

The Hands of Cowboy Red

Penny Armstrong

WHEN MY FATHER sucked in and released his last hyphenated breath, I was holding his weightless hands, trying to make them warm. He was old. He had cirrhosis of the liver, an abdominal aortal aneurysm the size of a grapefruit, and growing, congestive heart failure, hypertension, dementia, gout, and high PSA levels that a doctor had tried earlier to bully him into believing was caused by prostate cancer. He had been dehydrating to death for eleven days already. The purple skin around his blind eyes tore if you looked too hard at him. The roof of his mouth was scabbed from the dry air being sucked across it because he didn't have the strength to close his mouth, except at those too infrequent times we would moisten a swab and touch it to his gums. At those times, his jaw would clamp; and although he couldn't suck the moisture, he could squeeze it out. Looking back with all the guilt and anguish I can create with which to torture myself, I wonder why I didn't swab his mouth with oil and water every few seconds instead of every few minutes. Why didn't I tie or prop his mouth closed for him or have the words that would make him able to swallow or devise a cure for those wracking hiccoughs that arrested sleep and echoed throughout the whole house? Why didn't I become God and touch his head and lift him whole and restored into my waiting, compassion-filled embrace?

I couldn't. But I could hold his cold, blue hands and try to warm them. I could will myself to know when his last breath was coming, open

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my eyes that felt grainy and hot, and lift my exhausted, weary head early from a dead sleep, even though it was my brother's watch at that hour, so that I would be the one at his side, holding his hands when he left. Not a big deal, you might say—to warm hands that would be part of a corpse in mere moments. Or that were the least uncomfortable part of a wasting shell. Not a monumental act of charity or heartfelt sacrifice, not a laying down of one's life for one's friend. His hands were cold and mine were not. That's why I did it.

Not that I was the only one who held his hands during those strange and awful round-the-clock days. His bed was situated in the room so that we could pull a chair up to face him and hold his hands and talk and sing to him when he was awake or just sit and look at him or the television when we thought he was asleep. I don't know if there is such a thing as sleep or awake when one is actively dying, though. There was only lying helplessly still or startled and glassy-eyed while we turned and propped and tried to keep the skin on his back and heels from breaking down. There was a knitting of his brow and a certain hollow-faced grimace if we got his elbow cramped or his knee stuck in the bars.

And there was something else: a weak and almost imperceptible squeeze of the granddaughters' hands to answer when they said, "I love you, Grandpa. You love me, too, huh?" or when they sang "You Are My Sunshine," which was his trademark, his most beloved song, and which also was the one thing we couldn't get through without sobbing at the graveside.

Hands. Just hands. Hands that picked cotton in Texas to provide for the family after the father died and the ranch was wrested from the widow and her nine. Hands that yanked a barefoot brother off the back of a coiled rattlesnake; that held tightly to the bristled mane of a dusty, stubborn mule as it clopped lazily across the dry earth; that probed horses' teeth at auction. Cupping hands, small and tender, that captured prairie dogs and brought them into the house for pets. Young hands that reached under the seat of an old Model T and pulled out a notched-handled revolver to offer to his deputy sheriff-father so that he could retaliate for an accident, which had left a bump on the boy's head. "Here, Daddy, shoot 'em!" Flying hands that gestured to a deaf sister, and played yank-the-purse pranks from the roadside on passing motorists, and pitched stones at a turkey-thieving coyote. Greasy, toughened hands that hammered and

hauled steel pipe and oil rigging and splintery cable during the graveyard shift.

My father's hands cut and bruised faces in barroom brawls, shot rifles with precise and steady aim at deer and Japanese soldier boys, wielded a belt on erring offspring, and reined cavalry horses into rank-and-file submission. They stacked kindling and fuel for family camping, baited hooks and stripped and gutted catfish or crappie, and tossed inflated fish bladders into the kitchen sink for his children to play with. His hands held whiskey bottles and coffee cups with the same covetous possession. They were freckled and busted. They were as distinguishing a feature of my father as were his auburn hair and broken nose.

It seemed the most natural thing that morning that I would be the last to hold his hands before he finally quit using his beaten old body, since I had spent the last several years looking out for him; but it really could never have been foretold by anyone who knew us. We had been estranged for years, and he was living alone in New Mexico. The rest of us were in states north of there. When my youngest brother, Michael, was killed in an automobile accident, we all gathered for the funeral in Utah. I had been living in California with my young daughter. I saw my father at the funeral, but I didn't speak to him. I pitied him. I knew that his young son's death took some life from him as well. A sister pointed out that Michael was probably the only one of his children that he actually loved. But I couldn't muster words of shared mourning or consolation for the father of a boy taken too early. In those days I still thought it was mine to forgive or not forgive my father and his hands for the affront they had inflicted upon me in my youth. I chose not to.

When he came to see us at my mother's house after Michael's funeral, I decided to leave. As I walked past him through the door, my father reached up and put his freckled, broken hand on my shoulder and said my name. I didn't turn to look at him, but instead kept walking with my daughter to the car, and the next evening he called to say good-bye to us. My brothers and sisters talked with him on the phone, however superficially, but I still refused to speak to him. I went back to California, wounded deeply by my brother's death and eaten by pity and guilt I felt for the way things were with my father, who reached out only one more time a couple of years later, with a five-dollar bill folded into a Christmas card.

Some strange pull had diverted my life and deposited my daughter and me back in Utah like so much silt to settle again in the place I had

been running from for many years. Over the next several years, I heard scanty tales of my father's life in New Mexico from a brother or sister who kept up with him. They were the same stories I already knew of him. The only story that really surprised me was when the judge decided not to put him in jail for driving while intoxicated because he just couldn't see the benefit of locking up an eighty-year-old man.

I finally believed he was getting old. My brother and his wife had visited him a few times, posting bonds, paying fines, and cleaning up the bottles and cans in his little apartment. The reports of his welfare were getting worse, and my sister Deborah decided that he should come back to Utah so that she could look after him. My brother and a nephew drove to New Mexico in the summer to bring him back home. He was weak and ill enough that they thought he was dying in a cafe when he slumped in his seat with his eyes closed and wouldn't speak.

When they got him to a doctor in Utah, the prognosis was that he would not live to see the following Thanksgiving. They admitted him to an assisted living center close to my sister's house and took away his cigarettes, caffeine, and alcohol. My sister visited him frequently. He pinked and fattened up, but the aneurysm was enlarging and it was going to burst and kill him before we could celebrate another holiday. It was going to be an intensely painful and sudden attack. There was nothing I could do except to be glad I wasn't going to be around when it happened.

Deborah decided to move him into her home where she thought he would be happier and better cared for in his final hours.

During the Clinton Days celebration where we had gone to watch a pageant niece in the parade, we stood beside the road in the mean sun; and as I glanced across the street, there in a lawn chair under a sloppy old hat, sat my shrunken, weathered father, a man I hadn't spoken to or been free from in about a decade. The whole conspiring moment seemed plotted, contrived, and silly, yet there was a convergent current dragging on me. I gathered up my fan, umbrella, and daughter and crossed the street to talk to him. Would we collide like massive continental plates? Would our hot spots spew fire and debris into the environment? "Hi Dad. Do you know who I am?" With that, all those anguished and angry years had never existed.

Ours was not sentiment for a movie of the week, but at least now I could visit my sister and speak casually to my father who lived there for another year until his loving, dutiful daughter died suddenly on her couch as

she watched television. That same stunning night at the hospital that a person put his hands on my shoulders and said, "She's dead," we had to decide how best to care for our father. Not all of his remaining five children were centrally located. Some said he would be better off in a facility close enough for us to visit easily. A couple of us felt a loyalty to our sister's strong commitment that he be cared for in his family's home.

My father and Deborah's daughter moved in with my daughter and me, also with another sister who was living with us at the moment. Not only did he live to see Thanksgiving, but my daughter and I took the old cowboy back to Texas for a reunion with his remaining siblings. He lived to see even another Thanksgiving after we took him on a road trip to San Francisco. He was happy and not dying. We went camping, took day trips and small overnight jaunts, attended festivals and rodeos in the summer, went out to restaurants in the winter, and visited with relatives on birthdays and holidays and weekdays. We took a couple of trips to the emergency room because he suddenly couldn't gather his legs and feet under himself or was hit with acute abdominal pain. After one such visit, I was instructed to take him home, gather his family around him, and not expect him to live more than a couple of days. He thought it was another holiday with kids and grandkids hanging around, and he stayed alive for several more months.

This father was as tough as the one I knew as a child; and his hands looked like the same hands (only slightly more weathered), that hoisted shots and tinkered around with boat engines and deftly twirled steering wheels on bumpy mountain roads. But this was not the man without emotion or compassion or connection that I remembered. After the trauma of his daughter's sudden death, Red became depressed and lost weight. After having been socked again with the news of his brother's death, he slumped and sank into another funk. Sometimes he sat in reverie and, when roused, would say that he was just thinking about Michael or Deborah or his wife who had kicked him out years before. "She quit me."

This new father's hands were constantly slipping bills and salt-water taffy to his grandchildren, leaving large tips for waitresses, and searching for his dentures, comb, and pocket knife under his pillow of a morning. His hands rustled through his nightstand drawer to find gifts to bring to the table for us at breakfast. "Here you go, Katy. Don't say I never gave you anything." Pieces of rusty bridle bit, or McDonald's Kids Meal toys, or an

old buck knife—things we never remembered having seen in his room—would suddenly, mysteriously appear in his outstretched hands.

Red's hands shook and danced to music when his feet couldn't. His pointing fingers punctuated the air when he warned that no one better mess with his kin or he'd have to straighten someone out! They saluted us when he said, "Goodnight, y'all," and they kept vigilant poise over his walking stick and old slouch hat, just in case someone would be going out and ask him along for the ride, even if it meant accompanying us to church on occasion. Where years before he had gestured angrily at me for joining the LDS Church and for not realizing that Joseph Smith was hanged for being a horse thief, his hands now reached into his pocket to pull out a five-dollar bill to put in the collection plate which was really the tray of sacrament bread. At the Egyptian Theater for an evening of cowboy poetry, through the dimness of the room and the failing of his eyesight, he smoothed his hands across the velvet seats, asking in a surprisingly (to me) non-accusing tone, "Is this the Church of Latter-day Saints?" Those hammered, hammering hands of the past had become old and calm and easy at his side.

Just before the finality of putting him in a roll-up hospital bed in his room, when he was disoriented and lost in a strange world where he could see again, I played some of his favorite western swing music. As the invisible cowboy plucked at his git-fiddle and crooned, "I'm horseback and happy with the life that I have," my entranced father, Cowboy Red, raised his hands in the air, loosened up a lariat and let it fly over the head of a wayward calf. He snapped it taut and hand over hand, pulled the little doggie back into the herd.

It was easy for my brothers and sisters to hold my father's hands during those days when he lay dying and reassure him that they loved him. I sang songs to him and ached with helplessness for not being able to smooth the road over for him, but I never said those words to him until I sat again trying to warm his cold hands, and he jerked in that last crooked breath. Rushing to get the words out, just in case they were true and in case they mattered at this late date, I decided to finally admit, "I love you, Dad. Good-bye."