

## WAYMAN & SON

As published in The San Diego Union

My father and I came back together in a series of steps.

The first step was a long one: 46 years, from March 7, 1943, to July 5 of this year. In that time, I knew nothing of him. No pictures, no clippings, no calls, no letters, not a scrap, no evidence of him but me. Over the decades, I came to wonder if he was alive or dead.

Then, on July 5, an ordinary Wednesday, I was given a phone number in Greeley, Colo., purported to be his. I dialed it.

"Hello," said a man's voice, a clear tenor.

"Is this the Wayman residence?" I said, and he said, "Yes."

"Is this Don Wayman?" I said, and he was.

"My name is Michael Grant, and I am looking for my father, whose name is Donald Boyd Wayman.

He said: "What did you say your name was?"

"Michael Grant, but I was born Michael Grant Wayman, in Abilene Texas, in 1943. Were you at Camp Barkeley?"

He said: "I rocked you in my arms for 15 minutes before the nurse found me and kicked me out."

"I wanted to find you" I said.

"I wanted to find you, too," he said, and his "you" thrilled me.

After that, the steps came quicker. Arranging dates for my wife and me to visit. Getting his first letter, and seeing his picture for the first time. Arrival of the day, dressing for him (long-sleeved white with blue stripes, and jeans), the flight to Denver, putting the key in the rental car ignition, and turning it, following his meticulous directions out of Denver, Loop 270 to Interstate 70 East, left onto State Highway 85 North, prairie to the east, Rocky Mountains to the west, through Brighton and Fort Lupton, past unending fields of corn, 35 miles to Greeley, then 15, then five. Left at the interchange onto Eighth Avenue into Greeley, looking for 14<sup>th</sup> Street, the last of the 46 years slipping away, intersections passing like individual grains of sand, until only a few grains remained to fall . . .

We turned left at 14<sup>th</sup> Street, crossed Ninth Avenue and, approaching Tenth, we looked for the house. Gray (he had written), big porch, two-story on the corner, 1402 Tenth Ave., Greeley, Colo., 80635. I had wanted to remember how I would feel, but I can only remember time accelerating.

Then: Gray house on the left, two stories, big porch, and tied to the porch balustrade by the front steps, two bunches of party balloons. Here was the plunge. Turning left onto Tenth, I saw a man stand up and wave from the porch. Too young. I pulled into what turned out to be the neighbors' driveway. From the neighbors' porch, a man came bustling, across the lawn, around the back of the car. I climbed out, turned, and stepped into his arms. It was a little after 5 in the afternoon, July 27, 1989.

He was shorter than I, a trim build, hair combed straight back, balding from the front. But I still couldn't see his face, just as I couldn't the last time he had rocked me, in a darkened hospital nursery in 1943. Then he stepped back and our eyes met for the first time, and I saw a resemblance. I thought his eyes looked like my uncle Clyde's. The

younger man came down from the porch and my father introduced him. This was Don Lee, my oldest brother. My wife, Lynn, was introduced all around and we moved toward the house. Climbing the steps to the porch, I looked at the balloons. Two of them were special oversized silver ones, announcing: "It's A Boy!"

We walked into a living room and adjoining dark-paneled dining room. I said something awkward about "my father's house." He plugged in a cassette: big-band '40s music. Everyone smiled. He motioned to couches and we sat, he and I on one, Lynn and Don Lee on the other.

"I can't believe you're here," said Don Lee.

*That's just the tip of it*, I thought. Later, it occurred to me that reality was creating unreality. Our phone conversations and letters had been fantastic, but here was a condition that could not exist until I reached his front door. Once inside, it was amazing ground.

Now we sat on the couch, three feet apart, literal relative strangers. We were separate histories in a larger history that had shaped us both, without letting us compare notes. We had, each of us, lived the '40s, and the '50s, the '60s, the '70s and the '80s, from Hitler to hostage warfare, from Margaret Whiting to Whitney Houston, from Ted Williams to Bo Jackson, from Fibber McGee to MTV. But for us together, none of it existed. On the porch balloons, it was 1943. On the couch, it was 1989. In between, there was nothing. That was hard to believe, of a father and his son.

In a letter after the first phone call, he had written, "The vacancy in my heart will be, is, filled. It is OK to say that now, even before I touch your hand." Without memory, I could not share that sense of completion. Sitting here beside him was more like the first day A.D., *anno Dad*. My mother had recalled a man with black hair and dark eyes, practically black, she said. This man's hair had thinned, and his eyes, behind his eyeglasses, were deep hazel. His face seemed benign, inquisitive. But it was a brand-new map, and I didn't yet know the legend. I was at a loss for a starting point, so I settled for the first thing that came to mind.

"What happened?" I said.

## **War and marriage**

My father insists that he never understood why my mother's family disliked him so, except to suppose that, in 1943, he was only a two-stripe corporal, and they might have preferred an officer (by then, my uncle Clyde was already a cavalry colonel).

I thought maybe it was only because my father was one of 60,000 soldiers descending on a strait-laced West Texas town when Camp Barkeley, a huge training base, opened in 1941. Terrified Abilene families could easily have conceived the need to lock up their daughters. Indeed, my mother said I was one of 14 born at Hendrick Memorial Hospital on March 6, 1943.

Donald Boyd Wayman and Norma June Grant – he still calls her "Norma June" – met in the winter of 1941 at the USO downtown. He was singing there. My mother said he could sing like a bird. She heard him that day, before she saw him.

"It was an old tenor song," said my father. "'The Kashmiri Song.'" He still has the sheet music: *Pale hands I loved beyond the Shalimar, whom do you seek on rapture's roadway far . . .*

They were both about 19. He remembers they drank coffee at the USO the day they met and later he asked her for a date.

"We went to Red Stewman's Café, about half a block from the old Wooten Hotel," he said, referring to familiar places in my hometown.

Then he walked her home, to 417 Poplar St., on the south side, same house I grew up in. And they sat on the porch swing, same swing I swung in. And she said, "Do you believe in love at first sight?"

They were married on Easter Sunday, 1942. Clyde gave the bride away. Their mother – my grandmother, whom I came to love – had been a widow since 1929. Her name was Susie. My father can't recall any particular hostility from Susie, or Clyde, or anybody, on his wedding day.

From Camp Barkeley he was assigned to a post near Leominster, Mass., and my mother followed. During the summer, she became pregnant. He had to stay on post except for weekends. Late in the fall, they decided she should finish her pregnancy in Abilene. He followed not long after, and now found the hostility open.

By March, divorce papers had been filed, and restraining orders issued, on no more grounds, apparently, than the plea of an upstanding Abilene family. My father was not to come around the house, or attempt to see my mother, or, when I was born, me. "A tough nut," he recollected. The real obstacle, my father thought, was Susie. Susie died in 1976, without ever saying a word to me, that I can remember, about her feelings toward my father. My mother would later say to me only that he was "not very responsible."

A nurse at Hendrick Memorial Hospital called my father at Camp Barkeley to tell him of my birth.

"The nurses in the nursery knew what was going on, and they didn't like what was happening to me," he said. "They said they were going to fix it so I could come see you."

It must have been Sunday, March 7, the day after I was born. He slipped into the nursery according to plan, and the nurses – he doesn't remember their names – flipped off the lights and left him alone. He found me and we had our 15 minutes. In our first phone call he said it was "the nurse" who came and kicked him out. On the couch in Greeley, he said it was worse than that. He said when the door suddenly opened, it was Susie who flipped the lights on.

After that, the hospital people were instructed to turn him away at the front door. He hung around 417 Poplar awhile, admittedly making a pest of himself.

"I would throw dirt at the windows on Poplar Street," he said. "And one night I snuck up and set a big rock right in the middle of the porch." One day on the street, he pulled up next to my family's car and looked through the window at my mother – and me.

"When she saw me, she pulled the blanket up over your face," he said.

My family complained to the Army. Soon a "Major Bolling," my father remembered, was wagging a finger in his face and promising him the stockade.

Eventually, he was transferred to Louisiana. Before he left, he went back once more to the hospital. My mother was in and out of the hospital with complications from my Caesarian delivery. He found her room and stood in the doorway until she saw him.

"Get the hell out!" she yelled.

After the Army, he went back to Greeley, where he ran into Shirley Gibson, a younger girl he remembered from school, where she was the valedictorian of her class. They were married on Sept. 14, 1944. My mother and I went home to Susie's house,

where I more or less grew up. I didn't miss my father. I didn't know what, about fathers, to miss. It was like being born blind.

### **A 'cold trail'**

In the summer of 1961, I made a small effort to find my father. I was 18 and just graduated from high school. By then my emotions about him had evolved from embarrassment ("My father was killed in the war") through teen humor ("I ain't got no daddy") to simple curiosity. And it was simple. I felt no compelling need to take on another parent. My mother and Susie and two aunts had spoiled me rotten.

All I knew was what my mother had told me: his name, his hometown, and, of course, that he could sing like a bird. And he had been in the Army. So I was directed to the Veterans Administration. I made the query. The V.A. instructed me to write a letter, put it in a blank envelope, and mail it to the V.A., where it would be put in another envelope and forwarded to him, if they found him.

It was only a typical protective procedure. But instead of appreciating the bureaucracy, I merely felt insulted. I said the hell with it, I didn't want to find him that bad. That same summer, I changed my name legally from "Michael Grant Wayman" to "Michael Grant," the judge accepting my argument that by then I had become more Grant than Wayman, and Grant was the name I chose to perpetuate.

In the early '80s, around Father's Day one year, I tried again. I was writing a column that, if it was to work, obliged me at least to try to call him. I willed myself to ask directory assistance in Colorado Springs, Colo., if there was a listing for Don Wayman.

Of course there was not, because I was calling the wrong town. From earliest memory until nine weeks ago, I believed my father was from Colorado Springs. The brittle newspaper clipping from their wedding day said "Colorado Springs," and I can hear editors right now saying, "Never write a story from clips!" But my mother had told me Colorado Springs also, from forgetfulness or confusion or reasons of her own.

There was also the matter of the wrong birth certificate. Hendrick Hospital presented each newborn a large certificate that looked like a diploma. Mine has a picture of the hospital on it, with three official signatures, and a seal with a blue (for boy) ribbon, my length (22 inches), weight (9 pounds, 9 ½ ounces), and head circumference (15 inches), and my little blue-ink footprints, and it declares me a member of the Babies' Alumni Association.

For more than 40 years, I thought that was my official birth certificate. Then, in 1984, I had to get a new passport. I handed over my Hendrick Hospital Babies' Alumni Association certificate. The passport people had a good laugh about it and told me to get the official certificate from the clerk of Taylor County, Texas.

When that certificate arrived, I barely glanced at it. If I had looked closer, I would have seen, four lines under my father's name, his hometown: Greeley, Colo. I got my passport, and the real birth certificate disappeared into a file of papers at home.

Over the last couple of years, as I have worked to untangle certain personal torments, it became clearer that my father, even in utter absence, still held a piece of the puzzle. At last my need for answers overcame my reluctance to tackle the bureaucracy.

At 3:15 p.m. on June 5 – I made a note of it – I picked up the phone. But by then, the bureaucracy was so complete that I could not crack through the busy signal at the

government information number. I tried again on June 20, and again on June 27, and started to think "the hell with it" again.

Then, on July 1, came an idea infuriating in its simplicity. Since high school I have enjoyed the friendship of Jon Standefer, now a nationally respected investigative reporter at the *Union*. Among other things, Standefer is very good at finding people with not much to go on. The next day, I talked to him about it. He asked what I knew, and I told him.

"Pretty cold trail," he said. "Let me have what you've got."

On Monday, July 3, I dropped the real birth certificate to him in the inter-office mail. Standefer received it Wednesday morning, July 5. He read my father's name, looked four lines down, and saw "Hometown: Greeley, Colo."

Like any crack investigative reporter, he dialed Greeley information. Then he hung up and called me.

"There's a listing for a Don Wayman in Greeley, Colo.," he said. And that was that.

### **A new family album**

Specifics! As my father would say. He has had a heart attack, he suffers from arthritis, and he has a degenerative spinal condition called ankylosing spondylitis. He has to take it easy. He quit teaching in 1987. Two or three times a week he still visits the high school where he was a substitute teacher for 17 years, in Fort Lupton, 20 miles south of Greeley. He volunteers at the American Cancer Society. For years, he sang at weddings and civic events all over town, and he was in the civic theater troupe. He is widely admired. A Fort Lupton teacher, Donna Everitts, wrote me a note before we came: "You are in for a treat!"

I have four brothers: Don Lee, 42; John, 37; Tom, 35; and Douglas, 32. Don Lee and John both suffer from schizophrenia. You wouldn't know it, just to sit and talk, or listen to Don Lee play piano pieces he has composed. Our father describes their disorder as unique in that they seem normal in conversation and most behavior, but they can't focus well enough to function in the work place. Don Lee freely tells harrowing stories of his first "psychotic break," and the voices, the hallucinations and the pain. Both were married and divorced, and John has a daughter, Holly Ann, who is 5.

We didn't meet Tom, who lives in Phoenix with his wife and two children. My father describes Tom as introverted, tenacious, devoted to his profession. Tom is an electrical engineer who works in the government contracts division of Motorola in Phoenix.

"That's all he'll tell ya," said my father.

Douglas works as a hairdresser in Denver and is gay. Don Lee remembers a day in the mid-'70s when Douglas and his mother and our father stood on the stairway landing, screaming at each other. But Douglas out-screamed them: "I am a homosexual!" My father admitted to rage, but their choice was to accept Douglas in his lifestyle, and they have "been the better for it."

Douglas and his friend Gary come and go at will, and the Waymans are always glad to see them. Douglas is an engaging, interesting man, and before we left Greeley I had discovered family reasons to admire him very much.

All the sons and their father have passed a difficult year since the death of their mother. Shirley died Aug. 18, 1988, at age 63, of cancer, 16 days after my mother died, also of cancer, at age 66.

My father is 67. I asked him: "What's your birthday?"

"March 28," he said. So my mother, who would have been 67 last December, was three months older than my father. I never knew that.

### **Roots and reconciliation**

My father has lived in the gray house since I was 10 years old: 1953, first year of the first Eisenhower administration. His place felt familiar to me. His street is wide and shady, just like Poplar Street in Abilene, only wider. From my house, downtown was six blocks north; from his, it is three. Greeley is like Abilene: large enough to bustle, small enough to feel claustrophobic in its streets. "Damn prairie," said Douglas, in the same tone that Texans sometimes call their country "godforsaken."

In this house as in mine, I heard train whistles in the middle of the night. This house and mine both faced west. In the morning, the summer sunlight came from behind us, through the trees and across the street and onto the faces of the opposing houses, while our own porches remained cool and dark. Bordering his yard by the sidewalk is the same strain of privet hedge that fronted our porch in Abilene. They bloom in early spring into pointillist clusters of tiny white flowers, whose scent may prove to be my most enduring memory of the house at 417 Poplar.

I also wished aloud for a thunderstorm while we were on the prairie. On our third day there, a storm did gather. I stood as I had long ago, watching it from the porch. Don Lee poked his head out the door and yelled above the rain, "This is for you!"

But Don Lee is a fine cook, and lightning knocked the power from under his spaghetti sauce. Eventually, Don Lee, John and I went to pick up pizza.

"Name?" said the clerk.

"Wayman," said Don Lee. Hearing the name in ordinary about-town conversation amazed me.

Later, my father and I stood on the porch, lightning still flashing, and talked about my mother. He was sorry to hear that her life had become one of personal struggle.

"The Norma June I knew was kind and sweet and had a great heart," he said. "Her heart was in her eyes."

I was glad. I had hoped she had had years free of struggle. Then I had a thought that made me sad. What he said next made me wonder if the same thought was also occurring to him.

"I was sure that 30 minutes after the divorce was final that both you and Norma June would be Grants again," he said.

I had already told him of my 1961 name change, and he understood it. But my mother kept his name all her life. I looked at him in the darkness, wondering for both of us if she may have loved him all the way and kept the only thing she could that was his. She may have had to fight her mother to keep it, in those rending months of 1943. She never said, and I couldn't possibly.

As for me, at this point, I was a Grant – the four of us (the kids most of all) – were Grants to stay.

"But there is always Michael Wayman Grant," I said. "Would you like that?"

"Yes," he said.

### **A few adjustments**

Of course things change, for everybody. Before we left San Diego, my daughter had an anxiety dream: "I dreamed he tricked you into coming up there and then he killed you." We didn't take the kids this first time, because I kept seeing visions of the family herd descending on Big Daddy in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." He made a September date to come here, though, to see where I live and to meet his new grandchildren, and I already knew what we'd eat the first night. I asked him about his favorite meal.

"Take a rib-eye, get a skillet real hot, sprinkle salt in it . . ." In my head, I started talking along with him. It was my cut and my technique, exactly.

Things change for Don Lee. "I'm not the oldest brother anymore," he said, but sure he was. I wouldn't know the first thing about being the oldest brother.

"Maybe I could be No 1, and you could be 1A," I said.

"No, I'm the second now," he said. "I knew I was for a long time."

My father's family knew about my existence for decades. My father said Shirley would badger him about it. I would have been easy to find; Grant is still in the phone book at 417 Poplar. Initially he was fearful of the court documents, and Susie there to back them up. We agreed it was reasonable to suppose that early fear might have evolved into an even greater fear, of rejection if he tried to call, that I might hate him for deserting me. I told him I never felt that. But I knew he always had more reason than I, not to call.

### **A new status quo**

I have no idea where to go from here. The story has no end. The verb I keep quoting to people is "unfold."

Don Lee pointed out one afternoon that had the Wayman-Grant marriage survived, he would not be here.

"You couldn't have my father and me, too," he said.

"I wouldn't have done that to you," I said, seriously. The moment you start assuming the survival of that marriage, you start deleting lives and re-routing pretty dreams all over the place. If I had had a father, I would not have come up a Texan, and I would have missed that.

In fact, one result of embracing the status quo has been a wave of self-reassurance passing through. My father loves his boys no less for accepting me into his heart's vacancy. To me, now the No. 1 brother after his 42 years in the role, Don Lee could say, "I'm so glad you're here."

I didn't feel the wave until we were home again. I had wondered if meeting my very own father might suddenly endow me with mystical fathering skills. Then I suddenly felt angry. The hell with that, I thought. All I know about the father-son relationship has been achieved through my own son, Tyler Holman Grant. Together we have built a 13-year relationship, 13 stories so far in the building, and every room furnished. And I like that, just as it stands.

My father and I this summer have encountered a purity in our relationship that only conditions such as ours would permit. The price for that is that we suddenly find ourselves roaming a 46-story building, in which all the rooms are empty. Still, we have

the building, and over the doors we have hung a sign: "Wayman & Son." It is a place to start. And I brought home one of the balloons.

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