

I have only one photo of Donna and in it she is laughing. Not just smiling, chuckling or playing to the camera, but stomach clutching, bend over laughing at... something. What was she looking at outside the right edge of the photo? Who the hell knows. It was over thirty years ago and I have racked my brain to remember the day, but I can't.

Our families met, and became fast friends, when we were five or six. Our parents would get together a few nights a week and abuse each other over cards. The three of us kids (my older sister, Kim; Donna; and myself) were left to our own devices, wiling away the hours playing together. This usually consisted of building forts out of the living room furniture, playing Monopoly (a game I hate to this day) and watching sit-com reruns far into the night. We saw every episode of *Love, American Style*, *Room 222*, *Get Smart*, and whatever other 60s show was rerun on late night TV. Despite the fact that it was L.A., it was the 70s which meant there were only six or seven stations, but they played a steady stream well into the darkness.

If we ever got bored with sit-coms we didn't understand we would try to find a movie. There were a couple of channels that would run old movies late at night and we had more than our fair share of Cary Grant, Katherine Hepburn, Jimmy Stewart and the like. Many times an old western would be on which I would fight to watch as a healthy delight in them was instilled at a young age by my father. We watched many a western on Saturdays with John Wayne a regular, especially in my grandparents' house when we visited on the weekends.

The evening for us kids usually ended with us falling asleep to the National Anthem over a photo of the planting of the flag on Iwo Jima somewhere in the neighborhood of midnight or one in the morning. This gave way to the high-pitched tone of the test pattern as the channel's programming formally ended for the day. From the other room voices could be heard until the hum bled through forcing one of the adults to take a break from the hostilities to turn off the box leaving us in silent darkness.

What brought our parents together was a game called Peanuts. For those of you who don't know what Peanuts is, let me explain. It's a lightning quick, four-handed game that is a cross between solitaire and full-contact karate.

Each player handles their own solitaire hand with their own deck, though two players work as a team for the purposes of score keeping. After shuffling, four cards are dealt face up - these are the solitaire cards that are stacked upon by that individual player. In addition, a stack of nine cards is dealt face down. This is the pot and is left in its dealt order (or reverse, but not mixed about) with the winner being the first to use all of these cards. Aces (and this is where it gets kind of hairy) are played in the middle, stacking in order by suit, and anyone can build on any stack available. At the end of the hand these are separated and tallied for the score with the losers' remaining pot cards subtracted from their points gained through stacking on the aces.

Play begins with a bell, a whistle, gunshot, or a simple 'go!' shouted at the top of one's lungs as the adrenaline whips them all into a frenzy. With that, each player begins their hand shuffling, turning over cards, playing on their own four cards (or the aces, of course), as quickly as possible. Moving cards from their own solitaire hands to the stacks in the middle. Hands are slapped. Cards are thrown about the room. Cards are bent. It's a heads up game. You gotta be fast. It is, after all, a race and when it really gets moving someone could lose an eye, or, if you stand for a reach, something far more precious. I could never get my father to admit it, but I believe his fear of the errant card prompted him to start wearing a cup. I checked his dresser drawer one night during the game and it was missing. He tried to make up some story of it being at the cleaners, but I didn't buy it.

I suppose it would, at this point, be a good idea to lay the scene with regards to the players. My parents were, well, my parents. To say my mother was a perfectionist would be an understatement. Anal retentive is closer, but still an understatement. She would laugh at jokes, but, honestly, I think she did it to avoid inquisition as she had minimal sense of humor. What humor she did possess was macabre, to say the least. The funniest stories to her were any where I or my father saw injury. The stories where we lost blood were comic masterpieces - the jewels in her comedic crown and she would trot these out at parties or family get-togethers in much the same way another would share the story of how they met, a promotion or new birth.

Dad was hysterical, with impeccable timing. He once waited more than an hour to deliver a punchline. It was perfection. It happened when I was about ten or eleven. They were leaving the house on a rainy night when my mother slipped off the top step of the

porch and, to hear dad tell it, put Mexican cliff divers to shame by landing with one of her legs under the front end of the car, broken. He got her into the car and took her to the hospital to get patched up. As they waited for the doctor in the examination room, my mother, moaning in pain, dad reading a magazine, he looked up and said, "You didn't stick the landing. That's gonna hurt you with the East German judge." Just as calmly as he made the comment he went back to reading with nary another word regarding her drop in the medal standings other than to point out the fact that her distaste for milk was, most certainly, a reason for the disqualification.

Now, playing games was a long standing past time in our home. We were raised playing myriad games. *Sorry*, *Monopoly*, *Scrabble* and everything in between. Dad taught me Chess at a fairly early age and when Kim received a Backgammon game for Christmas one year, he refused to play calling it, "lazy man's Chess. Why not just play Tic Tac Toe for all the strategy involved?"

My parents played word games. A lot. My father always creamed her at *Scrabble* and *Scrabble Dominoes*. I would find the score card in the trash the next morning, written in my mother's ridiculously chart perfect cursive. Dad had two-digit scores on every play and my mother, rarely. Regardless of the fact that she seldom, if ever, broke 150 for the game, she played, regarding herself a wordsmith worthy of dad's English and Theatre background. In these situations they were competitive, but in an understated way, with Dad never calling attention to the drubbing he handed down previously.

Donna's parents, Sandy and Joe, had been told just after Donna's birth that they would not be able to have any more children which caused them to dote on her, but never to the point that she became spoiled or unruly. Beyond this, they were the only cartoon couple to actually exist in the real world. Sandy was a rather large, boisterous redhead with curly hair. Joe, however, was a little guy with thick glasses and the voice of Piglet. That's what Dad called him, though never to his face and *never* in a derogatory manner. He liked Joe, but, even if he hadn't, he would never take a chance with the possibility of hurting another person's feelings unless he really meant to do it.

Joe, I believe was an accountant, which further added to the Looney Toon nature of the relationship. To watch these two operate in a competitive environment was to watch the

balletic nature of Tom and Jerry's physical relationship. As the game got rolling, so did the abuse.

From the other room, we would hear, "Dammit, Yoseph! I needed that five!" Sandy always called him Yoseph though I never knew why.

"I'm sorry, Babe! I'm sure I have another one!"

"Really!? Another five of hearts! You have another five of hearts!?"

"I think so!"

"That's a good trick, Yoseph! How... Dammit! Look what you made me do! I missed the open two!"

"I'm sorry, Babe!"

The exchange was usually peppered with slaps throughout, then punctuated at the end by another slap or a bite to the shoulder of her teammate as he tried to make up for the faux pas by throwing a card that would block the other team's win. This move usually, unfortunately, achieved the opposite effect which would bring about more good-natured spousal abuse. Dad could be heard chuckling as he gathered the ace stacks to separate the cards and add the scores.

"Almost had us there, Joe. One more five of hearts and we'd have been done."

"Shut up, Terry." Sandy would turn her focus to my father's smart remarks, an altruistic move on his part as he was doing it in an attempt to give Joe time to stave off the bleeding.

These matches would last to the wee hours of the morning. As the battle raged in the dining room, I, not being much of a sleeper, would sneak to the doorway in an attempt to see what was going on. A difficult proposition as the doorway was really a wide archway in full view of all seated at the table. When caught I would return to the couch, lie down next to Donna and try to fall asleep.

Everybody (and by everybody, I mean our mothers) assumed Donna and I would be together when we grew up. A match made in heaven, they thought, as we spent most of our time together attempting to ignore Kim whose sole purpose was to shut me out of the fun by tempting Donna with the lure of dolls. Donna, however, could not be swayed by cheap plastic and nylon hair. She wanted to play with me and I with her. That's usually how it shook down for the night: She and I playing - begrudgingly, with my sister after being tattled on by her.

Regardless of the third wheel, we found a way to enjoy each other's company playing with my Evel Knievel stunt cycle and Six-Million Dollar man toys. They were put into situations where they had to work together to save the world by clearing, in a single jump, the sofa, a set of stairs, or, in an ill-fated event that would live in infamy with my father, the television. This little stunt ended in the near destruction of the very same Craig 19" - our very first color set, mind you - on which we watched the first lunar landing. The very same television that had endured multiple baths from my mother putting vases on top in an attempt to "spruce up the living room." Each would slide off the top, toward the back, spilling its contents through the vents burning out a tube or two as it did. This thing had lived through all of this only to nearly meet its end at the wheels of Evel's cycle as he attempted to clear it with Steve as passenger. No *Gilligan's Island* that night, I can tell you.

Once, when we were about eight, Donna told me she had a secret for me. We ditched my sister by hiding her Barbie. We were in the dark, on the sofa, *Get Smart* playing lowly, when she told me she loved me. I looked at her for a few seconds before speaking.

"Yeah, I know." Immortal words, to be sure, but, it landed on my heart as nothing I had ever felt. She laid her head on my shoulder and proceeded to fall asleep as the programming ended, snoring lightly along with the National Anthem until Dad came in to turn off the TV.

He stopped when he saw this picture of domestic bliss, Donna asleep with me sitting frozen, looking at him, eyes at half mast. He called the rest of the parents in to view this precious moment, thus vindicating our mothers' belief that a combining of their meager kingdoms was in the offing.

We continued this togetherness as though it was the only natural thing to do. After a couple of years it was brought to my attention that her family was thinking of moving away. Needless to say, I took it hard. I imploded, dying the death of a world weary ten-year-old facing the remainder of my life alone, wandering the earth in search of the happiness so cruelly taken from me. I argued with my Dad about it, not wanting to accept the explanation that they needed to be closer to Sandy's family and that Joe needed to find a

better job. I mean, who really cared about things like that? Didn't they see that we needed to be together? Their priorities were seriously out of whack.

They were going away for a few days, which included the weekend and I knew what this meant: It meant that I would not get to see her on Sunday which meant an eternity in pre-pubescent terms. I became withdrawn, keeping Donna at a distance. There was a pall cast over our relationship for the month before they were to leave. She tried to pull me out, tried to act like we always had, but I felt betrayed by the fact that she did not see the pain that would soon be inflicted upon us. I convinced myself that she didn't care. That there was nothing left between us. That the world would soon swallow our love as it did all beautiful things.

They loaded into her family's little Ford Pinto hatchback. I stood behind my father as they said their goodbyes. Donna was on her knees in the back seat trying to get my attention through the back window. She waved. I pretended not to see. She called me. I was suddenly deaf. My vision blurred. I squeezed my eyes closed as tightly as I could, forcing tears out, streaking my skin as they slid to my neck. I slowly opened them as the setting sun blinded me, taking precious moments from me as my pupils adjusted.

I finally saw her as the car started to pull out of our driveway. I waved weakly seeing, for the first time, that she was also crying. Whether from the pain I caused or from the situation, I can't say, but we shared our lives in this last moment where we found ourselves separated by parents and the window of her parents' car. As they drove away, she waved and cried, as I tried to force a smile.

When the car finally made it out of sight, I ran into my room, slammed the door and laid on my bed crying until I fell asleep.

Peeking at my father through slits, the morning slapped me to consciousness. He stood beside my top bunk looking at me, pained, as he slowly rolled me back and forth in an attempt to wake me up. Not an easy proposition in my younger years. I was such a heavy sleeper as a child that I slept through earthquakes, sirens and my sister's sleep-time diners that seemed to open up in the middle of night on the bottom bunk of the bed we shared.

“Michael. Michael, you have to get up. You need to come out for breakfast. Come on.” With this he lifted me out of bed, taking me to the living room and sitting me on our gold, flowery love seat. He then sat next me as my mother turned on Bugs Bunny - a regular Saturday morning occurrence. She left the room, even though the world stopped for her on Saturday when this show hit the airwaves. My mother returned with pancakes and we sat in front of the television for the next two hours. I laughed. My parents sat in silence.

During the quiet moments I could swear I heard crying in the back of the house. I never paid attention to the fact that my sister was not with us. Not once during the entire show did my father laugh. Never cracked a smile. They even showed his favorite cartoon with the singing frog. (Normally, he could be anywhere in the city of L.A., sense that this cartoon was coming on and be home before the first amphi-baritone notes were belted out.) He stared at the television as though it was empty space.

In my jaded later life I would have seen the signs for what they were - impending doom. At the time, though, I had cartoons and pancakes. Everything was fine.

When the show ended my father got up off the love seat to turn off the TV. He came back and sat on the floor in front of me as my mother gathered the dishes, disappearing to the kitchen.

“We got a phone call this morning.” His words came in short, monotone bursts. “There’s been an accident.”

I sat pie-eyed, wondering what, exactly, this meant to me other than the fact that I was missing *Schoolhouse Rock*. I watched as my father tried to find the proper words.

“There was an accident. Sandy and Joe... On the highway...” I continued my stare, not exactly sure what he was saying. I wasn’t stupid, far from it, actually, but my father was having a hard time finding the right words. “Donna... She’s gone.”

I knew this. This was not news. I was missing *Conjunction Junction* for this?

He looked at me, eyes getting red. He looked sad. My father never looked sad. He got mad. That was a whole different look. He looked happy. He laughed a lot. We would not have made it through many times in our house without his laugh. This look, though, was foreign to me. I knew it didn’t mean I had to cover my butt. Beyond that, I had no idea.

“Do you understand? Donna has...” He was groping for words. Given his super intelligence it must have been killing him. It was hurting me to watch and I had no idea what

was going on. If I had, I would have helped. As it was he kept trying to make it work: "... she's gone back to heaven... She's dead."

He stood now, staring down at me as I worked to untangle this concept mentally: *Dead. Dead? Yeah, I have no idea what the means.*

I had never dealt with anything remotely resembling death. Never had one of those most disposable of all pets: goldfish. Our only dog was still with us. All four grandparents? Alive and kicking. Literally.

I tried to equate some point in my life where I had crossed paths with the word "dead" and all I could come up with were references from the Westerns I watched with my dad. Most of them were black and white, so, instantly, my brain goes to a colorless scene where someone is shot, spins, falls through a railing onto a hay bail/bar table/back of a wagon, etc. No muss, no fuss. That person just doesn't show up for the last reel. Of course, they appear in the posse in the next flick we watch, so all must be well, right?

"Do you understand?"

"I guess so. She's not coming back here? She is staying with her parents?"

He was beside himself. Frustrated beyond repair. He grabbed my by my arms, lifted me off the sofa and carried me to the kitchen where my mother was washing dishes. He sat me on the counter on the other side of the room.

"I can't do this." He was at the end of his patience. I know he saw me as someone who could grasp this. I was his son, after all, and I, luckily, received his intellect. He just didn't realize that intellect was no substitute for a good old run-of-the-mill reference point.

My mother turned around. She had been crying and was now joined by my father. They tried to discuss what to do, but I have no idea how either of them could understand the other. They spoke in that code: Parental. After a few minutes of them speaking in tongues, my mother left the room.

My father went to the refrigerator, opened it, scanned the contents, then closed it again. He slowly crossed the room, leaned in so that we were now eye-to-eye, his pointed nose an inch or two from my own. He had dark, piercing eyes which now trained on burning holes through my own. The weird thing was that I could tell that he wasn't mad at me. He was at a tired. We stayed locked in that position for what felt like an hour or so. He,

then, lifted me from the counter, set me on the floor and walked out of the room, leaving me to decipher what, exactly, had just occurred.

A few days later my parents were getting dressed in dark clothes. My father in a suit. In the middle of the week. My father never wore a suit in the middle of the week. Not since he lost his office job, at least. For him to be wearing a suit during the day, outside of Sunday, made it obvious that something was up.

“Hey, Pop, where ya going?”

“Out.”

“Can I come?”

“No.”

“But, why?”

“There’s no need for you to go.” His tone said, in no uncertain terms, that to push it would be suicide... so, I pressed on.

“Why not? Where are you going?”

“To a funeral.”

This word I knew. Don’t ask me how. Maybe it’s innate in humans to better understand the latter term than the previous. I don’t know. All I knew was that someone, somewhere, was in a pine box, propped at an angle against a hitching post, with coins over their eyes. People get drunk, put the box in the ground and cover it with dirt while a woman in black - usually with two young children in tow - cries and the one sworn enemy of the guy in the crate pays his last respects by spitting in the open hole which contains said guest of honor. After this, everyone goes back to the bar, sings, dances, drinks some more while the scene fades to black.

“Son. Do you understand what we talked about the other day?”

“Donna?”

“Yes.”

“I think so.”

“That she went to Heaven.”

“... heaven...”

Whether I was numbed by some sub-conscious need to protect my fragile, little psyche three days earlier or I truly did not understand at the time, is open for debate. The reality was that I understood at that moment what he was talking about. A lump rose from my chest into my throat. Tears began to creep from my eyes. I felt the trails as they marked my face on their journey down. Reminders of the last time I saw her rushed past my eyes. I felt the first drop trickle across my collarbone. Than another. Another. Tears mixed with perspiration to create a lethal mixture of pain and disbelief.

I stood motionless, staring up at my father's tired face. He looked at me with a sympathetic look. My father wore his heart on his sleeve. He had a hard time hiding how he felt. He was emotional, but grounded. My mother was the same way, but where she acted, pretty much exclusively, irrationally, he was more a man of thoughts first, action second. He could intellectualize almost anything. In that moment, though, it all seemed to come in one swift move. The thought, the action, working as one. He picked me up and hugged me.

My mother entered the room and, with her usual ham-fisted sentimentality, barked, "Terry, put him down. We don't have time for that."

She blew through fiercely, vanishing as quickly as she had appeared.

He set me gently on the floor, asking me again, "Do you understand?"

I stood for a few moments as he set about working to secure the black necktie with his usual full Windsor knot. I marveled, every time, at the ease with which he achieved a perfectly balanced knot. This time, however, was different. His actions were the same, but slower. I watched through a watery haze as he watched at me through the reflection in my mother's dresser mirror.

"I want to go."

He stopped, put his hands on top of the dresser, leaned forward, stopping with his head resting gently against the glass. He finally let out a long, slow breath and, though I could see his lips moving, I could not understand a syllable he formed. Finally he turned toward me, letting the nearly completed knot dangle for a time. He stared into my eyes, his expression the same. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"I need to go." I had seen this tactic work so well in the movies, on TV: In the face of adversity, restate in a solid, direct manner, emphasizing the importance, and all shall turn your way.

"No."

He wasn't biting. He had seen the movies and TV shows, too. Many more times than I had, in fact. This was going to be difficult. The more I pushed my father to let me go, the more angry he became.

Then he did something I had rarely seen him do. It was certainly rare for him to direct it at me: He took a deep breath and thundered, "I SAID NO AND I MEANT IT!"

Maybe it was the look on my face. Maybe it was the fact that my father was acutely aware of everything he did and how he did it. Whatever the reason, he stopped mid-breath, then slowly exhaled. After a moment he knelt his six-foot three-inch frame in front of me so that we were nearly eye-to-eye. His voice took on a new tone. He was firm, but friendly, empathetic... my equal. He put his hands on my shoulders and stared at me with his sad, tired eyes.

"You don't need to see her like that. You don't need to remember her that way. Stay here and we'll talk when I get back. Alright?" I nodded slowly. "I'll tell her you say 'hi' and that you miss her." The room fell silent. I heard the birds outside for the first time that day. They fell instantly silent again.

"OK."

The only sound in the room was the rise and fall of our breathing which was broken by my mother's pounding footsteps echoing down the hall, filling the room with impending doom.

"Damnit, Terry! We have to go! We're going to be late! How would that look?"

"Like we're human. Get in the car and I'll be out in a minute."

"Come on." She stood, impatience oozing from her every pore.

"I will meet you in car." She didn't budge. "Get. In. The. Car." The staccato delivery signaled that it could easily turn into a very long afternoon. Longer than already anticipated. She, wisely, relented and left the room.

As her stomping grew fainter, he looked at me, hugged me, then got up and walked out, leaving me to find my own strength to get up.

We learned a week or so after the funeral that, while at the hospital following the accident, Sandy learned that she was pregnant. Given the diagnosis they had lived with previously, coupled with recent events, it was bittersweet news, to be sure, but still welcome.

They remained close friends with my parents for many years after, but they never played cards again. They wanted to ensure nothing could possibly keep them from being reunited in the hereafter. I never understood how it fit in with what we were taught, but they saw some basis for it and the late night marathons ended.

While I'd had a number of relationships since Donna declared her love for me, Sandy seemed to not care. I recall when I was eighteen, or so, getting ready for a date with the Dones visiting my parents. It was New Year's Eve and I was not hanging around the family. I walked through the living room on my way out the door when my mother made me stop, "Aren't you going to say hello?"

"Oh, yeah, hi." (I was a teenager - what do you expect?)

Following the obligatory "helloes," Sandy looked me straight in the eye and, after an interminable pause asked, "If Donna were alive today, would you be going out with her tonight?"

I was stunned. I was a deer in the headlights. Each time I opened my mouth to attempt an answer, all that came out was a dry wheeze accentuated by a puzzled look. In my brain I was screaming, *WHY THE HELL ARE YOU ASKING ME THIS?! NOW?!* But, outwardly, I was roadkill.

Beginning with his actions of that day nearly eight years earlier, my father set about teaching me to stand on my own, but seeing that this was beyond the reach of anyone, he came to my rescue, "Aren't you going to be late?"

"Yeah. I need to go now. Bye."

As I walked out the front door that night I left with one thought racing through my mind: What if I didn't come home that night? What if I were thrown from a car? or fell from the top of the parking garage? or was shot in a saloon and fell headfirst into a spittoon?