

[ESSAY]

Sometimes what a boy
needs most is his grandpa.

by Julianne Hill

raising nick



IT'S FATHER'S DAY, reminding me yet again that I make a lousy man.

The fact that I am not male is something I've regretted almost daily for years. This desire for manhood is not about sexual orientation. It's about fathers fulfilling needs that mothers can't.

My parents' photo albums prove that, in our family of four girls, our

mother ruled the early years. At 6, I wore pink dresses with itchy netting, a hat topping my tasteful bob. "Pretty" was the operative word.

A few pages later, though, I'm on the swim team, sporting a boyish pixie cut. The next page reveals the black eye I earned playing catcher during my ill-fated baseball career. Then I'm coming home from my first job, measuring metal

bits in a machine shop where Dad moonlighted.

Dad, it seems, had taken over.

My father's hand is visible even in how I move—with more speed than grace. Other girls know how to do twirly tricks on ice; I skate fast. Other girls do synchronized swimming; I race. Other girls obey speed limits; I don't.

Because my dad's been such a

strong influence, I've never bought into the notion, common among new mothers, that fathers are incompetent, maybe even unnecessary. Men, the reasoning goes, can't nurse. They never seem to hold the baby right. They watch far too many violent TV shows in front of the children.

No, I've always known, even before the studies a few years back started showing it, that a strong father-daughter relationship can boost a girl's self-esteem and problem-solving ability.

Good thing. I've needed it.

On February 26, 1999, about 4 p.m., I was hanging Hot Wheels decorations for my 4-year-old son Nick's birthday party the next day. The phone rang, announcing that moment we all dread. This was to be *the* phone call, the one that forever changes your life.

Doug, my husband, answered it and passed the phone to me. It was Alan Shepard, M.D., a Chicago neurologist.

Somehow, if we ever think about getting *the* phone call, we assume it will be about someone who's far away. But this call was about Doug. Doug, who had just answered the phone. Doug, who was 38 years old. Doug, the advertising copywriter, who did stand-up comedy, ran marathons, insisted on organic vegetables. Doug, the love of my life. Doug, my little boy's father.

The call wasn't totally unexpected. It came after months of trying to find some physical cause for Doug's dramatic personality change. Dr. Shepard had recommended a PET scan.

Frankly, I've blocked out the doctor's exact words, but his basic message was this: Doug's scan

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showed that he had frontal lobe dementia (FLD), a degenerative and ultimately fatal disease that atrophies part of the brain. As the disease progresses, it mimics a baby's development, only backward. Doug will lose his ability to work, drive, reason, feel emotions, count, go to the bathroom, walk, talk, swallow, and, finally, breathe. There are few treatments, no cures. He will look fine—even healthy—but eventually we will have to move him to a nursing home. He has two to 10 years to live.

I said it over and over: *Doug is dying. Doug is dying.* I told Doug the news. True to the disease, he showed no emotion.

My dad called. He said, "I can't stand it." He loaded my mother and sister Bev into the car and drove the nearly 350 miles between Cleveland and Chicago in what seemed like 15 minutes.

As Nick blew out his candles, we braced ourselves, knowing that the boy and his father were heading in opposite directions.

Now, it's four years later. My son is as smart and handsome as the man I married

18 years ago, with the same blond hair, green eyes, dimples, freckles, and quirky sense of humor. We don't know if FLD is always inherited, but sometimes this little carbon copy scares me. I pray Nick has just one chunk of my DNA.

Meanwhile, Doug has been in an assisted-living center for two years.

I think he still recognizes us, but it's hard to know. He has trouble talking. Occasionally, he calls me Jackie, his mom's name, or Katy, his sister's. He can no longer shower or shave by himself.

Since the diagnosis, my reading list has changed. Now, I look for books on how to raise Nick alone, how to help him understand what's happening to his dad, and how to teach him to be a man. *Raising a Son: Parents and the Making of a Healthy Man*, by family therapists Jeanne and Don Elum, implies that a boy starts looking for a man to be his role model by the time he is 8.

Nick is now 8.

Every day, I try to fill the void. I take Nick to Cubs games on Saturday afternoons and growl like a monster during tag. I feel it's my job to teach him how to shoot pool, do the backstroke, and ride a bike without training wheels—all things my dad taught me. I try to father the way Dad did, being firm yet fun.

But I know I come up short.

I forget to bow before sumo wrestling. I don't know how the studs on a tuxedo work. And I don't know what to say when he checks out the Victoria's Secret catalog.

Sometimes, Nick teaches *me* about manhood. Last August, our basement flooded. Standing in line at the hardware store, I thought about my wedding veil, Doug's winter clothing, and my hiking boots, now wet and smelly. Hot tears slapped my face.

Nick pulled me out of line. "Mom, you can't cry here," he whispered. "This is a *hardware store*."

When I travel for work, I'm stuck for child care. Doug's parents died a while ago, so Nick often stays



Julianne Hill (pictured above with son Nick) is a writer and producer whose work has appeared on National Public Radio, PBS, and A&E.

with my folks. My Dad, my hero,
drives from Ohio to Illinois one
day just to turn around with Nick
in tow the next.

"It's no problem," Dad says. He
tells tales of grandpa and grandson
discussing cars, comparing notes on
Nintendo games, and eating high-
cholesterol foods with side dish veg-
etables no greener than a potato.

When I fetch Nick in Ohio, I
catch glimpses of what might have
been between him and his dad.
Once, I spied my father explaining
the whys and wherefores of bunting.
Another day, he and Nick spent the
entire afternoon in the basement
building a see-through car engine.

This Father's Day, I must face facts.
Never will I exit a barbershop with
the same haircut as my son. Never
will I take him in a men's room.
Never will I be a man for my boy.

My dad can do all those things.
And he does.