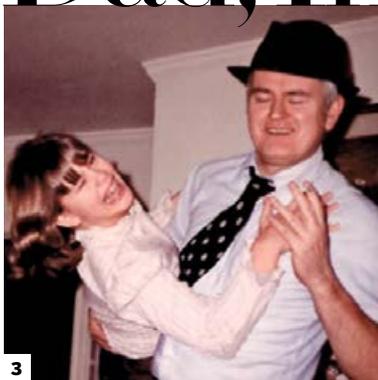


Dad, Interrupted



DOUBLE TAKE
FROM TOP LEFT:
1. THE AUTHOR
IN 2014; **2.** WITH
HER SON IN
CHINA, *VOGUE*,
2013; **3.** WITH
HER FATHER IN
BRONXVILLE,
CHRISTMAS 1981.
4. IN L.A., 2011.

As the holidays approach, **JEANNE DARST** reflects on her father and their complicated relationship since she published her memoir, *Fiction Ruined My Family*.

If I let myself be a little corny for once, I'd admit that I have a Christmas fantasy. I would like my nine-year-old son to sit next to my 83-year-old father at midnight Mass this Christmas Eve in New York as my dad theatrically belts out "Adeste Fideles." My son has made it clear he's not interested in another sunny Los Angeles celebration with our it's-all-good neighbors; Christmas casual, you might call it. He wants the East Coast, his rambunctious cousins, massive amounts of snow, holiday airport drama, the works. I want him to experience one of the few family traditions we have left, the solemn and the cheeky, Our Father and my father. And as the two of them sang, my dad and I would start speaking again and finally mend our relationship, which has been almost non-existent since my book came out.

When my memoir was published a few years ago, often the first thing people would ask was "What does your dad think

about the book?" The most truthful thing I could say to these people was "He's mad as hell."

About ten months before publication, I had sent him the manuscript. I wanted to be sure that he was OK with it before it went out into the world because my dad is the person who made me a writer. When I was a kid my father's stories of his childhood in St. Louis were the most interesting stuff I could imagine. His father was a newspaperman, and his mother had a column in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*; low-income public housing and civil rights were the main topics at dinner. The family had five kids and a lot of staff. My dad said it was like a Russian opera with so many characters coming and going all the time. After my grandfather died, only the driver remained. He would pick my grandmother up at the paper, and when they got home, he would open her car door for her, dash around to the back entrance, throw off his chauffeur jacket while running through the house, UP FRONT > 104

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: AARON STERN; SITTINGS EDITOR: MARY FELLOWES; HAIR AND MAKEUP: VALERY GHERMAN FOR CHANELLES BEIGES; SIM CHI YIN/VII MENTOR PROGRAM; JOSEPH CULTICE, COURTESY OF JEANNE DARST.

and then open the front door for her as if he were the butler. These stories spoke of an appealing domestic chaos, a mash-up of politics and family life, intellectualism and creativity, humor and delusion.

From the start, my father and I got a kick out of each other. Probably because he was a stay-at-home writer, I didn't learn about time and place the way the kids of bankers I knew did. He was always around, blaring *Le Nozze di Figaro* on the hi-fi, but also American musicals like *Kiss Me, Kate* and *Ain't Misbehavin'*. Like everyone in our family, he loved to sing and wasn't afraid to dance, and we did this any old time.

The summer I was sixteen, when I was a not-very-motherly mother's helper in Nantucket, we began writing funny letters back and forth, which we signed off with "Sove you lo much" and "No bout a doubt it," lyrics from a song in the Abbott and Costello movie *In Society*. His enthusiasm for my poetry, short stories, and plays was absolute. "Jean-Joe, it's Dad. I just sent you 'A Millionaire's Girl,' by Zelda Fitzgerald. You may already know it, but if you don't, drop whatever you're doing and read it . . . and then call me and we'll go over it." After college, he suggested I do a parody of *Firing Line* with my best friend, Tammi, a 24-year-old Dominican woman, playing William F. Buckley, Jr., and me tackling the role of John Kenneth Galbraith. My dad's ideas were outlandish, but that wasn't the point. He got it. He got me.

When my parents divorced and my mother's alcoholism ruled us all with besotted sovereignty, my relationship with my father relied on its usual forces to survive: writing, storytelling, and performance in all its forms. Maybe it leaned on these things even more since we no longer had a family home and he was less fatherly than ever.

During this time, he rented the room in front of his studio on Bank Street to his nephew, also named Stephen. My father, Stephen—six feet, handsome, gray, often in a fedora, then in his mid-50s—and my cousin Stephen—rakish, 30s—regularly went out drinking together. One night they wended their way to the White Horse Tavern, where a young woman said to them, "You can't believe what this jerk at the bar just said to me." My father walked over to the guy and said, "I

The week I sent him the book was a week of sleeping fitfully and almost running over a dog with my car

am going to give you about 30 seconds to go over and give a complete and total apology to that young woman over there or I am gonna bite that hat off your head." The man growled, "Screw you." My father leaned over and bit the guy's hat off his head. Fisticuffs ensued.

This brawly, parents-gone-wild period in our lives seemed to be where my sisters moved into adulthood having separated from our father emotionally. I didn't do that successfully; we were connected by so many common interests and problems—we were both writers.

In my book I discuss whether writing—specifically his—contributed to the fairly dramatic demise of our family. I also examine the other force that brought our family down, alcoholism, which my mother died of and which I also struggled with. If I had presented only my father's chivalrous hat-bitings and omitted the more challenging aspects of him, mainly his 20-year literary obsession with the idea that F. Scott Fitzgerald drove Zelda to madness with a dangerous abortion he forced her to have at the Plaza Hotel in 1922 by one Dr. Lakin, I wouldn't have been presenting my father in his full complexity. I think it was the difficult things I wrote about combined with the love I clearly had for him that made readers wonder about my father's reaction. Their question "How does your dad feel about the book?" was really asking, "Can you do that? And what happens when you do?"

The week after I emailed him the book was a week of dropping glasses in my kitchen, sleeping fitfully, and almost running over a dog with my car. I had never successfully had a conversation with my father about anything emotional. When my parents fought, what made my three sisters and me tremble in our nightgowns at the top of staircase more than anything, I think, was the truth. Because my mother and father seemed to fear it more than anything else. The truth being that lack of money was killing the marriage, that the house would get sold, the family would split up, my mother would die of alcoholism, and my father would become alienated from his children and grandchildren in pursuit of a manuscript that will never get finished. All of which was happening whether or not anyone wanted to talk about it.

My sister Kate, in a phone call during which my father was discussing how Zelda's abortion destroyed her in every way, was overtaken with pent-up 20-year rage and yelled, "*Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!*" and when she stopped yelling she heard, "Katharine?"

"Yes."

"I was saying that. . . ."

Maybe unconsciously I did know that a book was the only way to say these things without being interrupted.

Surprisingly, on first read my father was quite remorseful about what he saw as the tough situation I was in as a kid. That was hour one. Then came the things I had left out that needed to be put in, the adjustments, the corrections. The fury. He came up with the idea of telling his version of the story in italics throughout my book. As soon as he says it, I understand two things: One, this is the craziest idea anyone has ever had in the history of literature; and two, it's a brilliant idea and precisely why I adore him.

In the book, as in life, he objected to my calling my mother an alcoholic, despite having once squeezed vodka into his eyes after using a bottle of contact-lens solution he found in her handbag. He corrected my description of my mother's family. *Mama came from a "moneyed," not rich . . . family.* He defended writing and dismissed its financial toll on the family. *I don't think literature or writing, fiction or non-, is anything but the finest work of man. If Mama couldn't loosen the purse strings for Vassar and NYU, et cetera, and* UP FRONT > 106

maybe a winter coat and gloves from time to time, so be it. I don't believe a word of this David Copperfield crap, Jean-Joe. The most serious grievance he aired was that I had misrepresented his book on Fitzgerald. *I don't get the idea from your book that you have the slightest understanding that I have a story.*

It was honestly one of the worst times in my life. I remember being on the phone and saying, "If you're not with me on this, it takes all the fun out of it." It was hard to understand why he suddenly didn't get who I was. One day I blurted out, "Are you gonna sue me? Because I don't have any money for lawyers." He consoled me: "We're a family, goddamn it. We don't sue each other. And if we do sue each other, we all pitch in. Now, don't worry."

I was saying things that no one had ever said aloud, like that he had not written in years, that his Fitzgerald project was perhaps a literary escapade in guilt over the death of my mother, that his writing might have been more important to him than his family. But I was also working to make whatever changes were important to him. He was extremely worried about being denied access to Princeton's Fitzgerald archives because I mention he had hand-copied a transcript from there. I did not want him to look like a crackpot, because he's not a crackpot. He's a tragic hero, a person whose misfortune is caused by an error in judgment, a person like us. This is the crucial part of what makes a tragic hero. We look at them and think, That could be me.

But we were never going to agree on the interpretation of the facts, or my writing style. *Jean, you have to cut out about 99 percent of the fucks and fuckings and motherfuckers.* He disapproved of my including unbecoming details about my mother's death, like my description of the mouse droppings all over her bed. I felt they showed the nature of alcoholism, and also these unbecoming details *were* my mother for many years, and they mattered to me, just like my mother did.

His edits were not all critical. *I cried laughing at this scene while knowing that what you were talking about was truly about as comic as serial murder.* But after months of editing, I realized I could publish the book or make my dad happy, but not both. We stopped speaking, and I went out and tried to enjoy the result of approximately five or six years of highly interrupted work. When friends of his mentioned they were enjoying the book, my dad told them to hold off on reading it until he could send them his "notes." His notes on what I had gotten wrong came in at 140 pages. The book was 303.

I assumed he would see the book as my book, not *the* book, about our family. My family persona has always been to say too much. Drunk or sober, I have a lifelong case of what Dorothy Parker called "the frankies." It's what anyone who knows me likes and dislikes about me. I thought that's what love is—when you like and dislike the same things in someone. But I agonized over whether I was doing what I believed he had done: putting art before people.

My sisters think the book is actually generous to him and very funny. They felt he'd missed the opportunity to just be a supportive father. But I know now that to tell the truth in a relationship means it might destroy the thing that's holding it together.

After about a year, my father and I have a rapprochement. I call him when Baz Luhrmann's film *The Great Gatsby* comes out. But he deflects the chance for us to have a real conversation. He tells me that in the movie theater, while he was eating Jujubes, his front tooth fell out. "I looked like *Guernica* last week, but I'm heading to the dentist." He gives me updates on the Fitzgerald project. This peace does not last.

He turns 80, and my three sisters and I organize a dinner at a restaurant in Park Slope. I spend the day with him, take him to lunch, and buy him the new Alice Munro book from BookCourt. The dinner is really fun; my sister Julia, whom none of us have seen in years, is here from Tunisia. When I get back to L.A., he's officially angry again. Nothing I did; he's just decided he's not quite finished.

I do not want this coldness to be the tenor of my remaining time with my father, but it seems like all I can do now is check on him via my sisters, make sure his asthma is manageable, that he's eating OK. It's an unlikely way to end a relationship based on ideas and conversation and kidding around and a mutual love of the written word. It feels like a terrible way to end a relationship based on these things. There's a picture of

His notes on what I had gotten wrong came in at 140 pages. The book was 303

my dad and me, black-and-white. I'm about ten; my dad is the age I am now, mid-40s. We're standing side by side; I'm in my pajamas holding a Hawaiian straw hat to my chest while my father is holding a top hat of his father's against his chest. He's smiling; I'm deadpan, playing the straight man. I have always loved this picture.

Now I wish I had a picture of our future, of where we could go. Maybe as the person who pulled down the scenery, I am the one responsible for creating a new story. Maybe it would go something like this: We'll go to New York for Christmas, and after some initial awkward attempts to get into a conversational groove at the shrimp cocktail, I will say something that can't be argued with, something simple and true that we can move forward with, like, "Dad, I am so happy to see you." To which he would say, "Damn it, Jean-Joe, you've been on the high wire plenty in your day, but with this book you almost fell off. But it's over. Goddamn it, it's over." And then, in the most unsentimental way possible, I would add, "Sove you lo much." And we would enter a new phase where we would initiate my nine-year-old son into a world of dancing in the kitchen on school nights, impersonating Margaret Dumont from the Marx Brothers' movies, a world where you always wear a fedora, where anything is possible, it's all up for grabs, and we're grabbing and dancing like crazy.

That's the Christmas story I'm going to try and pull off, the story I'll sketch out in my mind as my son opens up the latest Pokémon book next to me on the plane—but the actual story, the one that begins once we land in New York, that's one I cannot begin to write. □