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While my siblings and I were still quite young, our dad met a stranger who was new to our small town. Dad was fascinated with this enchanting newcomer from the beginning. Although our mom was initially extremely uncomfortable with Dad's decision to invite that stranger to come and live with us, her discomfort gradually subsided. It never completely went away, though, and it sometimes escalated. My siblings and I enjoyed his company. He became a part of our family.

In my young mind, he had a special niche. Yes, I noticed the concurrent change in the roles our parents played. Mom had always taught us good from evil. Dad had taught us where the behavioral boundaries were and what would always happen each time we'd step outside them. But the stranger was our storyteller! He'd keep us spellbound for hours on end with adventures and mysteries and really funny stuff. In lots of ways, what we were learning from him were in stark contrast to things Mom and Dad were hoping we'd learn. Most of what they'd hoped we'd learn were things they had learned in church and from their parents. Yes, they took us to church every Sunday, but we were always anxious to get back home to our house guest.

He appeared to always know how to satisfy our occasional juvenile curiosity about politics, history and science. He knew stuff about the past, understood the present and even seemed able to predict the future! He took my family to our first major league ball game. He made us laugh and he made us cry. He never stopped talking, but Dad didn't seem to mind. That look of quiet concern on Mom's face sometimes really bothered me, though. She'd often get up and move gracefully into the kitchen. I wonder, now, if she went there to pray for that stranger to leave. He never left...and that bittersweet "strangeness" never really left us, either.

Dad ruled our household with certain moral convictions, but the stranger never felt obligated to honor them. Profanity, for example, had never been allowed in our home—not from us, our friends or from any visitor. Our house guest, however, got away with four-letter words that burned my ears and made my dad squirm and my mom blush.

My Dad didn't approve of the liberal use of alcohol, but the stranger regularly encouraged us to be sure and try it when we were older. He made cigarettes look cool, cigars manly and pipes distinguished. He talked freely (much too freely!) about sex. At least my mom kept reminding my dad that he did. His comments were sometimes blatant, typically suggestive and generally embarrassing.

I now know that my early concepts about relationships were influenced strongly by that stranger. Time after time he opposed the values of my parents, yet he was seldom rebuked. And he was never asked to leave. Now, as a parent, I understand the rationale – actually the rationalizing – for that non-decision. Yeah, I know: I should kick him out of my house, too. Maybe later...

More than a few years have passed since that stranger moved in with our family. He eventually blended right in! Now, with my young family, he's not nearly as fascinating as he was when I was still young. If you were to walk into my parents' den today, you'd still find a colorful descendant of that stranger sitting comfortably, waiting patiently for someone to listen to him talk and watch him draw his pictures and tell off-color jokes and stuff.

His name? He's known by his initials: "TV." The strangers in my friends' homes, today, include an array of his descendants. They're even more invasive than their patriarch had been. Their most common names are Windows and Apple and Android and such.



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