

1 Trying To Die

I could tell he was trying to die – really trying, as if by the sheer force of his iron will he could command his heart to stop, like he had so often commanded me, my sister, my mother and a great many others to stop, to halt, to shut up, to do this or that. He was in that familiar state of stern, steely concentration, laid out on the rented hospital bed at the foot of great grandmother’s regal plantation four-poster, his knuckly fingers rolled into fists, his jaw clenched, his brow furrowed, and the afternoon sun illuminating his gnarled and knobby toes. What, I wondered, was responsible for their profound disfigurement? Was it the miles of fairways, tees and greens he had trudged across in his 85 years? Or was it the endless hours pacing to and fro in San Francisco courtrooms, trying to command the thoughts of judge and jury?

Whatever it was, I decided then and there it should be avoided. I bent over my massive midriff and studied my own toes in the crusty white shag. Aside from the yellowing, curled nails, they didn’t look unusually bent or knobby, at least not yet, but I feared that like many of the failing factory parts of my six/six, 240-pound frame, they would eventually join in the cacophony of inflamed and screaming joints that had accompanied me into my 60th year.

My father’s exit had become unreasonably complicated. I could understand why, on a purely emotional level, he felt like dying. So did I, even on that exquisitely lit late summer afternoon. We had, both of us, a rough go of late.

It started with my mother succumbing to the “awful awful” (my father’s term for Alzheimer’s) in a quiet but possibly premature fashion, after which he promptly broke his hip, got pneumonia, and forgot how to swallow. Subsequently, his life quickly became a revolving door of hospitals, rehab centers, surgeries, more hospitals and rehab centers, skilled nursing facilities, and finally home to a house full of caregivers, hospice nurses, pills, purees, and us: me, my ever-patient and long-suffering wife Sandy, my winsome son Tripp, his equally winsome girlfriend Elke and the world’s most prescient, possibly telepathic chocolate lab Mr. Booper. On occasion my mercurial shape-shifting sister, Sisi, might show up, but those visits had become increasingly infrequent.

What made my father’s last days so devilishly complicated was this: my sister had decided she was burned out on care-giving and needed a break, so she informed everybody she was going on a three day backpack trip with her new post-divorce boyfriend, a rotund biker who smelled of Cool Ranch Doritos, with a doo-rag atop his shaved dome – the polar opposite of her hail-fellow-well-met husband of 22 years. Our father was horrified, convinced that this creepy recovering alcoholic was going to rape and murder his daughter, chop her up into bite-sized chunks, pack her up in double-strength trash bag and unload her in a Quincy dumpster. So when she didn’t answer our phone calls at the appointed time on Monday, Hal Brown got a little nervous. Then more than a little nervous. When she wasn’t back by Tuesday morning he was beside himself. Spiked a fever. We all started calling around to see if anyone knew of her whereabouts. By the time I learned from her employer that she had walked off the job in a huff it was too late. The old man’s vision of his daughter as a raccoon midnight snack had sent him into delirium, so he laid down on the rent-a-bed, closed his eyes, and told his broken heart to stop.

There I was, stuck between a father who was so bereaved by his daughter’s apparent abandonment that, like a grief-stricken Dickens character, he could just lay down and die, and a sister that obviously didn’t give a shit. Where would this leave me, once my father was dead and my sister gone? Would I be a 21st century version of young Rasnolikov, abandoned by humanity, my body in

tatters, my mind tortured, twisted and inflamed, and my heart throbbing with a cold, nameless ache; nothing more than a branch broken off the family tree, left to rot on the ground? After thirty years of teaching high school English and coaching basketball, with my remaining years stretched out before me like the last flight of the proverbial stairway to heaven, I felt like I couldn't take another step.

A strong breeze, the kind that usually heralds the arrival of ocean fog, had begun to whip the branches of the oaks, bays and redwoods outside my father's bedroom. I stepped away from my post at the foot of his rent-a-bed, Mr. Booper following me with his ochre eyes, and opened the sliding glass door, thinking a blast of chill wind might revive the old man, or at least dry the nervous sweat at the nape of my neck.

It was then, if my memory serves, that I felt something break through the dull, frozen undefined ache in my heart, like a poisonous baby viper cracking its egg: anger. Big, red, hot burning anger. I felt like taking my father in my arms and hurling him across the room. *Fuck this goddamn dying charade*, I thought. Then I was angry with my sister for being angry with our father. I was angry with death, angry with God. And above all I was angry with myself, for always being so angry with everybody and everything else.

"Dad," I barked after slamming the sliding glass door, "you can't die now. We've got some things we need to talk about."

He didn't move one single cell, but I could hear his voice in my head: *Yes, of course. About money, I suppose. And the land you and your sister will inherit in Louisiana. What else could there be?*

I gripped my big, square head in my massive paws and gave it a violent shake. "No, no that's not it at all!" I whispered, even though it was, or at least part of it was. He must have heard me because I heard his voice, though his thin lizard lips didn't quiver a micron.

What else is there besides the money and the land?

"What a smartass!" I hissed quietly, not wanting to alarm Sandy and the caregivers. *What is he seeing in his fading mind's eye?* I thought. *A six-foot, six-inch tall slimy green leech, with countless little sucker pods trying to latch onto him?* Though there were many unresolved issues regarding his estate, I honestly didn't want to talk about it. Not to the exclusion of everything else, at least. That's what he wanted to talk about, but not me. I sincerely and angrily wanted him to know how much I loved him without having to tell him so, but I didn't know how. Still, he appeared to be unconscious, so why not? He might hear me, but wouldn't be able to react.

"I love you, Dad." *Is it love?* I immediately wondered. *Or is it gratitude for the material comforts he had heaped upon our family? Can a child love a parent that once hurled his little body around the room like a football? Can a boy love a father for whom none of his efforts were ever acknowledged as good enough?* Maybe I should have asked him straight up: "Was I ever good enough?" But I didn't, at least not that afternoon in his bedroom. Besides, I already knew the answer, or thought I did.

Then I heard my father's voice in my head again.

Oh...no you don't love me. You can't. How could you after all the psycho-terror I heaped upon you and your sister? I may have been a good bank, but not exactly a good dad. But thanks anyway.

A good bank? I thought. It was the same sarcastic, self-deprecatory bile that we had grown up with. *Is the proximity of death causing him to actually mean what I imagine him to be saying?* I wondered.

Distracted by the peculiar clarity of his voice in my head, my anger began to dissipate. Quite suddenly, I went from hopping mad to complete exhaustion. Numb, frozen, bound, gagged, sad, hollow – I felt victim to an emotional gang rape. So I abandoned my post at the foot of the bed and collapsed into the low-slung rocking chair I had spent so many hours in as an adolescent, practicing

my guitar and reading science fiction novels. Soon Mr. Booper laid his long, soft and silky head across my own tortured toes. After a few minutes I took up the old nylon-stringed guitar that was propped against the bed and absent-mindedly plucked at it, watching my father's chest rise and fall and listening to the purple finches singing "chit chit chit" while they flitted about the swaying feeder outside.

Eventually I dozed, dreaming of the two of us, father and son, locked in a friendly golf match, emerald fairways crossed with the dark shadow bands of the redwoods and Monterey pines, golden Northern California hills glowing in the soft twilight. We knew that we were basking in the natural grace of the Golf God, seventy four degrees, not a breath of wind, the late summer scent of sweet vanilla rising, greens soft and forgiving, fairways trimmed to perfection, two tall dixie cups full of cold draft beer in the golf cart. My father put a seven-iron swing on the ball like George Archer, tall and loose, an easy backswing that started down slow, then caught the ball with a crisp whoosh-click, pulling a six inch divot skyward. The ball soared in a soft fade over the flag, kicked up a tiny tuft of green, then rocketed backward into the cup as if on a string.

At the very moment the ball rattled into the cup, I was jarred awake by Sandy, my wife of 32 years. "Well, how's he doing?" My eyes popped open.

"He's faking it. The whole thing. It's just a ruse to get Sisi to show up."

"Howard! What a thing to say!"

"Look at all that snot. His body is supposed to be shutting down, but his shnozz is a regular booger factory." It was true. Yellow crust had built up around his cavernous nostrils while a steady stream of sinus butter spilled across his upper lip and down his whiskered cheek. Sandy took a clean rag and wiped.

"Howard, just because his nose is running..."

"Look at his toes, Sandy, those aren't the toes of a dying man." I knew that there was no validity to my claim, just as I knew that my attempts to brighten the gloom of impending death with my banal levity were insensitive and inappropriate. But it didn't stop me. "He's obviously possessed by aliens," I said. Sandy paused and looked me over with mild contempt.

"Here your father is dying and all you can do is joke about it. Boy, Howard. You sure can be a jerk sometimes."

Sandy was right, of course. My father was dying, and as his only son I felt I had the right to be as flippant and selfish as I pleased.

"Death will do that to a guy," I said. Sandy shook her head, gave the old man a kiss on the forehead, sighed, and left the room.

I remained, slouched in the antique armless rocker with my size-15 feet under Mr. Booper's warm chocolaty muzzle, and considered what had become of the master bedroom. It was now a virtual hospital: the fully automatic, adjustable hospital bed was just a few feet from the foot of his real bed, the antique four-poster, and an oxygen tank hissed at the base of the pole that held the fluids and liquid food that got pumped directly into his gut through a peg tube. Atop his chest sat his little transistor radio, a single wire snaking up to the plastic earphone jammed halfway down his ear canal, and on the table next to the bed sat a plastic bag full of tiny triple A batteries. A few feet from the foot of the hospital bed stood a brand new 24 inch flat-panel TV on an antique end-table, its remote control aside the radio on his chest.

At one point after my mother's death, my father asked if dying was painful. I told him that, quite obviously, I had no idea, but in case it was we would be prepared. So, my father being a great

believer in better living through chemicals, I had his caregivers arrange a robust pharmacopeia atop his giant mahogany antique dresser. This I sampled generously, not only as my father's acolyte, but also in the interest of ensuring efficacy of the various pain meds. By the time of my sister's disappearance I was pretty certain that even death by sledgehammer would be pain-free.

That afternoon, after Sandy had pronounced me "jerk of the day," I thought a little morphine sulfate under the tongue might perhaps make me feel less of a jerk, and I knew it would relieve the throbbing knot in my lower back. But I also knew it would make me numb, light, dreamy, drowsy – I might fall asleep and miss my father's big event all together. There was also a healthy supply of Ativan in case one of us got nervous, and the Haldol, should we get psycho, but neither of those were called for at the time. So I decided to take a healthy swig of his liquid hydrocodone, the Vicodin cocktail. Within minutes the knot at the base of my spine had unraveled, and I was wondering how it was possible that my wife could consider me, big Howard Brown, the world's greatest high school basketball coach, a jerk.

I felt alert, imperturbable, as strong and solid as the redwood tree in the front yard. My brain parted like the Red Sea, with me on one side observing me on the other side – self abstracted from self, the watcher and the watched. I closed my eyes as my Vicodin-laced brain pulled sparkling clean memories out of the mental soup with pristine clarity, and eventually recalled a scene of Mom and Dad and a pact they made three years ago.

That day, the old man sat us down at the kitchen table next to his overstuffed club chair. Then he cleared his throat as if he was in the courtroom about to address the ladies and gentlemen of the jury. "Mom and I have agreed that we don't believe in any sort of life after death," he announced, leaning forward on the edge of his chair and running his twisted fingers through his long, silver-blue hair. "We've decided that this is the end."

He looked like the end had already happened, his giant hawk nose a roadmap of booze-busted capillaries, snot perennially coalescing in the nostril fuzz, his grey eyes broken down into pools of uninvited tears hiding in the shade of his overhanging silver brows, his terse upper lip shielding what was left of his teeth.

My mother had no comment. Alzheimer's had made such concepts as "death" and "the end" as meaningful as "spoon" and "poop." She might have been wondering what happened to her usual daytime rerun companions: Lucy, Ricky, Matt Dillon, the Brothers Cartwright, Bob Barker. She might have even wondered why we kept her friends holed up in that box in the corner of the kitchen.

But Hal Brown was serious, so I did what I could to paint a brighter picture: "That's the great thing about death, Dad. Nobody knows for sure what happens so you can make up whatever you want." This was probably the most metaphysical thing I had ever said to him in my entire life, and though both of my parents converted to Catholicism upon their arrival in San Francisco, Dad from the South and Mom from Chicago, their religious affiliations had more to do with blending into the City than with any faith in the Holy Trinity. But as it turned out on that particular day, he wasn't interested in a theological debate, nor was he interested in my theory of eternal party after death, or even to make lively discussion over Pascal's wager (which to me was, and still is, the only logical way of looking at it). Instead, as always, there was an immediate practical purpose, a command, a fatherly directive that he meant to impart:

"Well, we don't want any last rites or anything like that. And if you put on a little memorial get together we don't want any priests or religion involved."

Bullshit! I wanted to shout. *If that's how you've decided it's going to be then why did we waste all that time at St. Sebastian's getting baptized and going to catechism and getting confirmed and playing CYO basketball? Was that*

all so you could play God in the Christmas Pageant with your big ass God-like voice booming through the church? What about all the stuff we learned about venial sin and mortal sin and how to decide which was which and how big a mark a sin might leave on your soul and how much penance you had to say to wash it off? Weren't these the rules we were taught to live by, so when we got to where you are now we could relax, knowing we were going to Heaven to hang with Jesus and The Holy Ghost in super clean super white robes and golden halos? Now you're shitcanning the whole business, right when it matters most? Now that you've spent your whole life paying the premiums you're saying you don't want the insurance after all?

But I didn't say any of that. I glanced over at Mom who was now looking right at us. If the old man had his way, both he and Mom would be holding hands and, on cue, the lights would go out.

Here, and then... *flick!* Nowhere. No pearly gates. No exit interviews. No purgatory. No limbo.

But despite my father's commanding presence, few of his efforts ever went according to plan. As my consciousness drifted back to the rocker by his rent-a-bed I wondered what had become of my sister, and if her cruel disappearance had been planned to purposefully force the old man over the edge. *What the fuck were you thinking? Can you imagine what it must be like to be at death's door with no idea if your child is dead or alive?* Abandoning our father in his increasingly tenuous and precarious state appeared vicious beyond comprehension, and I soon realized there was no making sense of it. Regardless of how hard I wished, hoped, visualized or otherwise cogitated, I couldn't make Dad's final days a loving family sendoff any more than I could climb Mt. Everest.

As the afternoon faded into evening, so the did the strength of my chemically induced clarity. Sitting there in that old rocking chair, Mr. Booper stretched across my feet, I became hypnotized by the rhythmic rising and falling of my father's chest, all the while making wagers with God: *which breath will be his last? This one? The next? How many more? Five? Eight? 50? 100? Come on, Higher Power, when are you going to flip the switch?*