

CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 83 *CutBank* 83

Article 33

Spring 2015

Not Dying

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Recommended Citation

Martin, Joseph (2015) "Not Dying," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 83 , Article 33.

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NOT DYING

Some tasks get inherited, passed down like a package at an office, and I've become the *de facto* mail girl: with no one else left, at least not in the immediate "nuclear" sense (though my Aunt Joanne would have a coronary if she heard me say so), my role as *heir apparent* to a whole world of unpleasantness keeps getting clearer. I've had to comb my father's phone list for well-wishers and spend hours speculating the resale value of old toys, days meeting with real estate agents about market appraisal for our now-gutted house. I've had to fly to the Pacific to process and bury a body. In the midst of it all, my eulogy's ended up having the color and coherence of an afterthought – I drafted it on the plane back to Seattle and, to tell the truth, it's all television fantasy, the same run of quirks and praise that always passes for a meaningful epitaph. Beyond the complications from septicemia, it could be about anyone. I call him "Daddy," even, and talk about his twin loves, French cooking and golf, "neither of which he will ever be able to enjoy again" and neither of which, I suspect, he enjoyed as anything but busywork while he was alive. For a eulogy, it's awfully elegiac, which seems a poor sendoff for anyone with a life worth mourning.

To my mind, the trick to a memorable farewell speech is a little humor and sarcasm. But Dad was an army vet, Vietnam even, and thus not much for being funny or ironic (or, at least, not enough to break out any black asides). Even more, though, the eulogy depresses me for reasons other than its cause, which is doubly depressing, and I feel I'd be remiss if I didn't write something else down – a real story to tell people at the wake when they start to understand, listening to me wander on about pheasant-hunting and vacations in Aruba, that I've been describing someone else entirely.

In 1973, after a rare father-daughter day of ice skating and city food, our

bus overturned in Seattle when a dented, shark grey limousine of prom dates swerved first around, then into the bus's rear tires, fishtailing into a fulcrum that made the whole wobbly hunk of metal shiver and flip just shy of the Sound. My dad, sitting against the window, hopped up just enough to avoid breaking his neck, but still cracked apart his jaw against the frame and started drooling blood onto my powder-blue pinafore. He clutched me against his chest and I flopped around until, mid-skid, I fainted. When I awoke, both of us were strapped to gurneys and flying downtown in an ambulance. The van smelled like sugar and ammonia and the orderlies kept insisting to me – I was just nine-years-old, but I was the only one conscious – that there weren't any casualties. No one in her right mind could have believed them.

At the hospital, girls in scrubs kept carting crew-cut, bloody boys in tuxedos past me in the lobby. I counted at least six and tried to sit up in my gurney to get a better look, but I couldn't, and so couldn't see their faces. Our doctor was a tall, pale, Eastern European man with a curly mustache and a brown velvet vest under his white coat. He muttered about "nightmare drivers" in a sweaty Brooklyn accent as he wired my dad's mouth shut and his sunken eyes seemed to follow my twitches without paying them much mind. My arm was bent out, broken, so he smiled with his whole face, a painful smile, and set it in a wet cast. He offered me a coin-sized lollipop on a looped stick. I could feel the hairs of my arm soak and harden in the excess plaster, already starting to itch as he cradled me into a sling.

Dad tried out some soft moans, then must have stopped and motioned for a piece of paper like someone begging for a check. The hospital staff had dressed him in a papery pink gown and, as he hovered into sight, he looked womanly and oddly antiseptic. I looked up at the

stubble patching his face and head – even as a civilian, he maintained a military buzz – and cringed; he looked me over for a few seconds, enough time to take something important in, and started crying. I swallowed. I was losing lots of blood, mostly from my head; later, I’d find out it was split open on some loose glass, tearing apart the space between my left temple, eye socket, and scalp. But, as it turned out, this wasn’t the reason he, a thirty-eight-year-old steelworker with a bullet already in his leg, started bawling. After all, I was alive. Rather, it was that he couldn’t call my mom and tell her we were alive and had almost died. “Someone call her,” he scribbled into the paper. He didn’t realize that Mom’s information had already been fished from his wallet in the ambulance – that it was she who let them wire him up and fix him in the first place.

When my ex-husband Simon met me in college, he knew my scar, a sand-colored seam that made me look perpetually worried, as a war wound from a punk rock concert; my arm just suffered a nervous condition. Dad’s sidelong jawline became an onsite slap from a girder. The accident lodged in both of us like a gallstone, like time served: the event happened, but we resisted analysis. After the initial run of reporters, doctors, and policemen, we ceased discussing it at all, at least not between us. I myself wouldn’t mention it again until college, when my sophomore roommate, a perpetually track-jacketed Indian economics major named Shashi from the Chicago suburbs, admitted that she hadn’t been to her parent city since getting carjacked at the age of ten. We traded shots of whiskey over our shared victimhood and smoked a pack of clove cigarettes; I glazed over as she talked about post-traumatic stress, therapy, and resolving her issues with men or pedestrians or whomever. I said my dad saved me and she gave me a meaningful nod, said hers had done the same. He’d “cooperated,”

which was “all he could do,” and I almost told her that therapy must have made her oblivious about the jacking, that she mistook sanity for heroism. But she was nice enough and kept passing me her bottle. I wanted to relate.

“We almost died, Jaclyn, but we’re alive,” she said, measured, proclaiming our existence like a word in a spelling bee. She was drunk and it was snowing, so we burned jasmine incense, lit votives, and listened to side A of Bruce Springsteen’s *Nebraska* on repeat. When I said that most folks on earth could likely say the same as us, Shashi just laughed. I laughed, too, and spent the next morning throwing up.

During that winter break I visited my only living grandparent at the time, my maternal Grandma Eleanor, and so my memories of that Christmas center around her Anacortes homestead rather than my folks’: her maize-yellow rugs with fringed brown tartan curtains; the nest of pale red hair she’d accumulated like a natural, straw-like bob to offset her pitted cheeks and frown lines; her heavy Irish diet of corned meats, fried hash, cabbage, and potatoes; and her melodic, vague advice about the journalism grad student I was dating and would eventually marry, which revolved around withholding sex and acting like a pedestal now so that I could be placed on one later. (She was full of absurd counsel like this, often gleaned from her life with Grandpa Zachary, though not always – for example, she once declared that, for a woman and especially a mother, four years of biology and one semester of word processing would amount to the same income. This ended up a major fight, our only one, with me storming to the guest room and her cooking a pancake supper in apology.) My parents had decided to vacation in Spain that year and, as they paid my tuition and board in full that October, they encouraged me to stay on the mainland to catch up with my studies and elders. “You should cherish both,” Dad

insisted, intoning over the phone in a prayer voice. “Cherish them while they’re still around.”

Mom and Dad wrapped boxes of hair curlers, socks, and sweaters in brown paper and sent them ahead to Eleanor, who tucked them in her bedroom closet behind a bin of shoes until Christmas, when they were opened over scrambled eggs and a pot of honeyed coffee. But in spirit, I was alone with a maid for three weeks, left to quietly pine over Simon (who, being a few years older and rootless, had stayed in Iowa City to string for the local paper) and read about pharmacokinetic events that dissolved chemicals into bloodstreams, tissues, endocrinal processes. I suspect my parents understood Grandma’s powers of distraction or, at least, ritual – like any Irish Catholic worth her palms, you could set a watch to her churchgoing, eating, and television habits, most of which appeared to revolve around *M*A*S*H* reruns and the variety of special masses that stacked up at year’s end – and she exuded a metronomic presence, a forcefield of routine. I didn’t grasp her absence until the bus ride back to catch my plane in Seattle, when I daydreamed I was returning from a cozy, coastal bed-and-breakfast. It was strange, I thought, that a person could spend that much time with someone related to her and not absorb that relation on some essential level. I told myself she was simply too old and self-contained for me to understand.

I spent the early months of my next semester chewing ice cubes and leaf lettuce, having decided that growing into myself – developing a modest figure that was destined to droop – was a reversible process and, more than that, one worth reversing. Some of the more Catholic Chicago transplants on my floor had, perhaps due to coke and cattiness, become fascinated with the mod revival trickling over from the U.K. and started taping

old magazine spreads of Twiggy, as well as any number of anonymous, raccoon-eyed punk girls and hippie waifs sutured from their parents' yellowing *Times* and *Saturday Evening Posts*, to their dorm walls as a hex against the Fawcetts and Locklears of the world. Some of the hipper girls became raccoon-eyed and nihilistic themselves, discussing Dick Hebdige, post-ERA feminism, the cynicism of nostalgia, kitsch, and subculture as a source of self-definition, but mostly they just self-examined themselves and the rest of us into a kind of physio-academic oblivion. Physical addition, both in terms of height and figure, felt impossible and even unwelcome, so it made more sense to subtract oneself into a form that was more tolerable.

Shashi, for her part, didn't understand the impulse. "You're blooming into a bud," she said, but she was already thin and built that way – as tiny as a twelve-year-old, likely even now in her mid-forties. She ate hamburgers in the dining hall, practiced yoga with a thick blanket on our tile floor, graphed utility charts, and stared through the rest of us like we had already withered away. My silent wilt played against the only meaningful conversation we'd ever really had, and she began to spend evenings at the library.

As for me, I felt and acted pious, an errant Catholic inventing my own Lent. I sometimes wandered off campus to a strip of restaurants downtown to remind myself what I was giving up and inhale the scents, pretending I had just walked out of one with a full stomach. To feed on air seemed monastic, not the natural function of an eating disorder. It was the casting of a spell, an appeal to some inspecific god of youth. And, looking back, that's the head-scratcher: as a group, our short-lived anorexic fit was more philosophical than competitive and, like most philosophies, more interesting than sustainable. To compare the arrowheads of our shoulder blades or spines or breasts or biceps was a *faux pas*, an insult to our collective

intelligence, and we never prized physical decline *per se* – after one of the girls on our floor, a Nordic-type stick figure named Constance, collapsed in the bathroom and ended up in an emergency room (and, later, a psych ward), the rest of us scattered and started eating chicken tenders in the dining hall again. Constance had, or had developed, an actual problem. By comparison, we were the worst kind of fakers.

In late March 1983, I found a letter from Dad in my mail-drop. It read like a telegram without the STOPS, but they were implied, and I inserted them as I went:

Jaelyn STOP Your Mom is very, very sick STOP Sick enough
to have a hard time writing letters herself STOP She began her
treatments Friday afternoon STOP You should return home
ASAP STOP Call me collect when you receive this and we will
arrange a plane ticket STOP Dad STOP

“STOP,” I said aloud. The letter, black ballpoint on cheap pad newsprint, was thin and damp from sweat. I crumpled it into a ball and shoved it in the pocket of my pea coat, a hand-me-down from the now-condemned. My throat closed with a violence usually reserved for rejection and I understood why they had gone to Spain. “You asshole,” I said. “STOP STOP STOP STOP. STOP.”

But talking about the events surrounding Mom’s death to a funeral parlor rife with her friends, most pushing seventy or eighty, seems like the

wrong key and rhythm for this particular eggshell walk: lazy, interminable patches of dinner table silence in lieu of small talk; polyps the size and consistency, according to the surgeon, of caviar; a chemically shredded woman in a bicycle-spoked wheelchair; a man in his late forties kicking a coffin as it enters the ground, the graveyard stinking of manure and rainwater; the sister of the deceased wailing at no one in particular; a pale, dry-eyed daughter like a silhouette in a spiderweb, her high heels slipping into the mud and wedding her in place. Little of this is funny or sarcastic or even *necessarily* about Dad, which is why none of it makes the eulogy “cut.” It’s history, extended and pointless obituary.

So, instead, a story about Dad –

“You have no sense of romance,” Simon told me when he announced our separation in 1994, which felt a bit romantic on its own. The call came late from the *New York Times*’s Paris bureau, the time zone adjusted for my lunch break. I was working part-time at a local florist’s while our six-year-old, Wesley, was in school and Simon was overseas – after paying graduate dues in Iowa, working years of paste-up and photography for the nearby *Port-Au-Prince Post-Dispatch*, and freelancing when possible for the Associated Press and the *Tribune*, he got the *Times* to deposit him in Romania in 1991 and then Bosnia in June 1994. This was all before the States got involved, and he explained the political situation in Bosnia to me once before he left; when I asked why America should help, should act like the world’s police force, he called the question “absurd” and claimed he’d already explained. I said he hadn’t, that he didn’t understand the difference between the personal and the universal. It was a problem of his.

“There are women out there who aren’t so...” He paused on the line and I sipped a Coke. I wanted to feel upset, but I just felt tense, like I

was in an E.R., waiting. “Content. And cynical.”

“And you’ve met one, right?” I said. “Jean Seberg! *The New York Herald-Tribune!*”

He sighed with what appeared to be both frustration and admission. “Things are really awful over here. I mean, don’t you care? It’s like the end of the world. It feels like the end of the world.”

“You have a son,” I said. This seemed like an important point to make, though I didn’t want it to be the cure-all. I didn’t want *that* kind of marriage.

“We can discuss him later. This is just the declaration.”

“Well, I hope you get shot,” I said, and hung up the phone.

“That’s a good line,” Dad told me when, later that day, I got home and gave him the story. It was late summer and he’d been traveling around the country, visiting friends and extended family like he was on some kind of tour – a “tour of duty,” he called it, though it never came out that funny. After eight years of keeping on in my mom’s wake, working every day and devoting time to the church and visiting Simon and me once a year, retirement seemed to remind him he was alone, so he got in a car with his pre-pension savings and visited any and all surviving in-laws, high school friends, army friends. He’d planned his arrival in Port-Au-Prince to coincide with the Ice Capades, which had been purchased by Dorothy Hamill that past year; we planned to take Wesley while it was still around, convinced that it would be bankrupt within a year. The Ice Capades were slowly being replaced by Holidays On Ice, Stars On Ice, Disney On Ice, and even the best reviews of Hamill’s skating career couldn’t save them.

“It’s the end of the world,’ he says,” Dad said. His baldness was involuntary now, his forehead was well into an old-man fold, and his beard

had frosted over the past year, but he was still hulking and tan and every time he talked, he sounded like he was reporting something. “One day, he’ll learn that it’s always the end of the world.”

“He said I had no sense of romance,” I said. “He called me ‘cynical.’”

Dad smiled joylessly. “Let me tell you a story,” he said. I stared at him, trying to look as nonplussed as possible, but he just pulled at the collar of his brown and yellow shirt – one he’d owned since I was in high school – and straightened it. “A couple of days ago, I was in North Carolina visiting your Aunt Joanne, shooting the shit, and she started asking me about the bus crash. Do you remember the bus crash, when you were ten?”

“Nine,” I said, and switched on – started babbling about the event itself, the bloody teenagers, the Czech doctor with the accent, the itchy cast. “I broke my arm and there was blood,” I said. “In my eyes. And there was you, in this pink number, crying.”

“Right,” he said, like I’d fed him lines in a vaudeville routine. “And then your Mom came and picked us up from the hospital that evening.”

His hands were moving between a praying grasp and quick, one-handed gestures – pinched “A-OKs” and pointing – and he seemed to be enjoying himself, talking about the crash as though it was an anecdote honed at neighborhood tea hours. It made me anxious. A shaft of white light poured through my kitchen window, picking out dust in the air, and I got up to shuffle the curtains around.

“I don’t remember that part,” I said.

“Joanne was asking me about it,” he said again. “She said, ‘That must have been some drive home.’ That’s what she cared about, I guess, the drive home. It had always bothered her, made her curious, what that

drive home must have been like. Apparently, she already had an inkling about the crash, didn't think there was much to say."

"Oh yeah?" I felt curious, as well, which was likely the point. Dad had a manipulative streak in him, the type that helped him tell a good story when needed. "So what did you tell her?"

"I told her it was odd," he said. "If she really wanted to know, it was good she wasn't asking about the crash itself, because it's long gone – I was in shock for a good while that day. All I could remember, I said, was what you said on the car ride home. I remembered that perfectly."

He chuckled and leaned back in his chair, resting his fingers on the edge of the table. I was still at the window, my hands on the curtains. I pulled them in until the kitchen felt cool and the dust disappeared. Dad didn't wait for me to prompt him.

"I said your mom was crying," he said. "And I was mute on account of the wires on my jaw and the radio was playing 'Earth Angel,' which just made your mom tear up more. The mood in that car was plain awful – it was like cheating death just did not make any difference, because it made your mom remember death was around, remember her dad and grandparents and my time in the war and all that. She just sat there, remembering, steering a Buick in her black dress with her black bag, her hair pulled up in the back like she'd expected a funeral.

"Well, at some point, another car side-swiped us on the highway, nearly finished the job, and your mom started screaming obscenities!" His hand hit his forehead as though he was popping a blood packet in a play. "'Motherfucker! Bastard!' I'm surprised you don't remember it, because it was unusual for her, a first and last, Alpha and Omega."

He sipped at a glass of milk he'd been nursing since I arrived home, smiling to himself. "And then you! You turned to her and said –

and I quote – ‘*Goddamn*it, Mom, quit sobbing! We’re *alive!*’”

He laughed, this time from the gut, an animal roar of a laugh. “And that’s when I smacked you upside the head, the side without stitches, and *you* started crying,” he said, still laughing. I laughed, too, like he’d just delivered a punchline, and collapsed onto his head from behind. We shook against each other in hysterics, with the curtains drawn, laughing until we couldn’t breathe – horribly, and for a long time.