

THE MAGICAL WORLD OF DADDY O

by GARRETT OPPENHEIM

AS MY interests shifted more and more toward the kind of life that might be open to me, like writing and the arts, I'm afraid I developed a self-serving sense of superiority toward the robust physicality of Daddy S. When Daddy O. and Mother O. and my brother Ralph moved back from California, I began skipping my homework and taking the bus to Washington Square every night to spend an hour or two with them.

Somewhere around this time (I was about fourteen) I took this visionary poet and parent as my role model. And I began badgering my trio of parents for permission to live with him. As usual, I was able to get my way.

Daddy O. lived with my new stepmother, whom I looked on as more of a wonderful companion than a parent, and my brother Ralph. They were settled in a picturesque rooming house on the south side of Washington Square. It was run by an elderly French landlady named Madame Blanchard, or simply Madame. From Daddy O.'s third-floor window, you could see over the famous Washington Arch straight up Fifth Avenue. Ralph occupied a smaller room, where he wrote blood-and-thunder stories. My school was a long subway ride away.

Now Ralph and I moved into the large rear room that connected with my father's by a corridor that was fixed up as a bathroom. We spent many evenings in the front room, where I would listen with rapt attention while Daddy O. would interpret my brother's long and fascinating dreams.

Daddy O. had studied with the great Carl Jung in Switzerland and had practiced for many years as a Jungian therapist. But at this time he was devoting his energies to writing.

Sitting, almost literally, at his feet, I gently absorbed some of the major Jungian concepts, the collective unconscious, the psychological types, the meaning of dreams, the eternal feminine. All these ideas meshed somehow with my own spiritual experiences. A whole new magical world was opening up to me.

Moreover, Daddy O. had some wonderful visitors, artists, novelists, poets, composers, even a well-known cartoonist. This world was the magic carpet on which I, the Little Lame Prince, could ride to a more tangible contact with the universe, one that I might even be able to articulate. It was a kind of grown-up version of my favorite fairy tale.

More and more I yearned to get out of high school and live a life of the spirit.

One of the most wonderful attractions of my new life style was Mother O., who had immediately befriended and captivated me. She was a very delicate-looking woman who loved flowery dresses and big hats. She had a soft voice and she painted exquisite pictures, which were all around the room she shared with my father.

I was particularly charmed by the story of Mother O.'s daring invasion of Washington Arch. She had discovered a door in the arch that was left unlocked. Going through the door, she found a stairway that took her to the top.

In the dead of night, Mother O. and a group of her artist friends, including John Sloan and Marcel Duchamp, climbed to the top, where they had a party to celebrate the secession of Greenwich Village from the United States. Next morning this historic landmark was festooned with colorful gas balloons. A highly amusing and somewhat different version of this story appeared in the May 13, 1991, issue of the *New Yorker* magazine.

Mother O. and I would take long walks together, and our friendship developed an almost conspiratorial air. On one of these walks a gray-bearded man with glasses came to her side and moved into step with us. He began talking in a low voice.

I couldn't make out what he was saying, but I could see that Mother O. wanted him to leave us alone. At first I wondered why she didn't tell him to go away, but then I gathered that she was afraid of him. Her fear communicated itself to me. I found myself wishing that I was able-bodied and strong enough to demolish this man. He didn't leave us until we reached the stoop of our home.

One night as we were all talking in the front room, this man appeared in the open doorway without saying a word. Daddy O., who was much smaller than the intruder, sprang from his chair and pushed him out into the hallway. Without speaking, he jostled him all the way to the top of the stairs and with a final push sent him tumbling down.

Fred Lewis, as I soon learned was his name, picked himself up, found his glasses on the floor, and shouted drunkenly, "Oppenheim, I'm going to come up there and cut your bowels out!"

I was frozen in my chair until my father came back, breathing hard and looking extremely angry. This was the only time I ever saw him fighting or looking that way. I gathered that Fred Lewis had done him some terrible wrong, but I couldn't imagine what it was. Looking back, I can only guess that this unhappy drunkard was trying to force his attentions on my stepmother. My father was a gentle, peace-loving man, anything but a fighter. He must have been severely angered to attack Fred Lewis in this manner.

It was an unpleasant lesson for me, a lesson that every child who watches television these days has learned only too well: the almost unacceptable truth that some men try to force their attentions on unwilling women.

Every once in a while, after that, we could hear Fred Lewis out on the street, shouting his obscene threats to my father. I never found out whatever happened to this sick individual, but presently he seemed to dissolve from the scene, in a lake of alcohol, I would guess.

I HAD been writing poetry since the age of eleven, but now I was pouring it out, hoping for accolades from my father. Looking back, I blush at the overall poor quality of my efforts. My father read them dutifully, pointing out errors in grammar and spelling, and giving me his expert evaluations. He never told me what to write or how; he was simply helpful and supportive.

Presently some of my poems were accepted for publication in prestigious papers and magazines. And one night, talking about Ralph's successes and mine, Daddy O. made this remark: "It's as if my two sons were carrying out two unfulfilled interests of mine, to write popular fiction and popular poetry."

The significance of the word "popular" wasn't lost on me. I knew that he meant "shallow," in contrast to "deep," which was the way he, and I, rated his own work. Once more he seemed to be telling me that despite his love he saw me largely as a less important part of himself, a part he had not seen fit to cultivate.

The magic world that he had opened up for me seemed to recede beyond my reach. My poems were just the expression of a very unfulfilled but secondary part of Daddy O. After a year of living with him, I could feel, without ever admitting it to my consciousness, that he did not see me or accept me as a person in my own right. It was the same message I got on my tenth birthday, when I read his reaction to the discovery that I had polio.

Mother O. told me my poems were wonderful. Talking with her always made me feel good about myself. Just as Ralph and I divided all people into trolls and nontrolls, she called people lemons and poppies. She published a book of line drawings depicting both types, and the correspondence of lemons to trolls was remarkable.

My favorite lemon was the portrait of a lean, long-jawed woman who was President of the Society for the Prevention of Watching Isadora Duncan Dance. That revolutionary dancer had shocked the nation's gatekeepers of morality by baring her breasts during a performance.

One day Mother O. divulged a secret: She and her friend Nadia Sanzewich had rented a store at the west edge of Greenwich Village, where they planned to feature my book, *Lyrics to the Olympian Deities*, which I had written at the

age of twelve. Moreover, they were going to put copies of the book in the window. And she showed me some beautiful jackets she had painted to go over the drab cardboard covers of the book.

Nadia and Mother O. and I all went together to the store to begin fixing it up. The store was down a few steps, because, as our vivacious Nadia put it, "People like better to go down than up." Nadia, Mother O. confided in me, was a Russian princess who had come to our country incognito to escape the Czar's wrath.

A Russian princess! Wow! I don't think I will ever know whether this was true or a concoction of Mother O.'s energetic imagination. But to me it was just more magic.

I was exhilarated by the sight of the jacketed copies of my book in the window; you could see them from the street. As you may have guessed, there were no sales, and somehow the store project dissolved. Moreover, I was asked to keep it all a secret, even from Daddy O.

In spite of the project's collapse, the experience stands out in my memory as a very happy one, no doubt, because Mother O. was showing me the kind of care and support I never quite got from Daddy O.

I loved my father. I respected him. I'm sure I must have exchanged hugs with this wonderful man many times; but strangely enough, I have no memory of those hugs.

I DO have a memory of an argument between Daddy and Mother O. that opened my eyes to a universal problem: misunderstanding.

Our little family generally had dinner at Joe's Italian restaurant on Bleecker Street. Mother O. had been to her dentist that afternoon; she reported that he had advised her to brush her teeth back and forth, rather than up and down. Daddy O. gently reminded her that some six months ago this same dentist had advised brushing the teeth up and down, never sideways.

Mother O: Well, they keep on doing research, and this is what they're now saying.

Daddy O: How can you put stock in anything they tell you when they keep changing their minds?

M: Well, they can only give you the best up-to-date information, don't you agree?

D: You're missing my point. If they keep changing what they say, how can you believe them?

M: You just take the latest as the best they can give you.

D: You're missing my point

It went on like that until Daddy O. was getting exasperated and tears were welling up in Mother O.'s eyes. I wanted to intervene and say, "Both of you are right. Can't you see that?" But I was too shy to step in between these two idols. The tension hovered over us all through dinner.

I don't know whether this amazing quarrel over trivia was an indication of a much deeper rift that was developing between these two wonderful people. At the time I remained silent, but I kept turning over this argument in my mind until I came up with the obvious conclusion: There is never just one way of looking at something.

Is this the reason why people fight wars? Is this why couples get divorced? Is this why Mother O. mysteriously faded out of our lives? I never found out the answer to that last question, and for some reason I could never bring myself to ask Daddy O. about it, but it left me with a sadness and an emptiness.

Some time later, Daddy O. introduced me to a woman named Linda, who lived in the same building. She was a shy, soft-spoken young English woman who was soon part of our evening *mise en scène*. A few months later Linda became my father's third wife.