once," he would tell me. His work was impeccable. Corporate pressures led to an earlier-than-desired retirement for him, and so my days as his "Assistant Art Director" also became numbered. (And yes, he designed the type and layout for my business cards.)

"Measure twice, cut once." Whenever he was cutting something, he used his Zeyde's tailor shears. They were a mainstay on his countertop, and despite their worn and weathered appearance, they always cut a perfect line. While my father would often complain he never had enough counter space, he always had room for his Zeyde's shears, which, at the end of his workday were always laid down perfectly aligned without too much clutter orbiting them. I remember asking him about the shears. He told me when his Zeyde died, he (along with the rest of the siblings and cousins) was invited to his grandfather's house to collect remembrances of him, the personal belongings he had left behind. My Dad let the others take the rings and the watches. He only wanted the shears.

Towards the end of my father's career in advertising, I remember a trip my family made to Florida to visit my Grandmother Rose. My Mom's Mom. It was there, around the age of 11 or 12 that I picked up my first pool cue. Rose lived in communal housing, and they had a regulation-size pool table there in the club house. It was at that point I learned my Dad could play pool. Not only that, but back in the 1930s when he was a young boy, he racked the balls for some of the guys down at the pool hall for a nickle a night. He picked up a few tricks along the way, too. And so the pool hall became a place where my Dad and I would spend our equivalent of "throwing the old ball around." (At this point in his life, playing catch was out of the cards. He had Osteoarthritis in both his knees.) Whenever we played pool, he would always tell me to slow down my shot. He taught me that when you're playing pool, it's not about the shot you're taking, it's about the next shot. "Always set up your next shot." Now, I'm not big on sports, but that's probably the best sports analogy to life I've ever heard. I wish I was better at it.

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By all accounts, I wasn’t an easy kid. Growing up, I was kicked out of every school and summer camp I attended. For the life of me, I have no idea how my father spent his otherwise Golden Years putting up with all my bullshit and still spoiling me with love. There is no part of me that understands that kind of love, at least not yet. As a kid, much like how I always rushed the ball playing pool, I had little patience for anything else. Whatever I was supposed to be a part of, I wanted to do the opposite. To do my own thing. And a lot of times, that would invariably get me into some kind of trouble. I remember my Dad used to say to me, “Fake it until you make it. You don’t always have to like what you’re doing, but you do have to fake it if you want to get ahead.”

“Measure twice, cut once,” he used to tell me. “Always set up your next shot,” he would say. “Fake it until you make it.”

Like the rest of us, I am in quarantine now. A part of me can’t help but think of what my Dad would be doing in quarantine, if he was still here. He would surely be taking up counter space in my mother’s dining room on the table in there, working on a project. Maybe designing a sign for the lobby of their building for all the tenants to read. Something about making sure their trash was going to the right place to help the super out. (In addition to being a “Bra Man,” my Dad was also a self-proclaimed “Trash Man” - but that’s for another story.)

Whatever project he would be working on, he would be using his Zeyde’s shears. The ones I own now. And with all the uncertainty that surrounds us these days, I now know why he chose the shears instead of the rings and the watches. For him, they served as a call to action. To keep doing the work. To survive an immigration to this country. To survive through a “Great Depression,” as we now call it. To make it through two failed marriages until he finally met the right one, the one that led to me showing up. To accept a forced retirement when he still had so much creativity left in the tank. To beat cancer and survive through kidney disease, his Zeyde’s shears stayed there on his countertop. Wherever that ended up being. And he continued to do the work.

And now they’re on my countertop. My Great-Zeyde’s shears. These old things. It feels good to hold them. It feels good to know they’ll survive this too.

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