Mourning Glory

The only time I ever hugged my dad was when he was dying. By that time he weighed less than me. I bent cautiously over the hospital bed and wrapped my arms around his fading frame. ‘Can you bring me my dog?’ he begged. His eyes drooped like the kids in those black velvet paintings, ‘I gotta go pee, I gotta go pee. They want me to pee in this diaper, I just can’t do it.’

My youngest brother had phoned me. ‘I told Dad to call 911. I knew if family got involved they would never take him into the hospital to get assessed. And then I got a call from the Doc in emergency saying that dad was out of control, screaming, throwing bed pans at nurses, belligerent, they finally had to sedate him and tie him to the hospital bed.’

‘Oh my gawd, that’s unbelievable. I think you did the right thing. We’ve been through this before, he never got help. Maybe a crisis will get something happening,’ I said, ‘but he shouldn’t have thrown the bedpan.’

‘They asked me if I thought he had a drinking problem, I said do ya think,’ he chuckled. I laughed nervously along with him. ‘He’s not going to last long; he’s on his last legs ….days, maybe a few months.’

‘Do they know what’s wrong with him?’ I asked.

‘They’re not even going to look; he’s too far gone.’

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I drove twenty years to see him.

‘Oh that nice old guy in room 265,’ the nurse said, ‘what a sweetheart.’ *You must have the wrong guy*, I thought. He was propped up in bed, bib on, baseball cap sideways, his glasses that were too big for his skeleton face, made his eyes look like a lemur.

Do Not Resuscitate on the whiteboard. There was a photo of his dog on the side table. Obit written. Frail blue veins bulged and traced his blood path. Half-awake he smiled and muttered *you look more beautiful than ever*. He still knew how to hurt me.

‘How are you doing?’ I stammered.

‘I can’t believe this is happening to me,’ he said. After smoking and drinking for sixty years, I was astounded he lasted this long.

‘You look relaxed. Are they giving you medication?’

‘Yeah, they give me tons of pills…look at all this shit.’ He pointed to the side table. Drugs to replace drugs. At least he was calm. He dosed on and off.

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*He controlled the living room space, his feet on the naugahyde ottoman like lion’s paws ready to pounce. A rum and coke was perched on the edge of his carved mahogany table that had real elephant tusks, an acquisition from Africa when he was in the navy. A beastly environment. I read in my room. He was surprised that from his gene pool befell a book daughter, a walk in from a world of words, always questioning his position.*

*Sundays were for skiing. After church we piled into the red and fake wood paneled station wagon and drove out to Whitetrack near Moose Jaw. He never went to church; stayed behind to load the car with skis and lunches. I often froze my feet in the plastic boots. At 40 below with a wind chill, I snuck into the ski lodge to try and get warm. I sat alone, feet numb, crying. A stranger came over and started rubbing my feet. ‘You’ll be fine, they said, you’ll be fine’….I wished that were true. Scarf caught in tow rope; dragged up the hill. This strangling life…get back up there I paid for this. I can still hear him roar.*

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I waited for thirty minutes and then got up to leave. He woke up as soon as I stirred in my chair.

*‘*What, ya got something to do? Busy life these days?’ I froze, panicked and didn’t know how to respond.

‘I’ll come back tomorrow, is there anything I can bring?’

‘I could use a drink,’ he laughed. ‘At least you came to see me, and that makes me happy.’ He seemed afraid that he would die before I came back. And I was terrified that he would die while I was there.

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*The wallpaper vibrated when he hollered. I had a few friends over for a sleepover, he ran into the living room, ‘God Damn it. Fuck. Will you SHUT the Fuck UP!’ He whacked madly at us and he smacked the swag lamp, just missing one of my friends. He then disappeared for a few weeks. He left behind the red and white world book encyclopedia. A prestige purchase from a travelling salesman. I read the entire collection. It was back when I did what I was told, read only what I could gather off the shelves and juggle all the way home. I wandered down dog filled streets to the Moose Jaw Public Library in Crescent Park pushing a stroller, took my baby brother to see the swans.*

*Every day I dreaded coming home from school for fear that his rusty beige Pontiac would be parked in the driveway. Once and awhile he would convince my younger brothers to go out for a coke with him. They sometimes came home* *with a crisp fifty dollar bill. It always had to be new. They of course never realized that fifty dollars didn’t pay rent, food and clothing for a year. I waited again for the giant hand to come down from the sky and whack me on the back of the head.*

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The Occupational Therapist shook his head.

‘What’s his prognosis?’

‘Well, what usually takes ten minutes to assess, took me an hour with your dad. He has severe frontal lobe damage.’

‘Drinking a twenty six of vodka a day might do that,’ I laughed. My brother and I looked at each other knowingly.

‘He’ll need level four care if he makes it out of here,’ the OT said.

‘I pretty much assumed that,’ I said.

‘He tried to convince me that he could drive a motorized wheelchair,’ he said.

‘He was a good salesman in his day,’ I laughed. Now, this formidable man was no longer persuasive or cunning. His arms disassembled, dangling like a drunken puppet.

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*When driving, his huge arm swung like a crane into the back seat. He lashed out at anyone in his rear view mirror like he was trying to obliterate his mistakes. His other weapon was a thick brown leather strap. A false piety. His penance to some unfair God. He used it over blameless things like bed wetting or not cleaning the table correctly. I crashed through the ornate gold divider; footsteps thundered on the stairs, welts on my skin were imprints of a gaudy era. Not that he made any promises. No attempts at love. He once told me he never should have been a parent right before he steered away from responsibility and hit the road for good. Years went by.*

*The next time I saw him I was twenty-one. He was back in town and I was on my way to France to work as an au pair. I told him about my trip and he said, ‘What would you want to do that for!’ ‘Certains persons change jamais!’ I said. I was worldly and he was a drunk. He must have hated me then. Later, I heard he moved to Toronto and had another grand scheme to make envelopes with perforated edges for ease of opening. He spent most of his days dreaming up inventions. One of them was a shower with a toilet in it so that you could shit and shower at the same time. I actually thought this might be a good idea for motorhomes. He cut out newspaper clippings about conspiracy theories and was convinced he could solve the country’s problems.*

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He thought they were poisoning him.

‘Can you taste it first?’ he begged. He had been recently moved to a care home with ‘sunny’ in its name, an unpleasant place where people go to expire when they have no money.

‘What, so I would die before you?’ I joked. Most of our conversations were me filling in the gaps. I spoke of my children’s sports. His genes gave them their height and their athletic ability. Small victories.

‘Sports are not always positive experiences,’he said. I was surprised what he understood about loss.

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*He staggered onto the ice carrying his twenty-sixer of vodka in a brown paper bag; trying to conceal that he was impaired. He was a Sasquatch of a man and acted like the muckymuck of the rink. When he stomped, the zippers of his black galoshes flapped open. He looked ridiculous wearing a Habs toque. I never really understood his allegiance to the Habs. He hated the French, said they were a bunch of poutine eating frogs. He always went on and on about how Canada would be better off without them. He used to be a pretty good hockey player in his day; said he even played with the Moose Jaw Canucks. I suspected he was lying. I really wanted it to be true. All he ever did was watch Hockey Night in Canada and complain about the injustices in his life.*

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‘You know that woman you caught me with at the hotel,’ he said. I hesitated, my mind absorbing what he was alluding to.

‘Oh Dad that was over forty years ago can we just let it go?’ I said. He pulled at his blanket and struggled to straighten it, like he was back in the navy and someone was going to inspect it.

‘It wasn’t what you think it was, I was just meeting her for business,’ he rasped. I had blocked out that memory at about the same time I stopped caring whether he was in my life. ‘I know it changed what you thought about me,’ he said. He wheezed like his body was trying to exorcise the event.

‘I can’t remember what I thought back then,’ I said. ‘But it doesn’t matter now does it?’

‘It matters to me,’ he said. I waited for a few minutes not knowing how to respond.

‘What do you want me to say? That I forgive you for what you did?’ I asked.

‘No, you don’t need to say anything. I’m sorry for messing things up, for being such a son of a bitch,’ he said.

‘You definitely succeeded at that,’ I laughed.

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*I finished a degree, moved to British Columbia for five years and eventually came back to Saskatoon to marry and have three children. He never knew them. Later, we moved to Calgary and occasionally he would phone after drinking all day and one of my kids would answer. They would hold out the phone at arm’s length and say ‘it’s grandpa the drunk.’ Traveling sales and broken dreams, a single floating log stuck in an alcoholic stream, creative juice from an empty bottle, when you’re near your last breath regret will be your only word.*

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At the nursing home, I asked them to give him more ‘happy’ pills. I wanted him to stop counting the number of times the heat came on through the night. He had been asking for his pipe for weeks, I finally brought it against others wishes, *He’s dying,* I said, *what does it matter now*? *Well, lookee here! It’s Santa Claus!* He joked*. Aren’t you going to light it*? I asked. *I’ll just hold it awhile*. He asked me to rub heat lotion on the sores on his arms. I could tell they would never heal. *I miss my dog* he cried and cried. He gave me a list of things he needed. Most I could not bring. I said *I’ll be back soon.*

I drove back and forth from Calgary to Saskatoon for the next six months. His bony fingers grasped for love. The caregivers at the lodge told us repeatedly this would be his last day, ‘you better come now, we can see the signs.’ They looked at us with accusatory glances like we were to blame for his predicament, like we were failures at being his children. He told me that people were leaving him clothes and money, ‘I can’t believe it, isn’t that nice,’ he said. The happy drugs were obviously working; I had never heard him say a kind word.

He died alone.

I phoned his second ex-wife to let her know he passed away. *He was such an asshole*, she blurted out. I could tell she was crying. And I just said *I know…I know*. There would be no ceremony.

I had to put down his blind old dog. He had started biting. One of the last times I visited at the care home dad said*,* ‘I wish I could have left you something.’He left me the funeral bill. I buried him along with his dog, in a small hole dug by cemetery workers at the top of his mothers’ grave, in separate green velour cremation bags.