

## Fathers and sons

'Leonard wasn't your father, Tom.'

'What!'

'Your father wasn't your father. If you see what I mean.'

'No, I don't, what do you mean?'

'Sit down, Tom.'

'I want to know!'

'Yes, and I'm going to tell you. But sit down and calm down.'

Then she told me.

...

Life with my father — well, I'll still call him that because that's still how I think of him — was not easy, and our relationship was not always good. He had a ready temper and I had a ready temper. He was loose with his tongue and so was I. We rubbed each other up the wrong way and were often fighting. Not physical fights, just yelling at each other. Mom hated it and so did my younger brother. Paul, Mom's brother, used to laugh.

'A chip of the old block, you lucky son of a gun, now live with that for the rest of your life,' he said more than once. But that didn't cheer me one bit.

I wasn't the only who suffered from Dad's ready temper. As he got older, he began to fall out with neighbours and friends. Soon they would come round only when he was out. I got on fine with other people. I wondered about it, too. It was something about Dad that sparked me and my temper, and I didn't like it, and I didn't like it that Paul meant it would only get worse as I got older.

When I was fourteen, Paul used a phrase I had never heard before and I asked Mom what it meant. After another blow-out between me and Dad when Paul was at the house and Dad stormed off to Barney's Bar to cool down, Paul said 'Well, the apple never falls far from the tree'.

'What did Paul mean, Mom?'

'It's just a saying, Tom, just a silly saying.'

'So what does it mean?'

I remember she sighed a long sigh, and I caught a look in her eye I couldn't understand.

'It means 'like father, like son', he's saying you're just like Dad. It's just a silly saying. Means nothing, just something folk say. They say a lot that means nothing, you'll learn that.'

It was that odd look in her eye I noticed, kids are sensitive to these things. They always know, say, when someone is lying, though they don't know why and

don't how and they don't even know it's lying. They just know something ain't right. It was that kind of look.

When I got a little older, Paul and I spent time more time together. He was a good bit younger than Mom and he felt closer to my age than my friends' dads. He liked to take his car apart and put it back together again and I liked to help him. We talked a lot and he was more like an older brother.

'So what is it with Dad?'

You Dad? Your Dad's a one-off. He's a good guy, a really good guy, but he has his demons.'

'What does that mean?'

'There are things that bug him, set him off.'

'Like me?'

Paul laughed.

'No, not like you. Your Dad loves you, he's very proud of you, talks about you all the time.'

'So why is he always getting at me?'

'Most likely for the same reason you're always getting at him. People are strange, Tom, and the sooner you know that, the sooner you can deal with it. People aren't like they are in story books.'

It was around then, Dad had just turned 40, when he fell over for the first time and broke his leg. No one knew why he fell over, he just lost his balance, didn't trip over something, and fell, badly. Having a leg in plaster all the time didn't help his temper too much. Later he started getting really low moods. You could tell. He just sat in a corner, didn't say anything, just looking at the floor, not even staring, just looking. You'd call out — 'Mom wants to know if you want a coffee' — and he'd look up, look at you, didn't seem to understand, say nothing, then look back down at the floor.

'What's up with Dad, Mom?'

'He's not well at the moment, Tom.'

'Is it bad?'

'We don't know yet. Maybe. Maybe. But don't you worry. It'll all work out somehow.'

It did work out and Dad stopped just sitting in the corner, and we got back into our routine of blowing up with each other and yelling.

I could never figure out how my dad and mom got together. They seemed so different, not the kind you'd think would fit. But I'm older now, and I know you just never can tell. Folk marry for all kinds of reasons, end up with someone for a few years, then split. Doesn't mean they should not have gotten together, doesn't mean

anything except that they didn't work out how best to live with each other. Or there was something about the other they really liked and really wanted, and that was worth all the down times. Who knows? Who cares? There ain't no magic, don't believe TV and the films and stories.

...

Mom sat me down and shoed my kids out of the room.

'Well, Mom, what are you saying?'

'When Dad was diagnosed, they said you and your brother should be tested. So they tested you both, and ...'

'And?'

'Your brother was clear and so were you.'

'So?'

My mom could not look me in the eye.

'So?'

She took out a tissue from her sleeve and blew her nose.

'But there wasn't really a need to test you.'

'What do you mean?'

'There was no way Dad could have passed on to you what he had.'

'Why not?'

Now she looked at me again.

'I've just told you, your dad wasn't your dad, not your real dad.'

'So I was adopted?'

Mom sighed.

'No, you weren't adopted.'

'So what gives. Mom?'

She said nothing.

'Who was my real dad?'

Mom got annoyed, but she wasn't annoyed with me.

'Your dad was your dad in every way but one, Tom, every way! Every way! He loved you, always. He changed your diaper, he played football with you, he wiped your nose he ...'

Then she started crying.

'I loved your dad, Tom, I loved him with all my heart and I always will.'

'Don't cry, Mom.'

I stayed silent now, it was now for her to talk and if she didn't want to talk, not now, so be it. After a little while, she wiped her eyes and blew her nose, and looked at me straight.

‘When I met your dad, I was pregnant. I didn’t know it then but I was. And when I found out and told Leonard, he said it didn’t matter, it didn’t matter to him and shouldn’t matter to anyone else. That’s when I began to love him, Tom, guys like your dad are rare.’

I wanted to ask her and didn’t dare. But she knew what was on my mind.

‘I never knew who the father was, Tom, never. Folk always think us old folk were never young. But we were young, as young as you were. It could have been . . .’

She paused.

‘It would have been pretty much anyone.’

Mom is still alive and we are as close as we always were. And what she told me makes me feel closer to my dad, now, despite the fights.