

Living Proof

He was dead—that much was certain.

But, until the moment I stood over his coffin, the hushed murmuring of the mourners behind me, a part of me hadn't believed it was possible. But there he was, he was dead.

His face looked serene; I had never seen the features so relaxed, so even; he looked as though he had only ever had calm, placid thoughts about flowers or puppies or babies. As though he had never had that sneer, eyes hardened by the anger that flowed out of him like an uncontrollable hurricane.

No, he was dead. There would never be another moment when those merciless eyes would be turned towards me, the eyes that told me that there was no help for me, that the anger was

going to be unleashed, that destructive force, because of which, I hadn't seen or spoken to the man for twenty years.

I had gotten the call late on a Friday night. My sister, who had taken care of him in the final months of his illness, had told me, "Dad died last night". At first the words held no meaning for me. How could he die? How could the anger ever stop, how could his words, words that had cut through my being and torn it to shreds, ever stop flowing? I felt he would go on forever, like the perpetual storm of The Great Red Spot on Jupiter.

"The funeral is next week," she had said. "I hope you'll be there."

My first thought, when I hung up the phone, was that I wouldn't go. I felt nothing upon hearing the news, and I went to bed and slept soundly. But when I opened my eyes in the morning, and contemplated the shaft of bright morning sunlight

splashed across the ceiling, I realized that I needed to see it for myself. I felt that he wasn't dead, that he could never and would never be dead, that there couldn't possibly ever be an end to him, to his rage.

When I got on the plane, I was sure that when I arrived, Dad would be there, and he would look at me with that hard stare, waiting to say something cutting. Nothing had ever stopped his harsh words, how could it be over now? No, it wasn't possible I told myself, driving from the airport to the house. When I got there he would greet me at the door, beer in hand, wearing one of his ubiquitous plaid shirts, the game blaring from the TV.

But when I arrived, and my sister opened the door and let me in, all I heard was silence. A hushed silence permeated the house, and it hit me that it might be true after all. Maybe he

really was dead. I followed her through the living room, which was filled by a bed, an IV, a walker, and an oxygen tank. This was where he had spent his last year, dealing with his emphysema. When my sister had called me and told me his diagnosis, I had said, “That’s a tough break.” And I had hung up the phone, feeling nothing.

She led me into the kitchen. “You want anything to drink?” she asked.

I opened the cabinet over the stove; it was stocked with bottles of wine and whiskey, as it had always been. “You want to open up a Merlot?” I asked.

“Sure.”

She uncorked the bottle, poured, and we sat down at the kitchen table.

“So,” I said, “how are you doing?”

“OK I guess.” She took a long sip from her glass. “This was a good idea. I needed this.” Another sip. “How are you?”

“Fine.”

“I’m glad you made it. I really am.” She reached across the table and touched my hand. I smiled at her. I had always loved my sister’s warmth.

“Me too.”

She took another long sip. “It was tough at the end. He couldn’t handle being so weak.

He was totally dependent on me.”

“Let me guess, he handled it by yelling and screaming.”

My sister shrugged. “Well, he was a sick old man, what can you expect?”

“Yeah but what was his excuse all those other years?”

“Look, I really can’t go there right now. I know he wasn’t perfect.”

“Perfect? How about decent?” I shook my head. “I still don’t understand how you could stay here and take care of him the way you did.”

“To be honest with you, I don’t know how you could have turned your back on him for all those years. He was your father after all.”

I glugged down the rest of my wine and refilled my glass. I was wrenched by anger. How was it possible that she didn’t get it?

“I know what he was,” she went on, “believe me. But there were nights, I would sit there, wondering what it was that made

you break with him permanently. I wondered about the moment you decided never to see your father again.”

I looked down into my glass. I swirled the translucent liquid, noticed the deep reddish purple of it, drank more of it down. I knew exactly when it was, exactly the moment I had looked into his blazing eyes and realized it was over between us. For good. He was screaming at me in the car, I could still hear the grating harshness of his voice, it was like carbon monoxide invading my ears; and he said, “you’re just one big fucking mistake. That’s all you are. Do you hear me?” At that moment, all I had ever felt for him was killed. Murdered by his words. As he continued screaming, his poisonous voice filling the air with carnage, I started to look at him as a stranger. He was no one to me. His screaming was nothing to me. I had gotten out of the car and walked away.

“I need a cigarette,” I said. I got up, got my Newports and a lighter from my purse and lit up. I pulled the ceramic ashtray towards me, the one my sister had made for him in second grade, wobbly pink flowers painted on it, and tapped my cigarette into it. “I suppose he smoked right up until the end.”

My sister nodded. “When he died, it started with one of his coughing fits, and you know, they usually subside, but this time, it wouldn’t stop. He couldn’t catch his breath. I gave him the oxygen, he strapped it on and tried to breathe, but it didn’t work. He continued coughing until basically he stopped breathing.” Tears came into her eyes.

“I’m sorry Lorraine.”

“I think I’d like one of those too.”

I slid the pack across the table to her.

The next morning, as I pulled on my black dress, I expected to hear his loud, gravelly voice calling up the stairs to me, telling me to get my ass in gear. After I zipped the dress I stood at the door and listened. Nothing. Just the sound of Lorraine blow drying her hair down the hall.

Just the hum of the hair dryer, nothing more.

I met her downstairs. She was wearing a too-tight black blouse, her hair looked frizzy and her eyes were puffy. I felt sorry for my sister. She had nothing; she had never married, no career, no money except what my father left her, and she had put up with him all that time, and was with him until the end.

Always putting up with him, always making excuses for him, always saying “he’s still our father”.

We had driven in silence to the funeral home. Even as I walked up the stairs and entered the lobby, a part of me expected him to show up, his loud booming voice ringing out, playing his role as the great guy. He would shake hands, clap people on the back, tell them how great they look; his presence would fill the whole room, and everyone would come up to me after and say, “your father is such a great guy”.

I stared down at him; the makeup the undertaker had put on him was caking around his lips, his skin wasn’t red and blotchy anymore, it was a strange, beige-yellowish color. I supposed the undertaker thought that would be his ideal skin tone. A memory rose up, of a time when I was a girl, when he was young, that time he came into the house and touched my cheek—his skin had been smooth, with a clear olive tone; I had thought he was handsome.

He could be sleeping a deep, peaceful sleep; but suddenly I knew—wherever he was, he wasn't there anymore; he was gone, whatever had been inside of him that had done what he had done didn't exist anymore—it was all over.

I thought of his clear olive skin on that day when I was a girl, and he had touched my cheek, and to my great surprise, a sadness descended onto me. I would never see him again. I reached out and touched his hand—long fingers, folded together over his chest, and I said goodbye. My father was dead—that much was certain.