

North Of Everywhere

We were in the most northern out-post of Euro-Canadian “civilization” well past the arctic circle. It was a vibrant small freshly minted domed destination city. It had been intentionally created by the Canadian government using the latest techniques of the most modern energy efficient resources. It sat in the midst of thousands of square miles of pristine wilderness, accessible only by electric powered bullet trains. I was there with my family. That consisted of my ninety-three-year-old dad and my three wonderful kids, who were all well into adulthood. The scenery outside of the city was unique and profound. Thousands of animals, that I had never imagined, engaged in an annual ritual of migration over the permafrost skag around the protected perimeter of the city. Meantime, the family dynamic was excruciatingly awkward.

My dad had started to manifest symptoms of Alzheimer’s the year before. One of the first was when he became convinced that I was trying to steal from him, even though I had honestly stated that the only thing I had ever stolen from him was some booze while in high school. He could not verbalize exactly when this “theft” had taken place or what he thought was missing, but he was damn sure that it had and that I was the culprit. He even offered me a thousand bucks to return

what I had (not) stolen. He shared his opinion with anyone who would listen and took steps to physically, emotionally, and legally shut me out of his life. It was the most painful experience of my existence and I'm sure it was no picnic for him either.

My kids had thought that the trip, which had been planned long before the dementia started, might be a good diversion and a chance for him to soften his opinion of me. So, we had travelled together via the high-speed train through the northern hinterlands and experienced the bleak but somehow breathtaking scenery from the comfort of our compartment. Dad made sure to sit as far from me as possible. My kids were doing a great job keeping him occupied, with his mind on anything but me, his only son.

We had only been in the city a short time when it was decided that we should explore this unique cityscape by day. It was a bustling climate controlled urban scene, under a massive dome. The temperature inside the dome but outside of the houses and buildings was about fifty. Much warmer than outside the dome but still brisk. Most everyone dressed in warm ski gear. Even though it was summer, the temp outside of the dome hovered slightly above freezing during the twenty hours of daylight and there was still thick snow cover on most of the ground outside. The majority of the locals were even

carrying cross country skis or snow shoes. The effect was that the crowd of individuals out in the streets and in the stores looked eerily similar. Like I mentioned, my kids were doing an admirable job of maintaining a buffer between my openly hostile father and myself. But, all of a sudden, I realized that they had moved away off in different directions to explore their own individual areas of interest, leaving me and dad on our own.

He was looking feverishly for some small item that he “knew” was there, quickly becoming very frustrated. I tried to get him to tell me about the item, but he just became more agitated and dismayed as he realized he was alone with me. My offer to help was obviously only making things worse. I quickly did a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree scan of the mega-store, hoping to spot one of my offspring. But all I could see was an army of similarly dressed and kitted locals marching around the retail arena like the faithful circling the well during the “stoning the devil” ceremony in Mecca at the end of Ramadan. None of my kids were in sight. After the thorough scan, I turned back to my father. He had moved a few feet away and latched onto a store employee who was sweeping the floor using chemically enhanced sawdust as a mild abrasive and a large push-broom to coral that and the dust back into a manageable pile. After unsuccessfully trying to engage the man in conversation, dad grabbed a second push-

broom that was nearby and started to energetically sweep as well.

His efforts were sloppy and causing more mess than cleaning. But the employee's irritation had started to recede as it began to dawn on him what my dad's state was. He even started to give my dad some simple instruction on the proper method of sweeping. Dad, of course, had been a student of the science of sweeping in his youth. During the Great Depression, he had worked most of his adolescent years sweeping out (and emptying the spittoons) in his father's barbershop, in a small town in central Iowa.

It started to come back to him and his efforts at moving the sawdust and dirt around became more linear and organized. The employee complimented him on it. It acted as a balm, calming my him as his anxiety and frustration evaporated. I knew to keep my distance and let this stranger, whom I was so grateful to, work his magic. Through the shroud of sorrow that I had recently been feeling whenever I thought about my dad, rose a sorely missed feeling of love and pride that I had previously felt toward the man. As he gamely swept away, I began to imagine him eighty years previous in my beloved grandfather's barbershop, where I had spent many summers hanging out. Dutifully doing an excellent job with his broom, earning his dime a week, and more importantly, the approval

of *his* dad. An approval that was not given freely and always had to be earned.