



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2011

Article 13

1-1-2011

Like Father, Like Son

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Class of 2011

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Tanasoca, Paul W. (2011) "Like Father, Like Son," *The Mercury*: Year 2011, Article 13.

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Keywords

creative writing, non-fiction

Author Bio

Paul Tanasoca is a senior from Toms River, New Jersey. As an individual major in film, he plans on moving to California to pursue a career as a film editor. He is an active member of the track team, and in his spare time, he enjoys surfing, making films, and recording rap songs.

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

PAUL TANASOCA

Let's just say my dad is not your typical man. He has no cable and no computer. There is no dryer in his home and he never uses the dishwasher. The words "air conditioning" don't exist in his vocabulary and his only use of the heat is to keep the pipes from freezing. When he takes a shower, the water is turned on and off between lathering and rinsing off. He recently purchased a DVD player, but before that all he had was a VCR. This wasn't even a real VCR though, because it didn't have the standard recording feature.

Curiously enough, he lives in northern New Jersey. Not to say this is an abnormal environment for him, as he grew up there, but in many ways he lives his life as if he is off the grid. The suburb of North Haledon, where he now resides, is an older neighborhood that over the past fifteen years has been given an aesthetic face-lift. Many of the elderly couples who inhabited the area have died and now younger families occupy the borough. Though the glamour of a 1950's suburban utopia has faded with time, that same spirit still exists amidst the neighborhood's restoration.

There are some unspoken rules about living on Gemeinhardt Avenue. Everyone's ranch style homes are freshly painted. Their lawns are unnaturally green and little signs like, "Welcome to the Paxton's residence!" adorn the porches. The blaring sound of mowers can be heard every day of the week, and is only drowned out by the zooming of planes from Newark Airport that fly overhead. Though at first promising, the change of seasons hardly offers any noise relief at all. Mowers are replaced by the roar of leaf blowers in the fall and during the winter snow blowers take charge. The level of noise pollution is something that my dad can't stand. He often wonders why the neighbors can't coordinate their lawn care activities to the same day of the week.

To the discontent of some neighbors, my father's house is the only one on the block that didn't follow these assumed rules. His faded yellow home hasn't been repainted in years and he hardly ever mows the lawn. The only elderly neighbor left on the block, Dick, has repeatedly offered to mow Steve's lawn for him, and has actually done so a few times without permission. On the rare occasions my dad does decide to mow, a manual mower is used. His only reason for trimming his meadow is to create paths that allow him to traverse the thick plant life that has taken over the backyard.

His backyard is actually pretty cool, acting as an oasis in the desert of suburban sprawl. Though the yard is probably less than half an acre

in size, it seems endless. There are trees all around and everything is left untamed. Ferns grow wild and in the warmer months colorful flowers bloom everywhere. Deeper into the backyard there is a miniature forest that comes to an end at a stone wall. The chest-high wall acts as a buffer, preventing his little sanctuary from exploding into the other neighbors' yards. Underneath a cherry tree, you will find a homemade grill and a log table that he built from a fallen tree. He even has a makeshift archery range, concealed behind bushes to avoid complaints and startling his neighbors. Whenever you venture too far in, you feel as if you are Robin Hood in Sherwood Forest, searching for his merry men. (On this search you are unlikely to find anyone merry, but rather a giant compost pile.) There is even a small plot of land devoted to a garden, where he grows his own vegetables seasonally. This past summer he went through a phase during which he ate nothing but vegetable shakes. He insisted that I try one on numerous occasions. I respectfully declined.

To keep out intruders, he carefully places glass jars atop the windows and balances bottles on the doorknobs. During the night, the lights in his house run on timers, periodically turning on and off to create an illusion of activity. For many years, his number was unlisted in the phonebook, until the company began to charge him extra for the service. As a free alternative, he now uses his mother's maiden name to mask his own identity. He rips the addresses off all of mail that comes to the house (no shredder of course) and even burns them in the fireplace from time to time. With hardly anything making its way into the trash can, the majority of his waste goes into the recycling bin or compost pile. He bases this practice on a Native American ideology in regards to buffalo hunting: nothing must go to waste.

Though frugal, he does buy expensive things for himself every once in a while. A few years back, he purchased a motorcycle, in an idealistic attempt to be like Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape*. He wished to dash through green pastures and ride up and down the hills with nothing but total freedom (minus the part where Nazis chase after him). Sadly, there aren't many open fields in Northern New Jersey, and just like McQueen's character, my father was doomed to fail. One evening while riding alone in the winter chill, Steve fell off his bike. Thankfully, he didn't injure himself beyond a few bumps and scrapes, but it did mark the end of his motorcycle days. I always wondered what he felt like after the fall, wheeling his motorcycle back to his house in the freezing cold, unwilling to ride the bike even a few more miles. His accident didn't come as a surprise to me though, as I am terrible at riding any bike that isn't stationary.

Steve drives a jet black Mustang with flashy lightning bolts, yet consistently stays fifteen miles per hour under the speed limit. His vehicle moves so slowly that as a passenger you are often slouched down in embarrassment at what the other cars may think of you. I once thought about making a sign that said, "Sorry, not my fault," to hold up to angry

drivers passing by. I don't think traveling with him would be so embarrassing if he didn't drive a sports car. Why not buy a Civic or a Camry? Maybe he is subtly alluding to Teddy Roosevelt's big stick ideology: that he can go fast if he really needs to. His motivation for his snail-like pace has been explained to me as this: driving too quickly burns fuel inefficiently and you should never be rushing to get anywhere.

Perhaps he inherited some of these odd behaviors from his father Donald. During WWII, Donald was an x-ray technician who was sent home early due to radiation sickness. This illness is what I've always blamed his strangeness on, and others have never offered a better explanation. Donald was a bookaholic, and his house became his own personal library. There wasn't a single room that didn't have at least one overflowing bookshelf. The living room, dining room, basement, everywhere, books.

Though he never really talked about it, Donald was absolutely obsessed with Edgar Allen Poe. In his bedroom you'd find hundreds of Poe books, all protected behind a series of glass-fronted bookcases surrounding the room. He even had a license plate hanging up that he found on the side of the road. It reads "Poe 1." Sporting a moustache and wavy black hair, my dad also has an eerie resemblance to Poe. The ludicrous thought that Donald might have selected his spouse, just so their child could look like Poe, always made me laugh. This resemblance isn't so true anymore, as Steve has lived much longer than Poe did, but if he hadn't met such an untimely death, I bet they'd look remarkably similar.

My grandfather Donald was also known for collecting random things. I'm not sure if he followed this practice his whole life, or just as an old man, as that was all I ever got to witness. All of his used razor blades were saved and though he wasn't a smoker, he'd pick up cigarette cartons from the ground. He would then organize such items and neatly place them in his bedroom drawers. (I remember saving all of my razor cartridges as a young teenager just because I knew that Donald had done the same. Like batteries, I assumed that they had to be thrown away in some special fashion, which wasn't worth the hassle of regular disposal. Though I never had a problem living with just women, as a young boy learning to shave, it would have been nice to have a father present in my life. Instead, I often learned how to be a "man" by myself.) When I was a young child, he and my dad would often have silent wars over what each perceived as junk versus treasure. My dad would put out a broken chair from the basement on the curb, but it would magically find its way back inside. I always secretly rooted for Donald, as he was the older man, and I felt he had a right to keep whatever he wanted to keep.

Another odd thing Donald used to do was scatter marbles all around the backyard. He then would attach a cup to a tree, and deposit the marbles into it whenever he'd find one. Over the course of months, all the marbles

would eventually be collected and he'd start all over again. I always thought it was funny that Donald would intentionally lose his marbles, as if he metaphorically wished to seem insane.

Donald was also a writer. Out of curiosity, I Googled him once and found an article he had written about being a member of the Civilian Conservation Corps. It was strange to me, how a man who kept to himself when I knew him was so open in his writing. During his time in the CCC he was one of the boys, and describes himself as a talkative leader, and a hard worker. This Donald seemed like a different person, one that I unfortunately never got a chance to meet during my lifetime. (This always makes me wonder about my parents' past, or for that matter, the pasts of anyone I've ever come in contact with. We all have so much personal history that it is impossible to know everything about everyone. It's as if everybody has their own secret lives. I know my parents had spouses before they met each other, but who were they? Why did they decide to divorce? What are their favorite memories? I can't help but think that even the people who know me best, don't really know me at all.)

When Donald died, my dad didn't tell me for weeks. He eventually decided to just casually bring it up in conversation. It didn't really seem that unusual to me though, as I was just a little kid, inexperienced with the concept of death. Since Donald's departure, my dad has sold the majority of his book collection. Some were of little to no value, while others were rare, signed first editions that sold for considerable amounts. During the process of clearing out the books, my father and I would periodically find money tucked between the pages. Open up a copy of *The Violent Bear it Away* and you find a hundred dollars. Not a bad surprise, right? I guess that was Donald's way of remaining on earth past the time he was given.

The weirdest discovery we had while searching the books was a drawing of a strange yet recognizable design on a small piece of paper. My dad kept trying to remember where he had seen the sketch before but to no avail. When I saw him a few weeks later, Steve had figured it out. The drawing matched a stone pattern that was laid out in the backyard. He wanted to dig the spot up (probably thinking it was treasure), so we did. After removing the stones, we dug underneath the pattern for an hour or so without finding anything. Disappointed, I thought that perhaps this was all just an intricate joke set up by Donald. My contemplation was proven wrong as we eventually came in contact with two metal cans hidden deep beneath the soil. With the help of a screwdriver, my father pried open the tightly sealed cans. Can you guess what was inside? The ashes of Donald's parents.

While the ashes weren't the treasure my dad was expecting, I could tell from the look on his face that he was enamored by the discovery. For me, this was slightly horrifying yet not very shocking, as the unexpected is always bound to happen at my dad's house. I have to admit it was a surreal

experience: to hold the matter of someone in my hand that I had never met before yet had descended from. Without those ashes, I would never be here.

My father and I collected the cans we had just dug up and drove to High Mountain in the next town over. We didn't talk about why we went there specifically, but I guess my dad found it romantic for his grandparents to take their last hoorah off the top of the mountain, to blow with the wind and scatter wherever their ashes fell. Steve has told me time and again that he wishes to crawl into the woods and die against a tree in peace, without anyone knowing. His alternative death scenario is to swiftly launch an arrow from his bow during his dying breaths and be buried wherever the arrow may land. If the latter option is destined to unfold, I hope he is found in a location other than North Haledon, as I don't think his neighbors would be fond of him eternally resting in their backyard.

We hiked all the way up the spiral path until we reached the summit. (I've always liked High Mountain, particularly for the vibrantly spray painted boulders and the red rusted vehicle skeletons that line the trail. Why did so many people choose to abandon their vehicles here? It always struck me as an interesting blend of man and nature.) My dad reopened the cans and we threw the ashes off the top of the mountain after he said some poetic words that escape my memory. Regrettably, due to the wind, some of the ashes flew back in our faces. Steve asked me if I wanted to keep any of the rings and necklaces we found inside the ashes. Somewhat disturbed, I declined. Knowing that Steve would have kept them if they were of any real value, I watched as they followed suit off the mountaintop. (Sadly, this is only the second grossest ash story I have. My grandmother on my mother's side was throwing her brother-in-law's ashes into the bay he grew up near. We went to a restaurant afterwards and she came in brushing the ashes off her hands. She never went to the bathroom to wash them.)

I've never asked my dad why he is the way he is, and whenever I ask my mother she just badmouths him into the ground. (The words asshole and lazy come to mind.) I don't think this is the best parenting strategy, but then again she has done much more for me than he ever has. Regardless, I think that's a hard question to ask someone. If they don't know who they are, they'll probably start to think about it, which could be a good or bad realization.

Though his ways are strange, there is something attractive about the life he leads. He doesn't follow the status quo and he tries his best to be a great and moral person. He is a wonderful conversationalist and is undeniably charismatic, which is no doubt why other women and my mother found him so attractive. He knows all there is to know about art and he has a love for literature, history, cinema, as he is always longing to further explore any medium of creativity. Similar to the Poe collection from my grandpa's bedroom, his room is filled with nearly every version of Robin Hood and

King Arthur ever published. Of course these books are also enshrined by book cases with glass covers.

To no surprise for some of you, my mom divorced this man. After nearly ten years of marriage, they separated when I was five years old. I never questioned why they split up because it was all I really knew. All my closest childhood friends lived with single mothers too. When I am home from school, I live with my mother in Toms River, New Jersey. This is about an hour and twenty minutes away from my father's home (two hours if he drives), yet over the past few years I've rarely seen my father.

My atypical upbringing makes me wonder about the importance of family in one's life. I know I'm not always the best son. I've never been one to misbehave or break their rules, but I hardly keep in touch with either of my parents anymore. This has become truer since I moved further away from home to attend college. My mom and my sister will scream at each other for no reason at all, but then be best friends the next day. That is a bond that I don't feel I share with anyone, and that I wish I shared with my father. Instead, I'm kind of just there in my family, like a ghost, incapable of interacting in any way. I now realize that I take for granted the time that they are around, as my parents won't be here forever.

Despite his peculiarity, there are things I love about my father. I admire his individuality immensely, as he doesn't just follow the crowd. He knows how to think freely and is conscientious about every decision he makes. I also realize that our dwindling communication isn't completely my fault or his as the lives we lead only expand the gap. Meetings are less frequent and phone calls are becoming a rarity. Due to our collapsing contact, our interactions become more awkward whenever we see each other. It's as if we've forgotten how to communicate with each other. Though he is a great speaker, the conversation dwindles on my end of the bargain and eventually gets pretty quiet. Often, he'll try to convince me to explore some new lifestyle he's adopted, which usually ends up in frustration and me wanting to leave.

While sitting in a Chinese restaurant, Steve recently told me that he had failed as a father. If I hadn't had a migraine, the conversation might have pushed further, but instead, the flame he created was smothered quickly. Still, I can't say that I agree with him. Though we don't have the strongest relationship, I still have learned a lot from him and am sure his eccentricities are probably bestowed on me in some way. I do now love books, culture, art and anything creative, and while I don't place glass bottles atop my windows, I do find myself ripping up mail addressed to me into little tiny pieces.