

MY FAVORITE COUSIN DIED TODAY

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My favorite cousin died today, or did he? Medical science is busy these days debating what the exact moment is when a person is considered to be dead. Is it when the heart stops beating, the lungs stop exchanging air and when no response is elicited to painful stimuli, as we were taught once in medical school many years ago, or is it when the brain practically stops functioning, even though other vital functions may be maintained artificially? My cousin, Georg, was officially pronounced dead a few hours ago and will be buried soon. But when did he really die? A few weeks ago, when the growing mass in his brain cancelled the effects of the shunt operation that he had just undergone? A few months ago, when his memory and consciousness increasingly became dimmer, and when he lost control of basic bodily functions and sometimes even failed to recognize those closest to him? A year ago, when congestive heart failure and circulatory collapse further damaged an already compromised brain, exposing it to several periods of anoxia? Or, did he perhaps die, way inside himself, over thirty years ago, when he left Israel, where he seemed to be at home, and immigrated to the United States to follow his newly-wed wife who insisted on living in closer proximity to her own parents and sister? If the medical definition of death is complex, the psychological definition of death is by far more so.

He was very important to me, occupying a large and central space in my heart. He was a little younger than my own father, more dashing as a young man, a tall athlete and a very handsome man. In many ways he was my ideal. I loved him very much and he loved me very much. When I was a little boy, he often used to come over to our house and we would horse around in bed, him and I. He used to take me with him on Saturdays to the municipal stadium in Tel-Aviv, where I would meet his friends, all athletes, born in Germany and Austria and settling in Palestine as Hitler ascended to power. I

remember Walter Frankel, scholarly-looking and balding, like an Adlai Stevenson, the best long-distance runner in Palestine of his day. With my admiring eyes I used to follow Walter's running around the stadium -- five times, ten times, twenty times -- steadily and methodically swallowing kilometer after kilometer. It seemed so easy to him, and yet, it was obviously a supreme test of the human spirit and of human courage and against physical hardships and pain. Up to this moment of writing did I not know that these lessons in human endurance were, perhaps, not altogether lost within me, that they may have made a deep impression on my evolving character, as a six or eight year old. And, was this the influence that made me into an amateur long-distance runner, a few years after?

I remember Georg, dashing, sprinting the 100 meter distance in a seeming flash, breaking records, jumping hurdles with grace. How proud I was, a little and somewhat shy boy, when two separate photographs of my cousin were included in a series of pictures of famous athletes that were distributed as bonuses in cigarette boxes. I clearly remember the pride with which I told my friends that that tall and handsome man in the pictures was my own first cousin. I basked in his glory.

I remember him as a young man, tall, healthy and smiling, with a twinkle in his eyes. Several pictures stand out in my mind. Georg standing aboard ship wearing white slacks and a blue sport coat, going to the 1932 Maccabia. In another picture he is wearing a tyrolean hat with a small feather in it, and holding a pair of skis in his left hand, smiling warmly, perhaps even a little cockily. This all happened so very long ago, but it is very alive in me, as if it just took place yesterday.

It was, in fact, so very long ago, in a quite different era and with an entirely different set of characters. This old and physically deformed man, totally incapable of ambulating and even of helping himself to the toilet -- could he be the same man? Could this bumbling, almost brainless invalid, now so very dead, have been the same

person -- alert, a twinkle in his eyes, strong, tall and handsome -- my ideal?

He was beset with many illnesses in recent years, and in part it may well have been his own unconscious way of protesting against a life that he had no choice but to choose. All these terrible illnesses, one following the other, in a body once so strong and perfect, were perhaps not merely a series of coincidences nor a natural course of degeneration. Was he, perhaps like Samson, giving up his life in defiance of his captivity? He became totally disabled, totally dependent, and totally needing others for his entire care. Just like a newborn infant. Was this is unconscious way of taking revenge? This grotesque deterioration of a once proud and self-sufficient human being, could it perhaps be understood as an expected consequence of his life history, a closing of a circle?

I remember him now, as he was then. They were drilling not for oil but for water in Palestine of the early 1930's, not in the far away Negev, but just a little bit south of Rechovot, not far from Tel-Aviv, at the edge of the zone of Jewish settlement. When a new well was dug and a new source of water found, a new settlement would arise. Georg was enterprising. He and a few friends went into the hot, dusty and dry land that once seemed a distant and dangerous wilderness, and drilled for water. His eye disease started at that time. What it really was I will never know. I was no physician then, only an innocent-looking little boy, admiring his courageous and beloved cousin. Several times a day did he put drops into each of his eyes, for they were burning and red and would tear a lot. I could not have thought of it then, but was this the beginning of his crying? His mourning for his life? Even then he was already enslaved. He may never have known it. I only discovered it sadly in the last few years.

Georg, was the oldest of three brothers, the most masculine, physically the tallest and apparently the least complicated of the three. Even as a teenager I knew that the other two brothers weren't quite like him. They, too, were nice and I

liked them also, but they were very different. They were friendly, but they were never friends of mine. They were around, but they never seemed to have been there. Both brothers married very young, both married women who obviously set the tone each in her own family, and both seemed too eager to be pleasant and not at all eager just to be. I did not then know of the disfiguring power of fear. Yet, even as a teenager I remember wondering how come these two were willing to give up so completely the important function of decision-making to their new wives. I remember wondering, but I do not remember ever finding the answer. Georg did not marry until several years later.

Although I knew my Uncle Arnold and my Aunt Rosa, Georg's parents, I did not fully understand until several years ago that those three handsome young men, their sons, were all really no more than frightened little mama's boys, masquerading under the proud facade of manliness and masculinity. My Uncle Arnold seemed so forbidding, with his dour look and his large and impressive cigars, one of which was always between his lips. I was afraid of my somber and serious Uncle Arnold, and this must have confused the picture in my mind. My aunt, Rosa, on the other hand, used to hold me in her lap or against her big bosom -- hugging and kissing me--and I enjoyed it. This, too, confused the picture, for it was impossible for me to comprehend that this mild-looking, physically large woman, was in reality the undisputed boss of her family, husband and sons notwithstanding. She was not the manipulating bitch-type. On the contrary, she was responsible and efficient, capable and hard-working *(and overflowing with her giving.)* Her husband, and later on her three sons, must have considered themselves lucky to have found a wife and mother such as her. She did not de-ball them, as no woman ever de-balls a man. This is an unfair accusation usually made by weak and angry men against women who are only too willing to take over responsibility for those who are afraid to assume themselves. Uncle Arnold was depressed all right, and he died relatively young. But both he and his three sons have not been castrated not done-in by their women. Quite the

contrary, they themselves insisted on offering their balls on silver platters, at least for safekeeping, if not permanently.

It is so fascinating and amazing to view a chunk of human history in such immediate, personal terms. Georg must have been born in the first decade of this century, for he was almost seventy years old when he died. His mother, Rosa, was probably born around 1880 or a little before that. I remember a family portrait, one of those old formal ones, in which I appear as a little toddler, and in which Rosa and all her sisters and brothers, including my father, pose grandly and most seriously with their own parents. So here stand my grandparents, probably born around 1860 or 1870 and already dead for many decades, very much alive and real for me in this family portrait that ties me to my past. My grandfather, with a distinguished looking white beard, has soft, warm and loving eyes. My grandmother, slim and fragile looking, seems upon closer scrutiny to have more firmness in her chin and more decisiveness in her eyes than anyone else. No wonder, then, that my father was kind and loving, if somewhat lacking in strength, while Rosa, his sister, was firm and resolute underneath her soft exterior, like her own mother, the undisputed tone-setter in her family. Is it surprising then that Georg would leave his two brothers and his entire family in Israel, uprooting himself and abandoning his athlete friends and his past, his water holes and his youth, to begin a new life as a store owner, selling women's clothing in the Bronx, while he was already nearing forty? He was following his newly wed wife, a good woman in her own way, yet like his mother, Rosa, firm and resolute, but unlike her, often also cold, ungenerous and uncompromising.

I remember my first night in the United States many years ago. A young man in his early twenties, with a scant knowledge of English, an extra helping of temerity and gall and an exaggerated self confidence, yet more than a little scared. It was some time in the fall, just in time for the beginning of classes at Columbia University in New York. I did not want to trouble my relatives so nobody knew the time of my

arrival and nobody expected me at the airport. I took a subway into Manhattan, suitcase and all, having been told that Times Square was the center of New York, and therefore my destination. It was already dark as I lugged my heavy suitcase up the subway steps on 39th Street and Broadway, just behind the old Metropolitan Opera House. The building was literally black with soot, the wind was howling and blowing large sheets of filthy newspaper against me, as I emerged, full of anticipation into the United States. I was discouraged, frightened, overwhelmed. It was an unexpected and unusual welcome, impersonal, unfriendly and dirty. It was cold and somewhat drizzly. I seemed so small and insignificant near those huge buildings, those mammoth neon signs and forgotten among the rushing crowds about me. The taxi drive to Washington Heights seemed endless. I was afraid I would run out of money, for it was definitely the longest ride that I have every taken in a taxi. Ten blocks, fifty, a hundred, a hundred and eighteen blocks north! I paid the driver what seemed to be an unbelievably large amount of money, even more unbelievably so when I converted it in my head into the old currency I was used to, and rang the doorbell. There was no answer. Someone let me into the building foyer, where I sat on a step, discouraged, disappointed and cold, and cried.

An hour later they arrived, Georg and his wife. My beloved cousin, my childhood ideal, my friend. His wife was pregnant with their first child. She was anxious, she was angry, she was not really accepted into the family by Georg's mother nor by my father. She wanted nothing to do with me. They had a small apartment, and she feared that I would simply move in, which was the furthest thing from my mind. After a cup of tea and a bite Georg took me, on a bus, to the Bronx YMHA where I spent my first night in the United States. It was late in the evening as we crossed the bridge into the Bronx, both of us glum and hardly speaking to each other. She did not want me to spend even one night in their apartment, and he, my hero, yielded, perhaps even without a fight. He loved me very much, I know that. How

did he feel that evening, as he took me to the Bronx to spend that first night in the United States all alone among strangers? Did part of him not die that night? Is it possible that he did not know the humiliating price he had to pay for the security that his wife's existence provided him? He seemed to have no choice but to follow her to the United States, as he seemed to have no choice but to accompany me on that dirty bus that dreary evening to the Bronx. Part of him may have been dead already, and another part, may have died that evening. His body continued to live another twenty five years or so. Now it is dead too. Georg is to be buried today. When did he really die?

I do not blame his wife anymore. She did what she had to do, driven by fears, anger and hate. She mellowed somewhat with time, and wisened also. She is not a bad woman, and she did not do it to him. She played her part as he played his, like the characters in a Greek tragedy. They both continued to follow the internal consistency of their existence. He was depressed and dead long before he died. She was depressed and always lonely, even as she lives.

I remember Georg on his one and only visit to Detroit, during the Bar-Mitzvah of my son. He meant to come and visit me on many previous occasions, the invitation was always extended, both to him and to his wife, but they had the store to attend to, that store in the Bronx. He just "couldn't" get away. His lovely two daughters were growing and would soon be of marriageable age. He was openly worried about financial security, perhaps to hid^e behind his deep concern about his personal^{ity} security. Detroit seemed to him as far away as Israel, where his two brothers and many other important members of his family remained and lived. Although financially able to do so, he visited neither place for a couple of decades. He was truly enslaved. Then, somehow, he tore himself away for three days and came to celebrate the Bar Mitzvah of his favorite cousin's son, my oldest.

The synagogue was several miles away and he had to face a serious dilemma: would he drive on the Sabbath? He was never an observing Jew in his youth, and although raised in a traditional home was basically non-observant while in Israel. His wife, however, was very orthodox and they raised their two daughters in the same way. How did this happen? How was this decision reached? We will never know, we can only surmise.

Here he was, then, having to decide whether to drive on the Sabbath or not. He took me aside, asked me to please keep it a secret from his two daughters. He would ride to the synagogue, but nobody in New York is ever to know. His wife was a co-conspirator, he said, but his two daughters do not appreciate the fact that Saturday is the most important business day for the store. For years he has been keeping up a facade of being strictly observant, while in reality working half a day in the store. He would go to the Synagogue with his family in the morning, all dressed up in his best, yet as soon as possible after lunch he would slip out of the house under some pretext, take the subway to the store, and toil for the rest of the afternoon and evening. His daughters may have suspected it, he said, but he really did not know. He did not want them to know. He was afraid that they would find out, literally afraid. What happened to this man I wondered, to his youthful integrity, to his daring, to his vision, to his self concept? I loved him, but how can this be lovable? What is he doing to himself?

On the third day away from his family he apparently began to feel freer. He smiled spontaneously, laughed heartily and on several occasions seemed to be trouble free and as relaxed as I remembered him from years ago. The temporary absence of fear during the excitement of reunion with me and with the family and the atmosphere of celebration allowed him to feel less dependent and more assertive than usual, and in this new reality more of the man could come to the fore. But a long history of comfort in a relative dependency position, somewhat attenuated.

perhaps during the vigorous surge of youth in his late teens and early twenties, and reinforced by thirty years of marriage, were too powerful to overcome. He soon became frightened again and flew back to New York, a few hours earlier than he had originally planned to.

It may not sound that way, but some would say that he was really a giant of a man, this long-suffering little boy with eyes that lost their twinkle long before they were shut forever. He was honest. He was basically fair. He was often courageous and frequently kind, and he was very good. I loved him very much even though he was very weak. It physically hurt me to see him deteriorating in body as well as in spirit, I wanted to remember him as I always did, as a tall man and strong. So I avoided visiting him the last few years, but my heart ached for him many, many times, and I tried to make contact with him by phone. Whenever we talked in the last few years, whether in person or by phone, he always seemed to be preoccupied and unable to stop long enough to really be with me or with anyone else. Where was my beloved?

Now he is so dead -- it is all over -- it is so final, yet unfinished. My chest aches, my heart is with him. How much I would like right now to look him straight in the eye, find him there, give him once more a big embrace and exchange a true smile. It was impossible to do so for a long time, and now it is never possible again.

Georg's two daughters have recently married and have borne children, sons. They are just infants now, a year or two old, and they will never know their grandfather, not in his glory nor in his hour of shame. Will they grow up to be men? Here it is, five generations in which strong and basically good women raised sons and daughters. The daughters usually grow up in the image of their mothers, and the sons remain well-meaning little boys. Where have all the fathers gone? Have they ever really been there?

Our society is in real trouble. Several social cancers threaten its very

existence. They seem to be separate and independent from each other, yet closer scrutiny may reveal that they are all metastases from one primary source. Our troubles, economic and political, national and international, including crime and drugs, domestic strife and most foreign wars can all be traced back to the crisis and ~~the~~ breakdown of the Family, preposterous as this may sound at first.

Ours is a society without a father. In industrial mass society, Father is usually away from the family most of the time, except for a few evening hours, when he is tired and preoccupied. His image often is one of a benign and ineffective figure of fun, or alternately as mother's terror-striking rod. He may assume the role of breadwinner and titular head of the family, but his influence has steadily been waning, more so in the United States than anywhere else. The existence of a Women's Liberation Movement seems a cynical farce in this picture. If political movements could really correct distortions within the family, surely a Men's Liberation Movement would have been helpful, although most men would not admit to this, to spare themselves painful humiliation. The political and economic power positions of Men are usually pointed to by both men and women to contradict statements about Man's weakness. The fact that fathers only rarely have real authority in their own homes and families is generally ignored.

Georg, my favorite cousin, is not unique. Like Willie Loman, the hero of "Death of a Salesman", he stands for a whole generation of nice and deeply depressed men, panic stricken from time to time lest their protective mothers-wives abandon them. Fear strips them of respect, and often causes them to die young. Although their wives are also afraid, and could not comfortably accept another type of man, they are nevertheless also unhappy. They lack true companions to share their burdens with, no real men to stand by them when they need and deserve some help. Instead, the husband often resembles and assumes the role of another child to look after

and support. Children raised in such families are understandably confused and listless, and perpetuate the problem when they grow up and start their own families.

Psychotherapists, both male and female, are ^{also} often products of such families and may unfortunately fit into this pattern. No patient can ever go beyond the point where his own therapist has been, not only intellectually but with his or her whole being. Even therapists who themselves have been in therapy cannot be assured of having been freed from this tragic and destructive pattern, unless their therapist was free enough from the dictates of such hidden demands. Reaction formation sometimes changes docile self-enslavement into hatred of the opposite sex, with different looking, but equally tragic end results. There are no villains in this multi-generation tragedy, only multitudes of blind characters, misleading each other.

My favorite cousin died today, and an important part of myself died with him. Now that he is dead, perhaps the Georg of my childhood, my hero, can live more freely within me, undisturbed by the reality of what he had really been and of what he had become. That Georg, my Georg, is alive and well.

I will go out of my way in the next few years, if I am alive and able, to spend time and be with his grandsons. I will try to help them get to know their dead grandfather as he could have been, and as he is in me. This way, perhaps, they will become real men capable of loving themselves, and capable of truly loving others, including real women.

Goodbye, Georg! You are still important to me. You will always be.