

Heart of the Fathers

Thomas F. Rogers

The Child is father to the Man
—Wordsworth

You wake before the alarm you'd set for 4:30. You dress, almost ritually, and decide to fast. Today of all days you must maintain the proper mood—and your self-control. Yes, think of it as a ritual, a necessary rite. Like giving an inert body back to the earth. It has to be done. Someone has to do it. . . . But this is harder. Corpses don't talk back. You must keep the correct distance. Before the curtain rises, each actor must know the proper lines and be in his designated place.

Just before 5:00 you wake Janet, then the old man. Julie can sleep till the last minute. Meanwhile you step onto the chill front porch. It's still pitch dark and already raining. You don't like driving in the rain.

It was dark and wet—a frozen winter evening—when he re-entered your life some forty years ago. Flinging the last newspaper at the last porch, you had headed home. What would it be like, you had wondered, sharing the same house with him after all these years? Inside the front door your mother, smiling too broadly, informed you that “Dad” was in her room upstairs, resting from his long bus ride but still not asleep. You could go up and say hello. Blanking your mind, you had dutifully plodded upstairs. There, under a quilt, was the man whose profile you only vaguely remembered.

“Hello, Dad!” you finally blurted.

The man slowly turned his head—“Mike?”—then roughly kissed you, his bristles scraping your still beardless cheeks.

“How are you, Dad?”

The man waved you back—“Get to bed now. We'll talk in the morning”—then turned toward the wall.

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You stood awhile before returning to the stairs. It wasn't like you'd expected, but you already sensed that here was a man who knew what he wanted—whatever that might be—and would from now on have his way with you. Would this be your only mode of conversation—just agreeing and taking orders? Who *you* really were, you sensed, would only gradually become clear as you got to know this man now lying on your mother's bed. For the moment the idea had struck you like one more death, your own, and your future responses, you sensed, would be an evasion. . . .

So now, just last week, you'd written the letter that set in motion all this morning's activities:

Barbara Cugno,
Admissions Director, V.A. Psychiatric Hospital
Fort Lyon, Colorado

Dear Ms. Cugno:

I'm writing you and your staff, pursuant to my discussion with you this morning on the telephone.

You indicated that—providing available bed space—my father might be eligible for renewed residence at your institution. As your records will show, my father is a veteran of World War I, drafted and serving stateside for six months before that war's close.

Shortly after his return to our community in the early thirties, my father met and married my mother. I was born a year later, their only child. Before I was two, my father's brothers-in-law—a doctor and an attorney—persuaded my mother to commit him to the state mental hospital in Provo. He was then transferred to your facility on a veteran's benefit and remained there for some seventeen years, after which he was finally declared productive and able to live again in normal society. He resumed full-time employment as a building maintenance worker until his retirement at age sixty-five. He is now eighty-eight years old.

My wife and I believe that the schizophrenic condition which necessitated his earlier period of residence at Fort Lyon has, in his declining years, sufficiently manifested itself again to require further hospitalization. He is presently a ward in our home.

My father's irritability, verbal abuse, and constant demands have at this point created an intolerable disruption in our home. Our children are harassed and despondent, and my wife—his principal caretaker—is so fatigued by his demands that her doctor advises we do anything to spare her. My wife has a severe skin rash from diapering and cleaning my father with wet washcloths, and frequently lifting him in and out of bed has given her such traumatic bursitis that her doctor tells us her blood pressure has already reached stroke level.

I enclose a certification from the rest home where my father recently stayed on a short-term Medicare benefit which attests to his present mental condition. We plead with you to expedite whatever procedures you can to allow my father's return—some fifty years after he was first admitted—to your facility. We make this request with a considerable sense of guilt but are prompted by sheer desperation. I am prepared to escort my father to Fort Lyon if so authorized.

Janet comes to the door. "What are you doing out there?"

"Waiting for Riley."

"You told him not to come before 5:30."

"I'm afraid he'll be late."

"He's never late when he comes home teaching."

"He might oversleep."

"He'll be here. And things are going well so far."

"Is Dad dressed yet?"

"He's in his gown. And he's eating a soft-boiled egg."

"In bed?"

"Of course. He soiled the mattress last night."

"Again?"

"It's all right. It's the last time."

"Do you think he knows?"

"I think it's just another day to him. He thought he was eating dinner and asked me when he could lie down again."

"Don't let him lie down. Let's get his pillow. I'll take it to the car. Is his suitcase in the hall?"

"Yes. It's all packed."

"Good. I'll take it out too. You'd better wake Julie."

"She's already up. She helped me change him."

"What a thing to put her through!"

"She doesn't mind. I needed help and knew he wouldn't let you."

"I guess we all know that! What time is it?"

"Not 5:30 yet."

"They said to be there by 6:00."

"They don't need a whole hour to put him on before the other passengers."

"Maybe they think he's violent, that he'll resist and cause trouble."

"He's too weak. But he'll make the trip just fine."

"I hope so. . . . Do I hear him calling?"

"Yes. I'll go check on him."

"Why doesn't he ever ring that bell I bought him? It must not register anger like his voice can."

"Guess not." She goes.

Suddenly you're blinded. A car's headlights. Riley pulls into the drive, brakes, then slams the door, and bounds up the porch steps.

"Shh . . . !"

"Sorry. . . ."

"Now remember, you're not a high school history teacher any more. For the next half hour you're *Doctor Martin*."

"Right. Boy, would my dad be proud of me right now."

"Be tough. Be professional."

Janet appears in the hall holding a wet washrag.

"Where are your rubber gloves?" you ask, worrying about her hands.

"He was covered with feces."

You nod to Riley: "I'll wait out here till you call me in."

Riley joins Janet in the old man's room. "I'm Doctor Martin," Riley assures him. "We're taking you to the hospital today. You need . . . to be hospitalized."

"Don't need no one's spit. Yours nor mine."

"You need to go to a hospital."

"Says who?"

"Uh . . . I do!"

"Why're yuh shouting?"

"I thought you couldn't hear me."

"That would be fine with me, you fool. Fine and dandy."

An awkward pause. Janet pokes her head out the door and signals that they're ready to lift him.

You take a breath and follow. He's sitting now, his legs dangling over the edge of the bed. He doesn't seem to notice you.

Sure miss my dog, Podie. Never forget how he thought he was a bird an' used to lie in the coop with the chickens. How he'd stir up all that dust, raisin' his front paws an' flappin' em like they was wings. Used to have to keep him off their nests too. Wanted t' hatch a egg, if he could.

Finally you speak up: "Okay, Doctor. We'll do it like this: lock hands behind his back, then each take a leg."

At last you touch him. How long has it been? Together you start to lift, but your hands slip on the old man's satin robe. He slides to the edge, taking all his weight on the small of his back, his legs still dangling. "God damn it! What in the hell you trying to do?? Some doctor you are!!"

Went to a doc years back in Oklahoma. I'd skinned myself bad on some barbed wire. Give me a ulcer that wouldn't heal. The doc had this here root from China, ground up in sulphur molasses. Said it would cure me, an' it did. What I couldn't believe was all them bottles he had on his shelf. An' whadaya think they had in them? Gallstones, kidney stones . . . an' a lot o' babies that never got born. Lots of 'em. An' tapeworms too. Row after row. Line upon line of 'em. I never seen such long tapeworms. All come out with that medicine. All them folks cured by the same remedy—Chinese root in sulphur molasses. Course it wasn't no cure fer them poor babies. But they got put out o' their mis'ry 'head o' the rest of us. That's what it did fer them. A big favor. Anyway, this Okie doctor made barrels of it each month for the queen o' England. Did the Queen herself have a tapeworm, I asked him. Course not, he said. Was fer her soldiers in India.

You look at each other, steel yourselves, then get a better grip. He's up. You set him down just once before the porch steps, then carefully descend to the car. Don't slip. That's all you need. Janet opens the car door. Your high schooler, Julie, is with her. She holds two pillows—one for his back, one to sit on. Together you ease him into the seat next to the driver, shielding his head from the door frame. This part is a piece of cake.

You close the door. Gently. Then, loud enough for all to hear: "Thanks, Doctor."

Riley plays along: "I'll send you a bill."

As you pass behind the car and Riley moves to his, you whisper: "Thanks again. Go get some sleep. . . ."

You begin the drive at the wheel—you, Janet, Julie, the old man. No one speaks. Rain again. The wipers go on. You strain to find words. Then you reconsider. Don't rile him. Leave him to his strange thoughts. . . .

Met a man once while I was workin' fer a spud farmer in Jerome, Idaho. His mouth twisted all the way to the side o' his face. An' he whistled when he talked. Yeah, whistled when he talked. When I got back to the house I told the farmer 'bout him. An' he said that man had gone out o' his tent once when he was a little boy, campin' out with his brother. They'd set some traps. Early the next mornin' the boy got up, went out an' found a bear cub. Then the cub's mommie come along an' give that kid just one fast swipe with her paw. That's all it took. The man was fifty or sixty by then—still talkin' outa the side o' his face an' whistlin' whenever he did.

The earth keeps receding beneath you, but the trip seems endless. The wipers wag away the miles. (How many wags to the mile? Fast or slow?) You can see Julie in the rearview mirror, staring through her window at the rain. What's she thinking? When you told her yesterday, she cried. But when you went to bed, Janet told you why: "She feels so guilty."

"Why?"

"She told me that—when she was a little girl—she used to pray he'd die."

"Die?"

"Because he was so mean. Not like other grandfathers."

"I . . . can understand. . . ."

Now Julie's head bobs against Janet's shoulder—she's asleep, exhausted. At least he used to talk to Julie, tell her all his worn-out stories. They had a few good moments. But like you and Janet, she must be tired of constantly submitting and agreeably nodding to his will. When each of you finally showed your hand, he couldn't take it.

It might have been the first time that people he couldn't dominate or run away from had stood up to him. At first he became incensed and raged, then he just sulked—still demanding care and attention from Janet. Just remember, Janet, this is the last time.

You risk a peripheral glance at the old man sitting next to you. He stares straight ahead. How's he taking this? Does he comprehend at all what's happening? If he does, he's not letting on.

How many apples kin you use today? It's depressin'. All this good fruit goin' to waste. An' nobody to take it off my hands. Don't tell me them apples is wormy. Don't tell me that! Before long I'll be too arthritic, an' you or someone'll have t' pick 'em fer me. An' fer all them people in Africa an' Asia. It's a damn shame. Apples rottin' an' people starvin'. But I'll tell yuh whose fault it is—all them corrupt churches an' politicians. They's in it together, yuh know. Why, look at what a apple's worth nowadays an' a dollar ain't. In my time was twenty cent a bushel. Yep, you could buy five bushel fer a single greenback. But now a dollar's not worth pickin' up. . . . Why a smart-alleck Boy Scout come by th' other day with a printed sheet. "Local Church bulletin," says he. "How much?" I ask, since I don't subscribe. "It's free," says he. "Everyone gets one." "It cain't be!" says I. "How much is the newsprint? How much th' ink?" "I don't know," says he. "Well, yuh oughta know!" I yells at him. An' he up an' left. Maybe I scared the crap outa him. So what! Good riddance!

The dark begins to lift. Cars and buildings come into view. The old man still looks straight ahead. Like a condemned convict. No one speaks for the full hour it takes to get there.

At the airport people are helpful and solicitous. This is nothing new to them. Commandeering a wheelchair, they help him into it, then head to the designated gate. As you wait to be called up, you eye Julie. She pretends she's watching the people come and go to and from the various flights. Will she kiss him goodbye? What last memory does she want of him? You don't dare ask—not in his presence. Then *you'd* be the intruder.

Suddenly it's time to board. An attendant whisks the old man toward the plane. You follow. No time for Julie. It's probably better that way. There's something good about such abruptness—a good way to part. A good way to die.

Janet goes with you to help settle him. A flight attendant joins you. Julie remains in a chair by the gate. Discreetly no one speaks about an aircraft. Perhaps the old man won't notice, will think instead that this is just a series of waiting rooms in some hospital. Entering the plane through an enclosed ramp might fool him for the first flight, but what about the small prop plane on the next one? Don't borrow trouble, you remind yourself. One thing at a time.

Just beyond first class, the aisle becomes too narrow. You return to the first-class bay, turn the wheelchair around, then wheel him backwards to the first row of second-class seats and awkwardly hoist him over the wheelchair's high arms and onto the seat nearest the aisle. With his pillows.

Other passengers filter in. Most glance at him quickly, then look the other way. Janet covers his knees with a patchwork comforter, then puts on his favorite cap, a Norwegian fisherman's. Or is it Greek? One woman, bending over, pats his arm and coos, "Oh, you're so cute. You remind me of my mother!" This woman will never know how close she has come to losing her head in a lion's furious jaws. But the lion ignores her. Doesn't even blink.

Had this here dream. . . . I was somewhere I'd never been. Some furin country, I giss, cuz I couldn't understand all these sick people. There was some kind o' epidemic. They was standin' all aroun' me droppin' in their tracks. But I was just fine. An' I'll tell you why: I knew what was causin' it—their cul-i-nary water that was comin' from a river runnin' through their town. An' you know why they was all a dyin'? There was a body in it. Body of a naked woman. Full o' germs an' maggots. Decomposin'. An' they was drinkin' them maggots an' germs. But I wasn't. No, sir. Fact is, I was drinkin' the same water they was—'cept they was downstream of that woman's body an' I was above it.

Another woman is ticketed for their row but, sensing a problem, asks to sit elsewhere. No problem. There are plenty of vacant seats.

Janet bends down, pecks his cheek, and mumbles a cautious "Goodbye."

"What? You're not staying?" So he can still speak. And how true to form. In his later years, how often—after chewing his visitors' ears off with his monologues—he'd grab them and plead, "You're not goin' so soon, are you?"

"The doctors want *Mike* to be with you." Janet is firm. She's learned that from him—to fight his fire with her own. And he takes it fairly well—from her.

Goin' t' give me my pill again, are yuh? Thins the blood, does it? Don't remind me. Makes me think o' Agnes. How she suffered so after her stroke—lingrin' on all them years. Never sain' a solitary word. Never recognizin' me. Not once.

As she straightens up and turns toward the cockpit, you whisper your thanks: "Drive safely. Don't worry about meeting me when I come back. I'll catch a bus home." And she's gone.

What will the old man do now? He sits motionless. Oblivious again? Or just pretending? At least he's holding up well. A week ago, after you'd finally made plans—at wits' end—he suddenly weakened. You'd

begun to fear he might not make it. The last two days, in fact, he could hardly stand and—unlike the manic phase before when you couldn't get him to bed night or day and he'd completely worn you both out—he'd slept around the clock. That may have revived him, renewed his strength.

What's his reaction now the plane is moving? It's his first flight ever. He's hardly looked out the window and is still silent. Does he realize yet that he's on a plane? Or is he utterly overwhelmed and intimidated by both the novelty and the matter-of-factness with which you're handling him? The fact that his fate, his safety, is now completely in others' hands? Is he just not letting on? Or is he pleased with all the attention?

I run away from home in the seventh grade. First I stayed with some Montana Indians an' ate the raw entrails they shared with me. I was that hungry. It was cuz my Bible an' Book o' Mormon-thumpin' daddy beat me whenever I displeased him in the slightest way. That was all right. But then there was my sister, Flo. She sang in the ward choir back then. They give concerts here an' there an' one day she come back from one, brimmin' over with the pleasure it give her an' singin' to herself—I kin even remember the words: "We are all enlisted till the conflict is o'er. Happy are we." That's when our heartless daddy jist all at once slapped her face an' kicked her in the shins. An' that's when I decided next time he told me to go out an' cut a green switch so he could beat any o' us, I'd cut two. One fer him. I was goin' to pay him back if he so much as touched us. I was tall as him by then too. But at the last minute the thought come to me—"What's the use?"—an' I jist walked out instead an' never come back till years later an' he was dead in his grave.

The first time he made this trip, some fifty years ago, did Mother come with him? Other family members? Will this trip remind him of that one? Did they deceive him then too, pretending they were on some sort of excursion? How did they make that two days' journey? Did they drive straight through, or did they spend the night somewhere? Suddenly you want to ask his forgiveness, to explain, to say to him: "Please understand. I can't do anything more for you."

Who give you permission to dig more ditches around them trees? An' who said yuh could plant them vegetables out by th' north fence? Yuh dug up all the things I already planted there. Whadda yuh mean, it's just weeds?

The plane lifts off, and you glance at him again, sideways. Will you ever again dare look him straight in the eye? The other passengers, including yourself, involuntarily hold their breath, betraying a slight tension at the takeoff. He seems totally oblivious. And this his very first plane ride. Now his Bountiful suburb, his street and home, come into view through the window on your side. Would he like you to

point them out to him? Better not take the chance. Remember that hard-learned rule: never initiate a conversation. It will only provoke the slumbering lion.

I kin take care o' myself. Who says I'm too old? Some folks lives till they're a hundred and ten. . . . You had a wonderful mother. She practically died bringin' you into the world. But you never appreciated all she done fer yuh. Now don't get huffy. I did not insult yuh. Just stated the facts.

The flight attendant serves you each a muffin and a drink. Cheap airline. You order him coffee. Janet said not to forget. It will keep up his stamina while you travel. From the corner of your eye, you watch him nibble the muffin and sip the coffee through a straw. Though he complains about what you feed him, he always eats it. It's a good distraction.

At the Denver airport, they bring in a special chair on wheels—narrow and like a dolly. They strap him to it and whisk him head first out of the plane like some kind of merchandise. Clearly they're more experienced here and have no time to fuss. Outside the plane, passengers are lined up, waiting to board. Before you find a skycap and another wheelchair, the plane takes off again. You feel like the replaceable objects in a vending machine, waiting for someone to insert a quarter and set you in motion. The old man says nothing.

They had no right—plantin' that meter reader in the house. My sisters' husbands. My very own brothers-in-law. How could I know he was from the gas company or why he was there. Of course he come to kidnap you. I believe that still.

Finally they bring a wheelchair and show you to a waiting room in the commuter section. Another hour to wait. What might happen now that you're both so undistracted? What if he tells you to leave, makes a scene when the next plane's ready, refuses to board?

Them brothers-in-law had just helped elect a friend of theirs to the United States Senate, see. So in gratitude he makes Milt state party chairman an' after the war gets Clifford a high medical post in the nation's capitol. Well, I got wind o' what the senator had done to get elected—dipped his hand during the campaign in the laboring man's union dues. I was there. I saw it. An' I went right to the Senator an' told him what I thought o' it.

The waiting room doors keep opening, creating a draft. Luckily you're both sitting by an electric heater. You turn it on. "If you get too hot," you dare to suggest, "just tell me." Again you sense the need for ritual: For a moment you almost touched him the way you sometimes do, conversing with a new acquaintance or slightly distant friend. But just in time you have second thoughts. He might not accept it, might

think it indecent. It's okay to make him comfortable, but use the proper gesture. Do it just right. The way you'd dress a corpse.

That's when Milt an' Clifford sicked the gas man on me. I knew then I'd better leave the state or else. But I stood my ground. Ain't this a free country?

Still no response until minutes later. "It's too hot!" he barks.

"I'll move it then." Will those be his very last words to you? Better that than what he *last* said to you. You were helping Janet put him to bed. As usual, you picked up his legs, about to pivot him, while he sat on the bed's edge. Then, for some reason, unexpectedly and contrary to custom, he lifted his head and took you in—your faces just inches apart. His response was visceral and instantaneous: "Shit!" And just as spontaneously you shot back: "That's my name, I guess. If *you* said it. About the only thing you ever gave me, too."

Finally—again ahead of the other passengers—they transfer him to a van. You ask the agent if they can just wheel him to the plane in his chair, but you're told that the plane is too far out, that it's dangerous and against regulations. So attendants subject him to another series of rough hoistings—out of the chair, into the van, then out of the van and up the eighteen-passenger plane's narrow steps, which, when everyone and everything are stowed, fold inside the plane's door. At least these men are stronger than Riley. Still, there's a series of less-than-gentle maneuverings of the old man's dead-weight body—is he limp on purpose?—before they strap him into the seat nearest the door. Here the seats are less well padded, uncomfortable, even with the pillows. The van then returns for the other passengers—a Middle Eastern businessman in an expensive suit and just two others.

Throughout this flight he still says nothing, gives no acknowledgment that he's in an airplane, though you sit together just behind the cockpit, the pilot's back to you, the whirling propellers visible in either direction, the motors drowning you in sound, the small craft's movement noticeably bumpier. You're already over plowed fields, whose unsteady return of the sun's heat, now that morning is well along, causes frequent updrafts. These are the very fields the old man worked in his youth as a hired hand. You think to mention this, then remember the ritual.

What looks like the Fort Lyon hospital eventually looms on the horizon—a self-contained complex of multi-storied buildings with a tall smokestack and an enclosed green patch that must be its cemetery. Crowning irony—this country is doubly familiar to the old man, or should be. After his long, misspent years as a farmhand, after he had finally returned to his people, married, and fathered a child, he was sent half a century ago, in his early thirties, to this same facility to stay for sixteen of his most productive years.

So I give it to that gas man good: "You're a kidnapper, ain't yuh? Tryin' tuh steal my child. Come 'ere. I'm gonna show yuh what happens t' people that tries to steal a son of mine." An' I beat him good—good an' bloody. Never saw him after that. He never come 'round my place again.

You remember traveling here with your mother as a young child. You'd ride for two or three days on a Greyhound bus to this desolate corner of the dust bowl. You have vague memories of those visits—the too-polite interviews with the man, then middle-aged, who back then seemed just as formidable, just as much a stranger. The print shop where he helped turn out a newsletter with the daily announcements—menus, a bingo game, or the report of a visit from the local VFW auxiliary. A nearby tamarack-lined creek where young boys, perhaps the staff's dependents, skinny-dipped and netted crayfish. Back at the facility, the long row of doorless stalls in the patients' lavatory . . .

The place, you remember, is thirty miles from the local airport. They said a hospital aide would relieve you of him there. No need to go with them in the hospital car. No bus service back. The plane goes on to Nebraska and Kansas, so you'll have to wait at the small airport another six hours for the next flight back to Denver.

Mentally you rehearse the upcoming parting—the final wind-up. What, if anything, will each of you say in the face of such finality? Will the old man even have any sense of it? And will either of you show what is going on inside? Or will you manage—as so often in the past—to hide from each other?

Suddenly you feel pressure on your knee. It's his hand. The ride is particularly bumpy now. Is he simply fearing he'll pitch out of his seat and feeling desperate for support? Does he know whose knee this is? Perhaps this is a last tender, endearing gesture—the possible acknowledgment that you exist and that the old man claims you.

The tension between you—there as far back as you can remember—significantly worsened during that seemingly interminable manic phase, two weeks earlier when you finally said to Janet: "Go to bed. You've been up with him for twenty-four straight hours. I'm here. I can take the day off and care for him." He was, as usual, in his wheelchair in the living room. He always insisted on a fire when he was up, so even though it was balmy spring, he was sitting by the fireplace, where he had been, alone, for no more than ten minutes.

All at once he extended his cane—an accustomed gesture—to tap on the fireplace's brass frame and signal that he wanted Janet's help: to change him, wipe out his eyes, bring him food, or put him to bed again . . . for no more than several minutes.

"Tell *me* what you want, Dad. I've sent Janet to bed, and I'll get you whatever you need. But I'm not going to let you bother Janet.

You've worn her out. Completely. She has arthritis, as you well know. She needs at least twelve hours sleep each night to contain it. It's acting up again, and I told her to go to bed. So what can I do for you?"

No recognition. He continues the loud, impatient tapping.

"Now stop it. Tell me what you want. Don't wake her."

More tapping.

In frustration you pulled back the old man's chair to keep the cane from reaching the fireplace. The lion roared a stream of abuse. At least he acknowledged your presence, knew who you were. But he always did when sufficiently provoked.

"I never thought you'd be this way," he snarled.

"What way?"

"So greedy. So selfish."

"Greedy? Selfish? You've got to be kidding! By staying home from work and trying to help you? By taking you into my home?"

"*Your* home??"

"Yes. *My* home. You're in *our* home now. Though you seem to think we're all your slaves—here just to do *your* bidding. That we don't have our own needs or our own lives."

"Greedy! Selfish!"

"How can you possibly say that? Angry maybe. Ticked off, yes. But selfish? You have no idea how much we've done for you. But you'd better start realizing you're not in control here anymore. So you'd better help out, cooperate!"

No more words now. Instead, a long, cold stare. The evil eye, if there ever was one. But *you* stared back—even outstared the old man. It was as if he really couldn't believe what was happening. As if you were suddenly his worst enemy.

Finally, he started working the wheels of his chair, something he had never done before, never had the strength to do. But he worked and kept on working them until, miraculously, he maneuvered himself back within tapping distance. Once more he raised the staff.

"You bang that cane one more time and I'll take it away!" you warned. And the old man hit the fireplace again, harder than ever.

Seen a man killed once when I was real young. Couldn't o' been more than seventeen. Somewhere in the Dakotas. This man—he was real short—was comin' home from work the way he'd been comin' home for years, I imagine. But he wasn't supposed to. There was a strike on. An' he'd crossed the picket line earlier that mornin'. It was dusk, an' most people was already inside. It was by a bridge, headin' outa town. I just happened to be there. I was workin' fer a farmer at the time.

Losing your cool, you wrested the cane from the old man and tossed it across the room. More ugly stares. No words. Then the hands

went back to the wheel. The chair turned. And—miracle of miracles, after not walking for at least four months, since he had been hospitalized with double pneumonia and spent more time in a convalescent home—he slowly pushed himself out of the chair and, unassisted, with great dignity, walked the room's length and retrieved his cane.

"Look what you're doing! You can walk!"

"Shut your face! Don't come near me! Leave me alone!" He continued, now with the cane, through the dining room, into the kitchen, down a hall, and back into his room.

That was two weeks ago. The day you'd decided you could no longer keep him. The day you and he had ceased communicating—ceased for the nth time, though this time, you already somehow sensed, would be forever. Except for the intervening "Shit!" and "It's too hot!" he'd said nothing more for two weeks now. Since that altercation Janet had been your only intermediary. Throughout a lifetime though—two lifetimes—there'd been precious little recognition except for the sporadic, fitful passings near each other, the standing uncomfortably in one another's presence—each always conscious of the other, but mostly annoyed or threatened, neither showing any feeling except during periodic blow-ups. Like glaciers, coiled snakes. . . .

Now in this small prop plane the hand still presses on your knee.

Well, two men, a lot bigger than this first man, was waitin' there at the bridge when he gets off it. One of 'em has a big plank, an' without sayin' a word, brings it straight down on the little man's head. I hear a crack, an' then he falls to the ground. I'm close enough to see how it'd smashed in his skull—like some eggshell. Di'n't even bleed. You could even see his brains. . . . Then th' other two men see me standin' there an' come up to me. I'm thinkin' I'll be next. "Did yuh see anythin', kid?" "No," says I. "I di'n't see a thing." An' they let me go, or I woul'n't be here to tell about it, would I?

What's that in the old man's eyes? Tears? But they come often these days because his ducts malfunction. He's always asking Janet to wipe them away with warm water. Or are these *genuine* tears, induced by what he is feeling? And, if so, what *is* he feeling? Self-pity? Or the same sad nostalgia you, contemplating this day, have felt since you arranged for the old man's removal?

Still no words. Is he remembering something from his youth, something that the landscape—though he still looks straight ahead—can't help reminding him of . . . ?

Gotta keep the cookie jar full fer the neighborhood kids. Gotta always have cookies an' ice cream. An' why'd he take that cane from me? I'll show him. I'll get me another. An' thrash him like I woulda thrashed him if he'd hit Agnes one more time. Gotta have control. Or they'll control you. Reminds me o' them days in th' asylum. An' the men I knew there. That time I played a trick on the whole ward.

Put on this white attendant's smock an' told 'em all it was dinner time. An' they'd just had lunch an hour before, but none of 'em could remember. So they all went down to the dining hall an' just stood there—fer a half hour at least till a nurse come an' shooed 'em all back upstairs. Even then most of 'em never knew what happened. I laughed. I laughed so hard. . . . They was good old boys though. Some of 'em a little slow, a little incomplete. But we was close. We even shared toothbrushes. They'd hang all day on a string, them toothbrushes, an' by nighttime you never knew if it was your toothbrush or someone else's. An' it didn't matter cuz we was that close. You'd talk to one of 'em one day, big as life. The next day you'd be out there, trampin' the grounds, out near the cemetery, an' some lady would come up to you, cryin', with a bouquet in her hands. You'd ask her what was the matter. She'd answer that her husband jist died, they'd told her. What was her husband's name, you'd ask. She'd give you the guy's name you'd had dinner with th' night before an' whose toothbrush you'd used before you went t' bed cuz he'd already taken yours. An' you'd tell her, lady, you been misinformed. I know that guy. I saw him jist last night. I used his toothbrush. He's fine. Live an' healthy as you an' me. An' then, whadaya think? You'd walk down t' the next row o' graves. An' there would be a fresh dug one an' a tag on a stick with his name on it. An' that night when you went to brush your teeth, his toothbrush would be gone an' someone else's in its place. . . . That was the one nice thing about them days in th' asylum—nobody ever pretended!

You land at a tiny airport. A man is there to meet you—a Hispanic in a white uniform—pushing another wheelchair. That's reassuring, but also depressing. Another man stands by his side. A guard, in uniform and armed. The plane door opens and the steps lower. The other passengers exit first, businessman in the lead. Then the Hispanic enters the plane: "What's his name?" he asks.

"You can call him Bill."

"We've come to take you back to Fort Lyon, Bill."

"Shh!" you caution, hoping the motors' still deafening roar has kept him from hearing. "Don't mention its name, will you? Till you get there."

They lift him out—easier going down than up the steep steps—and into the wheelchair, then into a waiting car.

You take in the landscape—flat and utterly desolate. But, unlike the hectic, rainy pre-dawn, it is peaceful and warm in the sun. A good place to be when everything and everyone bother you. A good place to end your days when you crave isolation and, brooding, only want to turn inside yourself. Or is that only wishful thinking?

The rest happens quickly. First a word to the uniformed man before he gets in: "He likes his cup of coffee in the morning. Two lumps of sugar. Canned milk if you don't have any fresh cream." Then, hopefully out of earshot: "Tell them to . . . be kind to him, will you?"

"I'm just here to make sure he gets there."

"I see." Then to the Hispanic: "Will you ask them, please, to treat him well?"

Another blank look, then, "Sure. I'll tell them."

The window on the old man's side is still down. You can lean over and enact that last ritual gesture you've already rehearsed in your mind for days now. You do so, mechanically, as though your cue has come and you must this instant walk onto the stage, hoping the fear will shortly subside and the authentic feeling come. The kiss is only on the cheek, not on the lips as you'd planned. And you don't say, "I love you." Just "Goodbye, Dad. We'll be . . . looking after you." Which, as you say it, you know is a lie. The old man has already been relinquished—totally—into alien hands. Do your words at least imply forthcoming visits? No, that too would be a lie. You live too far away. You won't make the effort. And does he really care? He still hasn't turned his head, hasn't acknowledged the kiss or even that he's been spoken to. The lion didn't blink any more than when the stupid lady said, "Oh, you're so cute!"

Is this noble stoicism? A way, sensing he is trapped forever, to maintain some dignity, his lion's nobility? Then that too is worth applauding, the way you tried to applaud his miraculous walking two weeks ago—first unaided, then with his cane. Or is it—like the tears, the pressure on the knee, those silent thoughts—more nothing? Whatever it is, it's final. Besides, things can only improve at a distance—as the antagonism recedes and, with faded memory, you each fantasize a more ideal relationship. Or will he still be indifferent, his thoughts elsewhere?

No time to think or say more. As if this looming finality were the old man's doing, not yours, the car is gone. You're suddenly bereft, an orphan. And, unexpectedly, you're angry. You know a clerk is watching through the airport's large bay window—and the Middle Eastern businessman too, just now getting into his own parked car. But you can't help yourself. You lurch to a nearby fence post, lean on it, your free hand going to your eyes, your breath quick and labored. Another drowning.

When was the last time you cried like this? As you regain control—it comes in less than a minute—you ask yourself: What am I feeling? Why? The finality is clear enough: a death before the heart has stopped or the eyes have closed, the way it was with your mother after her stroke eight years ago. But this time *you* are the executioner, the judge—an only offspring consigning his progenitor to separation, to a spiritual, kinless death.

How do you ever divorce or disinherit someone? How do you disown a parent? Even if, feelingly, that parent has long ago divorced,

disowned, disinherited you? Isn't this just the ritual conclusion to what, in this instance, has long if not always been the case—the simple confirmation of a long-term circumstance, not a fresh, separate event? Only that you're more conscious of it. Is he? You'll never know.

You wait a good hour, then call Ms. Cugno. Has he arrived safely? How is he adjusting? "It's hard!" you blurt out unintentionally. "It's still hard!"

"Of course it is," she answers, understanding but matter-of-fact. "No matter what, he's still your Daddy."

"Well, how's he taking it?"

"Hold the phone. I'll go see. The doctor's examining him right now."

A long wait. "Daddy"? She called him "Daddy."

You had hoped for a reading from the doctor, but Cugno must have misunderstood: "He says he doesn't need anything."

Maybe that's the answer you're after. Even if you have somehow needed him all these years—still do, and so project your emptiness onto him—the old man doesn't need anything, or anybody. Not now anyway. *And maybe never did.* But why?

Six days later, you receive a call: "Your father expired this evening at 6:10. He was walking to the bathroom. . . ."

"Walking?" With his cane? Unattended?

". . . and fell. He expired immediately. It was so sudden we assume it was a cerebral accident. Or a coronary."

"I see . . ."

"What are your plans for the body?"

You think of that green plot in Fort Lyon, then answer, "We'll bring him back."

Six days. You could have held out that long. But you weren't sure how long he would linger. Did the trip hasten the end? If he *had* lingered, wouldn't he have ravaged and finally destroyed you—Janet first and, before that, what was left between you and her?

You can expect that as others find out, they will feign concern about how you are taking it. "Don't you miss him though? He was such a dear neighbor. All the children loved their 'Uncle Bill.' Gave them cookies and ice cream. And such a fine gardener before he got too old. Raised wonderful fruit. Practically gave it away. Never took advantage of anyone." True. "Adored your mother. And was always so proud of you and your accomplishments."

To those who know better and ask why you put up with him, you may want to say (but won't) that it's as natural, as fundamental as

breathing, to want to make contact and to keep trying. To seek to know him and have him know you. When he needs you like you've always needed him. Or so you want to believe. Even when he's nearly ninety and you're over fifty. That doesn't change. Maybe by then you're the only one who really cares. And if you are, maybe that's a good thing too. It makes being a son meaningful. At last. At long last.

But to those who would understand, you might then say that your father had already died to you that day in a distant provincial airport—if not long before, before either of you could possibly remember.

Besides, sadly or not, you can't miss what you never had.