



Remembering The Movie Man

Louisville is the place where I was born. But more important than that, Louisville is the place where my father died.

November 3, 1975, to be exact. I was four.

My parents had moved to Louisville from New York to be broadcasters. They made strides immediately. My mother became one of the first female news directors in radio and my dad had a following as WHAS radio's afternoon drive-time deejay and as the movie reviewer on WHAS-TV's evening news. "The Movie Man" they called him.

So there you have it. Nice house. Successful parents. Local celebrities to be exact. And a little girl with a wonderful, quiet, easy future awaiting her.

After 25 years away, a still-bereaved daughter returns "home" to come to terms with her father's untimely death. By Rachel Zients

Except did I mention that my father had been in and out of mental hospitals, thought he'd killed his boss's children when he poured rat poison down the toilet, and had taken to carving his thighs with a knife?

Not terribly idyllic. Even less so when he went through with it and my mother found him on the bedroom floor. She and I went back to New York before the horror could set in.

Twenty-some years later I'm a passenger in a car heading to Louisville from my home in Los Angeles, and the anticipation I feel as we get closer to my former hometown overwhelms me. Somewhere in the middle of the country a sense of freedom hits me. I'm heading from one broken relationship — I had just

found my boyfriend at the movies with a girl that wasn't me — towards the memory of another. I'm momentarily free. Hoping this trip will magically fix it all.

The reason for the trip is simple. My best friend and I are going to be in a movie. She is the lead and I am going to be a waitress in a scene where she goes on a really bad date. (Trust me, I do "waitress" really well. Years of practice.) I have two lines. My acting career in the past year has consisted of one line each in two different movies, so, the way I see it, this will be a whole year's worth of work in one day. It's all rather exciting.

And in between takes I'll conquer all my "intimacy issues," figure out why and how my father killed himself, and learn to stop falling in love with men who are comfortable disappointing me. A lot to ask, but I am going to be there for a whole week, after all.

As the country rushes by, I close my eyes. Something is going to happen — I can feel it. I don't know what, but dammit, something is going to happen. I am going to make peace with the most defining moment of my life.

Other than a speeding ticket in Oklahoma (mine), and some smelly feet (also mine), the trip has been uneventful. Just two women in a car for three days. My friend is struggling with her own problems and I am caught between what I've just left and what I lost years ago.

A half hour outside of Louisville, in the parking lot of the restaurant where we've just eaten what we hope will be our last really bad meal, we watch in amazement as lightning tears up the sky in front of us. It's a beautiful storm, but a storm nonetheless, and it's blocking our path. As we're discussing our options, a lovely older couple who had stopped for ice cream suggest we follow them into the city. They're locals; they know the roads. In the midst of our thanks and small talk, I sheepishly ask if they remember The Movie Man. Mid-'70s? WHAS-TV? "Oh I'm sure you don't..."

A resounding "Of course!" comes back at me. "You're his daughter? Well, how about that?" I smile at the recognition, and feel a pride I hadn't expected. And, with that, the lovely older couple who stopped to get ice cream leads us into Louisville safe and sound.

According to the state of Kentucky, I do not exist. And my father did not die. At least Louisville's main library does not have a birth record for me, nor a death record

for him. For some reason, seeing things in print has always made me feel safe. I'm not sure why — perhaps finding it in a book means that anyone else can find it there, too. I can remember searching my college library (my parents had gone to the same school) for anything with my dad's name on it: his unfinished dissertation, an old yearbook, anything to prove he was there. I remember the fear and excitement I felt when I discovered through an old directory that we'd lived in the same dorm. Could we have had the same room or have walked the same halls? It was a feeling that made him almost tangible, as if he were just around the corner. It's a feeling I've had my whole life — that the answer is somewhere just around a corner.

The microfiche flickers in the quiet Louisville library and, finally, his obituary from the local newspaper appears before me: I have the confirmation of what I'd



always known, but had never seen. I sit there quietly and cry, wishing slightly that I hadn't found it, but also I'm glad that I now have a copy.

A few minutes later I'm sitting in the Sweet 'n Savory Cafe, marveling at my anonymity. There isn't a way in hell that anyone I know could walk into this cafe in Kentucky — and yet I look at each person and wonder, "Do you know me? Did you listen to WHAS in the '70s? I'm Rachel. I'm Jeff Douglas' daughter. The one he talked about in his TV review of *Jaws!*!" But I know they don't know me, and so I just order my eggs and drink my coffee and smile and weep uncried tears, feeling so close and yet so far from what I imagined home to be.

My next stop is the county coroner's office.

Fumbling through the autopsy report, my hands shake with each new page. I am sitting in an empty hallway. Suddenly with all the information in front of me, I am more confused than ever. Everything I've known for 20 years is now a degree off.

"Excuse me," I say quietly to the woman behind the desk in the coroner's office. I want to ask her: "How could a man strangle himself with the cloth belt of a bathrobe using his bare hands? Wouldn't he pass out before he had the strength to finish the job? And why does it say here, 'allegedly found hanging in bathroom,' when we all know he was found on the bedroom floor? And what do you mean, 'nicotine was found in his system'? You mean my father smoked?"

But before I can say anything she looks at me and calmly says, "Dear, I've seen a lot of things come through this office that can't be explained, and yet they can all be explained. And sometimes things are wrong."

With that, I know that the details on the page don't matter; the details of the man do. I thank her for her help and wander back through the halls of the Barret Avenue building, feeling like a reporter

who has just stumbled onto a new and important lead.

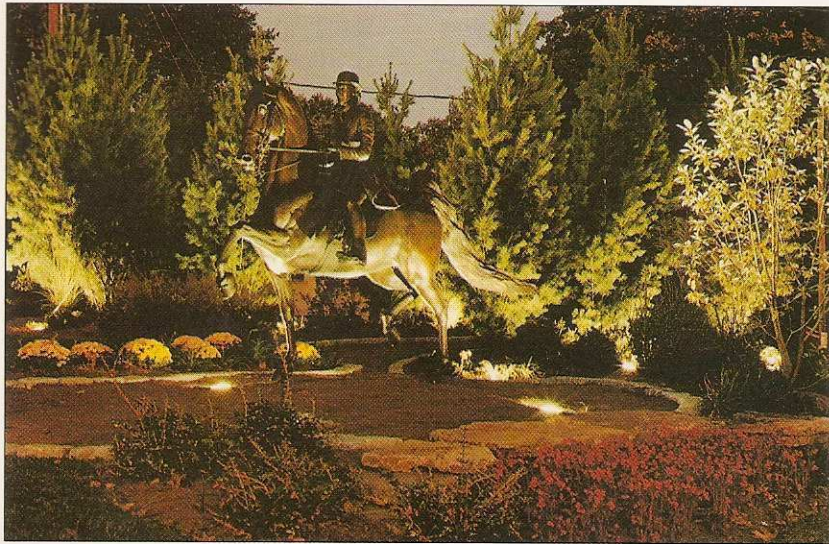
I have always felt at home in newsrooms. The radio station my mother worked at in New York City was my playground as a child. And yet here I am, standing in the middle of a newsroom feeling as scared and lost as a child entering for the first time.

This is where my father worked. This is where Jeff Douglas had been The Movie Man. I am here to meet a friend of his, a man who eerily reminds me of my stepfather. He greets me with a hello so genuine and full that I'm surprised we haven't met before this moment, and yet it is real and very appropriate.

His eyes are a little sad as he glances away. I am used to that look. It's a look I've seen my grandfather give me.

My father's friend shows me around and shows me off. I try to imagine this station as it used to be, maybe with my father sitting at one of these desks, laughing at his own jokes in his review of *The Pink Panther*, as my mother walks by amused at

Evening Impressions

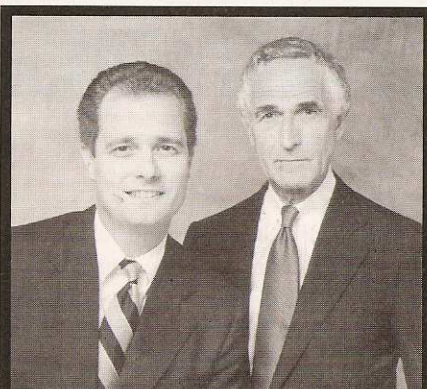


We cater to individual design. Specializing in outdoor effects of lighting. Fountains and fiber optics are available. Call our office for an appointment at 245-0720

HABCO
ARCHITECTURAL OUTDOOR LIGHTING

Landscape Lighting Company, Inc.

Design • Sales • Installation
13050 Middletown Industrial Blvd. • 245-0720
www.landscapelighting.net



DAN B. SANTOS SR., CLU
DANIEL B. SANTOS JR.

Agents



The Company You Keep®.

Life Insurance • Annuities

Mutual Funds • Group Insurance

Registered representatives for
NYLIFE Securities Inc.

Suite 1250
9300 Shelbyville Road
Louisville, Kentucky 40222
420-2063

Investment products offered through
NYLIFE Securities Inc. Member NASD
51 Madison Avenue, NY, NY 10010

OLD LOUISVILLE'S PREMIER RESTAURANT & BAR



Buck's

IN THE MAYFLOWER
425 W. ORMSBY
502. 637.5284

DINNER SERVED
TUESDAY - THURSDAY 5-10 PM
FRIDAY - SATURDAY 5-11 PM

JAZZ PIANIST
ELEGANT CIGAR ROOM

RESERVATIONS REQUESTED
Available Every Day For Private Parties
www.bucksrestaurant.com
FAX: 502.637.7883

his amusement.

Suddenly I am surrounded by my father's former coworkers. Someone says, "Hey, this is Jeffie's daughter!"

I feel like a rug has been pulled out from under me. He continues on and makes everyone standing in the little circle in the lobby laugh as he reminisces. And I keep smiling, but all I'm hearing over and over in my head is "Jeffie."

Who the hell is "Jeffie?" I knew Jeff. "Jeffie" was someone I didn't know. I look at this lovely man sharing his memories with me and I hate him: He knew someone I hadn't known and never would know.

I don't remember much after that, except how selfish I felt. I didn't want them to share in my pain. This happened to *me*, dammit. This is *my* tragedy, *my* journey. This is what makes me different, don't you know? It's what makes me special. But they weren't sharing in my pain; they were sharing in theirs. They had lost a friend.

Suddenly my father was not just my father. He was a friend, a husband, a son. I was just one piece of a larger story. And a little of the burden was lifted.

Later that night my father's friend takes me to dinner with his wife and two daughters. He tells me stories about my father and their many escapades. My eyes widen with the new knowledge; it's like watching a movie you know by heart and then, poof, there are scenes you've never seen before.

"My sensuous three year old' — that's what your father called you," he says as he leans back in his chair at the restaurant. My mind is racing.

"My?"

I was someone's daughter?

"Three?"

I've never been any age other than four with my father. I was four when he died. I was four when we left. I do not exist before four in my memories. But all of a sudden I'm three. Maybe I was two, and even one, once. Maybe I existed wholly, sweetly, innocently before death and loss crept into my life and defined my actions and expectations. Maybe I was once a simple, devilish little girl running around the back yard frolicking and playing, clamoring for attention, shouting, "Watch me Daddy, watch me," as I twirled in the sun and curtsied on cue. I remember I'm going to be acting in a movie in a few days, and my choice of profession makes more sense to me than ever. I quickly order another glass of wine.

There are stories we tell ourselves, regardless of their truth, to make our lives a little easier. Mine has been that if I'd been raised in Kentucky I'd be fond of frosted pink lipstick and work in a Dairy Queen. I had convinced myself that I had been given a gift when we moved away. That New York City and all the doors it opened had been better for me than being raised in a smaller city with a sick father.

As I sip my wine and look at this beautiful family sitting around me — a family not unlike my own stepfamily, full of ambition and intelligence — I realize that my story is wrong. It's both thrilling and devastating to recognize that the other road your life could have taken might not have been a dead end.

We say goodnight knowing it is good-bye, and I hug my newfound friends one more time. As I'm getting ready to leave I realize that every time I made a little joke, my father's friend laughed in a particular way that told me I reminded him of my father. (I guess comic timing is genetic.) I ask him about that. He pauses and says, "Why do you think dinner went so late? I didn't want you to go." And a warm feeling rushes through me. I'm helping him as much as he is helping me.

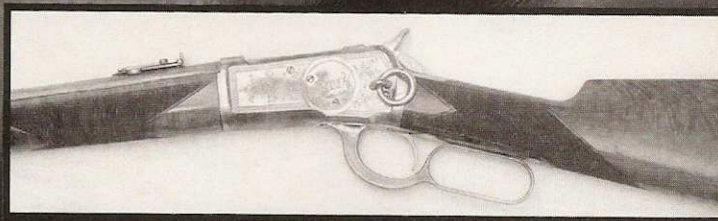
The best part of the night is that I know my way back to the hotel. The streets of Louisville now seem familiar. And with that I'm ready to leave.

I still have a movie to shoot, though, and a family in New York to visit when the movie is done and a life to get back to in L.A., including an ex-boyfriend I now know I'm better off without. I have things to do that don't have to do with my father; they have to do with me.

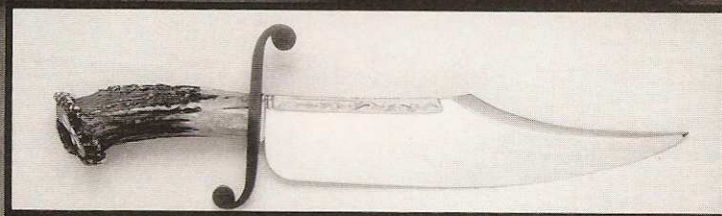
I feel like Dorothy, who vows, "If I ever decide again to seek my heart's desire, I won't look any further than my own back yard." But Dorothy wouldn't have known that if she hadn't followed the Yellow Brick Road at least once. Next time she'll know better and so will I.

I'll know that I knew my father before I even left. Because I am my father. And my grandfather is my father. And my mother. And my aunt. And anyone who knew him and loved him. Because he exists; he exists because we remember, because we choose not to forget.

Hi, my name is Rachel. My father died when I was four. But it's really not that bad. After all, I'm the daughter of The Movie Man. And I get a happy ending. ■



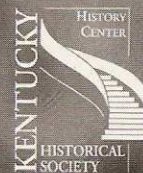
THE WEAPON AS ART



July 15 – September 24, 2000

Admission is free.

For group tour information, call 1-877-444-7867.



Kentucky History Center

100 W. Broadway
Frankfort, KY 40601-1931

(502) 564-1792 www.kyhistory.org

Hours:
TWFS 10-5
Thurs. 10-8
Sun. 1-5

Edgar A. Lopez, M.D., F.A.C.S.

C O S M E T I C S U R G E R Y

Certificate Of Advanced Education In Cosmetic Surgery
By The American Society For Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, Inc.
Certified, American Board Of Plastic Surgery
24 Years In Private Practice

The Springs Medical Center

6400 Dutchmans Parkway • Suite 250

Louisville, Kentucky 40205-3343

(502) 897-1234 • Toll Free 877 884-1207

(502) 897-1443 FAX • E-mail: lopezplasticsman@aol.com

www.plasticsurgery.org



Member
AMERICAN SOCIETY OF
PLASTIC SURGEONS