

Long Road Home

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I lean into the car through the open window, put my hand on my father's back to let him know I'm there. He turns with a sudden jerk, a defensive hangover from his P.O.W. days and I am sorry, when that happens, for having surprised him. He looks at me with amazingly big blue eyes, now glazed by the beginning of cataracts, maybe, or just age.

He is dressed in a garish outfit: a linen-weave sportscoat the same blue as his eyes; a forest green golf shirt; a red-patterned cravat and—the biggest eyesore of all—white shoes. His outfit is an attempt to be dapper, no doubt, so I tell him how sharp he looks. In this way, as weak as it is, I am allowed to say, "I love you."

"Have fun, Dad," I tell him. "Drive safely."

Seventy-eight years old, nearly blind in one of those blue eyes, extremely deaf, he and my equally-aged mother are headed south for the annual convention of a club to which they have belonged for decades. It's only a five- or six-hour drive from Vancouver to Wenatchee, but my father drives like the old man he is now: 20 kph through the city, maybe 80 kph on the highways, a dangerous habit when all the rest of the world is in a hurry.

During fifty-plus years of annual road trips to somewhere or other, my parents have had two near-fatal accidents. The last time, when their motor home went over the cliff on the Trans Canada Highway outside Golden, B.C., it passed through my mind that my mother and father are not as alert as they used to be. Today, standing beside my sister at the curb to wave them off, the possibility of another mishap makes us anxious. The final goodbye is, these days especially, never far from our minds.

But walking back to the house with my sibling, we laugh about the foibles and idiosyncrasies of our elderly parents. It is an attempt to be less morbid about our concerns — concerns which drive us to wonder out loud

what two old people can possibly find to enjoy at a convention of drinkers, speechmakers and adult partiers. Our parents imagine a gay time despite the fact that neither of them can hear when there is background noise or that neither can walk a long distance, my father not at all without the help of a walker or a wheelchair. My sister and I know that they are too old to continue going to these annual conventions, but we also know that we have no right to play God. We shake our heads in helplessness, look out the window and down the road in the direction our parents have gone.

My father's journey is not uncommon for his generation. An RCAF pilot who lost a leg when his bomber was shot out of French skies in 1944, he survived to bring an English war bride back to Canada, a wife who has spent years watching his struggle to redefine life after such a traumatic event. Now, as his journey comes to a close, I recognize with quiet regret the approaching loss of this primal male in my life. My father's eternal silence about his near-death experience, all his emotions tucked neatly away, is something I've had to accept: he cannot/will not/does not want to talk about the darker side of his life and so, as best I can, I've made peace with this aspect of his personality. But I will always wish things had been otherwise.

When I was little, my father's existence seemed somewhat surreal, like another being who somehow belonged to, but did not often materialize in, family situations. Because he was not often home before my sister and I were in bed, we normally saw him only in the morning, at the breakfast table or hurrying out the door to the young law firm which consumed his focus. But sometimes at night, just as we were drifting off to sleep, he would tiptoe into the room, ghostlike, and plant a wet kiss on our foreheads or cheeks.

A pure workaholic, the rare weekends not spent at the office were consumed by his toiling on the house or the garden. On exceptionally singular occasions, of course, he'd pile us into the car for a visit to cousins



outside the city or for a family day sponsored by one or other of his many clubs. He'd be with us, then, but not really present.

Sometimes my mother would demand a break from her single-handed parenting and my sister and I would be sent off with him for the day. It was not unlike visiting with a distant relative, someone we'd heard about, even met, but didn't know very well. So inhibited was my father by the total responsibility of our company that we, in turn, retreated behind a wall of shyness with him.

One particular mother's-day-off, he took us out on his noisy, continually broken-down old cabin cruiser. That long day was spent hanging over the gunwale pretending to fish with pieces of string, watching the water and listening to the sounds of gulls and lapping waves while our father and his law partner drank beer and talked. And it was so familiar to feel unnatural around my father that even when I had to pee, I wouldn't approach him with a request for a bucket or some privacy on the open boat.

But for a few weeks each summer, that same father metamorphosed into a different man. On camping trips deep into the backwoods of the province, freed from the routines of family life or maybe just more at ease in nature, he became a gentler, more relaxed person. As a child, the focal point of those trips always seemed to be the endless hours of driving, waiting for my father to choose a perfectly remote spot. Then, after we'd emptied the car and set up camp, he'd find a place to sit beside the silver stream or in the green shadow of a giant Douglas fir. And gradually, over the next few hours, the rest of us would gravitate towards him, sitting nearby and waiting. Sometimes then he'd slip into childhood reminiscences of what seemed to us a pioneer era: Vancouver in the 1930s.

He told us about the coal gas stove in their house on Twelfth Avenue, the ice box on the back porch, the delivery man with his huge tongs

and leather bag, oversized ice cube on his back, struggling up the stairs of their back stoop. ("Cost Mom and Dad twenty cents for a block of ice.") The "Chinaman" who delivered vegetables in an open truck and the horse-drawn cart of the Four-X Bakery. The milkman in his Model A Ford, the Jewish peddler clopping down the chestnut-lined street, walking beside his horse and wagon, calling out "Junk! Junk!" And for us, children of the space-age fifties, the stories seem to be scenes from a Hollywood movie about the taming of the frontier.

But the story that taught me more than I'd ever known about the boy who became my father was the one about skiing.

When my father was young — while he still had two legs — he played on all the school teams — soccer, rugby, football, lacrosse — and he was an avid ice-skater. At university he played for the provincial lacrosse championships. So when his oldest brother invited him to go skiing one day, it was a natural step to join the Grouse Mountain ski team and take up downhill racing.

They skied on the North Shore mountains, hiking up to the top of Grouse Mountain with skis and packs on their backs.

"You *hiked* up?" My voice squeaked with incredulity when I heard this detail. I remember, the first time he told this story, looking out the window at the blue peaks across the water and wondering why he didn't take the ski lift up to the top.

Skiing was an all-day excursion in the '30s. The Lions Gate and Second Narrows bridges weren't yet built so the two brothers took the car ferry across Burrard Inlet to the foot of Lonsdale Avenue and rode a streetcar to its terminus at the top of the hill. From there they had to hike across Mosquito Creek to the Grouse Mountain trailhead.



“The trail went up the mountain, all the way to the top, switchbacks most of the way. It was built during the dirty thirties, by people who ran out of work — they called them IRA camps. Even in those days we’d be packing up and we’d see these guys working on the trail.”

They skied the base of the big hill across from the Grouse Mountain Chalet, on wooden skis with old bear-claw bindings. By the end of the day, tired from hiking up the slopes after each run, they had to hike back down the mountain and home.

* * *

Tidbits like that would emerge during our annual summer holiday visit with him. They were the kind of stories that served to reconnect us with our other, more somber parent; to remind us of our second birthright, the Canadian-ness that seemed buried beneath the English influence of our mother. As we drove the routes of the early settlers into the Cariboo and Chilcotin and along the Gold Rush trail into Barkerville, we moved deeper into my father’s country. That was how I learned about his love of British Columbia, of the local greasy spoons and the kind of people who lived in the small rural towns of the backwoods.

* * *

I imagine my two elderly parents heading south through Washington state, turning east before Everett, steering their little compact across eight lanes of freeway, trying to manoeuvre between big SUVs and bigger 16-wheelers. My father will remember, maybe out loud or maybe just to himself, how different it used to be, decades ago. Both of them will be a little frightened by the noise and the crowding, the roar and speed of that oversized American road.

They will turn off the Interstate 5, heading east for Steven’s Pass and the mock-Bavarian town of Leavenworth before descending out of the Cascade Range into the plains of eastern Washington. And as they approach the Okanogan, the heat will begin to sear through the car windows. Outside it will be 30, 33, even 37 degrees, and they will turn up the air conditioner, uncomfortable.

When they arrive, they will be tired, unused to a day so full of rush and tension that they will lie down for a nap. My mother, especially, will sink into a deep sleep and later say she doesn’t understand why she feels so doopy. And when she phones to say they’ve arrived, we will hear in her voice the strain of having sat in a closed space with a chain smoker all day.

For her, this journey through life has been a war of love. Battling with her husband’s nicotine and alcohol addictions. Battling over the discipline of the children. Left alone to fend for herself at annual conventions where, not knowing any of the business associates or their wives, she was a stranger among strangers. And the biggest battle of all, running intervention between her husband and her second son.

I had an older brother with whom my father tangled in that son’s teenage years. He was always ‘different,’ my mother says of that brother; the type of child who might have benefited from the mental health programs available today. But in the fifties and sixties, no such support existed.

In Vancouver’s post-war boom, my brother’s special needs must have seemed like yet another impediment to success. After a long struggle with the devastation of disability, my father must have been rankled by the thought that the top of the mountain was now made unreachable by my brother’s indefinable problem. Because when his offspring showed signs of slipping through the cracks — of not standing up to Life — my father was often embarrassed, even resentful.



And as the cracks widened and my brother fell through, that same father's military background kicked in. In an effort to close the gaps of connection with his blood, he chose authority over outside support, meting out more and stricter modes of punishment. The distance between father and son widened, creating a huge sense of personal failure. Or that's what I have to assume: I can't otherwise explain why my father gave up on his child, banishing him from the family home.

One of the rare times my father has shown emotion was over that same brother's death. He sobbed as he announced my brother's passing and then drank himself to sleep. And when my sibling's ashes were sprinkled into the church's memorial garden and my mother's body responded to the sight with physical spasms, my father held her. It was one of the few hugs my father has given his wife in public, and as I return to that image now, I wonder who was being supported.

Shortly after the funeral, my parents went their own ways. My mother may have reached some invisible limit of patience or perhaps she'd finally felt the solidity of the wall between herself and the closed man who is my father, but at the crossroads marked by my brother's death, she requested a separation. Less than a year later, perhaps recognizing that marriage is a balancing act, they reunited.

* * *

Now whenever I go home, my father seems so pleased that he gives me a long, strong embrace of welcome, as though a visit from his eldest daughter is the biggest treat he could think of. And during the warmer months of summer, I can sit with him outside, allow him to smoke where I can still access some fresh air.

It's not that he doesn't care, I tell myself over and over. It's that he doesn't know how to show it.

* * *

On the Sunday of their weekend away, because I know my mother will feel empty without her church and friends, maybe even lonely in the company of her husband, I phone Wenatchee. My parents are early risers, but they are already lying down again when the phone rings at noon. The heat outside is too much for them and they have come back from a walk (I picture an old lady struggling against the dead weight of a wheelchair-bound veteran) to take a rest before lunch. And instead of answering my question about whether she is enjoying herself, my mother describes how she can see two plumes of smoke outside their window.

At this time of year, forest fires burn regularly on the dry mountainsides around Wenatchee and she jokes about the possibility that the fires may trap them in this small, distant place; that they may never make it home. I laugh with her, but I am thinking of the almost-weekly calls she makes these days, advising me of the latest mortality in the neighbourhood. It is a morbid fascination of hers, this game of watching and waiting for Death.

They will leave early next morning, she announces, and the keenness in her voice tells me she is anxious to return, a fact which makes me sad. For the past three months, conversations with my parents have been centered around an anticipation of this long weekend and now their big adventure is almost over.

But before the resumption of the pathetic monotony which is their life together, they will stop for dinner at a pancake house or steak bar along



the I-5. It will be the last, best part of the holiday for my mother who has spent most of her married life thinking, planning, or trying to get out of what to cook for her husband's dinner. He eats late at night, well after she has eaten by herself and wants to be finished with the cleaning up. But she has not taken the time — or perhaps was unable to spare the emotional energy — to train my father to cater for himself. It was a tricky situation, she says, because he had so much to endure when he lost his leg.

When they arrive home, my father will return to his unthinking manner, carrying his small bag the manageable distance into the house and leaving my mother to lift her own suitcase out of the trunk, haul it up the stairs. He will go sit on his back porch, glass of wine and cigarette in hand, before going to bed. She may or may not join him, depending on how the weekend went or whether there are any phone messages to return instead.

* * *

This is what I have learned from my parents: that rescuing and self-sufficiency are two of the stops along the road trip through life.

* * *

For now, though, I wait for the call that tells me they are home again; that once more my sister and I have worried needlessly about their safety. And in another month we will start the phone conversations again, this time about their fall trip to Cancun, to another convention.



About the Author

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A.S. Penne lives and writes on the Sunshine Coast of BC. She has won awards for her short fiction on both sides of the Atlantic and excerpts from *Old Stones*, a narrative nonfiction book about her dual heritage, have also won awards. As well as teaching English Literature, Ms. Penne coordinates a writing workshop for youths under the sponsorship of the internationally acclaimed Festival of the Written Arts in Sechelt, BC. She is currently working on a novel and doing research for a second creative nonfiction project.



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