



by Barbarella

## Daddy Docent

*I like to see a man proud of the place in which he lives. I like to see a man live so that his place will be proud of him.*

— Abraham Lincoln

**D**ad apologized for the weather, as if scheduling a cruise on a day that turned out to be cold and drizzly were an oversight on his part. “Are you kidding me? Cloud cover, cool breezes — this is perfect,” I said as we made our way along Harbor Drive from the ticket booth to the boat ramp. I knew Dad wasn’t bothered by the gray — he’d been avoiding the sun since he was diagnosed with a skin cancer ten years ago.

“Thanks for taking the time to come out; I know how busy you are,” Dad said.

“Forget about it,” I said. “I’d much rather tool around town with you than sit at home and stare at my computer screen. Anyway, I might have a lot of stuff going on, but I’m not nearly as busy as you.” Dad smiled sheepishly.

“He tried to learn something new every day. I thought that was so cool. He wanted to belly up to life and participate as much as he could.”

When he’s not on the road for work, a typical day in his life includes a five-mile walk before sunrise, time at the office, volunteer work (delivering food for Special Delivery, granting wishes for the Make-a-Wish Foundation, etc.), a class at the gym, and lunch and/or dinner with friends.

When tourists arrive in San Diego looking for directions and fun things to do, as an Airport Ambassador, my father is on hand to offer suggestions. Among the perks Dad receives in exchange

for his time are free tickets to local attractions. Dad was using his time off work to burn through his freebies. Already that week he’d been on the Old Town Trolley tour, a Balboa Park ranger tour, and the San Diego SEAL tour. And now he was taking me on a two-hour narrated excursion with Hornblower Cruises.

Every group boarding the boat was first photographed behind a white lifesaver on which the cruise line’s name and logo were printed in blue. Dad and I smiled for the camera, and then, still holding his smile in place, Dad said from the corner of his mouth, “They’re going to try to sell that to us later.” I assured him that between my iPhone, Canon PowerShot, and the high-def camcorder in my purse, we were covered in the documentation department.

Once all the passengers were settled, a long blast of the boat’s horn sounded and we were bay-bound. As we traveled south, a male voice shared trivia about all of the ships that were berthed in the bay.

“That one there is either *Hope* or *Mercy*,” Dad said, gesturing toward a huge white vessel with a red cross painted on its bow. A moment later, the voice explained that the ship could

hold 1000 beds and that it was larger than most land-based hospitals.

“Did you know the Port of San Diego is the primary port of entry for cars being shipped to all of America?” Dad asked. I shook my head as our official narrator parroted the same fact before listing other statistics, such as how many vehicles could fit on one of the gigantic car-carrier vessels.

“You’d be a great tour guide,” I said.

“I love knowing little local tidbits,” he said. “I was just on this ranger tour at Balboa Park, and I learned — did you ever hear about the nudist colony in Balboa Park? Zoro Garden, with one R?” I shook my head. “Between the Reuben H. Fleet Science Center and MOPA? Down those cement steps? Well, anyway, that was a nudist colony back in the ’30s. Now it’s a butterfly garden, but how cool is that? Who would have known?”

“It’s especially cool, considering how conservative San Diego is now,” I said.

“And the bamboo they use to feed the panda bears in the zoo? They grow it right there on the other side of the fence, in Balboa Park,” Dad said. “You should go on one of those tours; they’re free the first Wednesday of the month.” I smiled. Dad never misses a bargain. With his ability to save, my father is a walking, talking *Lonely Planet* guide for free shit. He may occasionally space on my name, but ask him which museums are free on a Tuesday, and Dad will spit out the answer faster than you can say “Rain Man.”

When our guide mentioned the Floating Instrument Platform, Dad leaned forward and talked over him: “FLIP lab’s so cool. I got to tour the inside once.” My father’s and the guide’s voices overlapped as they each explained how Scripps Institution of Oceanography uses the giant buoy to record ocean levels and noises.

Later, as we ventured into military territory, it was clear that Dad knew more than our guide. “Oh, no, he called North Island a

‘naval station.’ It’s a ‘naval air station.’ There’s a *yooge* difference,” Dad said, his Brooklyn accent bubbling to the surface.

As the guide rattled off information about *Nimitz*-class carriers similar to the one we were looking at, Dad offered further insight: “Those are nuclear-powered — they can be out for years. The only limiting factor is food. The problem is, when you’re finished with it, when the core is no longer good enough to make heat, it’s radioactive forever and you have to dump it somewhere. The Russians dump the radioactive cores in the waters off their coast. We have intricate, involved places to put them, in concrete and stuff — places in Washington or Arizona — even though we worry if there’s seismic activity...what if the thing cracks? But there’s always a price. You get fuel for a long time, but you have to get rid of spent uranium.” Dad paused long enough to hear our guide say carriers are the biggest weapons in the world. “Oh, yeah,” Dad said. “First thing we do when there’s a major threat is send a carrier. They pack a hell of a punch.”

“I was serious, you know: you’d be a great tour guide, knowing all this stuff,” I said.

“When my grandfather was in his 90s, he told me — and it wasn’t a task or chore or anything — but he tried to learn something new every day. I thought that was so cool. He wanted to belly up to life and participate as much as he could.”

“I bet he’d be proud of you,” I said.

Dad looked pensive as he nodded. Suddenly his face brightened and he said, “See that big hill over there? Underneath all that dirt is where they keep a bunch of fuel tanks for ships.” I nodded and relaxed into the ride as I listened to both Dad and the other guide describe the dolphin-training area. ■

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