



FROM “ABOUT DAD”

By Gösta Wennberg

Essay 2

Memory is often treacherous. We never know what we remember, really. Our forgetfulness affects us in selective ways. For many reasons, what we observe when we hear and see something is also selective.



I had a difficult relationship with my dad. [...] I wasn't afraid of him but I had some respect. We were not close. He expected things from me; he helped me feel guilty because I never did what I was supposed to. But he was never really mean. [...]

Dad died on August 12, 1953 at Halmstad's Hospital, severely injured from a road accident at Östra Karup in Halland, at a crossing that doesn't exist anymore. All E6 is rebuilt at this place. On Monday, August 10, the two of us were traveling from Värnamo to Båstad and were heading for Skåne. [...]

District surveyor Helge Wennberg

From the direction of Skåne [...] a black private car, a Buick, came roaring along at an estimated speed of 100 kilometers an hour. As we were deciding whether to drive to Båstad or go south, we stopped about 20 meters from the crossing. We decided on Båstad, I recall talking to dad as we went ahead past the crossing and continued without further stops. He must have forgotten to look once more in both directions. Probably he never expected such high speed cars like this Buick. Perhaps the car was not too visible against the background. We will never know.

The Buick hit our left-hand door at the crossing, crushing that side severely. According to the police record, it had been braking for a long time, but at impact was still travelling at a great speed. I remember nothing from that moment, cannot remember hearing anything until we were thrown into a wall right in front of the church [...]

I managed to press myself out of the car, which wasn't easy since the door was stuck in the edge of the ditch. The first thing I saw was dad who sat unconscious

bent over the steering-wheel, he was bleeding from a wound in the back of his head and moaning quietly. I tried to get him loose and he moaned even more. I got out of the car, tried to open the left door which was deeply pressed in, and I finally managed to. With the help of some people who came to assist, I managed to get him out and place him on the ground by the ditch.

He continued to moan and I am still not and sure whether I did the right thing or not. I was frightened but totally clear in what I was doing. I thought he had gotten the base of the skull pressed in and that he was dying. He said something like “be careful, be careful”.

The other car had over turned on its side. We later learned that the driver was fine but that his two passengers were hurt. Several cars stopped and people came over. Within 10 minutes two ambulances had stopped; it was propitious that they had just returned from deliveries to Skåne. They took care of the wounded. Within 10 minutes I was sitting beside one of the ambulance drivers after dad had been placed on a stretcher behind us. It was then that my reaction set in, but I cannot recall exactly how they surfaced as I still had not comprehended the event on an emotional basis.

At Halmstad’s Hospital I had to sit in a corridor or a waiting room for hours. No one noticed me as they were all busy attending to the badly injured. I had looked in a small mirror in the ambulance and then discovered that I was bleeding heavily, but only from wounds that did not seem to be very deep. I sat totally relaxed in this waiting room as people let me alone. Finally I was taken care of by a doctor who washed my face, removed pieces of glass (from the windshield that I had broken with my head) and sewed the bigger wound on my right cheek.

I asked how my father was. They couldn’t tell, he was badly wounded but otherwise they didn’t know anything yet. That was all I could remember. I then wanted to call Skeda but wasn’t allowed to, as only the nurse could. I still think that this was wrong but obviously that was their routine. Probably they assumed that I was more in a shock than I was. But I was still calm even though I was clear about what had happened.

I cannot say that I was paralyzed. It was more like I had shut down. The hospital helped me to find a hotel room near Österport. I went there, washed myself and then burst into tears and continued crying. Then everything was released. My back muscles ached terribly as the car crash had really injured them. The facial wounds, aching back and a short period of unconsciousness were the only injuries I suffered.

They wanted me to come back to the hospital and I sat by my father’s bed for an hour or so. He was totally unconscious, moaning occasionally but I didn’t reach him. Mom and Stina had taken a cab from Skeda and they came to replace me. I

went back to the hotel, tried to straighten out my clothes, went to bed, and remember crying hard at times. [...]

Dad died on Thursday the 12th. That day mom, Signe¹ and I had coffee on a full-rigged ship in Nissan, Halmstad, which had a café on board. As I remember it we all were very calm on the surface, I guess we felt relieved at that moment. Dad had been severely injured, not in his head, but 11 ribs were broken and likely his



lungs had been hurt so that he would never have been able to breathe properly. (Seat belts did not exist at that time but if they had, he would have survived. But then he would eventually have been found legally guilty of causing the accident.)

As I remember it, the funeral was held one week later. [...] The dinner was at Lundboholm, which had become a boarding place by then. Funeral service and internment were held in Rydaholm's church. I wore a tuxedo and Folke², Sten³, someone else and I were the pall bearers. Perhaps that was in retrospect not a good idea as I recall that I cried uncontrollably [...].

Rydaholm's church

Something that happened that autumn comes to mind. AnnStin and I take a walk at Södergatan⁴ towards the centre, as an ambulance behind us suddenly turns on its sirens. My legs just gave way and I had to sit down on the street. During the nights of that school year, I constantly dreamt about the accident. I developed guilt feelings because I had talked to dad and disturbed him as we were passing the crossing. When years later I learned to drive, I realized that it does not work that way; when driving you do not get disturbed by someone talking to you. [...]

I really don't know how the accident has affected my view of life or of dad. Maybe I have acquired a lot of anxiety, which my grownup daughters have confirmed. It could happen while swimming at Skeda or when we were out in the boat. But perhaps as a parent responsible for two children, I would have that that anxiety anyway. [...]

Of course I sometimes have used the accident and dad's death to make myself interesting, as I have told many friends about it. I think it is an integral part of the

¹ Signe was Helge's sister.

² Folke was Helge's nephew.

³ Sten was Helge's brother.

⁴ This was Södergatan in Lund, where Gösta lived until the middle of the 1960's.

story of my life and that they should know about it. But, of course, you want to make yourself interesting [...]

For my story it is also important to tell what happened before the accident when my dad and I left Skeda. I was then an environmental geographer and had, that summer of 1953, decided to take my moped and drive to Skåne to have a look at its ridges.

My dad was then 67 and retired. He had been ill from ulcerative colitis and had been through surgery some years earlier, and this summer had started feeling ill again. But he wanted to join me, and I enjoyed that because the two of us would then have a chance to become closer.

Aunt Karin was at Skeda then and had one of her worst black moods – something that the rest of the family just thought of as troublesome but which I, already then and more so in the following years, understood was caused by severe depression. Not having the ability to analyze herself, she seemed unaware of her condition. [...] On our way we were dropping her off at Ljungby. She was very nasty which made my dad very sad. He was still tolerant and understanding of her, since he was basically a calm person. We left her and continued along Lagastigen. We sat down by a rest stop. I have a picture of dad as he is sitting a little round-shouldered, drinking coffee at a rest stop stone table.

At that place and later during the trip he told me about his life and work experiences. It was very significant as he had never confided in me before, and



Skeda in 1943

decidedly an improvement in our relationship as he was finally candid with me and I was treated as an equal. [...] He confided to me that during all his life he had felt very insecure, lacked self confidence and felt insufficient about his work. He felt that he was slow and had never really gotten things done [...]

Suddenly there was a meeting of minds, a new openness, and a new feeling of equality missing until then. We could now have moved on and sorted out any problems between us. But within half an hour he was unconscious and two days later he was dead.

I want to share another memory from the funeral with you. While we were dressing for the funeral, I was helping Karin in the downstairs room at Skeda, where farmer Gustavsson used to have an office. (I had been there in 1940⁵ when he and dad concluded the purchase of Skeda.) Just before the funeral, Karin turns to me and blurts out “Listen Gösta - ghosts are nothing but our injustices against the dead.” [...]

Skeda was a dream place for my dad with its forest meadows at the seaside, its lovely beach, its hunting-grounds at the wood side, and the forest maintenance he could do (and in which, as a surveyor, he had been trained). He could fish in the lake. He was a great part of our lives there during those years by his hunting, his fishing, his calmly sitting in the rowboat on the lake.

A note about my father’s passing. During the afternoon of his death, I went to the hospital and asked if I could see him. I was given a key and allowed to go to the room where the deceased were kept. I entered a bright room where he laid on a bench; he was stretched out, with his mouth closed and looked quite like he always did.

I touched his face; it was a cold feeling, but there was nothing unpleasant about it. It was all calm but very serious, as I now remember it. I no longer remember what thoughts I had. Just that doing this was necessary, and that it wasn’t difficult. He had big blue marks on the left side of his upper body down his back, likely giant bruises from the collision. [...]

The man who had crashed into us was evidently a car thief from Malmö, who had sold the car, taken it back and was on his way to Stockholm to sell it once again. Since he was a thief and had driven very fast down the ridge, he was found guilty in the first trial of the accident. I was called as a witness at a trial in Laholm in October 1954 [...]

When the trial was finished we went to the train [...]. We walked to the station together and I talked to the accused. As I remember, he said he was sorry and asked me to forgive him for all that he had been putting us through. Everything was very calm, in an everyday manner.

But there is more. I have several press clippings about what happened, and they tell us that the judgment was later reversed. The guilty person was found to be my dad, the victim of the crash. This accident resulted in a decision that everyone must stop in front of major road; that is the STOP sign⁶.

⁵ Skeda was bought in 1941.

⁶ All major roads were, after this decision, marked in that way.

