

THE MEMORY OF CLAY

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Yesterday, hidden behind two circular-saw cases on a deep shelf under my workbench, I found my father's bench plane, the tool he used for smoothing and straightening wood. It was in sorry shape. The blade was gouged, the wooden handle hopelessly loose, and, worst of all, the metal body of the plane was cracked. Though it was beyond repair, I briefly entertained the idea of sharpening it anyway. Marcel Proust famously wrote about how the taste of a madeleine soaked in lime blossom triggered childhood memories of his aunt's room, which "rose up like a stage set." Well, holding my father's broken bench plane suddenly brought back his basement workshop. Dad had power tools of every kind: a band saw, a table saw, a lathe, a drill press. It was a woodworker's shop, and it smelled of old dogs and aged sawdust. On metal shelves next to his workbench Dad kept all kinds of wires, shims, hooks, and screws in brown cigar boxes, and behind a box of large nuts and bolts he hid his booze. He would often disappear down there, a sober man with a job to do, and come back drunk, leaving behind unfinished projects in his crooked wake.

I inherited my father's tools after he died. I recognize them still, not only by their age but by the red slash of fingernail polish that still shows through the rust and dirt. Dad began marking all his tools this way after a neighbor borrowed one and failed to return it. Seeing these marks of ownership, seventy years after Dad made them, brings back images of him in the basement workshop, brushing sawdust off a fresh rip cut and looking sideways at a half-made drawer, his mind at work calculating his next move — where to measure, where to cut, and what tool to use.

It's an old story that a boy grows up to measure himself against his father. It's unavoidable, really, and made more complicated when that father is deeply flawed. For all Dad's skill with wood and tools, his life was sloppily built. Some sorrow whose origins I can't name led him to

consistently misread the ruler. What does a son do with the wreckage of his father's life forty-six years after his death? Mostly I avoid thinking about it, except for those inescapable moments when a slash of red nail polish brings him back, or a gap opens in my own miscut wood joint and I'm reminded that I can misread a ruler, too.

My daughter Julia, a ceramicist, was telling me the other day about her struggles to make clay pieces in the image of an upright figure with outstretched arms. She calls these "ritual keepers," and they are designed to hold incense sticks. After being fired in the kiln, her figures would often come out leaning forward instead of standing up straight, as if they were gazing at the ground. Julia says that clay, especially fine clay like porcelain, has a memory, and making her ritual keepers stand up straight is "intrinsically against their nature." Raw, unformed clay wants to be round like the earth and yields only reluctantly to the potter's will. When it does, she says, it typically remembers the first shape it was forced to assume. In the case of Julia's ritual keepers, which were flattened with a slab roller, they remember the press of the roller and stubbornly insist on retaining its curve.

These memories of my father are stubbornly pressed, too, no matter how hard I have tried to straighten them. To be clear, I've tilled this field before. I've sat opposite therapists in well-lit rooms talking about my father's alcoholism, and this has been good work. I quickly understood the futility of my adolescent attempts to manage his drinking: confronting him with the bottle hidden behind the nuts and bolts; marking the level of booze in the bottles in the cabinet above the stove; and insisting on the logic no active alcoholic accepts — that if he really loved me, he would stop. I came to terms with my own vulnerability to the disease and used the fear of it to measure and remeasure my relationship to alcohol. For children of

alcoholics these are never-ending calculations that have no satisfactory outcome.

My mother often told me that drunks can live forever, so my father's death at fifty-seven came as both a surprise and a relief. But it created a vacancy in my heart that I didn't know how to fill, and in seeped anger, which colored my memory of the man in ways I've found difficult to undo. The anger was warranted, but it was also reductive. It erased his complexity and turned him into a cardboard cutout, a prop that I barely noticed because its meaning seemed settled. Until something unsettled it. What I did with the wreckage of my father's life was anchor it to an old theme: the story of the wronged son. It's a narrative designed to assign blame, and I thought my father deserved it. For years this allowed me to keep the memories of him at a safe distance. The problem is that he wouldn't stay in exile. I should have known this would happen, but I've always had a writer's naive faith in the power of story to find a proper place for things.

As I age, I notice how richly populated my memories are. I find myself lying in bed at night, trying to sleep, watching a parade of old friends, lovers, and family members march by, each hauling along a theatrical set for the place they inhabited in my life. I see Jan, a high-school girlfriend, with a cloth daisy pinned to her dark hair, looking eagerly into my eyes while we sit on the bed in the small third-floor bedroom of my house in Highland Park. I see my college friend Billy, his straight blond hair heading toward his waist. He's eating a carton of ice cream with a wooden spoon while we sit on the concrete basketball court outside our dorm. It is always May, and the Wisconsin spring bursts with birdsong. I see my childhood friend Frank in a puffy green down jacket, grinning at his own joke while we watch the sun set on Lake Michigan. We squint to see the Chicago skyline on the horizon, like tiny, ragged fangs set against the bloody sky. Each of these people knows where they belong in my memories, and they don't trouble me too much.

Memories of my father are typically drunken scenes. I see the shock on his face when I knock him down in the kitchen after he calls my mother a whore. I see him in a heap at the back door; my mom and I roll him awkwardly onto the landing while he says, "I want some peanuts. Give me some goddamn peanuts." I see him challenging me to a footrace down the street in front of our house after I contemptuously told him that I'd have no problem beating him. "Let's just see about that," he said, clumsily stripping off his jacket and loosening his bow tie. I was on the high-school track team and looked forward to humiliating my father. And I did beat him, of course. What I remember most clearly is the sound of change in his pockets as he ran — *ca-ching, ca-ching, ca-ching* — and that for some reason it made me feel ashamed.

But there is always one scene that goes off script: I went to see Dad a month before he died and a few years

after my mom divorced him. We sat together in his filthy kitchen, watching football on a tiny TV. He was relatively sober while I was there, and he asked me about graduate school, then offered me a beer. It was the first time we'd ever drunk together, and I hesitated to take the can, wondering what it might mean for a child to accept a drink from his alcoholic father. But I took it, and when I left him that day, I was overcome with pity, which surprised me after all that time. I didn't know what to do with it. Pity is harder than anger, because it requires that you surrender a part of yourself to sadness, which gnawed away at me for years. It wasn't that I felt responsible for the tragedy of my father's life, but I felt there was nothing that could ever successfully bind me to him. Over time he stopped being my father and instead became something unreachable and remote — an abstract lesson about the ways a life can fall apart.

Dad died in that kitchen of a cerebral hemorrhage. My brother took a call from my father's lifelong friend, who was worried: Dad hadn't answered the phone for a few days. My brother broke down the locked door of his tiny apartment and found Dad in a pool of blood on the floor next to his typewriter. For many years after that I used his typewriter — a beefy Royal office machine — for my own writing. I also kept the beige rolling chair Dad was lying next to. It was spattered with blood that I never cleaned off. I can't explain why I chose to live with a reminder of the day Dad died. It was morbid and vaguely disrespectful, which perhaps is why I did it.

In the last ten years of my father's life — his worst — we staged several interventions, and at the final one he agreed to go into rehab at Hazelden, still a premier treatment center. A former newspaper reporter, Dad took extensive notes in two four-by-six notebooks, where he summarized what the experts and counselors told him about projection, repression, regression, depression, and the Twelve Steps. What strikes me, as I read his scribbles now, is that he never wrote about himself. This was no personal journal but a reporter's notebook; he was collecting material for an article he proposed to write about group therapy for the *Chicago Tribune Magazine*. Like most things he started, the article was never finished, but I still have a carbon copy of the manuscript, and a letter he wrote to an editor at the *Tribune*, in which he talks of making many false starts before he finally "fell back on the old copydesk maxim to tell it straight." I'm not sure exactly what that means. My guess is that he chose to be a reporter rather than a personal essayist, which conveniently put him at a safe distance from his own reasons for being in the company of addicts. After a month, over the objections of his counselors, Dad pronounced himself cured, left treatment, and soon resumed drinking.

I have his draft next to me as I write this, and for the past few days I have lingered over a passage on the final page: He is walking alone on the center's leafy campus,

reading a book and bundled against the chilly wind, when his path converges with that of another patient, a young woman who is also reading. They walk together in silence for a bit. Then she asks, "Do the trees ever talk to you?" Dad replies that they do not and asks what they say to her. "That I'm not alone. That they are the voices of the people and places that are just over there. When I get home, I know I'm going to find them, because I'm happy inside. Don't they tell you that, too?" "No," he says, "they seem to say that this is my close world and my quiet one." Hemingway writes in *A Moveable Feast* about the importance of finding "one true sentence" to restart the work when it stalls. I'm suspicious of the truth of Dad's sentence, and I puzzle over its meaning. What does he mean by a "close world"? In the footer of this final page Dad writes, "more," but there is no more. It's as far as he got.

My mother died two years ago, and I find that, in her absence, Dad is more present than ever, an unwelcome ghost dragging his rusted chains. I have always trusted my stories about Dad to keep him at a safe distance, a character in a familiar narrative that is sad but sometimes comic. I was not prepared for him suddenly to return and threaten to break character. As you can surely tell by now, I am trying to figure out what I am supposed to do with him after all these years. We all live with unresolved pain that even therapy cannot reach; losses that lodge themselves in our bodies somewhere, connect with our nervous systems, and deliver a mild shock from time to time to remind us they are irrevocable. All it takes is a slash of red fingernail polish for me to feel that loss all over again. Why now? And what am I supposed to do about it? Forgive?

In 1935 my father was fresh out of college and took a ship to Europe with friends. They toured prewar Germany, and an old map I have of his trip traces in heavy black ink his journey from Hamburg to Munich, with a brief detour to Austria. He writes that the "Hitler men" are everywhere, and he took a photograph of a sign outside a German village that read, "Jews are not welcome here." My father was not a Jew, but we later lived for many years in a Chicago suburb that was predominantly Jewish, and across the street from us lived a kind, beautiful woman named Edith who had a number tattooed on her arm. She would not speak about her experience in the camps. If asked about visiting her homeland, Edith shuddered and said that she could think of no reason anyone would ever want to visit Germany. When I was a boy, I cut her lawn every Tuesday, and from time to time she would stand in the window and watch as I worked the hand clippers on the long blades of grass sprouting hopefully among the rocks at the edge of the lawn. When I think of Edith, standing alone in her front window, I imagine what it is like to live with horrible things that cannot be forgiven. I think, too, that her ghosts, so much more terrible than mine, may have been easier for her to hold at bay because they could not be

forgiven. This is something I cannot know, but I wonder whether there are times when forgiveness is not only difficult but unnecessary.

Among the many photographs of my father's trip is one I have kept on my desk ever since I discovered it. It is a picture of him standing on a glacier in a dark short-sleeve shirt, hands on his hips. He and his friends are on a hike up Zugspitze, the highest mountain in Germany. He is young and wiry, with a square jaw and an unruly shock of dark-brown hair, and he is somberly looking at the ground in front of him. Studying old photographs of the people we loved, and who have hurt us, is never simple. This picture of my dad is one of the few I have of him as a young man, full of energy and promise, but what I see mostly is his sadness. I know enough about depression to think that it may have kept him company on the hike up Zugspitze. But I suspect I am reading too much into the photograph, which is silent on the reasons for his somber face that day on a glacier eighty-seven years ago. He might just have been tired from the climb.

It is the quiet work of those who seek to understand our losses to find a story that makes some sense of them, and for years I spun theories about the causes of my father's drinking. It was often the subject of conversations with my mother before she died. "Your dad's father expected him to be a doctor like his brother," she would say, "and your father believed he had disappointed your grandfather, who was a very cold man." For years I clung to the idea that my father was a failed writer, and that when his first book contract fell through with *Reader's Digest*, he never recovered from the disappointment. Then the other day I found a letter from his editor on that book, who said the project had been dropped because Dad had missed the deadline. The reasons for his drinking are unknowable, of course, and part of the pain of living with a personal tragedy like this is that it will always be a broken story — the ending will always be inconclusive and unsatisfying.

Quite often Julia will spend days throwing and sculpting clay figures only to discover later that the pieces have shattered in the kiln. "I don't know how you can tolerate that," I tell her. "All that work destroyed; all that time wasted." She shrugs and says it's the bargain ceramicists make with themselves. Kilns are finicky, like clay, and loss is inevitable. A few times, when I witnessed the opening of a kiln and looked in to see shattered heads and broken bodies — a clay massacre whose cause was a mystery — Julia was never angry. She never shook her fist at the gods of clay. "What good would that do?" she says, and I marvel at her patience, her acceptance. Clay remembers, she told me before. It remembers the first shape it is forced to assume and resists all others. But sometimes clay resists taking any shape. It surrenders all its memories to the vagaries of high heat and moisture, and when it does, it is lost for good, and one must begin again. ■