NEAR OR FAR OFF △

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My father's pupils did not respond to a small beam of light, so the ER doctors knew right away. Dad had filed a living will with the hospital, but they could not find it in the records. Somehow, the will arrived and I cannot remember if I left my mother and father with my wife Jeri and rushed home or if Jeri had brought it with her in her own rush to the ER. It clearly stated that Dad did not want any extraordinary measures. He wanted his life to run its natural course. He wanted to be left alone.

January 5, 2005. The day before the start of the Winter Term. I had gone over to campus to Xerox first-day essentials: course syllabi, grading policies, bibliographies. Hurrying back to my office, I was trying also to go over the class-list names and faces of my students so that I could do the equivalent of a parlor trick: address them by name on the first day before they knew what had hit them. I heard my office phone ringing as I rounded the hall corner and struggled to get out my key without spilling the as-yet unstapled pages. In this course on Contemporary American Literature of War, we would read backwards beginning with the Iraq War's *The Gift of Valor* and its theme of being so overwhelmed by war as to distort diagnoses to deny the reality of a soldier's dying. I wondered if, by the end of the course, Hemingway's lines about being stronger in the broken places would ring true or whether they would seem a starkly sentimental lie.

When I picked up the phone, my mother told me that dad was sick, lying eyes-open on the bed and he wouldn't talk. I told her that I would phone for an ambulance and she should ride in it with dad to the University hospital. I would meet them there.

It is a bit of a trek up to the medical campus, and the cold of a Michigan winter seemed to compound the distance and my

own desperation. Breathing hurt. I pushed myself to cover quickly the distance from my Angell Hall office, past the science buildings and the Natural Science Museum, across the pedestrian bridge over Washtenaw Avenue, up through the Hill Dorms and then on to and through the hospitals—Mott Children's and Women's and Taubman and down to the basement floor where the ER was located. I knew that I had to be there when my parents arrived. My mother would be lost. So I waited in the cold outside the automatic glass doors to the ER. It did not occur to me that their opening and shutting, opening and shutting was the product of my pacing.

My father, 89, would have lived well into his nineties had he not broken his hip three years earlier in a fall at Home Depot. Absurdities happen. A crack in the Garden Department's concrete floor pulled his top-heavy shopping cart over, taking him with it, and breaking his left hip. The day before, he had gotten in a practice round of eighteen holes of golf in preparation for our match that weekend. He took competition with me seriously. But the broken hip ended all that, and over the next three years he became thin and frail. We bought him a lift chair to help him up when he finished watching TV. We joked that it might misfire and shoot him across the den.

Almost two decades earlier, my father had gone for a walk with his son-in-law Terence, who with my sister was on one of their rare visits from London. Following the path along San Francisco bay to the Coyote Point marina, Dad had told Terence that he sometimes wondered if he would have preferred to have lived his life alone so that he could have had the freedom to wander at will with his camera and live in the desert country of the American Southwest. In the early fifties, he had hauled the family—my mother, sister and me—on mad-dashing, two-week summer vacations out to the West. These were the days before car air-conditioning and before the interstate highway systems. The days of Route 66 and road-side attractions. For a small fee, one could sit for

a picture atop a bucking bronco, a masterpiece of taxidermy, next to a gas station in Oklahoma, or stay at an Arizona Wigwam Motel. These were the attractions of the trip for two children age five and seven. But Dad was drawn to the beauty of Arizona's Monument Valley, its vast red earth and buttes. He knew he was getting close when he could see New Mexico's Ship Rock in the long highway distance and he must have felt a kinship with its isolation and looming power exposed to desert heat and winter storm. At Gouldings Trading Post he parked his family and went off with a box of canned goods to trade for taking pictures of the Navajo. One of his pictures won the *Chicago Sun Times* photography contest. It is still a beautiful picture, sensuous—a rippling pattern on sand dunes with sheep being herded down to water and butte formations in the background. My father, who worked as a mechanic down at the Standard Oil gas station on Pine Lake Avenue, had the poet's eye. So when Terence told me what my father had said, I understood and was not at all hurt or angry.

Years ago during a late Easter trip to Yosemite, we had climbed Yosemite Falls. It is a long hike, and the winter snow was still on the trails nearing the top of the Upper Falls. I set my feet in the snow with Dad supporting my heels so that I wouldn't slip, and then he put his feet in where mine had been. At the top of the Falls the winter melt roared over the drop to Yosemite Valley. We were alone there, on the noble, strong granite, with the power of the pounding water so close and the beauty of the valley below framed by El Capitan and Half Dome. This was my Dad's element, and we did not want to leave it. So we lingered and listened without sharing any words. And then, again without words, we knew it was time and turned back.

I carry in my pocket a small screw-driver. The grain of its wooden handle is darkened with engine oil; the blade, no more than an inch-and-a-half. I had taken it down to Schlanderer's Jewelers to inscribe on one side of the flat blade my

father's initials in sharp block letters VJL and on the other in easy script the word 'Dad.' In the moment of his giving it to me, our business as father and son seemed complete, although I could not have articulated that at the time. One sees the pattern of history at a distance.

He died in a private room off the ER, a room designed for the situation. Mom sat by his head; Jeri and I, by his side. I leaned in to hold him, his chest against mine, feeling the unshaved skin of his face rough against my own. The body grows cold so quickly.

No sign outside the gate identifies the school. Its buildings are red brick and porticoed with white Georgian columns; the gold leaf of the schoolhouse cupola shines in the late-afternoon sun. Next to the schoolhouse a dormitory bears the name of one of the school's founding trustees, an Episcopal priest who was at home among the Brahmins of Boston. He had authored the school hymn whose opening lyrics, sung at the beginning of every school year, I still remember:

> Father of all, below, above,
> whose name is Light, whose name is Love,
> here be Thy truth and goodness known
> and make these fields and halls Thine own.

Across the way is the chapel, designed by Henry Vaughn, architect of Washington DC's National Cathedral. The chapel stands out from the rest of the school as if to assert the Father's primacy through granite and gothic-revival design. For all the years I had taught there, I felt the outsider, so when I proposed a visit, my wife was puzzled. Why would I want to go back?

We visited the woodshop in the basement of the schoolhouse. Through the windows I saw the shop teacher bent

over a harpsichord as if tendering a finishing touch. He recognized my voice and called out my name even before turning to greet me. In my life at the school, I had come to think of the shop as part of the school's soul, buried beneath the assembly-hall busts of Plato and Aristotle and the wood-carved names of graduates who had made Phi Beta Kappa. A level below all these refinements were machines—belts and blades—capable of dismemberment, yet with them, and with the skilled certainty of the shop teacher's eye, students made highboys and desks modeled after the finest pieces of the 18th century. Walking into the shop after so many years away, I recognized the smell of cherry and mahogany before my eye caught the Bombay curves and balls of clawed feet, patterned and turned on the lathe and polished so that the grain, fully revealed, would hold the sun.

As a boy and after we had moved to California, I grew up on the wrong side of the suburban tracks and dreaded the school bus ride. I waited at Kehoe and Roberta where, from the back of the line, I watched the body-shop foreman's son, his jeans low on his hips, crowd in front for the trip across town to Aragon High School. The bus coughed its way over the Bayshore Freeway and bumped across the commuter tracks and on through town, away from our homes on the flat lands of bay fill. Downshifted, its bulk lumbered dully into the hills, crawling among the shadows of eucalyptus trees that lined the Alameda, a grand boulevard where lawns were manicured and smooth in front of the homes of doctors and lawyers, the fathers of my friends. When the bus door snapped open, I felt exposed.

My father's hands were those of a master mechanic become service manager, and after work he returned home with the grease of engines ingrained in them. Although for seventeen years his hands had provided for me, I, with my soft, school-boy, No.2-pencil hands, knew about refinement and the

delicacies of class, and I took it upon myself one evening at the dinner table to observe aloud that my father's hands were dirty. He responded that he had washed them with borax; I reasserted myself by leaving the table. Perhaps at some level he had known that this moment would come, the pressure of it building up over time, and yet finally it all happened so quickly. My father left the house.

In my bedroom I heard the stride of his leaving and knew the anguished vacancies of a family, of a father and his son,that seemed then so ultimate and final. In the tenuousness of all that was secret and unsaid, two strangers were finally so far apart without even knowing how or why.

From my bedroom I heard the springs to the garage door contract and the car backing out. I could not know, could only sense the full consequence of what I had just done, and fearful that he had gone forever, I lay on the bed and wept. Later, I heard the garage door springs moaning open, and then felt the weight of his steps across the living room floor to my room. He entered, and without a word at my bedside, reached down to take me into his arms and hold me. He was not one to speak, so again with no words, he left the room.

Jeri and I drove out the gate to the school and headed down Route 111 toward the neighboring town of Ayer, Massachusetts. It was an army town bordering Fort Devons, and it is decidedly un-Georgian in its architecture. I remembered rushing over from the school to the town's Nashoba Pizza, a bar dimly lit and with the sound of cue balls being struck off to the side. The town lay only three miles away, but seemed a far distance.

Jeri turned to me as we drove along its Main Street and on toward Route 2A and the eleven hour trip to our home in the Midwest. She asked what the visit had done for me,

puzzled because to her the school was little more than a pile of expensive bricks that had little to do with me or I with it. I started to talk about a painting we had seen in the dining hall, a John Singer Sargent portrait of the Rector, outsized and arms crossed in an imperial pose. But then I stumbled into abstractions, guessing at the significance of the trip, and it was obvious that I had no clue about the visit. I still wanted something, and could not understand my own inchoate longing.

She reached over and patted me on the thigh, noting that the shop teacher saw the school quite differently and did not seem to struggle so much with it. Now, as I write almost twenty years later, I wonder who was behind the portrait's pose. I knew that the man in the portrait was, as I, a product of his time and his class and its ideals. He had founded the school thoroughly in their embrace, and was, I do not doubt, aware of their limitations and imperfections, which is to say, their reality. I know that there is a part of me that shared and still shares these ideals, and in them I often feel as vulnerable and fraudulent as the ninth-grade boys who had been in my dormitory. To any child and to some men, a father is always more than a father, regardless of circumstance, regardless of limitations and even of failures, regardless of the passage of time.

So here's the secret, and I am embarrassed to tell of it: I had wanted the Rector's arms and his school to embrace me, and it seemed unable to do so. For a while I thought that the arms in the portrait, the arms of the school, were too short, and that to be embraced by it, I would have had to become smaller. But I know finally that I, who had been a chaplain to the school, had been also too young to accept the fact that any embrace comes with uncertainty and risk and is qualified by them. In my own desperate immaturity, I had hoped for more from the school. I had wanted it to be my own private Eden, and it had insisted on being fallible, insisted on being human. But such understandings never happen apart from

how we turn them and polish them, apart from how we've been turned on the lathe.

When I was forty-five, I told my father that I loved him. I had returned to my parents' house for a visit and ended up feeling as if I were breaking apart. I lay on my bed wanting my father to come in, and when he called me to dinner, I didn't respond. I hoped that he would ask if everything were all right and then I could say no and we could talk. But that didn't happen, so I lay there for three hours and finally walked out into the living room. In the blue light of the TV, Dad sat in the La-Z-Boy, watching the Golden State Warriors play. "Dad," I said, standing above him and very uncertain of what I was doing, "can we talk?" "Sure," he said. Bundled in an afghan and in his seventy-sixth year, he looked small, almost fragile. "In the back room?" I asked. This was between him and me and even the living room seemed too public a place. He followed me and I closed the door.

I tried to tell him that I loved him and that for all my life it had felt as if there were a glass wall between us so that I could see him but couldn't touch him, and it hurt me terribly, and I choked on the words and the tears. "That's OK," my dad said. "Just get it out." His voice was very calm, and he looked at me with a gentleness that I will never forget. He had folded his hands quietly in his lap.

The next day my father gave me the small screwdriver he had once used for adjusting carburetors and putting engines to right. It smelled of motor oil, and its wooden handle was soft and smooth; the oiled grain, clear and polished with use.