

Memories of My Children



Years have washed away some of my memories, things I thought would endure forever in my mind have simply faded. However, with six adult sons, a few stories remain, and those deserve to be remembered. Some recollections are time-stamped, associated with events or places, while others float untethered. Stories are captured as they come with little regard for chronology or any other sign of organization.

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Hugh was born in the fall of 1978, the first day of my last year of college, and he didn't help my scholastic career. It wasn't his fault, but playing with a new baby was a lot more fun than studying physical chemistry. As he grew we started calling him Hoover because, like a vacuum cleaner, he sucked up anything he could find on the floor. Brutus, our black cat, watched over him. My grandmother was horrified that we would allow a cat near him, maintaining that cats smell the milk on a baby's breath and

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sometimes suck the air out of their lungs leaving them dead. Hugh is in his forties now, and Brutus—well, he isn't. Brutus often climbed into the cradle, and while he didn't evacuate the baby's lungs, he did stretch out and leave Hugh curled up in the corner—he also stole covers.

We moved to the Portland area when Hugh was one, where Doug and Ian were born. Working in construction at the time was hit and miss so I started a janitorial business, but I'm not a businessman, and after six years in college I thought it would be nice to enter the field for which I was trained. Finally, through the grace of God, there was a job for me at Genentech in South San Francisco.

The job provided subsistent wages at best, and we needed a place to live. Vanda and the boys stayed with her parents for about four months while I started working and finding a place for our family to live. Being separated was hard, but the boys did get to be around their grandparents. Everyone would laugh when Doug, who wasn't three yet, told people: "My daddy died in Caloria." When his granddad came home from work and took off his boots, Doug would walk around in them—the boots were as tall as Doug's legs. When Lee asked him to bring the boots to him, he'd say: "They're too hovy, Grandpa. They're too hovy."

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Music was important when the boys were growing up, singing songs with the accompaniment of a guitar. There was Hercomer, the cheap classical guitar my parents gave me about the time I started high school. He had been scratched and beat up badly enough that a friend tole-painted flowers all over it—a typical look for the early seventies. Hercomer’s top was finally bowed in so much it was not playable, but how could a thing that had brought such joy be thrown on a trash heap? Over twenty years later, Cameron helped me take the guitar apart, reinforce the top, and replace the bridge. Hercomer sounded surprisingly good considering what it lived through. It’s Cameron’s now, and he plays it better than I ever did.

A twelve-string was my extravagance the summer after my high-school graduation in 1973, and Charity, as she was named, was my primary guitar for years. That is until Vanda gave me a lovely classical guitar for Christmas in 1995. Naming her was difficult, but she eventually became Vocadolce, sweet voice. There’s a story about that, but I’m getting a little far afield.

Even little children can be critics. After years of trying to teach myself to play the violin, the music hadn’t got much better. When I asked a three-year-old Hugh if he wanted tunes, he lit up. When I picked up the violin case he said, “Nooo, Dabby! ‘Tarr! ‘Tarr!” Relenting, I switched instruments and played the guitar for him.

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About that same time, my cousin, Rod, and I were sipping scotch out of shot glasses, and Hugh kept asking for a drink. We told him he wouldn't like it, but the stubborn little kid wouldn't give up. I told him to just take a tiny bit, just enough to wet his lips. He took a tiny sip, but not tiny enough. He stood stunned with his eyes wide. Then he raised his hand and slapped himself on the forehead. He wanted it to go away, but when I tried to give him a drink of water he wouldn't take it. He had deemed me untrustworthy.

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When there was one little boy in a bathtub, we always watched very closely. With the third boy, we figured they were pretty safe together. We were still keeping a pretty close watch, but let them have a bit more freedom. Suddenly we heard a lot of splashing and some crying. Rushing into the bathroom the scene was one of Ian, about a year and a half old, soaked while his older brothers were trying to console him.

“What happened?”

Hugh explained, “We had a war.”

“It looks like Ian got the worst of it.”

“Yeah, me and Doug were the best team!”

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When Doug was little, he was very particular about his clothes. He loved his shiny black parachute pants and his yellow football jersey, or ‘putball toit’. Vanda took him gift shopping about that time; it might have been my birthday, or maybe Christmas. He ran through the front door exclaiming, “I’m not going to tell you we bought you a putball toit.”

This boy, so finicky about his clothes, seemed to have no regard for table manners. Doug loved to eat, but his tactics were a bit unseemly. Granted, he was a little boy, still in a highchair, but even taking his age into account, he was a mess. We were living in Gresham, Oregon where our dining room had a sliding door opening to the patio. Our usual dinner procedure was to spread out a plastic drop cloth to cover the carpet, strip Doug to his diaper, strap him into the highchair, and put food on the tray. At the end of the meal, I opened the sliding door, carried the highchair—at arm’s length—to the patio with its occupant still strapped in, and used a garden hose to clean the chair and the boy. After this preliminary cleansing, we took him to the bathtub.

He did learn etiquette, but slowly. We were around the dinner table when he was a pre-teen, and he was eating with his hands. I said, “Doug, use your fork.” He obediently picked up his fork with his right hand. There was a pause as though he was trying to understand how to make a fork work; then he started eating

with his left hand.

A few more years passed, and as a teenager, Doug got a job at a nice Italian restaurant. He quickly developed a keen sense of table manners, and his impatience with younger brothers earned him the title of manners police.

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Ian seemed to have a sense of humor from birth. His mom tells about him laughing—big belly laughs—in his sleep when he was a few weeks old. He wasn't much older than that when he started teasing me. When Vanda was holding him I started to reach for him, and he quickly turned away. Then, he carefully looked out of the corner of his eye to make sure I noticed. As he grew up he always seemed to have a witty quip.

One of Ian's pranks that comes to mind is the Hongo Mongo Jungle Spider. We had a house with hot water radiators for heat. Owen was about three or four, and his older brothers told him about the Hongo Mongo Jungle Spider that was big enough to carry him off. For his safety, they tied him to the radiator in the dining room. Then, Ian came crawling in covered in some draped in black. He was growling as he crawled through the room, and the two oldest boys ran away in terror, leaving Owen tied to the radiator. Ian realized how much he was traumatizing his little brother and tore the costume off, but it took a while for the

victim to calm down.

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When Ian had surgery at about four and we gave him a stuffed animal—a plush, Pound Puppy named Sir Jerry (say it a few times with the emphasis on the first word—you’ll get it). Even with this lovely soft dog, he commandeered an old stuffed animal. That would have been alright, but it was his father’s beloved teddy bear named Beary. He was named that because he was a bear and all respectable stuffed animals had names ending in a ‘y’. Beary wasn’t my only stuffed animal; there was Giraffey (he was a giraffe), Caty (he was a cat), and a lion whose name was—Chairy. You may wonder where that name came from. I was walking across the room, trying to think of a fitting name for my new stuffed animal, when my gaze fell upon a dining room chair. The name was decided in a moment—Liony was so three-year-old. All of this is a bit irrelevant; the only thing you need to know is that my child had abducted Beary, and to make it worse, he named my bear MeMe. All these years later, Ian still has the bear and still retains that silly moniker.

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Going back to Owen and that house, there were a couple of notable events. It was a large historic home, but when we first saw it, there had been no upkeep for about 20 years. It looked like something out of a horror movie complete with sheets of

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plaster falling off the walls and ceilings. Repeated meetings with the local bank president finally wore him down. It took a year of begging, but he said: “I’ll give you a construction loan so you can buy the house and have the money to renovate it. I can’t give you a mortgage because it’s not a home, it’s property. It isn’t livable.” For the first couple of months, we kept our rental house and spent every spare moment getting our new place livable. The day we moved in I worked into the night getting at least one bathroom done enough to get a shower the next morning before work. We used the largest bedroom for a living room and cooked our food on the porch using a camp stove for the next five months.

During this time I was working full time and working on the house evenings and weekends. Vanda and the boys also worked on it during the day. Two-year-old Owen learned to open the back door one day, and after frantically looking for him, Vanda found him playing in the driveway. She called me at work to tell me how terrified she still was, and how thankful she was that he hadn’t gone into the street. Thirty minutes later, I got another call to tell me that he had been in the street and someone had called the police. She told me, “I just had a policeman—who looked to be twelve—give me a lecture on parental responsibility!”

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The next time we lost track of him I was home. We looked everywhere, outside first but he wasn't there. He finally turned up sleeping on a pile of construction debris in the basement. When Owen got tired, he didn't fight it, he just laid down and went to sleep.

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Brendan has always had disabilities, primarily in speech and reading. Because of that, people often underestimated his intellect. Of course, there were exceptions. When he was nine we were at a dinner at the church, and a retired physician was standing next to me. I knew who he was, but didn't know him well. He had been watching Brendan and asked if his IQ had been tested. I said no, and steadied myself to hear what he was going to say, thinking I'd heard it all before. But Dr. Dotterer said, "He is very bright—it would probably be at least 120." I already knew he was bright, but I wasn't used to hearing it from professionals.

Our neighbor came over one evening, and Brendan was sitting on the floor playing while visiting. I don't remember what we were talking about, but I said something about 'colorful expletives' having no idea my son knew what that meant. He looked up and said, "Beep."

Brendan went on several trips with various boy scout troops when I was a scoutmaster. One outing was a winter backpacking

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trip when he was seven. We drove in after dark, and in the morning we realized we weren't at the trailhead. It was a gloomy day, and below freezing, but we knew we could find the trail by walking up the river. We had underestimated the time it would take to trudge through rocks and brambles without a trail. It was mid-afternoon when we finally reached the trail we had intended to take, but instead of going the other six miles to our destination, we decided to camp there.

Since Brendan and I were the Hulse Patrol, we were expected to have a skit at the campfire. Our skit began with Brendan pretending to carry me like a backpack. When we got in front of the campfire I rolled off his back and laid on my belly. He pulled me up by my belt and I made an 'A' shape like a tent. When Brendan let go of the belt, I fell down and he pulled me up again. After a few times, I stayed up and he reclined under me. I collapsed once more across him, got up, and told the group: "Camping Tip #1—don't use a 200-pound tent.

The other skit I remember from that trip was by Doug's patrol. Doug borrowed my hat and walking stick—which alerted me that I was to be the butt of the joke. The patrol walked around the campfire a couple of times and started saying, "Mr. Hulse, do you know where we are?"

Doug responded: "Of course. I have a map."

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That exchange was repeated a few times, and then one of the boys spoke up: “Let’s look at the map.”

Doug took out a map, studied it, surveyed the area, and said, “Let’s camp here!”

(For those of you who are bothered by the transportation logistics—we used multiple vehicles to travel to where we camped the first night. Then we drove two cars to the destination, dropped one, and brought the other back. All cars but one were parked a few hundred yards from where ended up. We picked the other one up on the way home.)

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With six boys, there were quite a few doctor visits. Owen was active, and his love of adventure often outweighed his fear. Exactly how he hurt himself is fuzzy, but it may have been when he tripped and broke his fall by hitting his lip on a corner of a coffee table. In any case, we took him to be sewn back together. The clinic was owned by a mature family physician who came to the door of the waiting room and called for us. Just then, his young associate, Sam, heard our name. Sam had dealt with Owen several times in the little boy’s short life—I don’t think he was over a year old. He knew Owen would hate to be strapped to a papoose board to have his lip stitched, knowledge that had come from experience. He turned to his boss and said, “I’ll take him—he already hates me, why should he hate both of us?”

Not all accidents are random. Sibling rivalry, one-up-man-ship, competition—call it what you like, can lead to doctor visits. Only Hugh and Doug were present, and they weren't very forthcoming with details, but it seemed to start with a comment from Doug, something like, "You can't hurt me—I'm tough." At which time Hugh grasped his brother's forearm and brought it down across his leg as though breaking a stick. It was all in good fun; neither of them knew how easily the bone would break. The snap they heard should have given them a clue, but they both left that detail out when they told the story.

My reaction was to look at the arm and say that he'd be alright in a day or two. There may have been something like, "Oh, quit being a baby," thrown in. Vanda always got a little more excited about injuries than I did. Her 'overreactions' probably saved lives, and I thank God for giving me a wife of wisdom. A couple of days later even I realized he needed a doctor. When we brought him back with a cast, I felt pretty guilty. We were moving from North Carolina to Southern California, and Doug made the trip with his arm in a cast.

The first weekend in California Doug wanted the cast off, but we didn't know where to go. The cast had been on for over six weeks, long enough for the bone to heal. So, the cast came off, and Doug went rollerblading on this beautiful Sunday. He had

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wrist guards, but neglected to wear them. When he fell, he instinctively broke his fall by extending his arm. When we took him to the hospital, the orthopedic surgeon told us the x-ray showed that the old break had healed well and that the new break was an inch or two from the last one.

On Tuesday, Ian decided to go rollerblading. After Doug's incident, we made sure Ian used his wrist guards. When he fell, the wrist guard protected the arm and transferred the force to the elbow—which broke. At least we knew where to take him, and we already knew the doctor.

Ian's injury healed, and we bought mountain bikes for the older three boys. Vanda and I had dropped Hugh, Doug, and Ian off to ride the trails in Wildwood Canyon, a park in Thousand Oaks, and then driven the few miles home. We were busy getting our family settled into the house we had just bought when we got a call. A man told us that one of our sons had a bike wreck and we needed to come pick them up.

There had been bike wrecks in the past, and the man on the phone didn't make this one sound too bad. When we drove up, Doug looked a little pale. As near as I could understand, they were going down a trail when Doug passed his brothers and probably shouted some challenge to them as he went by. When Ian and Hugh went around the next corner, Doug was laying on

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the trail, still—more or less. They thought he had fallen on his right side and slid to a stop. Closer examination showed that his helmet was broken on both the right and left side, and his left shoulder was the one that was injured. He had apparently executed a barrow role.

Hugh met us at the car and gave a rundown: “He has a concussion. He obviously broke his shoulder, his left arm is broken, and I’m pretty sure he at least cracked his right arm. When we got to him, he knew his name, and he knew our names. He didn’t know we were in Wildwood Canyon, or that we had been bike riding. Hey—he didn’t even know we had moved from North Carolina.”

His loving brothers sat with him until his head cleared, and used a belt to stabilize the shoulder, but they made him walk out of the canyon. We drove to the hospital to see the same doctor, who was getting to know us a little too well.

Owen seemed destined to get in on the fun. A few months later, he was running around the small church we were attending with some other little kids. He tripped on a microphone cord and fell forward with his arm across a step. We had one more trip to the orthopedic surgeon. Somehow we were never contacted by Children’s Services, but it’s a safe bet they had a file on us.

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After we settled into our home in Moorpark, Hugh and Doug started studying at the local community college. Hugh was studying history, Doug started with music but moved into physics—at least that’s how I remember. They both used our bedroom to study because that’s where our only computer lived, but their educational philosophies were somewhat different. The following discussion shows the divergent thought processes.

“Why are you studying so hard, Doug?”

“I’ve got to get an A on this test tomorrow.”

Hugh looked quizzical: “Why do you have to get an A?”

“If I get an A on the test, I’ll get an A in the class.”

“What do you get if you get a B on the test.”

“Then, I’ll get a B in the class.”

Hugh asked, “What grade will you get in the class if don’t even show up for the test?”

“I’d get a B.”

Hugh looked confused: “Back to my first question, why are you studying? Doug, a B is good. Bs are your friend.”

Cameron and Owen were about three and five years old while this was going on. Almost every night they went to bed with me playing the guitar and singing with them; I had just bought a book called Songs of the Civil War, and we were playing through that book.

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Hugh was working on a term paper in American history, researching on the Internet. In the late 90s, websites seemed to always have background music—a practice that has, thankfully, become rare. Owen walked through the room, and Hugh said, “I’m researching for a college class on the Civil War, and when the websites play tunes my five-year-old brother walks through singing the words.”

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In 2000, we moved to Simi Valley, where we had a bigger house and a much larger yard. Hugh was still studying history, especially military history. Coming home from work one evening Owen and Cameron ran up and told me I had to come outside to see what they did. They drug me out the back door unable to contain their excitement.

At the back of the yard, there was a hill that dropped down to the back fence. Hugh had been teaching them how to build a foxhole. They had cut away at the bank and dug down to make a hole just the right size for the younger brothers. They could stand in the hole and just see above the edge of the lawn, where they had mounted broomsticks as guns. They found some discarded netting somewhere—I wasn’t sure I wanted to ask too many questions—and made a camouflage cover by weaving leaves into the net.

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They were so excited, how could I be anything but overjoyed?

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Owen and Cameron both learned to play the guitar, but Owen moved away leaving Cameron with me for a few more years. Playing music with him was one of my great joys during those years. We played several times, but one sticks out in my memory. I was involved with an organization that provided mentorship to exploited, and I had been in an all-day seminar. There had been way too many hours of listening to horrific stories, and my entire being felt numb. Walking through the door, I looked at Cameron and said: "Get an instrument. we have to have music."

We spent well over an hour playing without even speaking. Slowly, life had come back to my body and I felt normal. That memory of that evening and my thankfulness for it will always live in my memory.