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“Like My Father Before Me”¹

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First of all let me tell you a few things I know about home movies.

Home movies are lies.

Home movies are idealized false representations of the family.

Smiley-face postcards for posterity.

If someone from another planet were to learn about life on earth solely from looking at a few rolls of old home movies, they would be led to believe that every day was a Sunday, that every month was August, that every season was summer. That life on earth was one big party -- a place of leisure without struggle.

Now let me tell you a few things I love about home movies.

Home movies are anthropological sites

Shards from archeological digs.

They are mirrors.

They are windows.

Time capsules.

They are questions waiting to be answered.

They are answers waiting to be questioned

SHOW SCENE FROM NOBODY’S BUSINESS

ALAN: Why did you take all of those 8mm home movies? PAUSE Why did you take all the 8mm home movies of our family? PAUSE Why did you take all the 8mm home movies of our family?

OSCAR: I don't hear you.

ALAN: Home movies. Why did you take the home movies? Home Movies. You took 8mm home movies of our family.

OSCAR: What about it?

ALAN: Why did you take them?

OSCAR: Why did I save them?

¹ Lecture given at New York University. May 7th, 2004.

ALAN: Take them. Why did you shoot them?

As you can see, my father never answered my question. Over the years I've stood up in front of audiences countless times and give my best guesses as to why he took our family home movies.

From the practical: it was simply his hobby.

To the romantic: he married a beautiful woman who was also an actress, so naturally with such a photogenic wife, he wanted to film her all the time. Who knows, maybe she was the actual force behind it?

To what I call the patriarchal generous: that he loved his children so much and was so proud of the life he was providing for them, that he wanted to put it all on film so that they would never forget it.

Or the patriarchal selfish: that he loved his children so much and was so proud of the life he was providing for them, that he wanted to put it all on film so *he* would never forget it.

Or finally to the psychoanalytic: that taking home movies was his way of compensating for the impersonal spaces of his own large family when he was growing up as one of 11 children.

But he never answered the question so I'll never know *his* answer. Only that at some point -- 35 years after shooting them -- my father the filmmaker found them painful to look at. How could that be? Did he see them as lies? As pointed reminders of a life he no longer had? Did he see them as idealized false representations of his family? Was he looking into a broken mirror? Shards of a broken heart? How could the joy of making them become the bane of watching them? Why *did* he take them?

But as I stand here today, these rhetorical questions about his past and the current state of my life *and* the focus of this panel are in a kind of glorious sync. For one thing, I no longer have to answer *for my father*. Now, in a kind of miraculous boomerang of fate, I find myself in a position to finally answer that question -- *for myself*.

Shari and I just had a son named Eli last month, and I -- like my father before me -- have been taking home movies of him from the beginning. And when I say, the beginning, I'm saying that I started shooting him barely two minutes after he was born...

And while, I'm on that subject, I had a choice -- to stand behind the camera and *film* Eli's birth -- or to actively participate in it. To witness with my own eyes, the miraculous, tumultuous, transcendent moment, when Shari -- with the most intense combination of courage and strength and intensity and soul I've ever witnessed, pushed *his* tiny body out of her own and into the world -- or I could have chosen to stand back and watch it through the viewfinder of a camera. That is to say, to make a family home movie of it.

In the end, I chose to be a part of it, to lend her my strength and support, to count the rhythms of

her breaths out loud, to gently guide her head and neck into the rhythm of her contractions. I chose to witness the blood and the struggle and the pushing and the intensity, and the screaming and the joy, and to share in a transcendent family moment -- one I'll never forget for the rest of my life.

Now... Do I miss not having all of that on film? As my father would say, "Absolutely!"

But do I regret my decision? Not for a second.

Back to home movies...

For the record, to be perfectly honest, I wish I could film every waking second of Eli's life. I really do. I'd love to hide a camera in his crib, in his car seat, on my forehead, in Shari's breast, in the trees of the park, behind the blackboard of every school he attends (OK, maybe everywhere except the bathroom). I'd love to be able to make a film about him that was edited from the raw footage of every waking second of his life.

I've even contemplated a new film project with the working title, ONE MONTH UP -- a take off on the 7 UP series begun in England by Michael Apter in the 1970's, in which I ask Eli a series of questions each month until he's old enough and self-aware enough to understand them and answer them -- and then perhaps follow-up at less intrusive intervals.

But like my father before me, I want him to love me, not hate me. I want him to find his own way in his own world, not feel oppressed with the burden of becoming a character in mine.

But either way we're in it together. Eli and me.

Just like with my father before me.

Because whether he knew it or not, whether he liked it or not, the home movies my father took belonged to everyone in my family. To anyone who wanted to look at them. To whoever **NEEDED** to look at them.

And as the trail of my films has so clearly revealed, that turned out to be me.

The home movies documents my father shot were so valuable, so meaningful, so fulfilling to me -- those precious images that allowed me to see, to deconstruct, to understand -- in some cases to remember -- were so profound to me -- that I want to do the same for Eli. I need to do the same for Eli.

So why do I take these home movies of Shari and Eli and me?

To show him how much he was loved when he was so vulnerable; to show him his mother and father when they were "young" -- (I use that word very much in the "relative" sense), to provide him with a family Rorschach diagram -- a series of vignettes -- unconscious, raw, unmitigated -- -- to hear our voices, to see our naiveté, to feel the naked power of our love, to show him things he'll never remember -- moments in his life, small and large, meaningful and mundane. To offer him the puzzle pieces so he might put his own picture together one day. His own photo-therapy.

Why do I shoot these home movies of Shari and Eli and me?

Maybe I'm doing it to offer him proof. Evidence. That these sounds and images might become "Exhibit A" in the courtroom of family judgment (or should I call it family justice?) one day.

I take images of Eli crying because I want him to be able to see the beauty and the willfulness, the power and the strength in the language of his cry. Just like I savor the solemnity and grace of his repose. They go together.

And I know what you're thinking. That I want him to be a filmmaker. That I'm hoping he'll grab *me* in the autumn of *my* life and make *me* face the music. That he'll make me dance to *his* tune one day. That he'll make me explain why a love that was so pure and simple and unconscious once upon a time has become no less unconscious but oh so much more complex. If that's what he wants, I'm no stranger to poetic justice. Count me in.

But the honest answer is no. Eli will be given all the room he needs to find his own way, in any way shape or form when it's his turn. I promise. And Shari promises to make me keep my promise. (Don't you?) Either way, I've no doubt that he'll be a storyteller in some language or other -- a person grounded in images and meanings, a lover of details, someone who can smile his way through the uncertainties of life -- the pushes and pulls of nature and nurture will almost certainly guarantee that.

But who knows what kind of media sophistication -- and the cynicism that comes with it -- will be emblematic of the era when he comes of age? I stand here and imagine that I know all the answers to my simple question. Why do I take these home movies? And yet I know for sure that the answer to that question here -- as I reflect on this very special moment in my life -- as self aware and as astute as my genes, my heritage, and my lack of sleep last night allow me to be -- that when Eli comes to see this stuff, when he gets around to pondering the who, what, where, when, how and why of it all -- that he'll understand something that I myself cannot say, cannot know and could never even imagine. Something that will help him on his own journey if -- and when -- he needs it.

By taking home movies -- like my father before me -- for better or worse -- I sustain a ritual more complicated than my father could have ever imagined. And yet, at the same time, I can't ever forget that I take these images for all of us: for Eli, for Shari, and for any and all curious progeny up and down our family tree. I take them because a part of me wants him to take them one day too. To do like his father before him. I take them because I can't help it. Because I'd suffocate if I didn't. Because I know there's gold to be mined in what's taking place both in front of -- and behind -- the camera.

Eli enters a family already overflowing with home movies. 8mm films from my side of the family. We're just now beginning to look at super 8 home movies taken by Shari's parents. But what makes all of this a bit more complicated is that in **OUR** family, films like *Nobody's Business* and *Intimate Stranger* are also home movies -- each in its own way a cross between sorting through the dirty family laundry and polishing the precious family jewel. Something Eli will have to contend with, one way or another when he's ready one day. Like **HIS** father before him.