

# My Father, My Friend

by Diana Wolf

**T**oday's mail contains a letter from my dad. Inside the vanilla white envelope reads a printed note: "Diana, Just a couple of items for you to read, Dad." He knows I love movies, so there's a newspaper article on this summer's movies. There's also a Ziggy cartoon about balancing a checkbook that dad likens to his own behavior. Typical.

The letters began over a decade ago, when I started college 160 miles away from home. Dad remembered his joy of news from home when he was drafted into the army in 1944, so in the memory of daily mail call, he filled my mailbox with letters. Everyday. For five years. Each word hand-printed in blue ink on white or yellow lined notepaper. He detailed the weather in hometown Pittsburgh for that day and the upcoming week, and any trips to the supermarket or post office he made with my mom. What they cooked for dinner and what TV shows they watched were itemized. He cataloged upcoming doctor appointments, as well as mom's work schedule. Cartoons relating to our family's idiosyncrasies or local newspaper snippets were included. More than once, dad taped laundry quarters in a neat row and mailed them to me. Exciting reading it was not, but I got to know the man I call my father through those letters, and I wanted to know more.

Anthony Leo Wolf was born in 1926 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the oldest son of three children. His father was a printer, his mother a housewife. Dad braved the wrath of nuns when he dropped out of Catholic School after the 10th grade, working to help the family finances. He never to earn a high school diploma or GED. After his honorable discharge from the service, he had the good fortune to meet a lovely woman named Betty Lou while they were spotting planes at a local airport.

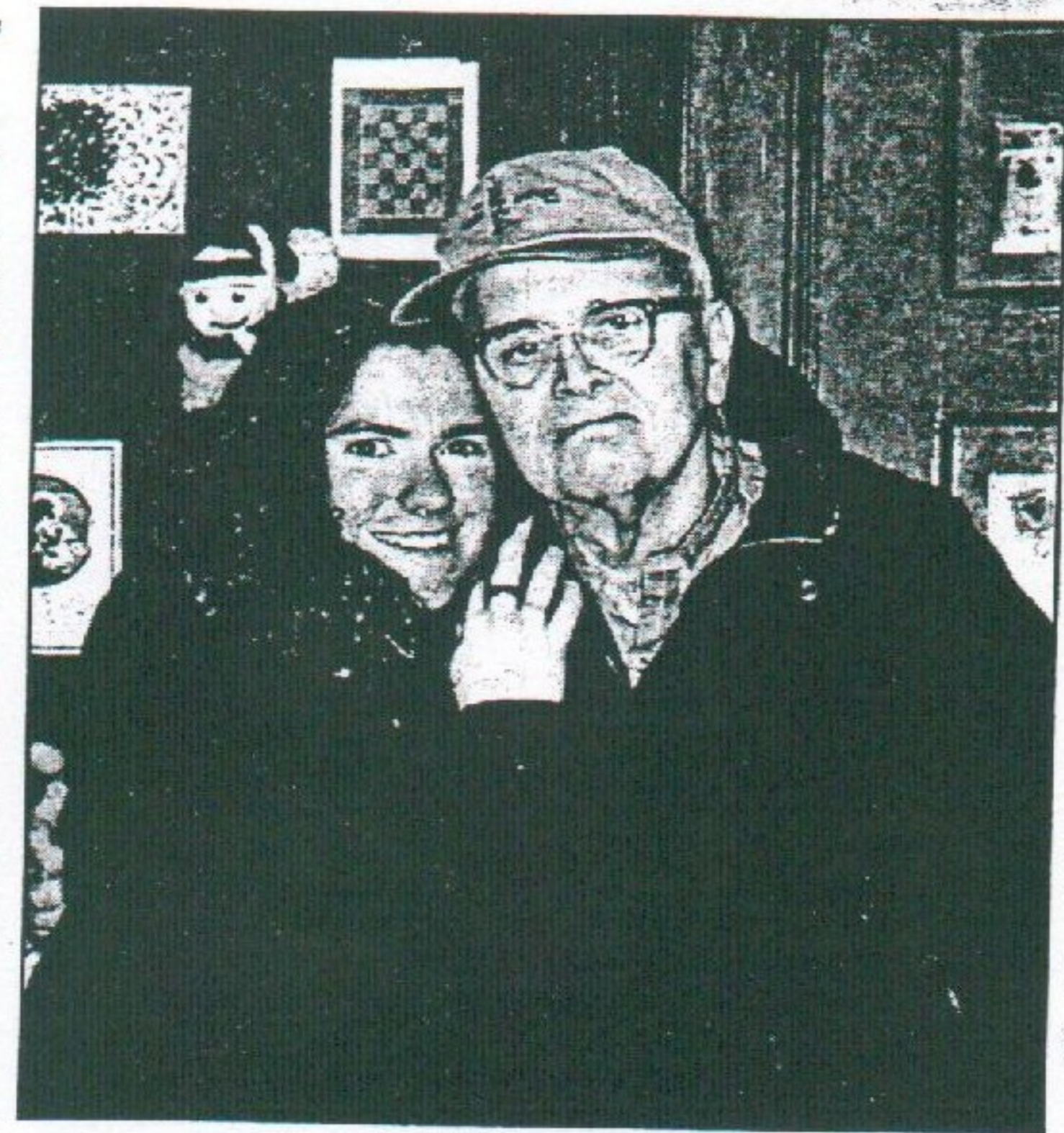
As of this writing, my mom and dad have been married 41½ years, a rare and wonderful example in this world where some divorces last longer than the marriages. After 10 years of perfecting the art of baby-making, my parents got the composition right, with mom discovering her pregnancy over vacation plans to Disneyland. They canceled their trip to save money for the baby — the beginning of my parents' sacrifices for me, their only child.

Dad worked a variety of blue-collar jobs — pharmacy delivery driver, warehouse packer and shipper — until illness forced a reversal of roles. Mom entered the 9 to 5 working world, and dad wrote letters.

**T**hat's how I arrive today, at 31 years of age, with a father in tow, when so few women know their fathers as well. The foundation was my good childhood, the only trauma being denied a Big Wheel bike, deemed unsafe by my folks. While some fathers express their love in silences, my dad does so through conversation. He talks to me and with me, not at me. He asks questions about my life, my boyfriend, my friends, and my work. He listens to my opinions and he laughs at my jokes.

Dad also talks to me because he's scared.

Dad's kidneys were diagnosed as operating at 23 percent and doctors predicted he'd be on a dialysis within 12 months. Then, despite



**Family Group:** Writer Diana Wolf and her father Anthony Wolf. She plans to surprise him with this story on Father's Day, Sunday, June 17.

being a lifetime non-smoker, dad contracted pulmonary fibrosis, a scarring of his lungs. Doctors say the normal course of this disease is slow-moving for three to five years, during which time his breathing will become labored, then after a bout of pneumonia, it will become fast-moving, terminal in a matter of months. If that's not enough, six months ago in November, dad was hospitalized with a cold which shut down his kidneys to 14 percent with dehydration, and he almost died. Numbers make the diagnoses real, yet rather than have me entertain myself with unknown demons, dad tells me the results of every medical appointment and procedure in excruciating step-by-step detail.

Dad knows his odds, and how

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many times he's beaten them. The inspiration for his stubbornness is his mother, Colletta, the only grandparent I had the pleasure of knowing for the first 16 years of my life. She was 81 years old when she died, a woman strong enough of mind, body, and spirit to go outdoors every day, regardless of weather, even the day after she was the victim of a noontime mugging. She would be proud of these past 10 years where dad has followed the doctor's instructions exactly and asked many questions to fully understand his illnesses. The result is that my dad is not on dialysis yet, and he's passing year six since his lung diagnosis. It's hard not to think of dad as Superman.

There is a swirl of romance surrounding a father-daughter relationship, from dancing to "Daddy's Little Girl" at a wedding to goochy-gooing a grandchild

into a googily smile. With sitcoms like "The Cosby Show," "Home Improvement," and "Married With Children" portraying dads as bumbling idiots out of touch with family issues and common sense, it's easy to understand why — with such models — there may be gap between fathers and daughters. Every daughter wants to connect with that part who is half her creation, and my dad's strong communication has made it easy for me to know him.

**I**'m learning to appreciate what he gives me, when he gives it. Today, his letters are less frequent, yet now they include leftover Sunday paper coupons. Our walks together are slower, dad pausing on his cane to rest or puff on his inhaler. Long, lazy Sunday afternoon phone calls are broken with a hacking cough.

The important thing is that he walks and he talks with me. He calls me, proud to tell me that he's strong enough to carry the garbage outside, and frustrated that it takes him 10 minutes to do so. I tell him to focus on the fact that he is getting stronger, no matter how slowly. I remind him that he's older, and it'll take him longer to heal. We find success in his ability to do the laundry by himself, to walk up and down steps without assistance, and to carry bags of groceries alone. He agrees, with a stubborn sigh, and then we talk about the weather.

I was home last Thanksgiving after his hospitalization. Dad was doing dishes, proud he was finally strong enough to help mom, and frustrated he couldn't do more. I hugged him and said, "I never hear you say it, but I love you." He hugged me back with one arm and replied, "You know I love you."

I choose to have my dad in my life as much as he chooses to be in it. Dad treasures our memories, and he tells me, sharing those emotions with me. I am connected to my past through him, and with him. I tell my dad "I love you" at the end of every conversation. I treat every visit as if it's our last — because someday it will be. Someday I'll live a life he won't share in, and I'll miss that.

My dad and I are best friends. ■