

Michael Enright: Some fathers will do almost anything for their children. They'll endure the working confines of the straight and narrow or they'll twist and turn and reinvent themselves if that's what it takes to put food on the table. This morning, in the Vacuum Story, Philip Fine brings us a child's-eye view of one man's sacrifice.

Philip Fine: As a boy, I would hear the same dreaded sounds from the bathroom near my bedroom at the same time every morning.

I was hearing my father's beginning-of-the-day routine. My father seemed to thrive on routine: shaving at 6:20, making the bridge just before 7:00 and having breakfast in town. There, he would eat with the same people, while being served by the same waitress and then go off to see his same clients. As a young man, I thought routine was synonymous with stagnation; it was something *I wanted no part of*.

One day the routine that defined my father went into a tailspin. It was back when all three of us kids were still small enough that our feet didn't reach the floor when we sat on the couch. He got unceremoniously fired from one of the surviving companies in an ailing clothing industry. It was the '70s, when so many factories began moving overseas.

Very soon after, he had a new job. He was going to sell vacuum cleaners. I don't know why he chose to do that. Opportunity knocked, I suppose, and he opened the door. Probably figured he could apply his natural salesmanship, and his ability to kibitz, to a new product. He wasn't exactly a door-to-door man. The job had my father performing a home sales pitch to leads he was given.

He had a script to learn. Promotional words about the Filter Queen vacuum cleaner. And there was a place in that script to put the name of the lady of the house. It had him calling my mother "Mrs. Fine."

I didn't find this strange or sad. I loved the idea.

We three kids – I was the youngest – gladly sat on the couch as we watched him try to sell a vacuum cleaner to Mrs. Fine.

The sales kit, which he took out for all of us to see, consisted of a piece of carpet, a small cloth bag of dirt, a bullet and a shower cap.

He set up the vacuum and began reading from the script. My mother happily played along. When my father looked up after removing dirt from the carpet sample, she smiled and was appropriately awestruck. She was a good sport.

I didn't have to try. I just thought this was all fantastic. There was this shiny silver machine. With a script I got to be part of. And I was getting to see the full potential of the Filter Queen.

My father took the hose of the vacuum and put it next to the dirt. We watched it fly up the chrome tube. His voice was raised over the vacuum. "The insulated motor makes this one of the quietest vacuums on the market," he told my mother. Best part of the show came when he took out the bullet. To demonstrate how powerful a product this was, we had to watch closely. And sure enough, the bullet disappeared off his carpet sample in one vacuum gulp.

That wasn't the only amazing thing that vacuum could do. My father put one side of the hose in the blowing end of the machine, attached a shower cap to the other side of the hose and fitted the cap around his head. I had never seen my father wear a shower cap, let alone one with a hose attached. But there he was, pretending to dry his hair. For us, it was one more Filter Queen feature to love. We bought the whole performance.

We couldn't compare my father's situation, selling vacuum cleaners, with his younger life, the childhood house with the live-in maid and the pool table in the basement. Adults would do that. Adults would see this as a 'predicament.' They would remember those trips to Florida and the times when there was money to finish a suburban basement, one with a built-in TV and stereo. Adults would ruin things and feel sad for him. They would ask how this happened.

From that time on, the Filter Queen has always been special to me. I don't know if it's better than a Hoover or an Electrolux but I still think of it as the ultimate vacuum cleaner. It had the power to suck up a bullet, and my father had the power to convince me into adulthood that it was a superior machine. If I spotted one at someone's house, the owners suddenly became people who cared about quality. My father sold one to his sister in the name of her granddaughter so the lifetime guarantee would last that much longer. My aunt's now dead and I find myself wondering who got her Filter Queen.

My father is also not around today but, in his last job, he was hired by a company that sold supplies to the needle trade. Even the businesses with the offshore factories still needed boxes and tape. He had a boss that really liked him and the vacuum phase had been just that. But that time of his life, the practicing of the vacuum script, is an important touchstone for me.

I'm in my 40s now, and I'm a father. And, finally, I understand routine. It allows you to plan so you can take care of others. And if some strange new job arrives, kids don't seem to judge. I know we didn't. In all our glee over seeing a real bullet and the fun of having dirt spilled in the living room, we somehow knew throughout, that he was doing it all for us.

Michael Enright: Philip Fine lives in Montreal

