

## MOM & DAD

My parents met at some sort of dinner party when, as mom liked to tell it, my father lost his bid for a seat next to a cute blonde and “got stuck” sitting instead next to her. Dad popped the question at The Fireman’s Ball, and Mom responded that she’d think about it. She didn’t make him wait too long, however, and her answer was yes.

They were quite an odd pair, I’d say. My mother was born Mary Lou Schlesinger in Goodyear, Arizona to a hard drinking laborer named Albert John “Dutch” Schlesinger, and a good Missouri girl named Ofe Hensley. A theory of some in the family is that my grandmother’s people were against the marriage because she had been weakened by rheumatic fever in her youth and would likely not survive childbirth. The family had, in fact, moved to Arizona specifically for my grandmother’s health, because the clean, dry climate would supposedly be good for her. (That was back when Phoenix actually had clean air).

As sadly predicted, however, Ofe didn’t live long after giving birth to her only child, my mother. I don’t know if Mom had any true memories of her mother, but throughout her life, she often had dreams where her mother returned home after taking a cure in a sanitarium. There aren’t too many pictures of Ofe in the family archives and in those pictures taken at the end of her life, she looks older than her 26 years. Being only about 2 at the time, my mother of course didn’t understand that her mother was dying and, like most everyone did, dying at home. Mom loved her father fiercely and I think he truly doted on her, but I can’t imagine he was equipped to raise a little girl, so he basically left it to my great-grandmother to bring Mary Lou up.

My father, Frits van der Steur, was born in Hillegom, Holland. He came from a long line of artists, architects and musicians; I believe we’re also descendants of “Pa” van der Steur, well known by the Dutch for running an orphanage in Indonesia for mixed blood children. My paternal grandfather, Johan Jacob Willem van der Steur and his wife, Petronella Boeree, moved their daughter and son to America in 1927, unfortunately, in time for the crash and Great Depression. They settled in New York.

Dad was a study in contrasts to me: he could fix anything from radios and clocks to toilets and broken windows; he soldered stuff and refinished furniture and tinkered with the car. He drank like a fish and smoked like a fiend and when we were little, he could call us with a piercing whistle that could cut through steel, aurally speaking. But he had a musician's gentle, thoughtful soul, and he could write melodies as light and lovely and sentimental as anything. He worked in music his whole life and by the time I was old enough to know what was going on around me, Dad had been a music teacher and orchestra conductor at Phoenix College for a number of years.

My father was 43 when I was born yet he was old for that age, as he made poor lifestyle choices, plus he had a very rough time of it in WWII. He had deafness in one ear before I was born and was in the hospital for cataract surgery while I was being born, and he also had a bad back that he once re-injured hoisting me up to see into a robin's nest when we were visiting family in New York. I think he worried a lot, and having an unplanned-for child probably didn't help. (Mom called me "a happy accident.") Dad knew the risks of having a child late in life - Mom was 40 - and was afraid I'd be retarded, and when I reached the age when I began throwing temper tantrums on the floor, he was convinced I was autistic. As I said: he worried.

These two individuals came together and made it work. Theirs was not a quiet pairing, but I think they loved each other very much.

They certainly loved their children.