

The Five Drinks of a Man's Life

He and his dad are close, even though they've avoided "deep talks." Isn't it better to just pour a drink and hang out like old friends?

BY WILLIE GEIST

M

MY DAD TURNED 70 THIS year, a week after I turned 40. I suspect our father-son dynamic isn't going to change a lot at this point. And that's fine by me. Just last year we wrote a book

together; it was based on the hard family truth that men are made squirmingly uncomfortable by those big, milestone talks they're supposed to have with their sons. The title is *Good Talk, Dad: The Birds and the Bees and Other Conversations We Forgot to Have*. Judging from the response we got, my dad and I are not alone in our aversion to chatting about sex, booze, or anything else not related to last night's game.

I've always had a great relationship with my dad. But I've never felt compelled to hear him explain where babies come from. That's what middle school health teachers and *The Miracle of Life* videos are for.

The bottom line is that most fathers are not professional life coaches wearing wireless headset microphones and barking moment-by-moment advice to their kids. I suspect that most of the deepest exchanges of fatherly wisdom come without any premeditated "Have a seat, son; we need to talk..." fanfare. Sometimes you're sitting out on the back deck with your old man, drink in hand, and everything just spills out. Before you know it, you're in the middle of one of those elusive man-to-man talks you read about in magazines. Looking back, I can think of five memorable drinks that inadvertently got my dad and me talking.



MEN OF WORDS
The author, a cohost on NBC's *Today* and MSNBC's *Morning Joe*, with his dad, CBS journalist Bill Geist.

The 40-Ounce Initiation

On the night of my senior prom, I was smack in the middle of my "40-ounce" phase. It was the early '90s, and although we lived in suburban New Jersey, my friends and I viewed ourselves as characters in the movie we worshipped: *Boyz n the Hood*. The irony of white kids drinking like an Ice Cube character drew us in, but even after it fell away, we still downed 40-ounce bottles of Olde English and Colt 45 in earnest.

By this point my dad knew that I'd been drinking the occasional beer in high school. In fact, when at the age of 17 I finished a weeklong bartending course at the top of my class, he was actually proud. I think he was also proud that I was relatively discreet about my drinking. My

adolescent boozing was done as it should be: at home in the basement, under the false pretense that the adults upstairs were oblivious.

Anyway, on prom night, I was kind enough to volunteer my parents' home as an afterparty destination for my class of 400. My friends and I gathered in the kitchen and stood around in our tuxedos drinking 40s. With the veil of parental disapproval officially lifted, I was free to toast with my dad the approaching end of my time under his roof. He did not have a 40 in his hand.

The Bourbon Legend

I went to college in the South—Vanderbilt University in Nashville—where I quickly learned that my new friends had been drinking bourbon

“YOU NEED A QUIET LOCATION... AND A MOMENT. IF YOU HAVE NO PLACE LIKE THAT WITH YOUR DAD, I ENCOURAGE YOU TO FIND ONE.”

since practically the cradle. Naturally, I took a “When in Rome” approach from the outset.

My dad visited me several times at Vanderbilt, taking note of my transition from Olde English to whiskey. I guess I felt I was growing up a bit by moving to liquor. I most remember the visit when my parents flew in for my graduation. My dad probably drinks more vodka gimlets than anything else, but that night, Bill Geist joined the Romans and had bourbon. We warmed up with Jack and Coke and then moved on to the good stuff from bluegrass country. As we toasted my expensive degree at dinner, I noted that my father had sent me off to college with cheap beer in my hand, and now he was sending me into the world with a tumbler full of Kentucky brown water. That sentence just made me thirsty. Be right back.

Full Heart, Empty Keg

My wife and I met in the sixth grade and started dating in high school. That prom night with the 40s? Christina was there. My sweetheart hitting a bottle of O.E.—I can’t wait to tell our children. On the long Memorial Day weekend of 2003, about 200 guests flew to Puerto Rico to watch us get married. There was a lot to be happy about that beautiful day on the Isle of Enchantment, but nothing stirs our pride quite like the fact that at our reception, we cleaned out the bar. As the crowd left for the buses, I asked the bartender for one last beer for the road. He pulled the tap to show nothing but spitting foam—all that was left of our evening.

Over the 16 years Christina and I had known each other, our parents formed a friendship totally independent of us. When my dad gave a toast at the rehearsal dinner, he used the moment to shower Christina’s mother, Joyce, with praise for pulling off the complex logistics of our wedding. (That’s a whole separate story. Have you ever tried to get married in Puerto Rico?) The drink of the weekend was the mojito. So there stood Bill Geist, with a refreshing, minty rum cocktail in hand, comparing my mother-in-law-to-be to General Tommy Franks, for the astounding shock-and-awe strategy she’d employed in organizing our invasion of Puerto Rico. It was not your conventional “union of these two families” father-in-law speech you hear at most rehearsal dinners, but at this point you’re probably starting to realize that we’re not exactly conventional.



LEAD BY EXAMPLE
The one thing to say to a son? It wasn’t Bill Geist’s style to say anything at all.



I still drink an occasional mojito in the summer. It takes me back to Puerto Rico and that weekend. At my advanced age, however, I only occasionally clean out the bar these days.

Baby, Bottle

I have a great photo of my parents rushing out the front door of their apartment, pulling their coats on and holding a bottle of Veuve Clicquot. They’d just received word that my daughter, Lucie, was born. Their first grandchild. Only minutes after the photo was taken, my parents arrived at the hospital and popped the cork, and we stood around my exhausted wife sipping champagne from plastic pill cups.

It was the first of many days we’d all stand huddled around Lucie, and later her little brother, George, and her cousins Russell and Billy. My parents live just three blocks away from our Manhattan apartment. Lucie, now 8, and George, going on 6, have such a close relationship with their grandparents that they hardly miss me and Christina when we drop them off for a weekend. We’ve taken to just leaving our kids with the doorman and heading out for a long night of dinner and dancing. (Note to the NYC Administration for Children’s Services: I made that part up. Well, most of it. We actually go to raves.)

Lucie and George have a relationship with their JoJo and Bumpa worthy of that celebratory champagne on the day they first met. I’m just curious to see how Bumpa will feel when in a few years my kids walk into my parents’ kitchen and casually uncup a 40.

Potables on the Porch

Where do a father and his adult son go to have their deep talks? It doesn’t happen as we drop the kids off with them on our way out of town, or in the middle of a raucous Thanksgiving dinner. You need a quiet location... and a moment. If you don’t have a place like that with your dad, I encourage you to find one.

For me, it’s on the back deck at my parents’ place on Shelter Island, way out at the end of Long Island. There are these big wooden outdoor rocking chairs that face out to the tranquil bay on the other side of the yard.

It’s a Saturday night in July or August. My dad and I settle in just after dinner. It’s a little warm still, but there’s a refreshing breeze coming off the water. And music on the speakers. We have CDs from the Bill Geist Collection that have been in the house since move-in day nearly 20 years ago. It might be Stevie Wonder; it could be Clapton, the Stones, or Springsteen. We probably could wire in the iTunes at this point, but we kind of like the old way.

I’ll grab a Maker’s with a splash of ginger ale. My dad will make a gimlet, and we’ll sit, waiting to see what comes out. There’s peace. There’s safety. You can’t help but reflect. Sometimes just to yourself, sometimes out loud. This is the place where my dad has opened the door, even if only slightly, to his struggles with Parkinson’s disease and to the time he served in Vietnam. They are subjects I like to hear about, but that don’t have a chance to come up until we’ve made it to this exact moment.

Grab it while it’s here, I think to myself. ■

Previous page: Mary Kahler (makeup), Manhattan Cricket Club (location); this page: courtesy Geist family