

Waystation

by
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On the last conscious day of my father's life he went to the local Ralph's supermarket and bought two bottles of Wishbone salad dressing, two bags of iceberg lettuce, two boxes of Cubbison's croutons and a 48 ounce bottle of Coors. He apparently came home and sat in his favorite chair in the living room of his small apartment, munching on salad and downing the beer. He carefully closed up the opened bag of croutons with a paper clip.

We don't know what happened. But at some point he vomited. At another point he carefully placed his teeth in the bathroom sink. He was wearing his leather coat. He had been getting very cold at night lately, even though we were well into spring and entering a toasty Southern California summer.

We found him three and a half days later, naked and barely conscious, on the floor. He lasted about four days longer, sustained by tubes, fluids, gasses, and many tender, well-trained hands.

He had lived for probably 86 hours without moving, excreting or probably very much blood pressure, sustained only by salad and beer. He was one tough old guy. He was 90.

I didn't know him until he was 70. I was 23 and figured he was going to kick any minute and didn't want him to become a psychological monster in my head. I wanted to do battle with him, make him pay for all the hurt he inflicted on me since the time he left me and my mother, when I was about 7. Twice in those intervening years we had tried to have a relationship; both ended up with his tyrannical anger and my mothers' tight-lipped tension whenever anything regarding my father would be mentioned. I didn't understand it had nothing to do with me.

The night before we met again, when I was 23, I was so terrified I threw up. I was sure he was going to kill me, emotionally, psychologically, somehow. I vowed that I would never, ever tell him I loved him, like I did when I was a vulnerable little kid. I would never open up and let him get close enough to strike a killing blow. I carried all my tough little vows with me to that first meeting. But we met, we talked and we watched sailboats together. And I realized, whether I liked it or not, that we were of the same species.

I have very few memories of him from when I was little. The most distinct one I have is of crouching on the other side of the bathroom door while he was inside conducting his morning business. I was maybe three years old. He'd be seated and I'd scribble little notes to him and slip them under. I remember convulsing with glee over this. My mother thought it was improper. My dad and I loved it.

Our visitation periods never lasted longer than four months. During one of these times, he outfitted his blue VW van with curtains and a bed for me in the back, in case I got sleepy. Then he took me on a little road trip up to Hearst Castle, where we marveled at the magnificent gaudiness of the estate. We were of the same species that day, too.

People who knew my father before he was seventy (which is just about everyone except me), remember him as a very successful man. I suppose he was, but by the time I got to him he was living in a studio apartment and subsisting mainly on potatoes.

He had been in the shoe business, starting off as a salesman on Market Street in San Francisco just after the Depression began to thaw. He was a hearty partaker of the pleasures of

the Barbary Coast, getting his jaw broken once after some misplaced comment (he was good at those.) He was devilishly good-looking; a picture I have from 1934 shows a dark-eyed dandy with slicked-back hair, staring out at the world intensely with a rakish confidence hovering just beneath the surface. The women loved him.

And he loved back. He understood women deeply, which was why he was such a success in the shoe business. After he had become a buyer at Ransohoff's, he designed a line of black pumps, each with a different lining of brightly colored Thai silk. The colors were saturated and sensuous—violet, turquoise, teal, vermilion—yet completely hidden to the outside world. “The girls walked with a little extra bounce, knowing they had something special going on.” He'd chuckle with retailer's glee. “The shoes just flew off the shelves.”

His second wife was a window-dresser at Gump's; she was petite, artistic and wild. They spent most of their pre-war years completely intoxicated while they tore up and down the hills of their beloved San Francisco in a bright yellow Hudson convertible. Herb Caen mentioned their marriage in his column.

Every waitress, every woman on the bus was instantly noticed and assessed (sometimes none too favorably). Even shuffling along at 90, he'd peer up at a passing nurse and say, with complete sincerity, “You look *wonderful* today,” and they would melt. Once he took the shoe off one of my girlfriend's feet to examine it. “He made me feel like Cinderella,” she wrote in her condolence card to me. He made, when he felt like it, every girl feel like Cinderella.

He had a rare and marvelous eye for appreciating the small details of life. He loved every nuance of weather. He relished disasters—earthquakes in particular. A Caesar salad and a steak barbecued on a hibachi while moored at Avalon was his idea of heaven. And he loved his wine. He found the cheap stuff as delectable as the fancy, and he'd defend it hotly, making up stories about the vintage and the baron who bottled it in his estate on the Rhine. It was an act of romance to unscrew the top of each bottle and indulge in a glass (or three). He relished anything that could have a story attached.

But there was a dark side to all the story-weaving. Danger lurked in every corner. The bastards were *always* out to get him. Life was a hostile territory that you had to battle through or be killed in the process. He was the original hippie: all authority enraged him, taunted him, made him put up his dukes. He fought all of them, for years, quitting his job because they just didn't understand. His businesses went under. His multiple inventions failed. No one understood. And there was always a story why.

When the bastards quit being an actual impediment, he started looking under rocks, manufacturing scenarios. His savings depleted, his stock ventures gone awry, he found himself living on Social Security and decided to take on the government itself. He spent the last ten years of his life concocting elaborate conspiracy scenarios and trying to get back his money from the elected officials who had done him wrong.

He always pushed back. And he always pushed forward. There wasn't a tunnel too foreboding to explore, no sail too risky to undertake, no cliff too steep to climb. As he got older his adventures became more and more outrageous. He could never stop and say OK, today I'll take it easy. When the adventures turned bad and he was cut and bleeding, he pressed on. “Why should I have turned back, Kathy?” he said to me once in the ER. “I'd already been there.”

Looking back on the past few years, I realize that there were many signs of his weakening heart. His coldness at night. His inability to remember nouns with any kind of accuracy. Imbalance. Mounting paranoia and anger. A hunched, lopsided gait. His extremities just must not have been getting very well nourished, including his poor fierce brain.

My last (two-sided) conversation with him was a fight. He wanted me to drop everything one night and go to Glendale, about 15 miles away, to buy him a television set that was on sale at

the K-Mart out there. I offered to call it in with a credit card but he said no. I offered to take him the next day. Nope. He didn't want to do it that way. He was angry and *so* tired of everything being difficult.

Commiseration didn't help. He told me he was going to have a couple of drinks, and that would solve everything. He hung up angry and frustrated. And the next day he went to get some salad fixings and a big tall beer. I didn't thaw out from my own annoyance for about four days, when he missed our weekly lunch date. He went out pissed, and on his own terms.

The time in the hospital was intense. Even when I wasn't there, my entire spirit was residing in the room with the hissing, sighing ventilator, the monitors with the seismic graphs, the still, tubed form wrapped in white on the bed.

The only people I wanted to deal with were the nurses and doctors—beautiful women, all. (I know he was deeply pleased.) I had known them for less than two days and I immediately felt a more intense connection with them than I did with my ex-husband, my boyfriend, my kids, my mother.

The world outside the hospital turned to a pastel wash of thin colors and shadows. It was only inside the hospital that I was able to engage in conversations that felt substantial to me. They were easy conversations, almost casual. I was making decisions about kidneys, pain relief and life support with almost less thought that I usually take to rent a movie on a Friday night. It was so intensely real it blinded me to the rest of life.

And then he died. Or, rather, we made the decision to increase the morphine and let the attendant drop in blood pressure do what it needed to do. After four days, the losses were outstripping the gains. We didn't pull any plugs, but we decided not to add any more either.

We didn't know when it would happen. I strongly didn't want to be there. My mind raced with errands I *really* needed to be doing. But the nurses and doctor assured me it was a peaceful moment. I was afraid I would lose control. The doctor, a tall serene intelligent woman, touched me on the arm and said, you know, losing control is OK, too. She suggested, as gently as possible, that I should stay.

In a last ditch effort to ignore the situation, I pulled out some work I'd brought with me. I pulled up a couple of chairs and put my feet on one of them. Behind me the ventilator breathed in and out for my father. He was motionless, but some seizures had started up that morning, rocking his body with a horrific approximation of returning life. The "vascular integrity" of his brain was diminishing. That meant it was turning into oatmeal. That was when I realized it was time to increase the morphine.

The nurse dimmed the lights. She turned off the sounds of the monitors. Alarms weren't really all that necessary any more. I settled down and tried to work, desperately trying to pretend this wasn't happening.

Finally I stopped. I'd been watching the blood pressure monitor far more often than I was editing pages. And I realized that this situation only happens once (thankfully), but it needed to be attended to, as much as I could bear.

I stood up and walked to the side of the bed. His hands and feet were blue, almost frost-bitten by the lack of circulation. I touched his hand gently, around the IV and the tape. The ventilator hissed, slowed down, hissed, slowed. The blood pressure dropped. Stabilized. Then dropped some more.

My father's favorite time of year was the end of August, when the huge thermal clouds bunched up over the San Gabriels, gloriously white against the hot blue summer sky. He'd watch those clouds as he sailed back from Catalina. There was always one weekend that the

clouds were just right and every summer we'd remark on it. It was the Sailing Home From Catalina weekend.

The last morning of his life I realized what these last days in the hospital had felt like. He was settling in to his boat. Stowing things below-decks, finalizing the ledgers, settling accounts. He was getting ready for a long journey, thinking things through—both about the journey he'd just completed and the one he was about to embark upon. I had been hoping that he'd come back up from below decks long enough to say good-bye, but that wasn't going to happen. He was waiting and working and was finally ready to go.

I touched his cold hand and whispered "Push off, Daddy—I'll throw you the lines." And about 20 seconds later the blood pressure went to zero and he was freed from the dock, floating off slowly and heading out across the great water.

Walking through the halls of the hospital after his death I felt a profound exhaustion, so deep and spiritual and bone-numbing, I only remembered one other time I'd felt anything similar. That was after I'd had my first son, Spencer. After a long labor and, finally, a caesarian section, I was exquisitely tired. I had given birth, and now I had given death.

There were more similarities than the fatigue. During both events I was surrounded by people who served as temporary guides to help usher in the mysterious transition between the states of being and non-being. The doctors and shamans and priests who attend these entries and exits are like welcoming and send-off committees, designed to make the traveler as comfortable as possible as they prepare for the next leg of their journey.

Despite the machines and clinical procedures, there was a deeply spiritual aspect to what the doctors and nurses were doing, both for my father and for me. There was a careful and gentle peeling back of support. An allowance granted which gave the spirit room to make a graceful and peaceful separation. The slipping away was as subtle and as profound as the lines being thrown from the dock onto the deck of the boat. The moment between being attached to the land and being water-borne was as transient as a bird taking off in flight.

I have not been all here since this happened. A large part of me is still living out there on the edge of the land, watching the horizon for hints of a mast or maybe even a shimmer of dark blue on the horizon. It's true I have been able to start functioning again. And my friends have even heard me laugh true, hearty laughs. But there is a piece still watching on the edge.

Sometimes I feel like Charon, the mythological ferryman, who spends his life shuttling people to the shores of Hades, his domain the dark mysterious river between both. I look at people walking down the street and think yes, you all will be my passengers some day. I am disenfranchised from both worlds, unable to access wherever it is my father now resides. Once again, I find myself on the other side of the door from him, scribbling notes across the great divide, hoping that somehow he'll receive them.