

Robert Smith

Professor's Name

Course #

Date

My Dad

I'm embarrassed to say my first thought was that of relief when my mother called to say that he was dead. It had been five long years and I was completely exhausted trying to deal with him. Finally, it was over. In the last few weeks, his health had worsened, so I had called the nursing home that Sunday morning and asked the supervisor if I should drive the 130 miles to see him. She said he wasn't doing very well, but that he seemed to have nine lives; one minute he was at death's door, and the next he was sitting in the recreation room having another cigarette. It's a good thing I didn't make the trip, because less than an hour later, my mom called to say it was over.

I remember when I first noticed that there was something wrong with Dad. I lived only about a mile away from my parents, and I walked over a couple of times a week to visit. That particular day as I walked up the driveway toward the back door, he stepped out of the garage and whispered in a secretive voice that he needed to talk to me. He was concerned that his backyard neighbors were growing marijuana behind their garage and he insisted that I come with him to take a look. Their fence was less than a foot away from the back of their garage, and it was apparent to me that there wasn't enough room for them to mow behind it. In the meantime, my brother showed up, and we both assured Dad that having grown up in the 1970s made us somewhat experts on marijuana and this wasn't it; it was just weeds! We thought we'd heard the end of it until my mom called the next day to tell me that he'd gone out during the middle of the night with a flashlight to take clippings off of the offending plants and had taken them to the

police department for identification. They assured him they were just weeds, but thanked him for being such a good citizen.

It was a short time later that I remarried and moved 130 miles away. He went downhill really quickly after that. First, he started having minor accidents with the car. He'd back out of the driveway really fast and slam into the car parked across the street. When the neighbors would come out to inspect their damaged car, he'd yell at them for having the nerve to park across from his driveway. Then one day he disappeared at 5:00 a.m. No one had any idea where he was until my sister who lives in a Chicago suburb received a call from the police in Lake Villa Park, Illinois, at midnight. It seems they found him standing outside of his car, completely disoriented. He explained to the police that he was forty years old, and was returning from a fishing trip. He was convinced he was close to home because he noticed that he was on Walnut Street. The only problem is, he lived in Green Bay, Wisconsin. He had been in Illinois for most of the day, blowing through all the tollways without paying, and even stopping for gas and driving off. That was the last straw for my brother; Dad's driving privileges were history.

Through all of this, my mother steadfastly refused to put Dad in a nursing home. Then, one day his health really started deteriorating. He was in the hospital for a heart problem, when a doctor and a social worker spoke to her, finally convincing her that it was time for a nursing home. She couldn't take him back home again. He was at the nursing home about an hour when he got dressed and walked right out the front door, got on a city bus, and headed for the casino. The nursing supervisor was in hot pursuit, finally catching up with him at the bus transfer station. Now, he was off to a locked Alzheimer's home. It was there that his health problems finally got the best of him. All those years of smoking and diabetes and heart problems finally took their toll. I was relieved to know that the stress was finally over. No more phone calls that started with "Guess what he did now?"

After all I'd been through I had forgotten about the real man that was my father. He had been retired from Procter & Gamble Paper Products for about twelve years at the time of his death. But people who worked for my dad twenty years before he retired came to his wake. "He was the best boss I ever had." "I'll never forget how understanding your dad was when my wife and I had problems. He was so supportive." "Your dad was so much fun; he made work a really nice place to go every day." For hours, the people just kept coming, waiting in line to speak to my family. I could finally reflect on the person he'd been before and put the past five years behind me.

He was the man who had grown up with an alcoholic father and had to get a paper route at a young age to help buy food for his family. He was the man who served as a medic in the U.S. Navy at Pearl Harbor during World War II. He was the man who raised money for United Way every year. He was the man who felt that earning a living would help the disabled feel useful again, so he arranged for them to be paid for repackaging products from Procter & Gamble. He was the man that shoveled snow for all the elderly neighbors and made sure his kids knew better than to accept money for helping someone in need. He worked hard, made a good living, and was a wonderful father and husband.

And it finally occurred me just how lucky I'd been.