

Razor Sharp

Marden J. Clark

You, my father,
Too damned independent at seventy-five
To admit you could no longer handle
A simple double-edge Gillette,
But not too proud to ask for mine
When you'd forgotten your four-headed
Electric.

I'd forgotten how long
Since I looked up in wonder at you
Stroking that long shiny blade against
The leather strop that hung like doom
From the wooden frame of our medicine cabinet.
Stroking back and forth back and forth
In fluid rapid rhythm, first on the rough
Then the smooth, almost no break
To turn the strop. Then the furious stirring
Of brush in broken-handled mug
That frothed with lather you stroked and rubbed
Into your face. Your delicate firm grasp
Of the handle, your finger cocking the blade
To jaunty angle, the sure fast strokes
That removed the sandpaper scrape of your cheek
Against mine in our play.

I never got to try that awful
straight edge. Even if I'd dared
You had graduated long before I had more
Than faintest fuzz to a safety razor
You kept honed on that Twist 'n Flip
Mail-order marvel you held in your palm
And cranked. The mechanism held the blade
Against the turning stone but on the third
Crank would rise and flip then settle
The other side against the stone.
Three more turns and up, over, and down—

In thirty seconds your blade would be
Sharp to shave again. We used to spin
That crank for fun, watching the infallible
Rise and flip and fall.

I learned on a safety razor, but
A double-edged blue-blade, inserted between
The split halves of the head. It was hard
To cut yourself with that, though more than once
I did, even after the fancy adjustable
Came along. That's what I handed you,
Adjustable, with a new chrome-edged blade:
Sharper than you'd ever honed. And left
You alone for an operation I'd seen
You perform a thousand times.
Too long! I suddenly thought.
You answered my knock with a mumble.
I waited then heard the lock click.
Two images etched themselves for life:
The basin half full of pink water;
And your face in the mirror, blood oozing
From twenty cuts, reddening
Faster than the rag could soak it away.
Most of your beard still stood.
You stood sheepish, grinning through gore,
"I guess my skin just isn't used to it."
Not used to it: bleeding from every
Cut. I've beheaded chickens, just the way
You taught, that bled less than you.

I took the razor, cursed myself
For leaving you alone, and finished you
As best I could, catching a few whiskers
Between cuts. It didn't matter much:

By the time we'd finished bandaging
Neither whiskers nor cuts nor skin
Showed through. We bundled you up
And took you, bandages and all, to church.

You lived all this. I don't suppose
You remember any of it, lying on this bed
In a room too dark for whiskers to show,
Where you know so little. But this I know:
I'll be damned if you ever borrow
My bloody razor again.