

Parricide

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My father killed his mother, confessed it to me in his last year as the black dog of depression chased him toward his own grave. Under siege by the sadness that pursues us all, every male in the line, he had over the years said many strange things. But in every utterance of craziness lay an unrevealed truth.

A year earlier, at age seventy-nine, on a mid-winter automobile ride along the windswept, sandy barrens of the New Jersey shore, “Wisconsin, America’s Dairyland,” he had said. My lady friend at the time surveyed the landscape and snickered in that superior way she had around the old, as if the dotterers could not hear or understand plain sarcasm. But the old man understood. “America’s Dairyland,” he said again, emphatically.

Not a billboard in sight. And only one car, a small red dot a good distance ahead. He had lost his glasses years ago. But in his brittle old age, his eyes seemed to pull the entire world into focus. I gave the Buick some gas. The red car now looming large in the windshield turned out to have a Wisconsin license plate.

Now he was confessing to murder. And somewhere in that confession I imagined there was again a distant truth. All the facts I knew, all the family legends passed down, argued against it. His mother, Freda, who had died before I was born, had suffered a long, lingering death from leukemia. The family had nursed her at home. That was in the early 1930s, a time when in many families life still began and ended at home. She and my grandfather were first cousins, a situation I recommend only to families with superb gene pools. Our genes were not superb; the best I can say for them is “interesting.” Much is funneled down narrowly, generation to generation. There is the matter of teeth. Some of mine are congenitally missing. In that same position in the jaw, my brothers and cousins have extras, one adult tooth descending from the gums over another already descended. There is also the matter of the bad backs. Although we may be separated by hundreds of miles, the back muscles of all the old man’s sons seem to go out simultaneously. We are specialists, it seems, in extra-sensory pain. And there is, of course, the matter of depression, not economic but clinical. My father had suffered it all his life. As have his sons in theirs. So the laws against incest, although not strictly violated in the case of first cousins, have always seemed to make sense to me. I know that if cousins could not have married, Europe would have lacked for royal families. But for commoners like us, who have no chance of controlling large portions of the world, purebred is a curse. Mutts are usually the happiest.

Freda, my grandmother, was a tall, German-speaking woman, illiterate but not ill-endowed with brains. She added up figures without pencil and paper, and although street signs were often a mystery, she had a map of lower Manhattan and Williamsburg laid out by landmarks in her head. Also imprinted there was a list of grievances against my grandfather, Louie. He drank, on occasion was violent with her, and, worse, with the children, and gambled in card games or speculated in real estate. They were never comfortable for long, moving from a rat-infested cellar where my grandfather had his bakery on the Lower East

Side out to Long Island, and then it seemed every time America went bust, so did my grandfather, and back they would move to the bakery cellar. My father had two small scars on his face, where rats had bitten him in his sleep when he was a small child. Blame the rat bites on real estate gone bad, on one of the several Louie-authored retreats back into poverty. Louie, particularly in the hard times, sometimes beat my father with a strap. So if my father told me he had killed Louie I would have, at least, understood that murder. But my father loved Freda. Surrounded by daughters, she had spoiled her only son, and he had spoiled her in return. After her death, he married a woman who was much like her physically. My mother had jet-black hair like his mother, a good-sized bosom like his mother, and a tendency to gain weight after bearing her children, like his mother. And, tragically, like his mother, she, too, died of cancer, not of a disease in her blood, but of cells gone wild in every female part of her. And so, like his mother, his wife had also abandoned him.

I thank God that my father and mother were not first cousins like the generation before. That would have been too much, far too much. Such a narrowing of the gene pool, and a compounding of initial error, would have created a generation of certified naturals, I am sure.

“I killed my mother,” he said. “I held gauze over her face and dripped the ether.

“Sometimes,” he said, “it made me dizzy. The night she died, I know she died of too much ether. Too many drops. I gave her too many drops. I have lived with this for fifty years,” he said. “And people wonder why I am sad. Killing the woman who gave you life. It can make you crazy.”

“You did not kill your mother,” I said. “You felt guilty that somehow you could not have done more to save her. So you have charged yourself with murder.”

“Besides,” I said. “There is no such thing as too much ether,” telling a small lie for good measure.

There was a long silence, a considerable stillness. There were times he would get sly as a two-year-old, testing you to find out what is a good word and what is bad. I was offering him absolution and he was reaching for it, but not totally convinced of my wisdom; after all I was his child, not the other way around.

“Do you believe in heaven?” he asked.

“Yes,” I lied again. “In some form, in some way, we do not disappear. We go somewhere.” And then, to reassure, although it may have been tactless to speak of such things to an eighty-year-old depressed man, I said, “In Sweden, they have done experiments, putting the beds of dying patients on large scales. And, at the moment of death there is a slight loss of weight. Only a fraction of an ounce. But the loss is consistent, patient after patient. And that is what makes me believe.”

“Milly,” he said.

“Milly what?”

“Milligrams,” he said again. “The Swedes would have told it in milligrams.

“I am now almost thirty years older than my mother was,” he continued. “If there is a heaven, how will she recognize me?”

“She will recognize your spirit,” I said. “She will know you by the electricity that makes us run. And you will know her the same way.”

He thought about that for a minute. “Will I always be this old? I look so damned old.”

I did not know how far I could bullshit him. But I did my best. “I don’t know much about any of this,” I said. “But I don’t think the spirit has an age. I think it is always the same age. Like God.”

“Everybody thinks God is an old man,” he said.

“Yes, I know,” I said.

My grandfather, Louie, in the end lived alone in a rooming house in Coney Island – abandoned by his children, his head shaved bald at a nearby barber college (this was an old baker’s trick to keep it from catching fire, though the ovens were long cold.) An old man, once violent, now gentle, leaning on his cane, staring at the cold Atlantic day after day, the same sea that had carried him here, a lifetime ago at age sixteen from a Rothschild-funded home for Jewish boys in England. The same sea that had carried his cousin Freda, with her family after they left Galicia in what was then the Austro-Hungarian empire. Louie had run away from the empire of the Habsburgs when he was ten, crossed Europe on foot, sailed the Channel in a fishing boat, and then had been nabbed as a wayward boy and put in that home. Did he in his old age think of those things, those adventures? Did he think of making love to his cousin Freda? And, later, of beating her? Of beating my father? Or did he think only of his abandonment?

In my father’s last sad year, I do not know if it occurred to him that like Louie he, too, had come down to the Atlantic verge in his old age, living in a combination hotel and nursing home right off the boardwalk in Atlantic City. His teeth were loose in his mouth because he did not take care of them. His breath was bad. He had stopped shaving because someone in the hotel had stolen his electric shaver. He never knew the time because someone else had stolen his gold watch, a gift from my mother that my brothers and I had always coveted. One morning, they found him jaundiced, a pale old man turned neon yellow, his heart failing, and the rest of him, liver and kidneys, shutting down with it. My brothers telephoned, and I drove to the Jersey shore. I resolved that my father would not die alone.

For two weeks, I sat with him in his hospital room. The Atlantic was only one city block away, huge swells rolling in from England and breaking against the long piers stretching out to sea. I took my meals at a small restaurant around the corner on Atlantic Avenue, a gathering place for a trio of whores, come down to cash in on the small-time gamblers now being drawn into Atlantic City. The girls were young, obscene, and dumb as hell, and the three of them would scheme to see if they could, at least, get me to pay for their meals. It was a point of honor with them not to let me get away without paying for something.

My father was being helped with his breathing, inhaling oxygen through tubes in his nose. He was also catheterized. I suspected that the catheter was for the hospital's convenience and not for his. He soon began to suffer bladder spasms that racked his body, his lips pulled taut and purple in a sneer of pain. I fought with the nurses, and his doctors, and finally got them to remove the catheter. They warned me that after being catheterized, a man his age would not get back bladder control. They were right. He wet himself. But he was no longer in pain. At least, I had done that for him.

His two doctors, partners in an Atlantic City practice, were familiar. I had gone to school with them, and could see in their long gray, harried faces the young men they once were. I reminded them we had been classmates. Neither recognized me, or remembered, even with prompting. They treated me only as

the not-too-bright son of a dying patient, and that condescension infuriated me.

If his kidneys were failing, I said, could they put him on dialysis?

"It is very painful. I would not do that to my own father," my disremembering classmate said. "No matter how much I didn't want to lose him."

I took his word for it.

My father feared death. But he had no idea he was dying. And he was, after the catheter was removed, relatively comfortable. Through the day and into the night, we played word games. He had never even graduated from high school but had a love of words, the bigger the better. While he reminisced about his reading, about the language of Boswell and Johnson, and Samuel Pepys, and George Templeton Strong, I debated with myself. Should I tell him that he might die? Should I then leave the choice of treatment up to him? If I were lying in that bed, would I want that choice? Would I want to endure the pain? Would I want to be aware that this could indeed be my end?

If I told him he was dying, I knew that he would cry. And that he would sink further into the depression that had seemed to lift with the attention of those in the hospital, and with the attention of his sons. That is what I concluded.

Sitting in the hard wooden chair in his room day and night, my feet began to swell. I would nod off for half-hours but was always too alert to his movings and mutterings, to the comings and goings of nurses and residents, to the groaning of an old woman three doors

down the hall. My brothers took a turn from time to time but they had nine-to-five jobs and families, and I had neither, being at the time out of work and alone. We hired a nurse, a “special,” in the hospital’s terminology. She was small, and fat, and loving. It was the best thing we could have done. No, not necessarily the best thing, but a good thing. He loved her attentions, her cluckings and pattings, the intimacies he had been denied in the years since my mother’s death; to be naked with a woman again – even in such a situation – gladdened him. The little fat nurse was mother and wife. With that wonderful, nasal accent of south Jersey working people, that reassuring cockney rhythm, dropping consonants, stretching vowels.

I rented a room in a motel a half-block away. The sheets were gray. An occasional insect would scurry from a corner. I wondered if my dinner companions, the three prostitutes, used this place. But some nights I never went to bed. I stayed up with the little nurse in my father’s hospital room and we traded stories, and shared coffee. She had lived a life in which there had been some rejection, and as the days and nights progressed, began to feel attached to us, my father and me, and, still fearing rejection, made it known that after her shift, maybe she could come over to the motel. She smelled wonderfully clean, of plain soap.

The two doctors who refused to recognize me began to hint that it was time to release my father. That he was after all, almost eighty-one years old, and they had done all for him that they could. I resisted, and consulted with my brothers who, like me, were confused. The little nurse seemed reluctant to have him released but also seemed afraid to openly advocate going against doctors’ orders.

“His heart has strengthened somewhat,” the leaner and grayer of the two doctors said. “Sometimes patients, even at his age, make recoveries. We have to give him a chance,” the gray doctor said, “to make it on his own.”

Finally, telling myself that this gray, disremembering man would treat his own father the same way, I agreed.

I accompanied my father in the ambulance to a nursing home in nearby Somers Point. He was now off the oxygen, and off the heart monitors, and off the care of his little, fat nurse. And he seemed worn out by the bundling, and stretchering, and the short ambulance ride from the hospital to the mainland in the January cold. In the bed at the nursing home, he did not have the strength to hold up his head. I kissed him on the forehead. There was no response. He was mustering his breath to tell me something. But then he fell asleep.

The telephone in the motel rang early the next morning. It was my youngest brother. “Sometime in the night,” he said.

The little nurse lying next to me began to cry. She sought to console herself. I pushed her away.

“Where are you going?”

To find out who murdered him, I wanted to say. But I could not answer. I was brushing my teeth, pulling on my trousers, seeing the road far ahead.