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6-19-2010

## An excerpt from 'And One Fine Morning: Memories of My Father'

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### Recommended Citation

Hayes, Nicholas. 2010. "An excerpt from 'And One Fine Morning: Memories of My Father'" *MinnPost*, June 19, 2010. <https://www.minnpost.com/politics-policy/2010/06/excerpt-and-one-fine-morning-memories-my-father>.

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# MINNPOST

## An excerpt from 'And One Fine Morning: Memories of My Father'

By Nick Hayes | 06/19/10

The best way to introduce my father is with a photograph.

It was 1954. He was at the top of his game. His eyes looked straight into the camera. He smiled in anticipation. A new suit added a touch of style. The newspaper had recently described him as an award-winning architect.

Nothing in his expression gives us an inkling that a few months later a series of heart attacks and strokes would cut him down, cost him his left leg, impair his speech, and cripple his gift for painting and drawing. Two years after the photograph was taken, a final heart attack killed him.



Mark Hayes

The suit was the only thing the undertaker got right. At the wake, I remember looking at the open coffin and thinking the smile was wrong. The undertaker knew better. He had known my father since they were kids on the play grounds of Minneapolis's North Side. The undertaker had never liked that smile. My father was mocking him, he might have thought. He had wired my father's lips shut and closed in a straight line. Everyone knew my father's smile sloped up to the left as if he were about to wink. By straightening out his lips, the undertaker gave him a frown. The part in my father's hair was also wrong. Only the suit and double Windsor knot were right. My father took the suit and tie away with him.

AN EVENING WITH  
**GARRISON  
KEILLOR**  
A NIGHT FOR MEXICO

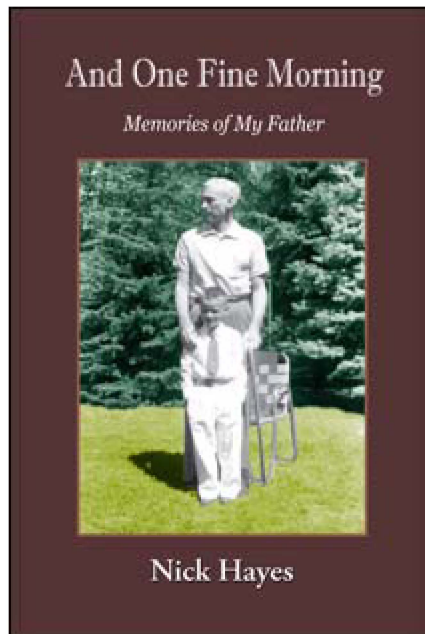
Garrison Keillor performs his one-man-show, "An Evening with Garrison", for the first time in the Twin Cities.

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In the photograph, his lips parted in his characteristic smile as if he is about to tell another story. My father loved nothing more than to tell a good story. When he said of someone that he had nothing to say, it was an insult. It was a fault that could not be corrected and an admonishment to us. Be polite but don't expect much of this guy.

More than fifty years later, I can still see my father smoking a Camel, martini in hand, holding forth to the smiles and laughter of his friends and family. I loved

nothing more than to sit beside him in the living room, on lawn chairs in the backyard, or at a table at Harry's, his favorite bar and restaurant. I would smile or laugh, pretending to comprehend the stories of old priests, his Irish-American boyhood on the North Side of Minneapolis, his days as a man about town when both he and Minneapolis came of age together. Sometimes he lectured on architecture, ridiculing a rival's work or explaining how the curvature of the woodwork in a certain church conveyed the concept of grace.



Memory is life's second act. My father's started on an afternoon in June 1956, the day of his funeral. After his burial, his memory rode home with the crowd that came to our house. I was eight years old. My ears took in everything. There were his friends, a clan of relatives, and all those priests and nuns — all of them laughing and re-telling stories my father told and the stories told about him.

That was when I began collecting the pieces of this story. Throughout my childhood and youth, family gatherings revolved around stories about him. My mother's stories mixed fondness with a few unresolved issues, providing a counter-balance to my Aunt Eileen's undiluted adoration of her brother. In the Catholic schools of my youth, priests and nuns would stop me in the hall. They would begin, *Your father was such a great guy ....* and add yet another anecdote to my growing collection. His things remained in my childhood

home. Watercolors and drawings, clothing, diaries, letters, and a navy locker full of memorabilia lived with us for decades, until my mother finally re-married, sold the house, and divided his things among her four sons and the Goodwill.

I am now older than my father ever was. My doctor tells me that I have less time left than I had thought. I spent my life searching for things of the past. I made a career out of the pursuit of the past as an historian of a foreign country and another time. All the while, I have carried my father's memory with me. My father is forever forty-something in the memory I have carried and in the course of time I have become his older companion.

It's time to tell our story. Along the way, I have opened a few archives, dusted the silverfish off old documents, sorted through legends, letters, paintings and photos, and made a bit of sense out of his life and times.

I had a girlfriend in college who said I had more of a father in my dead one than she had in her living one. She said I should write a book about him. This is it.

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