

Present for the Angels

My father sold women's handbags after the War. Through the 1960's he sold them directly, carrying a sample case shop to shop. Later he sold them by catalogue. He was the quintessential middle-man. The catalogue killed him. It broke his spirit. One by one the shops on which he regularly called—the ones that remained, that is—passed from father to son, or to entirely different owners, and it did not take long for the younger generation to phase out the salesman and to buy direct. This is the fate of my generation, and particularly, it seems, the generation that follows: the isolation of instant gratification.

Consider this story: in 1955, just at the end of the Korean war, my father paid a visit to the San Francisco Handbag Company, a prestigious outfit in Union Square. Waiting for the store's owner, my father's gaze fell upon the bare shoulders of a woman whose short dress sleeve had been hiked by the ill-fitted strap of, to hear him tell it, an unremarkable shoulder bag. Rushing to help the woman—for my father was a man who rushed: he drank his coffee standing, he kissed my mother, it seemed to my sister and me, only when in motion—he offered on the spot to repair her strap, and indeed he had the necessary equipment in his car trunk (shears, an awl, mink oil and cloth). As you might have guessed, two months later they were married and seven months later I was born. He rushed everything.

I did not see my father for twenty years: in 1978, I left for my mother's homeland of Brighton, England, five years after she died, of brain cancer, with Watergate on every channel on the hospital TV and Sesame Street. There, I married, had two children (one, Matthew, who died), worked, and returned to San Francisco only after my wife, (my ex-wife? Marcie, at least), took up with another man. I cannot blame her entirely; I'd taken up drinking whiskey with my morning coffee, and while my father may have rushed his marital kisses, in the end this husband did not kiss his wife at all. What I kissed were: bottle necks, crystal glasses filled with gin, pint glasses, straight, tuliped and the multi-paned piss-pots. I worked the college kitchen, I worked two local saloon bars. I worked packing blown glass, I worked unboarding boarded-up houses when the building booms came. I wrote short plays. And onward. I kissed graduate students,

undergraduates, a pretty union carpenter, once a girl of seventeen, once a man of sixty. Does this surprise you? They were all, like me, involved. In the latter days of that life, I would have gone to bed with the guy had he money enough to support my habits. And barmaids: I once brought into my marital bed a Swiss girl of nineteen, who announced to me that it was her first time and requested that I be gentle. I was not. I proceeded to have her in every conceivable way, at least in every way conceivable to me, and was moving toward the unmentionable when Marcie came home with Rick and Matthew when she was meant to be in London at her mother's. I hit Marcie with an ash tray. I hit the girl with my fist and I threw myself at the mercy of my two young boys like a monster.

In 1962, my father bought a small cabin near Mount Shasta. There, he taught my sister Julia and I how to ski. I was seven at the time, Julia five, and my parents must have been just thirty. It is remarkable to think of them as being so much younger in age than I am now, and yet so much more developed, hatched. In the mirror in the morning, I say a prayer for strength now, to St. Monica—the patron saint of drunks, pill poppers, relentless schwankers—and I telephone Mrs. Stottlemyre as my father did every morning at six. The Stottlemyres lived beside my father, and now, with my father's death in the fall, they live beside me in the Carlton Arms, in San Francisco's once-seedy Mission, just down the road from the Mission of God. His life dissolved here, in two rooms, with leaking faucets and a window that looked out onto a wall. And my life dissolved, disappeared up its own asshole, in Ireland, in the Wicklow mountains, where I'd been dumped after a serious rolling in Dublin and where my hand became frost-bit and eventually lost to gangrene. Yes, in every way I am no longer a two-fisted drinker.

Each morning in that ski house my father would rise before sun-up and light a fire. Our cabin was tiny, two small bedrooms, bunk beds in one for my sister Julia and me, a two-butt kitchen, with a borrowed sofa, a junked table, in front of a wood stove. My mother would make banana-nut pancakes, eggs, anything but the porridge that she'd grown up on in England.

"England is porridge-happy," she'd say. My father loved it, I discovered only in this last year, only since I've been living with him—or had been living, this is a difficult construction; when I speak of Marcie, who is still living, in London now, with a baker, and not just any baker but a master baker whose breads are delivered to #10 Downing, when I speak of her in the past tense I don't want people—people? well, Mrs. Stottlemyre, whom

I sometimes see downstairs at lunch, or Father King—to think she has died, it is I who have died in one sense, and my father very much in another. And Matthew, more so. For seven years I guess I didn't even speak Matt's name. When they cut off my hand, in hospital, in a hospital, I am American and I am living in San Francisco now, I dreamt of my dead kid. We were on the boat, not the time I lost him, not the time when I thought he was clowning and watched him dissolve into blackness, but before then. He was on my shoulders. I should tell you here that I would have taken my own life then had the English nuns not thought to phone my father. My father! How could they have known? And then only after finally finding his address, one he'd been at for over eleven years, and only then after overhearing the nuns saying that a woman had come onto the telephone, this being as I'd learn Mrs. Stottlemire, to inform the head nurse that my father was in fact dying and would want—if she would bother to ask him which she decidedly wouldn't—nothing to do with me, only then, naturally, it wasn't long before I travelled home. After all I'd lost my hand and I needed someone to terrify, so it might just as well be my dying old man. When the drinks and the drugs, heroin mostly but whatever else there was that might lift and lower, lower and lift, leave your system, when you get through the first wave of nightmares that make you stick yourself in the wrist with forks, when the priests and the bedstraps *that you request* do nothing to stop the feeling that your own skin is a snake that means to smother you, when you get through this wave and another, and another finally what you are left with is what drove you to it in the first place, what took the hand that hit the wife that was not used to reach for a drowning son. Sweet Jesus!

In the dream he was on my shoulders. Matthew was always a small boy and at five his legs just reached, from across my shoulders, my chest. So they were kicking me there, this must have been my heart's fight against the anesthesia, and he was laughing and when I asked him to stop his feet fell off and dropped to the bottom of the dingy. He started to cry and his feet, in blue tennies, scampered across the deck. In the dream, Matthew began to scream and I set him down and his eyes came out at once and then one by one his teeth and he chased after his feet, after his eyes, after his lips, his legs bloody sticks clacking across the deck. And then his heart burst from his body and plopped, just beating, a blue-red mess, at my feet.

I picked it up and ate it, my own son's heart, and I woke to see that last stitch being pulled from my wrist, the surgeon's arm extended up near his head.

My father adored porridge. I'd make it for him, here at the Carlton Arms just off Union Square overlooking the construction site for a brand new gardenless Hilton Garden Hotel, nearly every morning. The secret I've found, at least it was news to me, is to use equal parts milk, water and buttermilk. This produces a consistency substantial and creamy, and the buttermilk cuts any sickly sweetness from the combination of oats and milk. You can add in raisins or prunes, fresh fruit or my father's favorite, as I was to learn, almonds. Anyway, it's cheap, except for the almonds, and nutritious, but at the ski cabin we ate banana pancakes and eggs.

My father had bought us all skis. He must have made a decent business from handbags in those days and as one of the few non-Jews in the business I suspect he was a bit of a relief to those with more narrow minds than his own. In any event, in those less centralized days, he was able to buy us snowsuits and skis. He spent one morning teaching us the basic snow plow, Julia was in fact better at it than I, and after that each morning he told us the exact time to meet him and my mother at the bunny trail line for lunch, and then, with my mother following behind him, he'd be gone. Julia and I would spend the morning riding up the t-bar and gliding down the gentle hill. Up and back we went, run after run, and when Julia got tired she'd sit on the logs at the hill base and I'd glide down toward her as if she were a pink marker. She is a beautiful woman, Julia, and she was a beautiful girl. We did not have any of the troubles you often hear between a brother and sister. She went, like I, through the city's public school system and whereas I took to the road to discover my mother's roots after my mother's death, Julia went on to UC-Davis where she met and married the assistant registrar. They are still married and live in Richmond, just across the Bay. We spoke, of course, at his funeral, and she would often visit our father, tried many times as I understand it to get him to move into their amply sized house, but I made myself scarce during those visits. She professes that she does not like my absences, and perhaps she doesn't, but she does not, it seems to me, need to have me around, the violent ghost of me, or what this is that I've become. I work days at St. Anthony's, nights I attend meetings. Once a month, I call Rick my son in Summerlin, Nevada and usually spend the time talking with his young Thai wife when Rick doesn't come to the phone.

I remember clearly nights I'd look in on my parents; my mother would have her face rested against my father's chest, or he might have her cradled against him. He was gentle with her. He was gentle with us. I think of them in that cabin, lit with candles, a fire in the stove. I think of my mother

drawing smooth curves down the mountain, my father speeding a line across the moguls. In the end he died alone in the VA hospital, with a picture of my mother at his bedside, with Julia just gone back across the Bay, and me stuck on the BART from a garbage can thrown on the tracks. Well, he was not entirely gone when I arrived: he lay in the hospital bed rasping, with the stock market on the TV—until his dying day an optimist—and when I asked the young, Asian intern how he was doing, the intern flashed a pen-light into my father’s half-opened eyes and leaned down to his ear. He called out my father’s name, louder and louder, and then tapped him in the center of the forehead with the butt-end of his penlight. “Mr. Cummings, MR. CUMMINGS,” he shouted but my father did not respond. The kid doctor looked up at me and misread my expression. “He’s not in any pain,” the intern said and my father continued to rasp and then, when the intern left to administer more horrors on more former servicemen, my father opened his eyes entirely and died.

St. Francis says what we are looking for is what is looking. Today, I’ll scrub down the floors of the church’s nursery school. Father King comes in and we light cigars, an indulgence, and he tells me stories about his uncles in Limerick who still at eighty sprinkle sneezing powder onto pints, drive cars into bogs, and we talk about the Bouncing Baby and Gorgeous Granny Supper the church will be hosting, Father King beside me on his knees, smoking, circling the floorboards with rags.

I stood over the bed for a moment. It was profoundly unmoving. I felt a shadow of an emotion, like the fingers I could still feel on my missing hand. I called my sister. I called Father King. I walked up the hills and down the hills to the Bay. There was the Golden Gate Bridge. There were the waves. Matt hit his head, that’s what I hadn’t seen. I thought he was grinning. I thought he dove back under the waves. I thought he was fooling around. He was calm. Shoomp! When people jump off the Golden Gate Bridge, and they do 114 times a year on average, the ocean just takes them in, come in, come in. There’ll be banana muffins, there’ll be eggs. There’ll be go-kart tracks and helter skelters and beaches galore to run along. Endless beaches, with sand like white snow.

You adjust a strap.

You buy cheap you get cheap, you can wear a paper bag tied with a string as far as I’m concerned, that’s what he’d tell them.

The Priests told me, and I was eighteen at the time, that God had taken my mother for Christmas, as a present for the angels.

But not before, I mentioned, He'd chosen to rip the skin and lips from her face.

Amen.

Once, I took Matthew to Blackpool. Just the two of us, as Marcie had to work. Blackpool was a real shithole in those days, I'd guess it still is, but I wanted to see it and it was nearby, as we'd moved out to the Cotswalds, the old arcades and casino piers hanging over the littered beaches. We went up the famous tower and rode the famous ferris wheel. We played skiball for a long time—it's not just an American game—and turned our tickets in for a Paddington bear knock-off. And there was a robotic fortune teller, Madame, in a booth that fascinated my son. She was metal and her brown metal hair was wrapped in a red metal scarf, gold earrings painted on each ear. You put in 50p and asked your question and then bulbs popped until Madame made up her mind and slid out a card. When we walked by the booth, a box really, Madame lit up and asked in a sort of English-French Gypsy caw, "Fortune?" Matt was both fascinated and scared. He asked me about it. "She tells your fortune. You ask her a question." He stood a few feet from the machine and held my hand. I'd had beers at lunch and needed to piss. "You want to try? I asked. "No." But I knew he did. I gave him a coin. "Go ahead. But ask your question first." I let go of his hand. I felt he needed to do this himself. He took one step toward the machine, wondering I guess if it would light up again—that was a frightening experience, when the recorded voice scratched, the mechanical lower jaw clacked, metal on metal—but Madame was quiet. Matt moved the silver coin toward the slot. I can still see it. "Ask your question," I reminded him, the good father.

"Do you like it in there?" he asked and quickly dropped the coin in. He stepped back. The lights blinked and Madame's metal jaw snapped and the crystal ball glowed between her metal hands and a card spat out at my son. Matt looked at it, then handed it to me. It read, *You can't be let down if you don't expect the world.* He laughed, politely, and then we went for fish and chips, even though we'd just had an egg sandwich lunch, to take with us on the bus trip home.

My sister made the arrangements for our father's burial. Mrs. Stottlemyre threw dirt to his casket. After some guy made a video of people jumping, the city of San Francisco lined the Golden Gate Bridge with nets.

Father King said the prayer. I join my tears to yours, against the spirit of despair, toward hope; against the spirit of anger, toward love; against the

spirit of blame, toward forgiveness; against the spirit of suspicion, toward trust; against the spirit of doubt, toward faith; against the spirit of fear, toward peace.

Marcie and I buried Matthew in a Church of England cemetery in Hook Norton with a view of an ice-cream stand in summer, by a small river and a tree.

You can sit in a pub in Cork. You can lie in a gutter in Antwerp. You can drive a lorry, and not write that stage play, you can ship off to Korea and see the dead in your dreams or fly off to Fitzrovia. You can sell shoes on-line from Las Vegas. You can hold a dozen bouncing babies and kiss a dozen gorgeous grannies and give each of them first prize.