Rhythms

Marni Asplund Campbell

MY FATHER'S HEART IS STRONG AND SCARRED, bound in spots by thread, a delicate patchwork of veiny fabrics. I imagine, when I talk to him on the telephone, his physical presence. I can hear his breathing in the brief pauses before he answers a question—a necessary affectation, no doubt, after years of playing the law professor, gently withholding wisdom like a tweed-coated Socrates. He always signals the end of the conversation with a heartier tone, "Well, we love you, Marni," and it is at this moment when I think I can hear his heartbeat—slow, deliberate, like his golf game or the way he plays "Laura" on the piano. It was my lullaby, as he nursed me through cold Edmonton nights, his first pink daughter—a rhythm of protection, quiet reassurance.

During his ten years as bishop, his heart must have absorbed the shocks of a hundred lives worth of infidelity, drunken, angry hatred, and poisonous despair—absorbed them well on the outside, never showing the pain that threatened to burst its walls, like Milton's cannon, with the combined combustion of saltpeter and sorrow. A father for twice as long, it must have torn and bled with each scrape and sin. He taught me once how to skip, step-hop, step-hop, in front of our house. An uncommon moment for a man, tall legs moving to a child's double rhythms. But I tripped when I tried and fell on my nose, making it bleed. He carried me to the bathroom and cried, just a few small tears that got lost in my hair. I was secretly thrilled with the glamor of the injury and impressed by his emotion.

His father's heart was no less strong but grew fat on Alberta beef and fried bread. It sent him signals, tiny bursts of hot semaphore—

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stop, slow down—but they were silenced by ignorance and a glass of bicarbonate of soda. A heart as wide as the prairies, but still one day in the church cloakroom by the chapel, it stopped. Just stopped. In a glorious seizure it ceased and settled, my grandfather falling to the floor next to the dripping winter boots. Dad, still in college, bore the loss. But his heart also bore the hereditary weaknesses—the too-tender empathy that made it shudder at pain and ugliness, the fierce integrity that made it tremble at avarice, that luscious longing for meat and gravy. At the end of his meal, Dad would go to the cupboard for a piece of soft white bread and slowly sop up the last of his gravy, winking at his pleasure. And that germ of weakness that pulsed through his veins spoke to him one day. Stop. Slow down. He called the ambulance himself and waited for it in front of his office.

I told my little sister when she came home from kindergarten, "Emily, Dad had a heart attack today." I don't remember how I knew. Was there a note on the fridge, by the picture of Mark in Brazil? Did Mom call? Emily sat on my lap and cried silently, like a woman.

Dad spent a month in the hospital, waiting for the slow revelations that could chart the waste of flesh, the hardenings and softenings of chambers and tissues. The worst test, said Dad, was the angiogram. You were conscious so that you could cough and make the muscle jump for a more lively picture, and it was more painful than the attack, like having fire shot into your veins. And there, in the basement of the Hotel Dieu hospital, lit up like a crazy neon roadmap, was the impasse, the heart-plug, the forty-five years worth of saturated fats and silent anxiety. It was a quadruple block and needed to be removed.

The night before his surgery, we all went to the hospital and sat in a room at the end of the cardiac wing. Beautiful—surrounded by windows, on the eleventh floor, where we could see miles of Lake Ontario, dull gray and silver. It must have been January, because it wasn't quite frozen. From that height, the waves looked like a relief map, the continent of Europe in motion. We sang some hymns—we'd never really done much with Family Home Evening, but this seemed an appropriate time to approximate the form—and each one of us said something about Dad. But the miracle came when he silenced us with his presence and told us simple stories about his love and gratitude for his children, his wife. We have no promise of a painless life, he said, or even the presence of beauty to temper the suffering. All we know is that it is good to love. Then we prayed, kneeling by the windows, and left. I slept with my mother that night. She couldn't stand to be alone with the extra pillows and the telephone.

that it is good to love. Then we prayed, kneeling by the windows, and left. I slept with my mother that night. She couldn't stand to be alone with the extra pillows and the telephone.

I also stayed with her during the surgery, when I wasn't in school—ten hours that I remember in small bursts. Friends brought sandwiches, jello, ice cream. Mom ate nothing. Another family was waiting for their father in surgery, and at midnight a nurse came to tell them that he had died. And I learned then that death was nothing, really nothing, and that was the awful, leering injustice of it. Just a word and an absence—he is no more. Mom and I cried like it was for us, and we were alone.

Another friend came—she took me to the cafeteria; mom was immovable as a sphinx, convinced that her vigilance would speed the miracle. When we came back, the nurse had been there. The doctor had asked if we wanted a priest—the operation done, Dad's heart, romantic little organ, insulted by the thoughtless vivisection of the scalpel, refused to beat again. I found a quarter, called my father's bishopric counselors. As moments crystallize into permanence, they acquire unnatural dimensions. This one seems to me now gigantic, the time drawing out like Einstein's light-speed clock, aging more agonizingly than the bean I planted in Primary. They came and washed and anointed their hands, then his head, surrounded by green nurses and the surgeons, with the ghastly chest exposed, ribcage casually set aside like kindling, the hiss and click of electronic life methodically controlling the circulation. His heart began to beat. I asked him later if he'd had a near death experience, and he said, "No, Marni, just a damned painful one."

I suppose a girl always harbors a peculiar love for her father, a subtle fascination with his tallness and inherent opposition to her substance, but this is not really going to be about Dad. For I learned, during the hours in the waiting room, when we sat holding hands just for warmth and the reassurance of vitality, during the weeks after, when she lost twenty pounds and let me drive the car, even though I was still fifteen, when she finally ate with me, a whole strawberry pie with cream between the two of us, that my mother was a woman, enigmatic. Not a monolith of power dictating piano practice and bathroom cleaning, but a wife and lover, who knew much more intimately than I the rhythm of my father's life, the rhythm of my own creation. Her frantic energy was an expedient counterpoint to his soft sureness, the two bound endlessly together by mysterious ties of blood and bone. And last week, as I lay on a paper-covered table in the Health Centre, I heard a new rhythm, an insistent swish swish twice

the speed of my own, transferred through jelly smeared on my stomach and a tiny microphone. It filled the room with a mystical presence, stronger than my own life, more lovely than my husband's eyes as he smiled.*

**My father, Tom Asplund, died of a heart attack in September 1990, seven months after I wrote this essay, four months after the heartbeat became my daughter. More than ever, this is dedicated to my mother who continues to bear, with unflagging patience and humor, the heat and labor of the day.*