

My Daddy Was a Pistol and I'm a Son of a Gun

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

L E W I S

G R I Z Z A R D

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Villard Books  New York 1986

My Daddy Was a Pistol and I'm a Son of a Gun

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

L E W I S

G R I Z Z A R D

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Villard Books



New York 1986

Copyright © 1986 by Lewis Grizzard.
All rights reserved under International
and Pan-American Copyright Conventions.
Published in the United States by
Villard Books, a division of Random House, Inc.,
New York, and simultaneously in Canada by
Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

The title of this book was taken from the song "Dang Me"
by Roger Miller.

Copyright © 1964 Tree Publishing Company, Inc.
All rights reserved. International copyright secured.
Used by permission of the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Grizzard, Lewis, 1946-

My daddy was a pistol, and I'm a son of a gun.

1. Grizzard, Lewis, 1946- —Biography.
2. Authors, American—20th century—Biography.
3. Humorists, American—20th century—Biography.
4. Fathers and sons—United States. I. Title.

PS3557.R5368Z466 1986 814'.54 [B] 86-40187
ISBN 0-394-54989-9

Page 245 constitutes an extension of this copyright page.

Manufactured in the United States of America
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2
First Edition

**My Daddy Was a Pistol
and I'm a Son of a Gun**



C H A P T E R

One



I CANNOT DRINK AND TALK about my father, who died in 1970, or I will cry. Sometimes, I am able to keep it to a few sniffles, but more often than not, I begin to sob when I attempt to drink and discuss my daddy. That's what I called him. Daddy.

There are various stages of intoxication of the male, of course. These have been put down by someone more clever than I, and so I do not claim the following, but I do find it to be amusing, as well as on target:

THE TEN STAGES OF INTOXICATION

Anonymous

1. WITTY AND CHARMING: This is after one or two drinks. The tongue is loosened and can yet remain in step with the

MY DADDY WAS A PISTOL

brain. In the *witty and charming* stage, one is likely to use foreign idioms and phrases such as *au contraire* in place of “No way, José” or “Bull-sheyet.”

2. RICH AND POWERFUL: By the third drink, you begin mentioning the little 380SL you’ve had your eye on down at the Mercedes place.

3. BENEVOLENT: You’ll buy her a Mercedes, too. It’s only money.

4. JUST ONE MORE AND THEN WE’LL EAT: Stall tactic.

5. TO HELL WITH DINNER: Just one more and then we’ll eat.

6. PATRIOTIC: The war stories begin.

7. CRANK UP THE *ENOLA GAY*: “We could have won in Nam, but . . .”

8. INVISIBLE: So this is what a Ladies Room looks like.

9. WITTY AND CHARMING PART II: You know, you don’t sweat much for a fat girl.

10. BULLETPROOF: Bull-sheyet, gimme them keys, I can drive.

I find only one thing wrong with this listing. It is incomplete. There remains one other stage, and it is a stage that I personally discovered. I likely reach it more often than most other men, but given enough to drink and the right setting, most men will arrive at this same level. I call it “CRYIN’-ABOUT-YOUR-DADDY DRUNK.” I am not certain where it fits in the aforementioned list. I would guess it would fall somewhere between “7. CRANK UP THE *ENOLA GAY*” and “8. INVISIBLE,” but that is only a guess and some may reach the level earlier while others reach it later. You don’t need to be able to make a lot of sense when you are CAYDD, nor is it necessary to be able to make sounds intelligible to other forms of life.

I first realized this stage of intoxication some years ago after I had played tennis with a friend at his private court. If you

AND I'M A SON OF A GUN

play tennis, it always is nice, as well as convenient, to have a friend who has a private court.

We had gone three hard sets and then settled into a few late-in-the-evening cold beers, which my friend's wife dutifully delivered to the court from the refrigerator back up at the house.

"You've got a great wife," I said to my friend.

"You've just got to make them learn to appreciate you," he replied. "Other night, we were out having dinner and this good-looking honey walked over and kissed me.

"My wife said, 'Who was that?'

"I said, 'That's my mistress.'

"She said, 'You've got a mistress?'

"I said, 'Sure.'

"She said, 'I'm getting a divorce.'

"I said, 'Fine, but just remember if you do, you're not going to have me around anymore to give you the things I give you. You'll have just one car, and we'll probably have to get rid of the place at the beach, and I won't be around to pay your credit card bills, either.'

"About that time, a friend of ours walked by with another young honey. My wife said, 'Who's that with Bill?'

"I said, 'That's his mistress.'

"She said, 'Ours is a lot better looking than his, isn't she?'"

We laughed together and then his wife showed up with another couple of cold beers and also a cassette player and a Willie Nelson tape. I think it was during Willie's spirited rendition of the old hymn "Precious Memories" that my friend started talking about his father. The beer . . . Willie . . . it was only a matter of time.

"I remember when my daddy died," my friend began. "We were all in the hospital room with him. The doctors had told us he wouldn't last much longer. He had emphysema and God

MY DADDY WAS A PISTOL

knows what else. He opened his eyes for a moment and asked me to come close to him.

"I didn't know what he was going to say, but I knew I would be listening to his final words. I leaned over the bed so I could hear him.

"'Son,' he said to me, 'why didn't you and your mama tell me I was going to die?'

"I said, 'Why would you ask something like that, Daddy?'

"'Because,' he said, wheezing all the time, 'if I had known I was going to die anyway, I never would have given up smoking.'"

My friend was on a roll. He took another pull on his beer and was off on another remembrance.

"My daddy knew everybody in Atlanta, and he was always working on some deal. He ran for every political office in town. He never won anything, but it really didn't matter to him. He just enjoyed hanging around the courthouse and seeing his political ads in the paper.

"Anything he needed done or you needed done—if you were his friend—he knew a guy here or a guy there who could help. I'll never forget at his funeral, my ex-wife came over after the services to talk to my mother.

"My ex-wife got a bad case of religion after we divorced. She became one of those born-againers, and I found out she was sending about half of my alimony check to Oral Roberts every month.

"Anyway, she goes up to my mother and says, 'Margaret, you know Paw-Paw'—that's what the kids called my dad—'isn't going to heaven, don't you?'

"Mother said, 'Why not?'

"My ex-wife said, 'Because he didn't accept Jesus as his personal Savior before he died.'

"My mother thought a minute and said, 'Well, he may not

AND I'M A SON OF A GUN

get into heaven at first, but he'll meet somebody who can get him in, eventually.' ”

Willie sang on, as we laughed together:

*“Preeeeecious mem-ries
How they linger. . . .”*

A few moments later, I countered with a story about another friend's father.

“His daddy was really old, somewhere in his eighties or nineties, and the family was called into the hospital for his final hours.

“The old man was barely alive, and everyone in the room was a little uncomfortable. One by one, they drifted out to the hallway so they could talk and smoke, and my friend found himself alone with his father.

“His daddy had been a thrifty old coot all his life, and my buddy figured his father would like to hear about the deal he had just made at the bank. It had been a big financial story. Several banks in Atlanta were competing for money market accounts and all of them were offering an incredible twenty-five percent interest for the first month if customers would open a money market account.

“My friend leaned over his father and said, ‘Daddy, you would have been real proud of me this week. I opened up a money market account at the bank that’s going to pay me twenty-five percent interest a year.’

“The old man didn’t respond at first and my friend thought he hadn’t heard him, so he said it again: ‘Daddy, you would have been real proud of me this week. I opened a money market account at the bank that’s going to pay me twenty-five percent a year.’

“The old man slowly opened his eyes and looked into his

MY DADDY WAS A PISTOL

son's and said, 'It's only for a month, you damn fool,' and then drifted back on out."

Cold beer goes down so easily after you've been playing tennis and perspiring a great deal. I suppose we'd had five or six each when I started talking about my own father. Daddy. I talked about the day he died.

He was living in this little town down near Savannah. He'd had a stroke on the street and after he was in the hospital a few days he got pneumonia. I was living in Atlanta and I'd been down to see him about three days earlier. He was unconscious then and was having these awful convulsions. I don't think he knew I was there.

I finally had to leave him and come back home to work. But one morning I get this phone call at about four and a nurse at the hospital tells me things are pretty bad and if I want to see him one more time while he's alive, I'd better come in a hurry.

It was over a four-hour drive down there, but I made it a lot faster. I kept praying the whole time I was driving that this whole thing was some kind of nightmare and I'd wake up.

I got to the hospital and they showed me where his room was. There were three other men in the room, men from his church. Daddy loved going to church. It's how he made friends. He would go into a church in some little town where he was going to live for a while and he'd sit right down front so everybody could see him.

He had a beautiful baritone voice, and when the singing would start, he would belt it out as loudly and as forcefully as he could. After the services, everyone would want to meet the handsome, gray-haired man with the beautiful voice.

I shook hands with the three men after I walked into the room.

AND I'M A SON OF A GUN

"I believe your daddy's about to pass, son," one of the men said.

I looked down at him on the bed. He was a big, stout man. He'd been through two wars and all sorts of other hells, and he looked pitiful lying there in that bed. And he was blue. I swear to God he was blue.

I took his right hand. It was cold. I pressed it tightly with my hands. He didn't respond. He was breathing so slowly. One breath, and then when you didn't think he would breathe again, he would gasp for one more.

I had never seen anybody die before. I didn't know what in hell to expect. I imagined there would be doctors and nurses all around a dying man, trying to save him. There weren't. There wasn't anybody but me and three men from the church.

I asked had a doctor been in. One of the men said his doctor had come by a little earlier, but said there wasn't anything he or anybody else could do.

I really didn't know how I was supposed to act. I was twenty-three, I guess, old enough not to want to carry on in front of a roomful of other men. So I didn't cry. I even thought that maybe his dying wasn't that awful a thing. When one of his brothers, my uncle, heard he was in bad shape, he'd even thought the same thing. "He's been through enough hell as it is," is what my uncle said.

God, how I had to agree with that. There were the two wars, and when he came home from Korea, he was totally messed up. Couldn't sleep. Couldn't stay off the phone. He'd get so drunk and then get on the phone. He'd cry. Lord, he'd cry. I remember my mama fighting with him over the big telephone bills.

He started borrowing money, too. Lots of it. And nobody could figure out why. Mother would say, "Lewis, where is all that money going?"

MY DADDY WAS A PISTOL

He'd never tell her. He would never tell anybody. There was this dark secret or something. Like maybe he had done something awful and somebody was blackmailing him.

Then he skipped out on the army and started roaming. This job, that job, and you could count on a bender every now and then. Mostly now. I never knew where he was half the time. When I was a kid he let me down a lot. He'd promise, and then he wouldn't deliver. Promise he was going to straighten out and come back to me and my mother. Promise he'd take me to ball games, promise we'd go on long trips together. He'd promise me the world.

But then he wouldn't show and I wouldn't hear from him for a long time and then I'd get a money order. I suppose his conscience would get to him and he'd night wire the money, trying to make everything all right.

I never really got mad at him for those things. My mother would get mad that he would do me the way he would do me, but, somehow, I always understood. I'd be disappointed as hell, of course, but I always sensed he was doing the best he could. I really believe that when he promised me something, he had all the intentions in the world of carrying it out.

He embarrassed me a few times after I was older. I was married, and he'd show up at my house. Drunk. My wife didn't like that. He had very little family, and he started leaning on me a lot. Started asking me for money. I always gave it to him. My wife didn't like that, either.

I was still holding his hand when he took his last breath. He breathed and then he didn't breathe again. It seemed like a peaceful death. I don't think he was in any pain. I wanted to talk to him, to tell him how much I loved him, but it was better he go that way.

One of the men from the church went and got a nurse. She felt for a pulse but didn't find one. Without a word, she went

AND I'M A SON OF A GUN

out of the room, then came back with a doctor. The doctor put his stethoscope on Daddy's chest and listened. I was still holding his hand, when the doctor looked at me and said, "He's gone."

I let go of his hand. The nurse pulled the sheet over his head and then went out of the room behind the doctor. One of the three men said we ought to pray, and so he said a prayer. I don't remember which one, though.

I was in a daze.

I called my mother. She said she was sorry. I knew she was, both for me and for her. My daddy was not the kind of man you could stop loving, no matter what he did to you.

Then I called my uncle and he said he'd make some arrangements about bringing the body back to Atlanta, about the funeral. After I hung up, I had no idea what to do next.

There was the hospital bill. It was eight hundred dollars. Daddy didn't have any insurance. I didn't have eight hundred dollars. A good friend helped me pay it. They had said they wouldn't let the body go until I paid the bill. A woman said it was hospital policy to get this sort of thing cleared up as quickly as possible.

All Daddy had was in one of those plastic garbage bags. I remember opening the bag and going through his belongings. There were the clothes he had worn into the hospital. There was a ring. It didn't look like it was worth much. His old watch was in the bag, and so was his wallet. There was nothing in the wallet, no money, not a single piece of identification. I looked inside his coat and found a letter he had been carrying.

It was a letter from me. I had written it six months before. It was short, maybe a page, typewritten. Down at the end, I had given him some grief about straightening out his life. I told him I would have to think twice about inviting him to my house again if he didn't promise he wouldn't show up drink-

MY DADDY WAS A PISTOL

ing. I'd just signed my name. I didn't say "love" or anything. I had just signed my goddamned name like I was a real hard-ass.

I still wonder why he carried such a letter around with him for so long. Maybe he kept it as a reminder to do better. I don't know. Maybe he kept it to remind himself his only son was turning on him. Whatever, I never forgave myself for that letter. I can't get it out of my head he died not knowing how much I loved him.

I'd held back most of the tears until I had reached the part about the letter. Then they came full force.

"Dammit!" I said to my friend. "I can't help crying when I talk about that."

I lifted my head from my hands and noticed my friend was crying, too.

"I still miss my daddy, too," he sobbed. "Just two weeks before he went in the hospital, I was supposed to take him fishing. I called him and told him I had too much to do at the office. He loved to fish, and I put him off because I was too damn busy."

"You never stop loving your daddy," I said.

"No matter what," said my friend.

Together, we had reached the stage of "CRYIN'-ABOUT-YOUR-DADDY DRUNK," two grown men, bellies full of beer, sobbing about the memories of their late fathers.

Soon, we would be reaching "INVISIBLE," so we popped one more cold beer and toasted our precious memories. Before my friend's wife came and put us to bed—"Bull-sheyet," I said to his wife, "gimme them keys. I can drive"—my friend said to me, "Know what I would do if I were you, a writer? I'd write a book about my old man. I'd write about how much I loved him, about how much he meant to me."

I said nobody would want to read about me and my daddy.

AND I'M A SON OF A GUN

"At least you'd feel better about it all," said my friend.

I've been CAYDD a number of times since then, and hardly an episode passed that I didn't think about that book, a book about Daddy, about his life and his hard times, about how much I loved him and how much he meant to me. About how I still miss him and about how I'm forty years old and I'm still crying for him.

I mentioned the idea of a book to a relative once, who said, "Forget the book. Put him behind you. It's over. That was another part of your life. Forget the book and forget him."

But I couldn't do that. I have his name. When I look at pictures of him, I can see my resemblance to him. I can do his voice. I can *sound* like him, especially when I tell one of his stories, and I tell them often.

He was a hero. He was a drunk. He was a con artist. He made me cry. He made me laugh. I loved him with all my heart.

There is a title to this book out there on the cover somewhere. But don't go by that. From the start, I've called this *My Daddy Book*.

I just thought I'd feel a lot better if I wrote it.

C H A P T E R

Two



I NEVER HAVE SERIOUSLY looked into my family on my daddy's side. I go back only as far as his daddy, my paternal grandfather. Frankly, I've never been interested in that sort of thing. Besides, I recall the Rodney Dangerfield line, "I looked up my family tree and found out I was the sap."

I do know something of the origin of the family name, however. One day, I was thumbing through the paper and came to one of those "Know Your Name" features. "Grizzard," believe it or not, was in there.

"Grizzard," said the article, is from the French *gris*, which means "gray." "Grissard," which is how the French spell my name, translates as "codger" or "old, gray-headed man."

Needless to say, I was disappointed by all this. I didn't mind being of French origin, but "codger" and "old gray-headed