

## A SONG FROM MY FATHER

By tradition, the third Sunday of June is set aside to recognize fathers across America. Father's Day can trigger distinct memories for different people. Some of us reflect on those men who have cared for us and nurtured us. We think of the men who have provided a roof over our heads and have taught us so many things about life. You know who these men are. They are the ones whom we call "father," "dad," "pop" or some variation thereof. Yet, those of us whose dads are now deceased are moved even more wistfully on Father's Day. Various things can trigger a memory: a scent of aftershave, the sight of a father helping his young child or perhaps just the tilted brim of a hat. For me, a jazz classic serves as the fitting metaphor for a wondrous remembrance of my father.

Years ago, before CDs and DVDs were introduced, serious jazz fans – "aficionados" -- treasured their collections of record albums. For me, a special album was "Song for My Father" -- composed and led by the great jazz pianist, Horace Silver. The album cover had a photo of Silver's dad, resplendent in a snazzy brimmed hat and with a warm smile. The hat and smile strongly remind me of photos and other mental images of my own father. Yet, the title brings a more significant gem from the past.

On a late December day, a very long time ago, my father strode through the living room of his mother's house, as he prepared to go out into the frigid weather of a Philadelphia winter. For some unknown reason, Dad paused abruptly and returned to the majestic wooden piano that held a prominent place in my grandmother's parlor. Wordlessly, he sat down on one of the piano stools and began to play a hauntingly beautiful melody, a tune that we had never heard him play before. The strong fingers of this railroad worker had not been formally trained. My father played by ear. His dulcet harmony soothed and warmed us then as it still comforts me today.

When he finished playing, Dad got up from the piano and walked out of the door – still without saying a single word. His enchanted song hung in the air like a gentle fragrance. My prescient grandmother watched as her son departed. Then, she chillingly said, "Lord, I hope that nothing's going to happen to my child." The prophecy was sadly fulfilled. We never saw my dad consciously alive again. He was mugged a day later and he died on New Year's Eve, after spending days in a coma.

My heart aches and longs for the father who was prematurely taken from my life. But, I know that I am blessed to even have known him and to have been cared for by him over a number of years. Many people might be thankful for such a memory. Yet, to modify the adage: we do miss the water even more when a filled well runs dry.

## **Page Two**

My namesake father – Ralph Sr. – gave a lot to me, his only child. In his calm and unassuming way, he taught me many things: how to ride a bicycle and how to knot a necktie. Dad took me to buy Christmas trees and he set up my electric model trains. He carried me on public transportation to distant auto and airplane shows. Most of all, he spent time with me and he gave of himself. However, one of Dad's most enduring gifts may have come as a divinely inspired parting gesture, one that has left an indelible mark on my psyche and in my heart. My heart aches, my eyes moisten and my throat runs dry. There is a soft yet persistent ringing in my ears. Shhhh. I am listening to a gift for the ages: a song from my father.

Ralph Gordon

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