

## Sunday Photos

Bill Albert

'You're just like your father,' she said in exasperation.

He laughed. There was nothing else to do. Was it so bad to be just like his father? It was there in her voice. When she said it, it was always there. But, why shouldn't he be like his father? He loved his father, didn't he? He felt the tears coming. He ran into his room, slammed the door, locked it.

'Don't you slam that door on me!', she shouted, close up on the other side.

'Do you hear me?'

The door handle rattled. He watched it.

After a few minutes he heard her footsteps. He wiped his eyes and pulled the cardboard carton of toy soldiers from under the bed. There were some English ones his father had bought him. Made out of lead and brightly painted they came in a long flat box. Each one was individually attached with a bit of string to the backing. He was very careful with these. Then there were the others he got himself from the toy store on Saturday with what was left of his allowance after the children's matinee. US Army soldiers moulded in hard rubber. Some with machine guns, others lying prone with rifles. He liked the one with its arm drawn back ready to throw a handgrenade. He began to set them up.

About 1945. A tall, thin man in an Army Aircorp uniform. Dark wavy hair, a big strong nose. Smiling, holding him up, tight to his chest. Must have been three, maybe four years old, wearing a sailor's suit with short pants. He can't remember a time he lived with them, with him and his mother. All those years ago.

He looks out the window into the garden. His son and daughter are sitting on the lawn with their backs to the house. She says something to the boy. He turns his head and replies. She puts

her arm around him, hugs him. He squirms a bit but doesn't resist his big sister's embrace. What are they talking about?

He picks up the photograph, looks at it more closely and tries to remember. It's difficult. So much less in focus than the photos' sharp black and white images. Will his son remember? His daughter? Probably not.

'I'm sorry. I know you would rather play with your little friends, but he is your father.'

'Mom!'

'OK. OK. You don't want to see your father, don't go. I don't care. Stay here if you want. But, you'll have to call and tell him. You're not going to get me to do it for you.'

'Ah, Mom. Please, Mom!'

His mother standing with him by a tree. She's very young, maybe 25. It's autumn, the ground covered in leaves. Behind them is a fence made of rough-cut redwood. Behind the fence is a small palomino pony. A third of the photo has been ripped away. Where his father had stood. She must have been very angry. He puts the photo down on the table with the others.

Every Saturday his father picked him up in his car and took him home. A collection of apartment buildings on Holloway Drive just south of Sunset. Pink and blue stucco, lots of cold cement stairs and iron railings. Inside there wasn't much furniture and what there was looked flimsy, temporary, not like his mother's furniture. There was only one bedroom and so he had to sleep on the couch. He didn't mind that.

He had taken an old tennis ball outside and thrown it against the steps. It bounced back at unexpected angles. Each time he caught the ball he gave himself a point. A woman in a blue terricloth bathrobe opened an upstairs window and told him to stop making noise. His father said he would have to behave himself because they didn't allow children to live in the apartments.

Once he wandered off into the wood behind the buildings. It wasn't much of a wood, more like an overgrown vacant lot. Dusty bushes and scrub oak, old tires, torn magazines, bottles and cans, and, best of all, a burned out car. The doors were rusted shut. He crawled in through a broken window and began to drive it. An hour later his father found him. He reached in grabbed him by the arms and pulled him out of the wreck. His father didn't say anything, but he could tell he was angry. It frightened him when he was quiet angry like that. He never went back to the wood.

He looks up from the photographs. He can't see the children. The lawn is empty. As if they had never existed. He turns over another picture in his hand. Fingers with horizontal wrinkles along the joints. The back of the hand covered in fine dark hairs. Slight scars on the knuckles, knotted veins. Too soon there'll be brown spots.

Still no one on the lawn, but now he can hear them. His son is laughing. They must be alright. He takes another photo out of the manilla envelope.

Once a distant cousin from New York sent a set of large gauge electric trains. A locomotive and tender, three boxcars and a special bright yellow car with a crane on it. He had never seen anything like it.

'Your cousin Eli collects electric trains,' his father explained.

They were so heavy he could hardly pick them up. At first he wasn't allowed to play with them by himself, as if they were too valuable. After a while his father didn't bother. But, he wouldn't let him take them home. It was something to do when he came to stay on the weekends.

His father standing in front of the Hot Dog Show. Somewhere below the railway tracks on La Cienega. He's wearing a brown suede jacket. A gaunt faced man waving at the camera, at his son. The smile is forced, the eyes unsure, the hand held up tentatively. Someone accustomed to more dignified surroundings.

Sunday mornings his father made him get up early. They drove down Santa Monica Blvd. to Fairfax. He could smell the fresh bread through the window of the car. All up and down the street. Bagels and onion rolls. Their first stop was Ma Gordon's. In there the smells were darker, herring and pickles. Ladled out of big barrels onto hard brown paper. He liked to touch the barrels and lick the salt from his fingers. He only did that when his father wasn't looking.

Then the lox. Thin pink strips cut by a fat man with a little moustache wearing a black *yamulkah*. He sweated and muttered in Yiddish as he sliced the fish with a long sharp knife. He never smiled.

At home his father would talk him through each step of the cooking.

'First the onion. Slice. Dice it. Got that? Right, OK. Fry until it's just brown. OK? Then the lox. Cut it up into squares. Put it in with the onion. Wait until the pieces go dark pink. When that's all ready you add the beaten eggs. Right? You watching this, boy?'

'Yes, Dad.'

His daughter had brought the envelope with her.

'Mom found these. She thought you should have them.'

'That's nice of her.'

His father was badly crippled with arthritis. He walked bent over from the waist, but had very strong hands, translucent white skin. Once in a while he would give him a shy kiss, hard and quick or stroke his hair.

After breakfast he let him read the funny papers. Blondy and Dagwood, Dick Tracy, Denis the Menace. Later they'd watch football and his father would try to explain it to him. He wanted to understand, but it was never more than a haze of black and white figures on the television screen, strange foreign names. The games seemed to last forever. He was happy when they were over and he could go home. Sundays.

Suddenly it starts to rain. A tropical downpour. The children come running into the house, wet and noisy, wanting to eat. His son falls into his arms, presses his damp body against him, holding tight.

His daughter, more restrained, more grown-up, stops to look at the photographs spread out on the table.

'It looks just like you', she announces to her brother.

'No', he replies indignantly. 'It's not me. It's Dad when he was a little boy.'

'Come on you two', he says to the children. 'Let's have something to eat before I have to take you back.'