

---

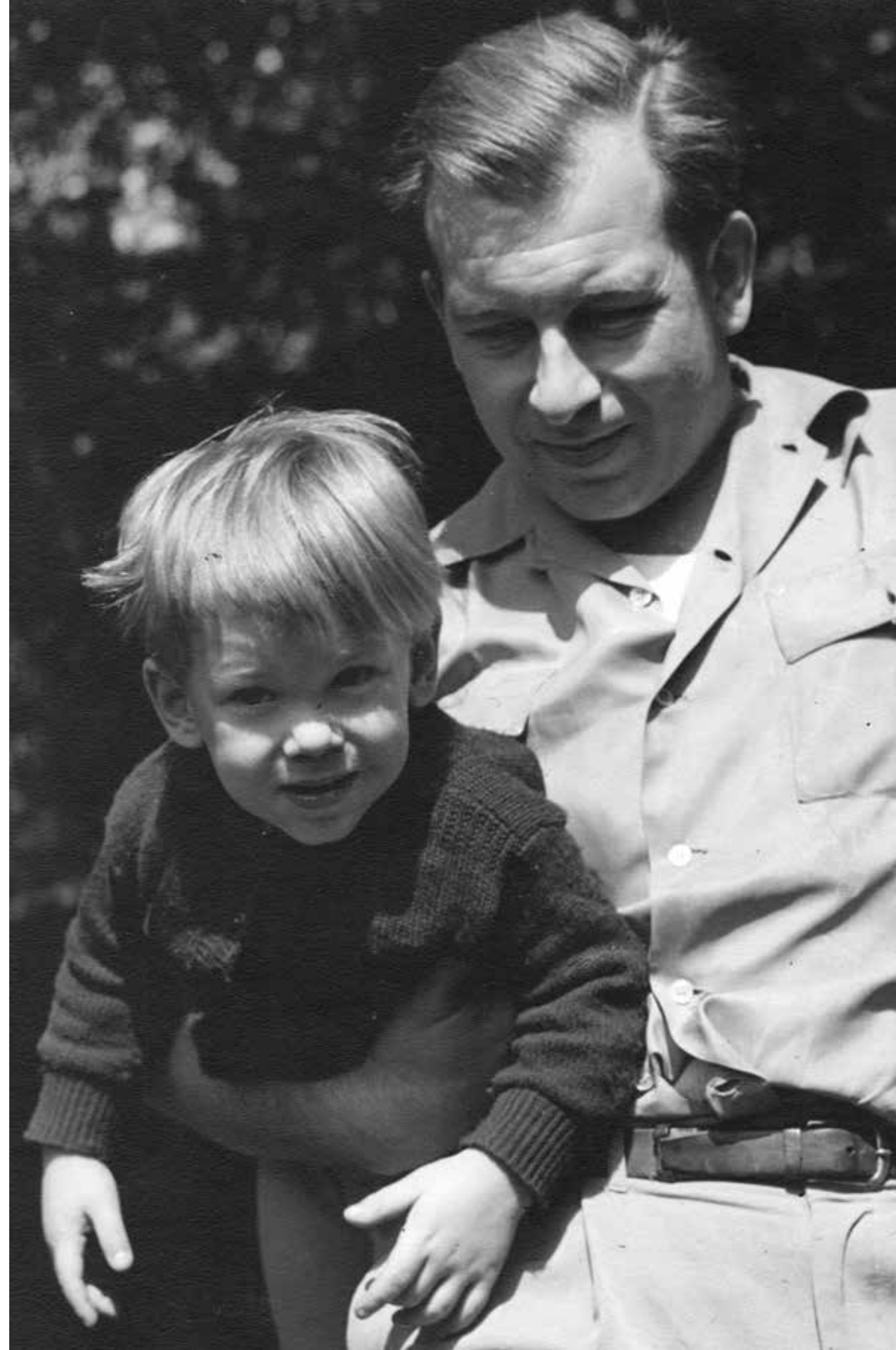
# Forgiving My Dad

*The son of the great Finnish-American architect Eero Saarinen recounts the ups and downs in the limited life they both spent together.*

By Eric Saarinen

**Eero Saarinen** holding his son Eric.

PHOTO: SUSAN PAUL HAMMOND





**Eero shows** his winning soap sculpture in a 1926 Ivory Soap contest.



PHOTOS: ROXANNE LAMBIE

**Lily Saarinen** in a tender moment with her son Eric.



**Siblings Susan and Eric**, Eero's and Lily's children 1968.



PHOTO: BALTHAZAR KORAB

**A family gathering at Cranbrook** in August 1958. Front row, left to right: Susan Saarinen, Eero, Loja Saarinen (Eliel's widow), Aline Louchheim Saarinen (Eero's second wife) and Eames Saarinen (Eero's and Aline's son). Back row, left to right: Eric Saarinen, Donald and Harry Allen Louchheim (Aline's sons).

**M**INE IS THE CLASSIC TALE OF NOT GETTING TO KNOW and appreciate one's father until it is too late to have a meaningful relationship with him. As a child I was seriously bothered by my lack of access to him. My mother and others would constantly explain that he was a "very important" man and had "so much work to do" and I would eventually get to know what a singularly focused man he really was.

My dad, of course, was the noted Finnish-born architect Eero Saarinen, today, more than a half-century after his death, considered one of the masters of 20th-century American architecture. Perhaps his most widely known work is the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, his breakthrough achievement. But among his many other architectural achievements are the Trans World Airlines Terminal at the John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City, the General Motors Tech Center in Warren, Michigan, the International Headquarters of John Deere in Moline, Illinois, the IBM Thomas Watson Headquarters, The Irwin Miller House in Columbus, Indiana, the Ingall's Hockey Rink and Morse and Stiles Colleges at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, the First Northern Christian Church in Columbus, Indiana, the Crow Island School in Winnetka, Illinois, the Kresge Auditorium and chapel at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Mass., the Dulles International Airport in Chantilly, Virginia, and the United States embassies in London, England, and Oslo, Norway.

The scope of my father's genius made little impression on me as a young boy. I was far more absorbed in my day-to-day life in the lovely town of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, just north of Detroit. My father, grandfather and grandmother had settled there soon after their arrival from Finland in

*“I will stand before any judge in the world and tell him this is wrong!” I shouted.*

1923. Eliel Saarinen, my grandfather, was Finland’s foremost architect, with a growing international reputation. He was lured to the U.S. by the founder of the Cranbrook Academy of Arts to design its campus and ultimately, in 1932, became its president.

Here I should pause to tell you what Eliel has meant to me. He was so different from Eero—gregarious, friendly, helpful and consoling. He truly enjoyed spending time with me. He had countless friends, many of them learned and talented—people like Finland’s Jean Sibelius, the Swedish sculptor Carl Milles, the Russian writer Maxim Gorki, the Austrian composer Gustav Mahler, and the architect Frank Lloyd Wright. What Eero had failed to give me of affection and time Eliel had provided even before I was old enough to understand words. He would poke me in the stomach and make a squeak with his mouth every time I saw him. He made me laugh. He died in 1950 and I still miss him.

**E**ERO, HAVING BECOME A U.S. CITIZEN IN 1923, WENT ON TO study architecture at Yale University between 1931 and 1934, spend two years traveling in Europe and the Middle East and finally returned to Cranbrook in 1936 to rejoin his father’s firm and the Cranbrook Academy. In 1939 my father married sculptress Lily Swann (my mother) and I came along in 1942, followed by my sister Susan three years later.

Whatever lingering resentment I harbored toward my dad’s absence, it was quickly turned to anger and rage when I came home from school one day to find my mother alone in my room packing boxes. There were books everywhere. Her head was down but I could see that she was crying. Then she said that she and dad were getting a divorce and that we were moving to Cambridge, Mass. “Who says!” I shouted with the defiance of an impetuous 12-year-old. “The judge,” she replied. “I will stand before any judge in the world and tell him this is wrong!” I shouted. “Too late,” was her only reply. I felt terrible for her. I hated my father for kicking us out of the house, out of our school and away from our friends. It didn’t seem fair.

So off we went to Cambridge—my mother with a broken heart and Susie and I not very happy about having to go to separate schools, each about a mile walk from home.

There was no doubt a number of reasons for my parents’ breakup but the overriding one had to be the 1953 arrival in Bloomfield Hills of Aline Bernstein Louchheim, at the time associate art editor and critic at *The New York Times*. She was there to interview Eero on the occasion of his recent architectural successes, notably the General Motors Technical Center, and the Saint



PHOTO: YALE ARCHIVES

**Aline and Eero** during a relaxed moment.





**The Gateway Arch in St. Louis.** The model of the arch at right has three-edged legs, a suggestion from sculptor Carl Milles (Eero's original idea called for quadrilateral legs). Eero never gave Milles credit for this improvement and Milles packed up and returned to Sweden.

#### Louis Gateway Arch.

Aline was an intelligent and well-educated woman, having graduated from the Ethical Culture Fieldston School in New York and then Vassar College. Before joining the *Times* she had served as managing editor with *Art News* magazine. She and Eero were immediately drawn to one another. In fact subsequent archives of their correspondence corroborate that they made love that very night, before he drove her to the airport. But their mutual attraction went beyond romance. Apparently Eero found in Aline someone who could provide the intellectual stimulation and understanding that my mother could not. The two were married in 1953 and would soon after have a son of their own whom they named Eames after Charles Eames, Eero's best friend, noted furniture designer and my godfather.

During our teens Susie and I would make regular summer visits to Michigan and got to know Aline and her two sons, Hal and Don. The first summer I worked in the blueprint office. I never got to see my dad during the day but at night we had kind of a ritualistic dinner where everyone got dressed up and talked about world affairs and it all seemed so very civilized. The next two summers I worked at the office every day. I was given some architectural problems to





**Two views** of Eiel Saarinen's Helsinki Railway Station.

PHOTOS ABOVE, BELOW AND LOWER RIGHT: ERIC SAARINEN



**Inside and outside views** of the Trans World Airways Terminal at the John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York.





**The Ingalls Rink** at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut.

solve but I soon realized I would never be an architect but had to find something in the arts that was really fun for 16 hours a day so that I could in some small way follow in my father's footsteps.

The next year I worked in the office the entire summer and bought a car with my earnings. When I asked my dad if I could drive it back to Cape Cod he gave me an emphatic No. But then Aline and my dad got into a private discussion and she came back and said: "Yes, you can go as long as you don't hurt anyone or yourself." So I drove alone to Cape Cod the next day, over-nighting in Buffalo. The two days of freedom were contagious.

During prep school the following year my father picked me up and we drove to New York together and out to the site of the TWA Terminal. They had made plywood molds, poured in concrete, let it cure for 27 days or so and then pulled off the wood to reveal the organic shapes of the concrete. I was too young to realize that everyone had been scared to death the whole thing

would collapse—and too young to marvel at this huge sculpture as a work of art. My dad was proud and happy to show me this because he knew that someday I would be thankful and appreciative. I am both proud and humbled by that wordless lesson. Suddenly I realized that two summers earlier I had printed the plans for the TWA building and thought "These people are nuts."

**T**HE LAST YEAR I WORKED IN THE OFFICE I TURNED 18 AND I drove back to Cape Cod again. Ten days later I got a call from Aline. She told me to fly back immediately. No explanation. When I showed up they decided to take me to the Bloomfield Hills Hunt Club, a place we had never been to earlier. Then she had me lie down on a couch near the pool and put on an eye mask, saying they would be right back. After a while I heard some scuffling and muffled sounds followed by silence. Then Aline returned, removed my mask and said: "Okay, off you go back to Cape Cod."

PHOTO: ERIC SAARINEN



**Eero Saarinen** in his Bloomfield Hills office.

*Even facing death, he couldn't share his remorse with me. I'm sure he was scared.*

I had no idea what had transpired. Was Aline attempting to persuade Eero, who had never shown any sign of weakness in my presence, to admit to me that he was dying? Aline was a good step mother, probably as good as one could hope for.

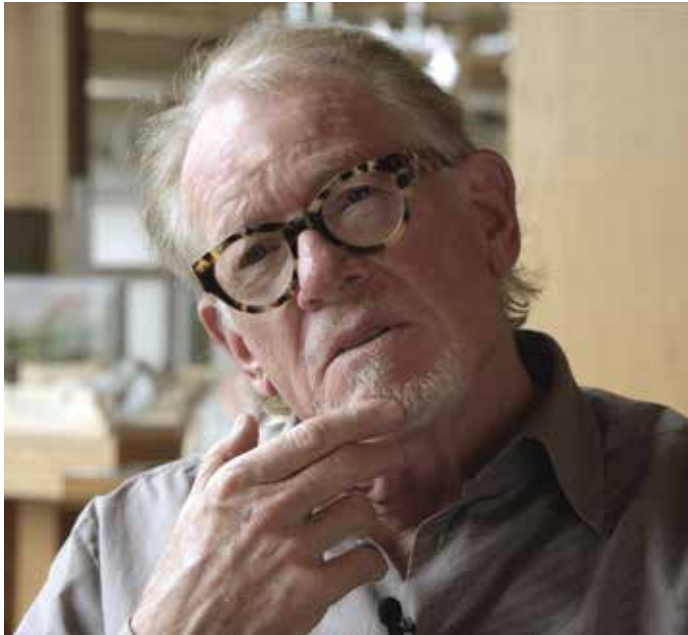
At the Cape a few days later I got a call from her explaining that my father was going for some tests and she would let me know when she had gotten the results. Two days later after Susie and my mother had gone for a walk to the beach, I was alone in the house when Aline called in tears. My father had died on the operating table. He had had a brain tumor and the doctor told him he had a 1-in-10,000 chance of surviving surgery. But since the tumor was in the creative center of his brain Eero had decided to go ahead with it. Dad had died at 51. I was 19.

That knocked me for a loop. I had had zero closure. I became introverted. I went into what I can only describe as my hippy phase. I felt rootless, listless, non-directed. But with time I managed to snap out of it. I started delving into Eero's archives and book collections and found that my interest was sparked. You could say that I was slowly reassessing my father's life, I was undergoing a catharsis. I began to see what Eero and Aline had meant to each other. And I read letters my dad had sent to his psychiatrist in which he expressed his feelings of guilt, how he had let his work get in the way of his contact with his children. Even facing death, he couldn't share his remorse with me. I'm sure he was scared . . . or maybe it was just too late. It was increasingly obvious that the only times he really opened up was when he talked about wanting to be remembered in the future for his own work.

**T**HE HIGHLY REGARDED DOCUMENTARY FILM DIRECTOR Peter Rosen had asked me several years earlier whether I would be interested in being the Director of Photography for a documentary film on Eero for the American Masters series on PBS. At the time I turned him down. Also my teenage resentments, my parents' divorce and father's remarriage plus not having been present at his funeral and not knowing until three years ago where he was buried all combined to sour me on the assignment. Something hit me gradually. Two years ago I called Peter back. I started to realize that maybe I could help my father's work be remembered I wanted to help and he accepted. This is when the real catharsis began. This film could help everyone, and even heal my own resentments.

I warned Peter that I was stubborn, and asked him if that would get in his way. I was a director too, and had my own ideas, and wanted to fight for the truth. I must say he has a good heart, and we worked together, and made a good team. I prepared a timeline starting when Eliel Saarinen designed the





Eric Saarinen


Finnish Pavillion for the 1900 World's Fair in Paris, all the way to 1972, when Aline passed away. This was important because it shows Eliel's influence. The film, *Eero Saarinen: The Architect Who Saw the Future*, will be broadcast in December throughout the U.S. in prime time and will be seen by several million people—actually many more over the next four years of repeat broadcasts on PBS. The film will also be on Finnish Television, YLE, in December.

This brief account of my life with Eero comes at the 50th anniversary of the Gateway Arch, the PBS premiere of Peter Rosen's documentary film and, incidentally, the eve of Finland's 100th anniversary year as an independent nation. Because my study of my father led me to his father, Eliel, and his own work in art and architecture, I believe the key to Eero's methods is a result of Eliel's work and philosophy of architecture, which finds the solutions in nature. I am now working on a film about Eliel, and his path. Hopefully this can be a companion to the Eero film.

---

**Eric Saarinen** is a Director/Cameraman In the Director's Guild of America and in the American Society of Cinematography He earned his B.A. at Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont, and studied cinema at the UCLA graduate school. He has photographed 15 feature films including Albert Brooks's *Lost in America*, *Modern Romance* and *Real Life*. He co-founded Plum Productions and went on to shoot many award-winning commercials, including the one that earned the Grand Prix at Cannes for best commercial in the world. He has been inducted into the ASC for "Extraordinary Achievement in the Field of Television."

GAMMA  
CAPITAL MANAGEMENT

 GAMMA is the principal partner of The Iceland Symphony Orchestra



Professional  
investment  
solutions for the  
Icelandic market.

With a personal touch.

REYKJAVÍK  
Garðastræti 37 | 101 Reykjavík | Iceland  
(+354) 519 3300 | gamma@gamma.is | gamma.is

LONDON  
25 Upper Brook Street | Mayfair | London | W1K 7QD  
+44 (0) 207 429 2200 | gcm@gcm.co.uk | gcm.co.uk