

2.5 MINUTE RIDE

(As the audience hears the sound of a slide projector advancing to the next slide, lights up on Lisa, holding a “clicker” and a laser pointer. She describes the following “slides” which are not actually slides but squares of colored light. As she talks she indicates what she sees with the pointer.)

These are my grandparents. My father’s parents. This, as you can see, is their wedding picture. I never knew them, actually... My father left his hometown in Germany in 1937, by himself, when he was fifteen years old, as a part of a program to get Jewish children out of Germany. I’m making a videotape about my father—about his experiences—well, actually about this trip we took together to his hometown in Germany and to then Auschwitz.

(Changes the slide with the clicker. The sound of an advancing slide projector is heard as a new square of light replaces the old one.)

Okay. This is my father’s hometown. And here you can see we’re looking down on the town from the clock tower. It was originally a walled city—I think you can see a little bit of the wall right here. It’s very beautiful. All these red

roofs. My dad remembers every cobblestone in this city. He knows its history from its inception in the middle ages and I think he considers himself a part of that continuum. It was incredible, actually, when we were driving around. He can't see too well anymore but he'd say things to me like, "Now if you look to your left, you should see two dirt tracks," and there would be two dirt tracks, and he'd say, "That road was built by Napoleon." Then he'd say, "All right now we're going to go over a bump in the road," and we'd go over a bump, and then he'd say, "And if it's still there, you'll see to your right, a hill with a ditch at the bottom," and there would be this hill and a ditch. And he'd say, "I remember when I was a boy I used to ride my bike as fast as I could down that hill and try not to get caught by the group of boys who were chasing me but if I did I developed a technique in which I would lie down in that ditch and pull one of the boys on top of me to use as a human shield."

(Changes the slide.)

Okay. This is my dad, you can see, and he's standing outside this apartment building where he lived when he was about three or four years old and here you can see that he's pointing up to this second-story window. And he was telling me here about how, when he was about three or four years old, he put his head through the glass in that window. He said, "I planned it out very carefully. If I put my head through at the right angle and with the right amount of force it would pop right through the glass and then I could watch the parade going on down in the street." And I said, you know, "Did you hurt yourself?" And he said, "No, no.

It worked out about the way I'd planned." We took this trip about seven or eight years ago, now. My dad had been back to Germany several times and I had been there once but we'd never gone together and this was something we always really wanted to do. So...

(Changes the slide.)

Okay, we're still in Germany. A little earlier in time, you can see here. This is my father and his father and they're here in the synagogue where his father was the cantor and also the teacher in the Jewish school. This was taken, I think, a few days before my dad left Germany to come to the United States. When he came here, he lived with a foster family in New Haven, Connecticut, and he received letters from his parents about once a week until one week, instead, he received a letter from the Red Cross informing him that his parents had been deported to the Litzmannstadt ghetto which was in Poland. And that was the last time he heard from them directly.

(Changes the slide.)

Okay. This is something I might use in the videotape actually. This is a letter that my father received in 1947, from a man who had been with his parents in the Litzmannstadt Ghetto. I had it translated and it says, *(as she reads she traces the lines with the laser pointer)* "Unfortunately, I must inform you that your parents were among the first transports sent to Auschwitz from the ghetto." *(She traces ahead with the pointer.)* And then skipping down here a little... "I was a close friend of your parents and I know

quite well how attached to you they were and how often you were talked about.” So, the other part of this trip was that we went to Auschwitz where neither one of us had ever been before. And the trip was extraordinary. It was so much *more* than either of us had imagined and when I returned I decided to make this video because my father has so many incredible stories and I wanted to make a record.

(Changes the slide.)

Okay. This is my Dutch “sister,” Elizabeth—Elizabeth Klip, who was an exchange student who lived with our family when I was in college. She’s extremely bright and so goodhearted, you know, and a little high-strung, I think you can see here, a little bit around the eyes. *(Says this last bit while indicating the eyes with the laser pointer.)* She’s completely devoted to my parents and she drove down from Holland to Germany to pick us up and take us to Auschwitz which is in Poland which was so great for us and a very nice vacation for her, too, as you can imagine.

(Changes the slide.)

Okay, this is my friend Mary who I asked to shoot this video for me. She’s a professional videographer. She’s done some wonderful pieces about her family and I asked her to accompany me and my girlfriend, my partner, Peg, to Lansing, Michigan, where I grew up, where my parents still live, to shoot some interviews with my dad and then also to accompany us along with my entire, extended Midwestern family on our annual trip to the Cedar Point amusement park in Sandusky, Ohio, where my dad loves to ride the

roller coasters, so we wanted to get that on tape as well, but anyway, here you can see Mary is in my mother's study, which is in the back hall of my parents' house, and here you can see she's showing me this little file cabinet of my mother's with all these little tiny drawers each meticulously labeled, and you can see here that she's pointing to this drawer marked "stamps" and she was showing me here how my mother has organized all of her postage stamps with these little handmade dividers by denomination. And she was saying to me here, "You know, your father's story is interesting but *this* would make a great video." My mother knows that everything has a purpose and throwing things away is a sin. She says, "You know, you all make fun of me for hanging on to everything but when someone needs something they always come to me." My father always says, "I don't know. I'd like to live in a stainless steel house with a drain in the middle."

(Changes the slide.)

Okay. Um. Okay, I don't know how this one got in here. This is Peg's family. This is from a huge family party that I went to at Peg's parents' house several years ago. It was incredible. There were hundreds of them, Healeys, Dohertys, Flahertys... They were all healthy and Irish and good looking. They all played sports all day. And at one point in the afternoon, another one of the in-laws asked me, "Does your family have parties like this?" And I said, "No, no. My family's all either dead or crippled."

(Changes the slide.)

Okay. This is something that I might also use in the video. This is my dad here in his office, you can see—we were taping some interviews here—and behind him you can see this watercolor portrait that was done of him when he was an American GI. I think he paid a German soldier something like three packs of cigarettes to paint this for him. It's really so beautiful. My dad was drafted by the American Army, after he managed to get himself declassified as an enemy alien, and then he was sent back to Germany where he worked as an army interrogator, questioning German... well, I was going to say POWs but they weren't really POWs. They were...arrestees, I guess you'd call them...or maybe detainees is a better word. (*Delighted with this stupid joke occurring to her.*) If they were "arrestees" I guess they'd be Greek.

(Changes the slide.)

Okay, this is my family—my mother's side of the family—the ones I actually know. And here you can see we're about to leave for Cedar Point—we're here in front of my cousins' house. There are about nine or ten of us who take this trip every year and when we do we separate out into three great big American-made cars. You can see here my parents' Mercury Marquis, and here's my cousins' Buick Skylark and here I think you can see just the corner of my brother's full-sized Ford Econoline van. Cedar Point is, I would say, about three, maybe three and a half hours from Lansing, and when we take this trip every year we set aside three whole days so that we have a full day at the park and then an entire day for travel on either side. And during this epic cross-country trek these three vehicles remain in con-

tact at all times with the use of—I think you can see a little bit here on my parents’ dashboard—walkie-talkies. I brought this picture because my mother says that I exaggerate when I talk about the family but, I mean, look at the pictures.

My mother is horrified at the prospect of people in her house with video cameras and she keeps bringing up that 1970s PBS series on the Loud Family. And on our second day in Michigan she takes all of us over to the Pilgrim House so that we can buy all new chairs for the living room. Now, my parents have been in a solidly upper middle-class tax bracket for at least thirty-five years but they’ve never owned a piece of furniture that wasn’t previously owned by someone else, but I think that it’s the threat of immortality by video that brings out in my mother an almost irresistible urge to redecorate.

I’m trying to remember how many times we actually went to Cedar Point as a family when I was growing up. It’s occurring to me that it’s one of those fake “traditions” my mother uses to get me to come home more often. Like how she asks me every year, “Are you going to make it home for Christmas this year?” And I say, “I don’t come home for Christmas. Mom. I have never come home for Christmas. We are not Christians. Stop trying to trick me!”

(Leaves the slide as she is overtaken by this next story. From this point on she will shift between story threads without pause or apology, each new thread overtaking her naturally, in the way consciousness jumps from one

thing to another. For clarity, these shifts are notated here with asterisks.)

Elizabeth drives like a demon over pitch-dark Polish roads. Dad sits in the back and tells us stories. I ask questions. I keep my voice firm. I keep my crying to myself.

“Were you looking for your parents?”

“No, I had done that the summer before.”

“And was it hard to accept it? Was it shocking?”

“No, I don’t think it was hard to accept it because I don’t think I did accept it. I knew but I think somewhere I thought maybe they were still alive. I don’t think I accepted it until a few years ago, in Lansing. It was the winter and it was so cold and I was shivering. In my coat. And I realized this would only happen to them once. They were old and they stood outside, lined up in the cold and they were of no use to anyone and they were killed.”

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At the entrance to the Magnum there are signs all over which say under no circumstances is this ride suitable for people who are elderly, diabetic, or have heart conditions. I look at my father. He can’t read the signs because, in addition to having all the conditions listed, he is also legally blind. I tell him what it says and I say, “Are you sure this is a good idea?” And he says, “I don’t have to do anything. All I have to do is sit there.” And then he pops a nitroglycerine in his mouth. “Well, then, why are you doing that?” I say. “Just in case.” I try to get him to pretend to take another one so that Mary can tape him doing it. This might make a very nice video moment. But he says no because he

is worried that if the girls who run the rides see him taking a pill they won't let him on.

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A horrible moment in the parking lot. We think they're going to make us pay to go in. No way, no way, no way. In the car we don't say anything to each other but it's clear to all of us that we can't pay an admission fee for Auschwitz. Oh. They're only charging us for parking. Well. Okay.

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My brother is getting married. In Peg's family when someone's getting married, her parents say, "Oh, isn't it exciting? They're so in love." In my family when someone's getting married, my parents say, "Well, I hope they know what they're doing. They seem to be crazy about each other." My brother lived on the third floor of my parents' house until a few years ago when my mother asked him to go live in the attic of my dead grandmother's house. Peg and I had spent a month living in that house the summer after my grandmother died, about seven or eight years ago, to help my mom organize an estate sale. The house was packed, floor to ceiling with things. Like, there was a whole room full of Avon my grandmother had bought because she felt sorry for the Avon lady. We tried to sell as much of her stuff as we could but there was just too much and there was the added problem of my mother's attitude. When someone would ask for a lower price on something, my mother would snatch the item out of their hands and say, "I know exactly how much my mother paid for this item twenty-five years ago and if you don't want it for that price I'll just keep it myself." So now, eight years

later, the house is still full of this stuff although it has all been organized on the first floor on steel shelving along with the large collection of gay male pornography left by my grandmother's brother, my great-uncle Robert, who also lived in the house, who was a horribly twisted and bitter old closet case who never had a cheerful or generous word to say to anyone. His two most often used phrases, actually, were, "My God in heaven," and "99.9% of the people," which he would combine into sentences sometimes, such as, "My God in heaven! 99.9% of the people who go to that breakfast bar over at the Big Boy restaurant just shovel the food into their mouths! *They just shovel it in!*" The month we stayed in Lansing to help out we lived in the house with him. He refused to learn Peggy's name and referred to her only as, "That girl you people call Peggy!" Anyway, now my uncle is dead and my brother lives in the house so that my mother can keep it insured. Peg says that David better never get in trouble with the law because he lives like a serial killer. "I mean look at the facts," she says, "He lives in the attic of his dead grandmother's house filled with gay male pornography because his mother makes him."

My brother met his fiancée on the computer. He wanted to meet a Jewish girl and he lives in Lansing, Michigan, so he signed onto America Online and went right to the Jewish singles room where he got down to the business of finding a wife. Every girl seemed really great to him. I tried to figure out his standards. They seemed to me to be something like, "Well, she doesn't seem to have a criminal record. I think I'll marry her." Finally, though, finally, he met the right girl. Shoshi Rivkin from Brooklyn. They asked us to

be bridesmaids. “Yes, we’d love to!” we said when they called to tell us they were engaged. It seemed like such a funny joke. A few days later we realized we had agreed to be bridesmaids. I, in particular, realized I had agreed to wear a matching outfit with my girlfriend. This seemed to me to be a special kind of nightmare. I called to tell Shoshi how terribly honored we were but we just couldn’t be bridesmaids but we would be happy to sing. I don’t know why I told her that. I wanted to write a funny song for the reception. Peggy was horrified. “What kind of a funny song?” she said, “David, we thought you were a neuter / until you met a girl on the computer?” Then they wanted us to sing a Hebrew song in the ceremony. Then they told us we couldn’t sing because their rabbi is Orthodox and he told them that Orthodox men cannot be in the presence of a singing woman. They said they hoped we weren’t offended by that. “Hey,” I said, “It’s your wedding and we want what you want.” I’m trying to take my mother’s advice. She says, “I’m just going to go to that wedding and pretend I’m watching a National Geographic special on TV.” But I have a horrible vision. I can see myself at their wedding wearing a man’s suit and chomping a big cigar and I’m afraid that every time the rabbi walks by I will compulsively sing at him, “There’s No Business Like Show Business!”

(A new slide clicks into place. She picks up the laser pointer and describes the new “image.”)

Ah. This is poor Mary standing on the exit stairs of the Iron Dragon. Under no circumstances would they let us bring a video camera on a roller coaster but one of the girls

told us that Mary could go up the exit stairs and shoot from the platform on the other side. But when she got there they gave her a really hard time and she was really pissed off, you know, because these little high school amusement park girls were getting all snippy with her and making her stand in the sun and she already had that kind of aggravated look that lesbians get in amusement parks in Ohio. So she told me that I would have to go first and convince the girls to let her onto the exit platform. And I found a method that worked pretty well, actually. I'd say, "Can my friend shoot here?" And the girls would say, "Well...um...uh-uh..." Then I'd say, "We're doing a documentary video about my father. He's a seventy-five-year-old, blind, diabetic Holocaust survivor...with a heart condition." And they'd say, *(overwhelmed with sympathy)* "Oh. Oh. Okay." It's painfully easy to place the weight of the world right on a teenage girl's shoulders.

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We flew from Michigan to France, to save money, and then traveled by train to Germany. The train trip was a nightmare. Dad had brought four bags as if he was traveling with a valet when in fact there was only me. Also I couldn't read any of the signs because I don't speak German and he speaks German, of course, but he can't see to read them and so I had to sound them out. This was an exercise in pure humiliation. I'd say, *(making a great effort to be clear but quiet enough to avoid attention. She has no idea how to pronounce these words)* "Wahlen...Sie...jetzt...die Vorwahl...und *(long pause culminating in a deep sigh of inevitable humiliation)* gewuenschte...Ruf...Rufnummer..." And he'd say, "What? Speak up. I can't hear you."

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There's nothing like watching someone else watch your family to really give you some perspective. I keep catching Peggy and Mary staring at various members of my family like this: (*hands rush to her face as she staggers backward as if witnessing a scene of horror.*) They don't understand why my family likes to come here. Now that they bring it up, I guess I don't really either. Three members of my family are, to use an expression I think you're not supposed to use anymore but it's the expression my family uses to describe itself: "crippled." As in the phrase, "So crippled up we can hardly walk." In addition to being crippled they are also in great, great pain. They gasp and moan with pain all day. It is in this state that my family, once a year, tackles a fifteen-acre amusement park. This year, along with her wheelchair, my aunt Francie is also dependent on an oxygen tank which must be wheeled alongside of her. It's so hot that the park is nearly deserted and my mother and my aunt consider anything above fifty degrees a heat wave. The sad truth is that my family comes to Cedar Point for the food. I can't bear it. A few years ago, after a little therapy, I began to be aware that the women in my family often say things like, "Oh, I'm really not hungry. I couldn't eat a thing. I think I'll just have some pudding." Or, "I just need a little something light, maybe some pie." And as soon as we arrive at Cedar Point, Aunt Francie, true to form, says, "I really don't feel good. I think I need a hamburger." The day has just begun and already I'm feeling trapped, trapped, trapped with my family. I involuntarily leave my body and squish my whole self into my brain where a voice in my head is ranting, "A hamburger will not

make you feel better! Shut up! Shut up about hamburgers! It's 10:00 in the morning for godsakes! Eating the hamburgers at Cedar Point is probably what put you in that wheelchair in the first place!" My therapy brain kicks in. I think, "Now, Lisa, this reaction seems a little extreme. Is it your aunt you are despising or the part of you that is capable of eating a hamburger at 10:00 in the morning?" These thoughts must be leaking out of my brain onto my face because I see Peggy giving me the "chill-out-it's-only-10:00" look! I try to reenter my body but when I do I see that Aunt Francie is eating from out of her purse several cold sausages left over from breakfast at the Bob Evans. I concentrate on making my face blank and just following Peggy, and I try not to think about how last night at the Friendly's my aunt went on for ten minutes to the waiter about what foods make her choke.

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When Elizabeth doesn't eat she gets insane. She drives up on curbs and the wrong way down one-way streets. I try to coax her to eat. "Would you like a cookie?" "No!" she says. "I can't stand those cookies. I can't even look at them anymore. They make me sick." And she hurls them into the back seat where my father looks bewildered, thinking something is blowing in through the windows. I say, "I think you're really hungry." This is so stupid. It's like when you're little and your mother says, "You're acting tired," which, I don't know about you, but inevitably made me furious. And Elizabeth yells at me, "I'M NOT HUNGRY! I'M JUST DRIVING BUT THIS COUNTRY IS STUPID AND THE POLISH PEOPLE ARE STUPID AND THERE'S NO FOOD HERE AND THAT'S FINE. I

DON'T CARE. I'M NOT HUNGRY." As she continues this rant she picks up speed, at one point hitting about sixty-five miles per hour on a dirt road. She's right though. There is no food in Poland. Well, maybe there is but they keep it a secret. Where are the big neon signs? That's my question. How do you locate food without big neon signs? I'm also sick of the little Dutch anise cookies we've been eating for three days, although, unlike Elizabeth, that hasn't stopped me from eating them. "Wait, stop," I say, "There's a restaurant!" "No," Elizabeth says, "I don't care." "Elizabeth, honey, we have to eat something. Please, Elizabeth, we have to go back to the restaurant. Oh my God. Come on, Elizabeth, you have to stop the car. Elizabeth, stop this car! Elizabeth, stop this car NOW!"

We've found a Polish pizza parlor. There's only one thing on the menu. Pizza. We each order two pieces of this pizza even though we are fully aware of its nature. A piece of white toast with melted American cheese and ketchup poured on top. We eat the pizza. And we like it. This might actually go over big in the Midwest where cheese is a vital component of every dish. No food is considered edible in the Midwest unless it is fried and covered with melted cheese. Health food in the Midwest is anything in a pita. Like a Big Mac in a pita would be considered health food in the Midwest. And so I settle back into my Midwestern heritage and I enjoy the greasy, cheesy toast. I order a third.

(A new slide appears.)

Okay, we're going back a little bit in time here. This is a picture from 1983 and here you can see me and my dad and we're standing in front of the Demon Drop which is a three-story free fall. Cedar Point is known as America's Roller Coast because it has more roller coasters than any other amusement park in America and every year they add a new one. And in 1983 they added the Demon Drop and Dad asked me if I wanted to ride it. And I laughed. I thought he was joking because at that time my family didn't ride the roller coasters. We mostly stuck to the more handicapped accessible rides. Like the Riverboat Ride was one of our favorites, which is a scenic tour down the mighty quarter-mile-long Cedar River where you pass a number of mannequins, you know, animated mannequins, engaged in a variety of activities like, oh, you know, playing the banjo, getting caught in the outhouse, engaging in a feud, a scalping, that sort of thing... But this first year of the Demon Drop, Dad asked and asked and asked about it. He brought it up in the morning at Jungle Larry's Safari and then again during lunch at Frontier Village and at the end of the day when we were heading back to the parking lot via the Swiss Chalet Sky Ride, he asked about it again and all of a sudden it dawned on me. "Do *you* want to ride the Demon Drop?" I said. And he said, "Oh. Well, if that's what would make you happy."

It's hard to describe a three-story free fall. It's not bad, really. It's not good. It's just like: (*sudden, shocked exhalation of all the air in lungs as if kicked in the stomach.*) When it was over, about a second and a half after it began, I was speechless, I was aghast. I looked at my dad. He was grinning. A crazy sort of a grin.

That first ride on the Demon Drop was the summer before he lost most of his vision. Before that time he had just a small blind spot in his left eye. Someone told me that my mother thought that maybe it was that first ride on the Demon Drop that caused the hemorrhage that took the rest of his center vision leaving him with just peripheral sight. All of a sudden the middle was gone. Only the edges remained. Dad doesn't think the Demon Drop caused his vision loss. And even if it did, he says, "the damage is done."

At his office we tape him showing us all the tools he has to help him see. The closed-circuit TV, the overhead projector, and, of course, the big bag of eyeglasses, worth \$2,000, that he carries with him everywhere. He has one pair of thick half glasses he uses so that he can sign a check or a credit card slip, and one pair of binoculars mounted on glasses frames that enable him to make out a telephone number written in big digits on a notepad and, of course, his ten- power monocular that lets him read a sign far away, word for word. He says to us, "It's interesting how the brain compensates. For instance, Lisa, where your head is, I see a...a flower pattern.

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In Poland we see men carting hay in horse-drawn wagons, old women digging potatoes, empty streets in rundown cities. I thought I'd be so fascinated to see this world where the clock had stopped fifty years before but now, to my horror, I find I'm just like Edna from the World Apart Travel Agency in Lansing, Michigan, who had said to me before I left, "Eastern Europe? Oh, cripes, that's depress-

ing.” Where is the mall? That’s what I’d love to see, the Polish mall where I could look at the different items in the Polish card shops and buy funny things to bring home for the cousins and for Peg. I’d feel so much better if I could just buy something. How did I end up in Poland anyway when where I really wanted to be was Polish-Land where I could go to the Pierogi-Hut and buy a kielbasa hero from a fresh-faced high school student. I don’t speak Polish. I don’t speak German either but at least when I was there I could tell where the words begin and end. Here I feel like I’m listening to gibberish. One time we stop at a bus stop to ask a man for directions and when he answers me I start to laugh. I laugh right in his face. I’m not laughing at him. I’m laughing at how absurd it is that I’m listening to him as if I had the vaguest idea what he is saying. He gestures that he wants to get into our car. He’s going to ride with us so he can point us in the right direction. He directs us to his house. Then he gets out and says something like, “Blah blah blah. Pointy pointy point. Polish polish polish polish...”

It’s a good thing Elizabeth has a sixth sense about where we’re going. I’m supposedly the navigator but in Poland I’m hopeless. The roads are all tiny and curvy and it’s hard to identify which is which since they all seem to be spelled C Z Y C N Z S Y. But Elizabeth just glances at the map and she’s off. Speeding us in the direction of Auschwitz.

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What is my mother going to do about this wedding? This is exactly the kind of event she’s been studiously avoiding for the past thirty years. In a certain way we wonder why my

brother would even have a wedding when it means putting my mother in this situation? She hates ceremony. She hates ritual. She has a law that she never goes anywhere where you have to wear pantyhose. And then there is the No Picture Rule. This is really the thing. This is the heart of the matter. We do not take pictures of my mother. And this isn't a joke. No sneaking up is allowed. We never, never take pictures of my mother and it's funny really because she loves pictures of other people. She loves them so much that sometimes I think she would like to have a copy of every picture taken of every person she ever met. She can't bear to think of a moment being lost when it could have been recorded. *(To someone in the audience.)* If you were ever recorded on video and you tell my mother about it she'll say, "Oh, I'd like to have a copy of that." So it's funny, really, that she won't let us take pictures of her.

(A series of slides appears. She describes them.)

My mother looks girlish and womanish and very happy and she's beaming out of a tiny color photo in a big, blue picture hat. Behind her, my father, with his hand on her shoulder, purses his lips and rolls his eyes up, mugging away, unbeknownst to her. It is their wedding picture. There are a few pictures after that. Their trip to Europe. I was conceived in Venice, you know. Well, not actually in Venice but in the nearby town of Mestra where the hotels are a lot cheaper. In these pictures she is windblown and beautiful and so happy. My dad is dark and mysterious. Thick dark hair. Huge brown eyes. Mom showed me letters he wrote to her when they were first married. Scores of them. Describing their life together. All written as if to someone