

The Beloved



"I don't feel well," I wanted to say, but I didn't. Instead, I put on dress slacks, shirt and sweater, and combed my hair. No one had spoken since breakfast, but we knew what to expect. At 10:45 each Saturday (1:00 p.m. Sundays after church), we assembled outside the garage and waited for Pop to back his green Buick into the driveway so that Mom could get into the front seat, while Weezie and I climbed in back. No horseplay or teasing, we simply got in and sat quietly.

As we drove the 27 miles from Westwood to Glendale - always the same route of Wilshire to Santa Monica Boulevard to Beverly to Western to Los Feliz and then east to the low mounds that separated the Los Angeles River basin from the Sierra Madre watershed further east -- I was conscious of the world rolling by outside where people not so different from us were engaged in interesting and worthwhile things. We were going to a grassy knoll to sit and not fidget for several hours of silent remembrance before re-embarking for the trip home to a supper of consommé and toast. Once, Pop substituted Third Street for Beverly, but the pace had been more than he could handle, so it was back to Beverly despite the fact that it added ten minutes to the trip.

Lamar's death had changed Pop. While he had never been especially exciting as far as I could see, he was now - as fourteen-year-olds know all too well -- an embarrassment. We crept the entire 27 miles, turning it into what seemed like one hundred. Other motorists, when they at last found a way past us, ripped by shaking fists and mouthing angry epithets. I cringed, but Pop didn't seem to notice.

In truth I wasn't concerned about Pop's problem. I felt I had plenty of my own. I was expected to suffer mightily, act like an invalid, make no complaints, and take Lamar's place. Teachers who helped themselves to generous measures of praise for Lamar's schoolboy achievements were eager to help me demonstrate that I was fully incapable of becoming what it was I never wanted to become. Worse still, the one teacher who supported my efforts to be myself -- a man of the cloth who found his calling among

adolescent castaways – had, I suspect, a keener interest in my profane body than my immortal soul, but my problems weren't headed in that direction.

After the bustle of traffic and confusion of Glendale, the grounds at Forest Lawn Cemetery -- immortalized in a once popular black-humored novel, *The Loved One* -- were as dead as the formaldehyde-laced cadavers in the brass-bound caskets who waged silent war against the corrupting forces of nature. The sign at the second street past the gate pointed to the Wee Kirk of the Heather that overlooked our sacred turf, and after a minute of twisty climbing turns, we would emerge on the brow overlooking a verdant verandah contrasting sharply with the dun-colored Los Angeles River Basin beyond.

After parking and carefully setting the brake, an operation that seemed interminable, Pop would disembark and lead the way down the slope to Lamar's brass plaque, taking care to avoid the extended areas of the other grave sites. Lamar's was by itself because Pop had bought up the surrounding plots in the expectation we would all lie together someday.

Then, we'd sit. Summer or winter, damp or sunny, blustery or calm, we'd sit; each of us immersed in thought. Mom and pop wouldn't have liked mine - how I burned to be anywhere but here on this open hillside, having to sit quietly beside the dead feeling life streaming inexorably by.

It was worse for Weezie because she was eleven and I doubt any of this made sense other than everyone was miserable and showed no inclination to be anything else. She had waved as Lamar and Hattie and I drove off, bound for adventure in Los Angeles. Pop had given Lamar a St. Christopher medallion for his key chain, slipped him \$20.00 "for the road", cautioned me about behaving, and gone back inside the house. Mom reminded me to behave myself and instructed Hattie what to do when I didn't. Hattie and I were used to this so there was no threat. Then we were off -- a swirl of music erupting from the twin glasspack mufflers of Lamar's shaved and lowered Ford, his pride and joy that I thought mighty peppy among the smoke-belching, tire-shredding, ear-shattering behemoths that roamed the road looking for righteous action in the days before street racing became a dire no-no.

Twenty miles north of Oceanside, on the Marine Reservation of Camp Pendleton, lies a two mile stretch of beach named San Onofre, doubtless the finest most consistent surfing beach on the California coast. Rumor had it that a nuclear power plant was going to be built there - that the beach and its broad-shouldered waves would be ruined forever - but the possibility seemed remote to those of us who camped out for days with our boards waiting for big surf. I ragged Lamar to stop because friends would be there, but he wasn't to be swayed. I pouted for a minute but brightened as we passed Salt Creek and Cotton's Point where a knot of surfers awaited the next right-hand shoot of waves.

The highway, which ran nearly due north for the 26 miles separating Oceanside from San Clemente, turned suddenly east, clawing inland for a mile before resuming its northward trend. It was at this second bend our trip ended on the oversized bumper of George Nakano's truck that failed to negotiate the turn and plowed straight ahead instead. George was running late on his delivery schedule and was trying his best to make up time. Lamar and Hattie died instantly; he spindled on the steering column while she was crushed between the gas tank and engine. I was thrown clear, scything branches 10 feet up before landing in a manzanita thicket well out of sight from the road. Because our car was dropkicked an eighth of a mile backwards, it was some time before I was found and dragged back out to the highway and into the care of a doctor who had stopped to see if he could help.

"What's your name?" he asked as he held me from thrashing. To another person he said, "see if you can find something to tie him down on. He may have a broken back."

"Can you tell me your name, son?" he asked once again as he cinched his belt around me, pinning me tight to a fencepost commandeered for the occasion. "Where do you live?"

Movement ... faces ... words. Flames licking against the fireplace walls. A background surge of sound and purpose, yet on closer attention, meaningless chatter and sterile snik-snak gusts of nothing...trapped gases venting to nowhere.

Then we were roaring away in an ambulance, an event that was at once exciting and hollow. Snatches of siren wail and arrhythmic swaying; pricks as intravenous tubing hatched and slithered into the encompassing darkness. Later—it must have been later in his office--Dr. Garrett busied himself cleansing and stitching as I watched with detached interest. As he worked, he talked.

"What I'm doing is getting ready to send you up to a hospital in Santa Ana," he said in concert with his stitching motion. I was intrigued by his ability to match rhythms.

"You're losing blood somewhere," he continued matter-of-factly, matching his activity. "It's amazing you have no broken bones." He peered intently at something outside my line of sight. "You don't have to be afraid," he reassured me. "My friend, Dr. Mears will be waiting for you at the hospital. He's the best there is."

"Will you stay with me?" I asked, and he nodded, tying off a strip of sutures.

"You may set a world record for stitches," he said, leaning back to admire his handiwork. "Your face has a lot of cuts from the windshield." I didn't understand but I trusted him and his office with its warm smell of pipe tobacco and medicinal alcohol and his nurse held my hand.

The hospital was different. Dr. Garrett turned me over to an orderly, leaned down to where I could sense his presence, and told me that all was going to be well. "Dr. Mears and I went to school together," he explained. "He was the top student in our

class." He paused to wipe moisture from his eyes. "If you were my son, he'd be the person I'd want."

They put me in an alcove because the hospital was full. An intern sat with me and he did his best to keep my spirits up. It was great fun. If I felt like being silly, others played along. If I said "black is white" people agreed. I was a jerk and knew it...reveled in it in fact. The intern would offer a nice thought; I would come back with a mean one. I would suggest something; he would respond logically; and I would counter with an off-the-wall absurdity.

"We think it's your spleen," Dr. Mears confided in me frankly. "If we're right, we'll see you tomorrow," he continued confidently, "if not, it'll be a bit longer."

An orderly arrived, and he and the intern transferred me to a gurney for the trip through the main lobby and into an elevator filled with visitors. A woman recoiled while her escort explained that she suffered from asthma. Her action and his response reminded me of something else but I couldn't quite bring it into focus.

Often on weekends, I rode my bicycle from our house in Westwood to the beach at Santa Monica, a distance of perhaps nine miles. On the way was the Veteran's Hospital at Sawtelle referred to as the "Old soldier's home", but during World War Two, its clientele mushroomed to provide for the newly maimed. Most stayed within the confines of the hospital grounds, but some would come out and sit on the bus benches along San Vicente Boulevard. Many wore uniforms with their medals prominently displayed, and I made a habit of stopping to talk with them at least once a week.

Most memorable of these men was Lieutenant Clark whose face bore witness to the flames that filled the cockpit of his P-400 fighter, downed over Guadalcanal in early 1943. He had no nose to speak of and his mouth was pulled back in a derisive grin. He spoke unevenly through twisted lips, but his eyes, evidently protected by goggles, were clear and soft.

He had been born and raised in Indiana, he told me, had a sister and brother who still lived at home, and a dog who could sense a pheasant in the brush at fifty yards. He had gone home once, but he saw immediately it had been a mistake, so he returned to Sawtelle where there were others just like him - some even worse. It would be his home, he decided, even though he would have to face his fate alone every day for the rest of his life. I longed to tell him that he could come live with us - that I wasn't frightened by him and his face - but I knew it wouldn't work out, so we talked about flying and friends and sometimes other horribly mutilated soldiers would sit and talk with us.

Perhaps that was what sat just beyond memory's reach as the elevator made its way up to the surgery floor where they wheeled me into the operating room. Dr. Mears, smocked and capped, helped lift me onto the operating table.

"Dr. Garrett tells me that you are worth saving," he said as he adjusted his gown. "I don't want to disappoint him." The nurse floated up on my right side and asked if I'd like to smell something nice. It reminded me of a Christmas fruit cake as I took a breath thinking how strange it all seemed. The lights flared for an instant, sounds grew hollow, as much as I struggled to hold my ground I felt myself sliding helplessly down a greased tube into an undulating ...

Pop was devastated, suffering what could well have been a mild heart attack though I didn't know it then. Mom arrived on the second day, bringing me bright stories about how well Lamar and Hattie were doing and how they hoped I'd be home soon, and the nurse brought me guinea pigs to play with. There wasn't much to do but think, so I remembered Larry, in Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*, and how he overcame pain by imagining it as a ball to be taken outside his body and rolled around on the tip of his nose. I tried it and it worked which was a very heady accomplishment,

But deep down I knew the secret was that none of this was happening, at the same time learning to identify the nurses by the rustle of their dresses and the doctors by their tread on the carpet. Nice people came and went a lot, and one day someone left a newspaper and that's how I found out about Lamar's funeral and that I was badly injured. It said nothing about Hattie, so I asked the nurse who told me I'd have to ask the doctor. Reality began to come at me from all sides.

Walking was hard at first. My left knee had struck the dash board with such force that it tore it from its moorings and pulled it half-way through the windshield following my egress route. Surprisingly, nothing was broken except the skin, which had been split by the impact, but since things like kneecap and cartilage had been left to dangle in the breeze--stopping the bleeding had been more important than knee function—Dr. Garrett had stuffed the parts back roughly into place and sutured things back together.

The slice in my abdomen to get at the spleen was a different matter. It was puffy and tender with a keloid tissue seam running eight inches top to bottom on my gut, and I had ripped several stitches laughing while reading *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* where Sir Boss blows up Merlin's castle. Mostly, it felt as if someone very large had performed his trampoline routine on my stomach, and it didn't help that I had taken to manufacturing a great deal of gas. Expelling it was a relief, but the effort took its toll.

Pop was on the mend, because Mom started coming every other day and staying for several hours. She read to me which was fine because I didn't know what to say about Lamar. When I'd bring him up, she would talk about Pop and how much he missed Lamar. I missed him too, I told her, but I really didn't know how much at the time. I still expected to see him walk through the door with his cockeyed grin and say something like, "ready for a game of tennis, short-stuff?" That was his way.

Finally, it was time to go home, and a fair crowd of nurses and doctors and sisters (it had been a Catholic hospital, though nobody went for my soul) gathered at the

sidewalk to see me off. Even the intern whom I had made miserable the first evening, was there and one of the nurses gave me a guinea pig to take with me.

Mom and Butch and Neale Bearden came to pick me up and drive back to the beach. I sat in the back and tried to envision the sequence of events leading to the hospital. It was funny looking out at the scene of the wreck, thinking I ought to remember something, but drawing instead a total blank. I felt pretty good for a while, but by the time we reached Oceanside, I was tired and a little apprehensive of what my reception might be.

As at the hospital, a clump of people stood outside the house waiting for us. They waved as we came around the curve and started down the hill. Weezie and her friends, several Matthiessens and Englishes, the Wilhemys and Forves, and an assortment of cats and dogs belonging to the neighborhood. I half expected to see Hattie come out wiping her hands on her apron and that's when the first inkling of the enormity hit me.

"You mustn't rough-house with John for a while," Neale Bearden cautioned the assemblage. "He's still got some mending to do."

It was wasted breath. No one wanted to get within five feet of me because I looked considerably different from when I left. I was pale and slightly hunched; walked unsteadily; and my face was still swollen and lashed with scars and welts from my collision with windshield and tree. There was a little foot-shuffling and platitude pushing, but pretty quickly everyone headed off to other pursuits. I could see that my company was not in great demand for the present.

Pop was upstairs in bed resting, and the moment he saw me he burst into tears, his body shook with gut-wrenching sobs. They welled up within him like waves, so Mom led me downstairs without a word being spoken.

It was no better the next day, and Mom suggested that Pop needed more rest before I went to see him again.

I had been home for four days when Pop came to my room. He looked horrible - paler than I and shaky. He tried to say something, shook, and fled.

It was the mold in which our days were cast. Eventually the tears ceased, but the silence remained. New patterns emerged, the most pervasive of which was our Forest Lawn trips.

As it began to get dark, Pop would gather himself together and we would troop up the hill, me bringing up the rear. In the beginning, Weezie would try to hold his hand and be cheery, but she soon learned that this was not what he wanted. Not that he'd overtly reject her, in truth I think he really tried to come back into this world, but he was beyond hope.

It was during this time, he wrote a letter to a famous British psychic named Ilene Garrett whom he had met in the early thirties during a weekend retreat at Lake

Arrowhead Northeast of Los Angeles. He was ill, having recently lost a kidney, and he was uncertain over how he should approach the future. Mom suggested he consult Mrs. Garrett and made the arrangements. She told him to just go on and live his life and not worry about what might or might not happen - good advice for anyone under any circumstances. He remembered her now.

The correspondence between Mrs. Garrett and Pop mounted and for a while it seemed to do some good for him. Lamar was well and happy and wanted him to be well and happy - indeed wanted all of us to be well and happy - she said, having sought him out and found him among the multitudes beyond the grave. But that was the extent of the miracle she could perform. She never charged a dime for her services, faithfully corresponded until the end, and just maybe if she had sent a bill, he'd have felt some compulsion to accept her visions and again get on with his life. But he couldn't.

In fact he could barely get himself to start the car and begin the long silent journey home on streets thronged with people on their way to having a pleasant, even joyful, evening with family and friends. Once, he had to pull over and let Mom drive because his grief was too much to contain. Weezie and I looked out of opposite windows the rest of the way home, confused and frightened by the excess of emotion.

Things were not particularly cheerier at home. Following our trips to the cemetery, we'd dine on cold leftovers or consommé and crackers. It seemed appropriate, somehow, putting a fitting cap to the day. Better still, it didn't take too long. We stayed at the table until Pop finished and went upstairs to read and go to bed, and then we were on our own.

I was no help. Indeed, I became more a part of the problem than ever before. I hated school, not merely because I wasn't good at it or interested in it, but because the ghost of Lamar was there so powerful and so pervasive that I was held up to standards and challenges that neither made sense nor satisfied desire. At first I resisted, but it brought no surcease. Finally I revolted - absolutely refused to play the game - and then, and only then, after I resolutely refused going to Lamar's school, Mom and Pop and the headmaster reluctantly agreed that I ought to go elsewhere.

I transferred to University High School in West Los Angeles, a district composed of upper middle class white Christians and Jews; third generation Mexican-Americans; and Nisei Japanese. There was only one black (Negro in those days) student in the school, but he happened to be the student body president. Uni High was known throughout the Los Angeles City School system for its lousy football and so-so basketball teams, and kick-ass tennis program. It was the 1952 equivalent of Yuppiesville.

Compared to the academic demands I had been used to, Uni High was a joke. Mere attendance was worth a passing grade. Excellence in classwork was a sure way to social suicide. Making it was mediocrity - or less.

I chose less. It's going to sound squirrely, but I didn't choose the path of least resistance, I fought everything. I was in revolt, and by God I was going to carry it through. I was committed to proving Pop's assessment of me correct.

School ended and we returned to St. Malo. The Doctor insisted that Pop take the summer off and spend his time relaxing and repairing his health. For a while, the change seemed to do him good, and he spent long hours fishing in the surf or playing cards with friends who would come for the weekend as in the old days. I found it best to stay out of his way as much as possible as seeing me would remind him of Lamar. Sometimes it just became too much for him, though, and he would get in his car early of a morning and drive the hundred miles to Los Angeles to visit Forest Lawn. He'd stay over a day or two before coming back, and he would look the sadder for the experience.

Then came a night Pop left dinner early complaining of a stomach ache. Mom went upstairs with him and I sat in the living room reading. Weezie was spending the night with Louise and Martha Cummings across the street and I had it in mind walking on the beach, when Mom came down to call an ambulance.

Pop died of a massive heart attack within an hour of his arrival at the hospital. There was nothing they could have done for him, but I believe that he really didn't want anyone to help him.

The remnants of our embattled family returned to Los Angeles the next morning with the funeral following several days later. The trip we made to Forest Lawn to bury him next to Lamar was the last I ever took. They're there side-by-side, watched over by the keepers of the Wee Kirk of the Heather.

Postscript:

Mom and Weezie are both dead, 1984 and 2015 respectively, Neither is buried at Forest Lawn. Nor will I be, the extra plots remaining empty through eternity, unless, of course, the cemetery custodians feel secure enough to fill the vacancies..