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My Father Was Shiva

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My father was Shiva, god of creation and god of destruction. This is his story as it is mirrored through my mind. And this mirroring has been a part of my attempts to deal with the enormity of the demon. It began first in poetry. I found myself one night writing a poem about the horrendous event, an event that has plagued me for over 30 years. The writing of that poem and the ones that followed over time became a kind of self-administered therapy that began a healing--or at least helped to grow scar tissue over the wound. Writing this is also a part of the healing, I hope. This story also contains a message to all scientists and brilliant, talented people, with a wish that they not make the same mistakes my father did.

LONG ENOUGH

I have carried this burden long enough
that dark act
done by my father
stains me
the flow of blood splatters
me also
therefore I must dip my pen
in that dark pool which never congealed and write.

I must to the river
with sunlight
to wash and bleach
my clothing
bathe in the sparkling stream
swim in the current
and dry by the sun
then
move on.

My father became a scientist. As a boy, he was pretty much a loner, was never involved in team sports. He ran track and cross country in high school. He did well enough academically to get a full

scholarship to Wesleyan University, where he graduated in 1925. He received a Ph.D. in chemistry from Princeton University, working day and night to put himself through. He got a job as instructor of chemistry at Haverford College, then assistant professor of bacteriology at the University of Pennsylvania. In the '30s he collaborated on several texts in qualitative and quantitative analysis. My younger brother and I had to be very quiet when we played around the cabin in the summers when he was working on the manuscripts for his books. On the flyleaf of the first book he wrote, "To Son Jim, the boy who had to play away from the cabin while the Ms for this was in preparation. From Dad, June, 1938." In mother's copy he wrote, "With Love to Esther whose patience in keeping the children quiet and away from the cabin, while the Ms was in preparation, was never exhausted and whose help direct and indirect meant much. Earl." In the second book he wrote, "To Son Jim The world in every way is rapidly becoming a smaller one. Your Dad 6/15/39." About six years earlier he was honored by the Red Cross for saving two boys from drowning when the boat they were fishing in with their father overturned. He dove twice, bringing up the boys, but was unable to rescue their father, who was lost in the murky water; a bittersweet memory for him, he was pleased with saving the boys but was plagued by the fact that he had been unable to save the man as well. Years later hearing a similar story triggered a poem.

HEROS

My father was a hero, you know,
the summer before I was born
he dove twice into the muddy depths
and fished out two boys
from an overturned boat
he dove again for their dad,
but he came up dead.

Reminds me of an indian lad I knew
out guiding who saved
his fisherman
heartstruck
ran cross country through the bush
swam for a boat, got help.

The man in gratitude gave the guide
keys to his house, his boat,
his bar and said "come when you want,
drink when you wish" and he did
fat, alcoholic bum, left family, left all.
My father was another--
came to no good end.

(Flosdorf, 1985, p. 34)

His father, my grandfather, was the son of a German immigrant, a mechanic and electrician of sorts. My grandmother was born in Switzerland and came with 13 brothers and sisters to the U.S. when

she was about three. She did in-home sales and fittings of undergarments. My father was their only child. When he got a scholarship to college, my grandfather went to his old friend, Doc Patterson, and asked him what would be a good thing for a boy to go into. Chemistry, he was told. Chemistry it was, although I have often thought my father's real love was history. After he graduated from college he took his mother to Europe and, staying with relatives, traced the family trees of both families. He traced the Flosdorfs back to the beginning of the 14th century. Later, he researched the history of our house in the country and enjoyed collecting antiques of all kinds, including maps, clocks and automobiles, which he set my grandfather and me to working on, fixing up. At the end of the summer in Europe they came back, and he went to Princeton to continue with chemistry. After his degree he taught, pursued his research, and moonlighted by testing wine for a cigar company.

GRANDFATHER

Ah, old man
it broke your heart
what you son did
the boy had such success
such promise you were thinking
as you ran your fingers across the
wall splashed with blood
uncomprehending
how could you
how could I
it broke your heart that day
but you were a year
a-dying.

Later, for his contributions to medicine he was made an honorary member of the A.M.A. He was an inventor of the modern technique of freeze-drying. Freeze-drying is drying by sublimation; the frozen water is extracted by going directly to a gaseous state from the frozen state (ice), bypassing the liquid state--the way frozen sheets on a clothesline dry in mid-winter. It was first used for the preservation of serum and vaccines, such as the pertussis (whooping cough) vaccine, which he had a hand in developing. In 1933 the first blood products and serums were freeze-dried in his laboratory for use by the Philadelphia Serum Exchange. In his book *Freeze-Drying* (Flosdorf, 1959), he writes,

Processing and drying of all the first sera was carried out by the author in the Bacteriological Department of the School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania. The dried sera were used both for prevention and for treatment in clinical trials. . . .Convalescent measles, scarlet fever, chicken pox and mumps sera and pooled normal adult sera had been administered by 1935. . . to a total of more than 600 persons. . . .[In addition to preserving very perishable materials, it] was also felt that the method of preservation could be a powerful aid in the utilization and further investigation of the values of sera and other products from human sources for many purposes. (pp. 69-70)

Later it was extensively used for preserving penicillin. In the same book he gives the following credit,

Particular gratitude is due to my wife, who, as a bacteriologist, made many helpful suggestions, especially in the years when the work was in its infancy, and finally for her help in the preparation of the manuscript for this book. (vi)

In 1935, he also dried the first blood plasma.

Freeze-drying's most famous moment was in the second world war when it was used to preserve blood plasma for use on the battlefield. I remember as a child taking a battlefield kit into school for show and tell--I was perhaps in the third grade--and demonstrating how, when sterile water was added to the bottle of dried plasma and it was set up with the proper tubing and hung from a metal hook, it would feed life-giving fluids to a wounded soldier. I was too young to grasp fully the importance of this technology, but it got my father special notice in *Life* magazine. He was now working for the company that manufactured the freeze-drying equipment as Director of Research and Development and was internationally known, making frequent trips abroad to give lectures or set up laboratories and installations for freeze-drying. He was proud of his international reputation, thought he was more honored and better known abroad than in the U.S. In later years he used to say he should have gotten a Nobel prize for freeze-drying blood plasma and saving all those lives during the war, or at least an honorary degree from his college. He would say this with some bitterness.

During the war we had to save tin foil and fat (to be turned in at the butcher's for manufacture into nitroglycerine). We had two gas-rationing stickers, an A and a C, on our car; because my father was so important, the government gave him all the gas he needed to get around, at least that's what he told us. I remember blackouts and air-raid drills. My father was an Air Raid Warden, which meant he had to walk around the neighborhood streets and make sure no lights were showing. At about the same time I remember being severely spanked for drawing pictures on the wallpaper over my bed and having to bring all my toys and paints down to the kitchen and watch as they were destroyed and put in the trash. My mother told me much later that my father had gotten into trouble with the wife of an Air Force major for making sexual advances while her husband was abroad in the war. In retrospect, I think that is why my mother moved her bed into the guest room and why we moved into the country when I was 11.

I remember sitting at dinner and hearing him predict that something terrible was about to happen: he couldn't say what. The war in Europe ended. Then it happened. The bomb was dropped! He had known! He had known about it before it happened.

In the late '40s and early '50s I remember he brought home small cans with labels that said, "test . . . , lot . . . ," and we sampled freeze-dried hamburger and freeze-dried orange juice, saying which tasted best. Then he talked about having Top Secret Clearance, the highest there was. Later there were veiled allusions to things we did not understand, names like Mudd, Reichel, Kistiokowski. He began making trips to Bethesda, Maryland, to the Naval Hospital, the research facilities there. He said he was working on "bone burgers," a kind of bone paste to be dried and used in repairing bones. I was doing paintings, oil paintings. One of the last ones I did was a battlefield scene, a man's head resting on the shoulder of another, there was horror on his face. There was big guns pointing to a devastated landscape in the background, a valley, a village, and a strange white mist flowing down into it.

Intuitively I had guessed--he was working on germ warfare for the government! They were turning

his life-saving invention into a monster of destruction! I wonder now why he said yes. Did he have a choice? He must have. His invention, which was made for preserving pharmaceuticals, blood plasma, then for food and other peaceful uses, was being turned into a terrible, unspeakable weapon. Even today we do not speak of it. Germ warfare is simple, needs no Enola Gay, is beyond thought. But it was thought. It was being developed! It corroded my father's heart. His lips were sealed. My father hated that painting, and I taunted him with it. But no one could speak. Over the years I have become more and more convinced that the painting was true, and that it showed what was eating at my father's core.

WE KNEW

i

We knew
(we children)
before it happened
a cataclysm was coming
veiled allusions around the dinner table
names of men, scientists, linked
with the project
whispered predictions
"something big"---
Enola Gay was pregnant.

We knew
or felt it rather
behind the pride of clearance
TOP SECRET
lurked the guilt of one who had served
saved
thousands of lives
freeze-dried blood plasma
(we showed off the bottles in school)
the gift
twisted now, contorted
at Bethesda--
preserve the germs of the dire disease
(I knew and taunted him in a painting)
unknowing they grew
in secrecy's veil
in the interstices of words,
between the joints and the bone
in the nerves
that shook the hand
as the glass tipped

in the nerves that burned
in the gut
in the long rambling talk on supperless evenings
(we staring at the floor
shifting from foot to foot)
but we only saw
through
the glass
darkly.

ii

We knew
and winced
at the bruises
in the morning
and no one
dared speak
“canst thou not minister
to a mind
diseased”
silence of fear
and ignorance
“pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow”
the doctor there
in his cabinet there
below the sink
“and with some sweet oblivious antidote”
a golden vial
of clearest liquid
“cleanse the stuff’d bosom of that perilous stuff”
we knew
“which weighs upon the heart”
in
silence.

In his book on freeze-drying in the chapter on “Applications” is a subsection on “Bacterial and Viral Cultures” in which he gives a lengthy and detailed description of the process of preserving live microorganisms and then regenerating them after many years’ storage. The process is used to preserve strains of bacteria pure for laboratory use and for preparation of vaccines. He writes, “Siler and his associates at the Army Medical School have maintained their cultures of the now well-known S-58 virulent *Eberthella typhosa* without desiccation over a period of many years. From Dr. H. Parker Hitchens I have learned personally that viability and type have been maintained for over 10 years at room temperature. Preservation of this strain in this manner made it possible for Siler and his group to embark on a program of research over a period of years. There would have been little

justification for starting the program without having assurance that at the end, they would be dealing with an organism of the same characteristics they started with, as could be established by freeze-drying. As a result . . . a much improved vaccine for preventing typhoid fever was produced and was available for World War II. This is another major, although indirect, contribution of freeze-drying to the great success of American military medicine during the war” (p.92)

Several pages later in the book--and I have just now discovered this as I am writing this paper--is a brief section entitled “Biological Warfare,” which I shall quote in its entirety. It made me feel ill the first time I read it, because it was the first confirmation of what I had only suspected before.

One of the unfortunate possible applications of freeze-drying is in the preservation of the various micro-organisms such as bacteria and viruses which are pathogenic for man and other animals, plant life and also products produced by micro-organisms. It has been said that bacterial warfare was invented in 1649 by the Venetians who sent a physician with a flask of buboes to spread bubonic plague among the Turkish army in Crete. Some of the recently developed possibilities have been set forth by Rosebury and Kabat [footnote to article published in 1947]. Any of these agents such as pathogenic *Neisseria* may be preserved by freeze-drying for production of a carrier rate high enough so that cases would appear; for virus of mumps and measles, which are highly epidemic particularly among children and among adults from rural areas; and for yellow fever virus. The latter can apparently be transmitted without the aid of insect vectors under artificial conditions not met normally in nature, since the dry powder apparently can penetrate unbroken skin. Naturally, there may be many other applications developed in recent years which, for reason of security, are not being published. A fine dust of such a virus in freeze-dried form, as well as other materials, might even scatter sufficiently if merely dropped in a glass vessel, although of course much more efficient means could readily be developed. These authors point out what is now generally accepted, that bacterial warfare is feasible, although actual demonstration of its practicability is lacking since the destruction or immobilization of men or of essential productive and military equipment and materials without excessive risk to the user has not been proved. For no other reason than possible retaliation there is risk to the user. In fact, biological warfare is similar to or in the same category as chemical warfare, in which a major reason, for fully exploring the possibilities is to be fully prepared as a means for defense. Defensive measures mean not only measures of defense *per se*, but must include full exploration of the possibilities in offensive tactics as well. Freeze-drying plays a part, not only as a possible method for direct dissemination of infectious agents and for distribution of immunizing agents, but as an invaluable aid as a research tool in delimiting the possibilities.

The work of Rosebury and Kabat as published and as referred to above contains only data that were publicly available before 1952; it was treated as confidential during the war emergency, and has only recently been published by virtue of the removal of war-time restrictions. It is to be hoped that biological warfare will never become a reality. If it does not, the tremendous effort will have been repaid by virtue of the major contribution to medicine in increased knowledge of the control of disease prophylactically, therapeutically, epidemiologically and otherwise. (pp. 98-99)

Was he working, even then, in 1957, on germ warfare, or did the project begin later? Did he gradually grow into the project, unaware, or was there a clear choice point? Or, did he, as this

passage might suggest, volunteer himself for involvement in some sort of project? Whatever its origin, such a virus--that of participating in experiments regarding germ warfare--must have infected and soured the entire psyche, no matter what sort of rationalizations he made.

He always liked to say that he was for peace and the common man. He was pleased that all the workers, from the janitor up, greeted him when he went to work. I guess this identification came from his parents' working background. He was sensitive about this. He never forgave my mother's aunt for a remark she made just before the marriage about the lower social status of his family compared with that of my mother's. At work, however, in addition to being in charge of research and development, he was responsible for quality control, and many times he came home ranting about how he had to give so-an-so "hell" about something or other, usually some "dumb" mistake. We would hear about it all night long. At some point in the fifties he was offered the presidency of the company when the president either died or retired--I don't remember which--but he turned it down. My feeling, looking back at it now, is that he felt he couldn't deal with the social aspects of the job. He may have been the real power behind the throne anyway.

With his honorary A.M.A. card he was able to get a compliant pharmacist to give him drugs for the pains that knotted his stomach, made worse by his heavy drinking at night. Doctors put tubes down his esophagus but found nothing they could cure. He was probably suffering from severe spasms, for which there were not as many good medicines then as now. I do not know what he took, but he treated himself. He went in to work late in the morning, but no one seemed to mind, and he didn't drink until he got home, at about seven every night.; We had to stand around and listen to him talking about the day's events as he and mother drank, he getting louder, she getting sleepier. My brothers and I had eaten earlier; they didn't eat until ten or eleven. She suffered in silence, covered her bruises with make-up and made up fake excuses. She was the daughter of a minister who had built a large church in Philadelphia, but unfortunately he was dead. Possibly he might have helped. My father respected him.

STONE

It hit me like a huge stone
Splitting off from primal consciousness
And splashing into my brain.
Its echoes reverberated
Against the rocks of my skull
Deafening my ears.
The chill splash
Numbed me
Then made me shake
And warmed to recognition
As the ripples spread,
Created their own echoes and cross-ripples
And then subsided
Subsided
Almost.
For the rock lies there
Visible in the depths.

Why fear death
For death is no more
Alone
Than life.

To what lengths was his mind taking him? Our family doctor was a country doctor, a good-natured G.P. At my father's request he supplied him with a fetus for experimentation; it was frozen in a loaf pan, taken to the company where my father worked, and freeze-dried. The pan was then filled with liquid plastic, and when it hardened the fetus was turned out--embedded in a plastic block, like a bug in amber (Flosdorf, 1949, pp.250-257), It gave me an eerie feeling every time I walked by it.

THE UNBURIED CHILD

i

My father had a pact
with the village doctor
who one night delivered
a six-month fetus.

So for scientific curiosity
they iced it
in a bread-pan of glass,
sublimed it,
filled it with acrylic.

Turned out a plastic loaf,
he lay, arms folded,
tissue-skin, cartilage, and bone,
half-risen on my father's desk.

ii

And in the dark, and rainy days
I am afraid.
I feel the child begin to rise--
burst to a whirlwind, shatter crystal crumbs and shards,
cut the skin of them that baked him
flay their bodies, parchment skin and bones,
and throw them into rain--
and in the surging swell all shall be washed
to the sea
where a long slow bell tolls.
On that milky breast the child learns to howl.

Dealing with an alcoholic is difficult, and there was no real help for us in those days. His two favorite expressions had always been "Be a man" and "Trust no one; only *bona fide* authorities are not to be ignored." He was still pretty much a loner, with only a few friends. His closest friend was a neighboring pork farmer; when he died there was no other. When I got a little older, several times I pleaded with my father to quit drinking, to no avail. My younger brother and I drew away from home. He left college to join the service. I got married after my junior year, until the last minute my father threatened not to come to the wedding. The scene was unpleasant. Two and a half years later, in 1957 around Christmastime, my mother left him. Taking my brother with her, she lived in an apartment in a nearby town. She stayed away for several months, then went back because she thought it would be better for my little brother. It was later that spring--I was in the second year of graduate school in English, preparing for my qualifying exams--when the call came at midnight. The police said there had been an accident. When I arrived I found out. There had been an argument over a pheasant that had burned in the oven. Mother started out the door. He shot her. My 12-year-old brother nearly got hit as he ran out. My father took off his glasses, his shoes, put the gun barrel in his mouth and pulled the trigger with his toe.

INQUISITION

Were you flying
was there sensation of floating
of rising above the body
drifting upward, turning inside
out through a long tunnel
ribbed with spirals
turning, turning toward the end
where brightness is--
what color was the brightness
white and pale blues
reds, oranges, violets
or blank vacancy
like rain in winter
or blindness

before you reached the end
did you look back
back to the overturned rocker
you on the floor leaking blood, spilling
brains like a bowl of grits
hot in the dust

did you look back to the hallway
back to the tearing fear, walls splattered
she sprawled in blood
face torn open
at the door

did you look back
back into the kitchen where your
pheasant lay burned
in the pan, two glasses
on the counter
bottle drained; did you see
your purple rage at the charred bird
did you look back to a little boy
running barefoot, running up the road
barefoot in blue pajamas
did you look back
before you reached the end--

the end of sensations
of floating?

WHEN HE WAS
(paper, lead, and brass)

When he was five he wore long curly hair,
his mother's joy, and dresses as he first
was led to school, until
the teacher said let him be
a boy.

When he was seventeen his father asked
old Doc Patterson
what was a good profession
for success
for a boy.

"Chemistry" he said and chemistry it was--
and so ends the age of paper.

When he was twenty-three he led his mother
abroad to trace the family tree
discover coats of arms
on dirt-filled courthouse shelves.

When thirty, newly-coined
PhD searching for success
In a sterile lab--
so ends the age of lead.

--forty a hero on both sides
of the sea, so he
thought
--fifty collecting antiques

and prizes--
so the age of brass

fifty-five and a success
he blew it all--
(paper, lead, and brass)
in two s-
hell
s
!

The Red Cross brought my second brother home from Italy. His wife came soon after. There was not much we could do. My youngest brother lived with the cleaning lady briefly, than a neighbor, then went to live with his guardians, a childless couple who were owners of a boutique; "Uncle" Ed was dying of lung cancer. They had been named by the will, so he could not live with us, even though we wanted him to. He got no therapy. He went to church a lot with his guardians' aging mother. After college and an M.A. in philosophy, he married, had a son, and gradually slipped deeper into schizophrenia, was in and out of hospitals, then disappeared.

CHILDREN, YOUR UNCLE

While the phone wires us
head to head
your brain-space is light-
years from mine.

It's not just space and time
separates us, brother
you have warped
across the ribs of death

to a wharf
beyond Neptune
where ghosts drift
like mist on water
sleeping
in a roach-flea-rat
creeping place
aged in youth

without even a plate
to your name
you call, wishing
to share your room

though the flea that bites your back
bites my heart
though your stomach is weaker
I cannot . . .

Children your uncle
is dying in streets
no one can reach
his mind

he is missing
dark pits of the city
and we may never see him
ever again

we may never see him
ever again
for ghosts are rising
from the cold, dark river.

BROTHER

You wander
 thin hair blowing
the streets looking
for an ear for
your tales
wild-eyed and fantastic
you wander
 shaggy and bug eaten
to bars looking
for the father who missed you
when he shot your mother
and himself
you desert your home
 stale and gray
to sleep in halls
on benches
in streets
you wander in the park
 eyes that have seen
 too much
admire bronze saints
stone
you desert friends

too soon bent
shuffle
through alleys
in rain and snow
wanting no one
but
the dead
you wander
mindless
among the shades
now
we fear your eyes
as we pass.

We do not all deal with things equally well, but the pain, frustration, and guilt I feel for my little brother is difficult to bear. Hospitals could not hold him, nor could his marriage; he got worse, and began wandering again. In and out of hospitals. There is nowhere for him to go but to wander, it seems. Perhaps that is what he wants to do, what he must do. There must be a better answer. What is it? He still carries within him sounds of the shot that killed his mother. He still searches for his parents, endlessly.

KINSHIPS

i

Through you, my father, I am kin
to all murderers, all who take a life
in fear and anger, in dim-eyed drunkenness
afraid of loss of love, enraged
by the daring of independence.

Through you, my father, I am kin
to all who take their life
in anguish and pain of living,
unable to stand before the judge
of self--and awful guilt.

Through you, my brother, I am kin
to all who lose their mind
in seeing the unspeakable horror
and wander forever among visions
that cloud and protect a wounded sight.
Through you, my brother, I am kin
to the homeless, will-less, impoverished
who roam the streets and alleys

searching among rubbish for a scrap of true
nourishment, although there is none.

Through you, my father, I am kin
to heroes who save thousands
of lives, only to find, confronted
by self, there is nothing
but hollowness and death within.

ii

Through you, my mother, I am kin
to all the martyrs who suffer in pain
and silence, tied by love, or hate
or fear to circumstances
they can not change, until too late

Through you, greatgrandfather, I am kin
to all poets and painters who struggle
to set down the image of their life
to din, to see, to share
the anguish and the joy residing there.

Through you, my grandfather, I am kin
to all preachers who hope to find
a vision of timeless worth
and set it out, strangely meek,
to charm the ears of those who wait.

Through me, my child, you are kin
to all the pain and glory
that we share, and you will not escape
the uneven hand that distributes
and makes us, round the world, kin.

The day after my parents died I sat in the den of their home, uncomprehending, in shock, but also somehow not surprised, with my grandfather and the man from the bank who was to administer the will, talking. In my pocket was a small piece of paper I had picked up in the kitchen; it was in my mother's handwriting, and it said, enigmatically, "Don't put out the light on me." Why had she written it? I still don't know. On the way in to the den we had to walk through the hall where she was shot. Her blood was still on the wall. My grandfather ran his fingers across it. The room where we sat stank with blood. I did not know it was where my father had shot himself (the room had been quickly cleaned) or I would have said we must go into another room. All I could do was chain-smoke cigarettes to cover the smell. To this day I am not sure why my grandfather did that, ran his hand across the wall, made us sit in that room; maybe he was blaming me; maybe he was trying to immerse

himself in the horror of it all; he, too, must have been in shock. He died a year later of a heart attack, a broken heart. He didn't say much, only blaming my mother and "you kids" for not appreciating our father. I wonder if he knew about the germ-warfare corroding my father's heart. When they drank together did my father break his silence and tell his father what had happened to his life-saving invention? How many other scientists and brilliant, talented people are being abused by their government, or allowing themselves to be used, are being asked to turn their life-giving inventions into instruments of torture or death in the name of patriotism, of service to country, for the glory or the money? How many seduce their own egos into demonic tasks with elaborate rationalizations? How many will say *no*? How does one say *no* to one's country? How does one keep one's life work from being perverted? What are the pressures? They must be enormous! Yet we must find the courage. We must confront the god-demon, Shiva, and with open eyes look it full in the face.

EPITAPH

Side-by-side
they laid
and
side-by-side they are doomed
to lie

shroud them lightly
stony earth
once more let grass pave
the wounded soil

spread wide your shade you elms
let your roots sink deep
to suck
the juices
that poisoned
breathe them to leaves
transpire and let them fall

then weave a net around the slow decay
and rise
hand the skies in your branches
and drive your roots deep in the stormy ground.

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COMMENTARY

Here is a tragedy within a tragedy, like one of those carved Chinese ivory balls that contain other carved spheres within them. The outer ones must be patiently turned to reveal the hidden images inside. Not only has Father killed Mother in a desperate act designed to banish the panic of abandonment, but then he also deliberately carried out his own execution, mixing their bloods in one last assertive, if crazy, attempt to overcome fear, rage, pain, and black hopelessness. And, not only was the youngest brother lost to the emptiness of schizophrenia, to “wander forever among visions” and to “roam the streets and alleys searching among the rubbish for a scrap of true nourishment,” but the writer, a sensitive and thoughtful man, was also held hostage for 30 long years in an unyielding rip of shame whose sharp claws marred and disfigured yet another life. To top it all, much of the blame and some of the shame are still in the way of clear vision, and thus they still interfere in the process of fully resolving the pain.

Even so, here is a piece of writing that leads to self-healing. The heavy burdens of guilt and self-blame are all lessened as the tragedy is exposed to the light of day. Such is the power of reality. It always helps in separating the self from its internal tormentors. But seeds of more torment in the future lie hidden in *this* healing. The father within the writer remains condemned. He is not yet lovingly or even sadly understood, nor is he painfully forgiven for being ineffective and weak. In continuing to blame the dead father, the son’s capacity to accept himself as a father and as a man remains obstructed. The work of self-repair will have to continue beyond this point.

This beautifully written piece depicts Father as an idealized, world-famous, and brilliant scientist, a real hero, and to the young son still a god. But the grown man sees him even now as a devil of destruction, an alcoholic man of violence who not only helped create the atomic bomb but who was also responsible for perfecting germ warfare. For the writer this long-held view of Father as a killer was finally confirmed in the latter’s own writings. But no confirmation of the son’s old suspicions exists in the quoted passages. In fact, we are given a most plausible explanation of the need for research on germ and chemical warfare, to insure that neither will ever be used. Potential enemies have always been prevented from using horrible weapons by the fear that such weapons would be used against them. The fear of possible retaliation has kept us all from evaporating in a nuclear holocaust. “It is to be hoped,” says the father in his well-reasoned statement, “that biological warfare will never become a reality.” But the son continues to see his father unrealistically, with harsh and unforgiving eyes.

Neither the writer nor we will ever know what really happened in that tragic relationship between the parents, but an altogether different scenario is possible, and much more likely. Father was a loner, we are told, never involved in team sports, an only child who was led to school in a dress and who later took his mother, not a girlfriend, to Europe. A man who for fun traced family trees all the way to the 14th century, Father also researched a history of a house, collected antiques of all kinds, and wrote chemistry books. This is a picture of a man not very comfortable in relationships, one who does not excel in his capacity for intimacy. He was involved with things, not with people.

Why would such a withdrawn man make sexual advances toward another woman, not his wife? He hardly fits the picture of a ladies’ man. It may well have been a desperate act of loneliness by a person so starved to be softly touched that he lost all good judgment. Most probably he felt like an abandoned child, neglected, unloved, squeezed out, a stranger in his own house. Did Mother

really move her bed into the guest room and deprive her husband of her sexual company because of those “advances”? Was she ambivalent perhaps about her femininity, and unhappy in the role of wife and mother? Was Father’s behavior a reason, or merely a convenient pretext, for this “daughter of a minister” to leave the marital bed? Why did she marry this isolated man in the first place? Even the son recognized that his father was “afraid of loss of love, enraged by the daring of (Mother’s) independence.”

The father’s real despair and loneliness are completely overlooked by the grown son who still is unsympathetic, and who taunted the father even while a youngster. The passage of time has not done much to change the son’s old but unproven, and apparently baseless, suspicions. He does not see their flimsy basis although he writes “we knew, or felt it rather,” and continues to hold that “what was eating at my father’s core” was “the guilt of one who . . . at Bethesda--preserve[d] the germs of dire disease.”

Yet nothing in the story confirms these questionable ideas. Besides, vague pangs of conscience do not lead to self-destruction, and surely not to the murder of others. Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb, agonized about the mass destruction of life in Hiroshima and Nagasaki that he made possible. Even though hundreds of thousands lost their lives, neither Oppenheimer nor others involved in this project committed suicide. They reasoned with some justification that the extreme horror prevented an even greater horror, and that had the war continued an even larger number of American and Japanese lives would have been lost. The moral choices that we must often face are not between good and bad, but between bad and greater evil.

The father we encounter here was not directly responsible for any deaths except his own and that of his wife, and nowhere but in the son’s projections does he appear to experience guilt about anything else. The freeze-drying of the fetus is a horrible act in the son’s imagination, because he over identifies with the unborn child. Thus the unrelenting anger and the hate of the long-dead father who allegedly “baked” the fetus.

Father was indeed a bitter and disappointed man. He believed he deserved a Nobel prize, but never received it. Angry and unfulfilled he became a harsh disciplinarian remembered for destroying all of the son’s toys and pens and for spanking him severely because of a childish act of drawing pictures on the wallpaper. But this is only one side of his portrait.

I see Father instead as an inept, tragic, scared, and depressed man with chronic psychosomatic symptoms; severe spasms, a knotted stomach, and vague esophageal burning without a physical cause, all made worse by heavy drinking. Like depressed people, Father also had trouble getting up in the morning and was often late for work. But his drinking, we are told, was confined to the evenings, when he got home. Here he was met by an essentially rejecting wife and by a rejecting son, or sons. The family was disorganized, dinners were not taken together, both parents were alcoholics, and physical violence apparently was common. Father had only one friend, a neighboring pork farmer, and “when he died there was no other.” He was a pathetic, lonely man, drowning his pain, his hurt, and his rage in alcohol. The bottle was the closest friend he ever had.

How is it then that the son, a gifted and sensitive writer and teacher, would miss all these tell-tale signs of depression? Because children commonly identify with the parent who appears to suffer the most. This in general is Mother. Typically she is seen as long-suffering, fragile, devoted to family, and often downtrodden by a boisterous, violent, and angry husband. These are, and have been, our cultural stereotypes. Besides, sons are commonly angry at ineffective fathers who do not stand tall, even though they also resent strong fathers able to curb their narcissism. The tasks of fathering are very difficult indeed.

Sons, even more so than daughters, tend to over-identify with Mother, the giver of life and the source of every child's security. Thus they often see the world through her eyes. This father's sense of powerlessness, his enormous fear, the panic beneath the bluster, the cold emptiness and loneliness behind the preoccupation with antiques and books--none of these were noticed. The apparent total absence of warmth or welcoming in the family is also not mentioned.

Why did "an argument over a pheasant which had burned in the oven" lead to such violence? Was this just the tip of an iceberg? Did Father accuse Mother of being careless with the preparation of meals in general? Was Mother's move toward the door one of many hysterical temper tantrums, or was he really about to victimize her with more than words? Was she manipulative and self-righteous, tugging on his fear of abandonment, or was he about to attack her physically in an outburst of drunkenness? Neither the son nor we will ever know for sure, but usually there is more than one villain and more than one victim in any pathological marriage such as this. Rarely if ever is one completely white and the other completely black, as described here.

I was especially pained by the story of the youngest brother. Apparently no one could muster the strength to contest the will, so that the 12-year-old youngster would move in with one of his two brothers. The image of this wasted life, this innocent boy who was robbed both of childhood and of decent adult living refuses to leave my mind. But the brother did not become schizophrenic, from "seeing the unspeakable horror." He never felt safe within his skin even before that bloody night. In this barren desert of a family he never had a chance. There are no villains in a true tragedy, all are victims. Everyone is always paying a high price for growing up in loveless and chaotic surroundings.

Whether Father is seen as pathetic and sick or as an evil murderer and a proliferator of germ warfare, makes a profound practical difference. The possibility of healing demands closure, inner forgiveness, and conciliation. Only when Father is also recognized as a tragic victim of his past can such closure come about, and with it self-acceptance.

The son of a vicious murderer can heal himself partially by individuating, and by distancing himself emotionally from the one who committed the act. But the inner mark of Cain continues to haunt the family for generations. Not so if Father is seen as a sick man, one who also had no chance in life, the inevitable end-product of tragic circumstances, inadequate parenting, and basic insecurity. This father was also haunted by demons, by panic, by loneliness, and by his sense of worthlessness. The fact that he wrote books and made important contributions to humanity does not alter such basic traits of the personality.

The son of such a father can learn painfully to accept and even love his memory, and thus he can eventually also learn truly to love himself.

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