The Waiting Room

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I don’t remember driving to the hospital on the day my father died, or parking the car, or walking across the parking lot. I only remember rushing through the electronic emergency room doors and entering an empty lobby. Not slowing down, I stormed through a set of double doors, wondering briefly where everyone was, and almost passed my father’s sister Cindy and his girlfriend, Faith, as they gave information to a nurse.

“Sharon!” Cindy nearly gasped when she saw me. The tone of her voice chilled me. When the nurse was done gathering information, she lead us through another set of double doors to a small isolated waiting room within the emergency room, telling us to wait here while the doctor worked on my father. I remember standing in the doorway to that room, slightly behind and to the right of Cindy, looking across the ER toward the room where I assumed my father was. I didn’t know he was in there; I was following my aunt’s gaze. She and Faith had arrived with my father – they saw him put into the ambulance; they saw him wheeled into the room. I kept thinking, it’s too quiet. Doctors and nurses should be running back and forth hurrying to save people. Machines should be beeping and breathing and someone should be yelling “CLEAR!” Instead, nurses talked softly behind the desk with all the computers and charts, and grave looking doctors walked toward us only to whisper past on their way to some other errand or emergency.

As I stood there, I shifted my attention back and forth between the room that my father was in and Cindy, trying to read what little I could see of her face as she stood in the doorway to our tiny waiting room, with her arms crossed over her chest, staring across the ER. She knew. I didn’t want to sense that she knew, or know that she knew; as long as no one told us different, my father was still alive. I turned toward Faith, who was sitting in a chair against the far wall. I say far, but the room was only about ten feet square, so the wall wasn’t that far at all. Faith’s hair straggled past her face only to hang limply at her shoulders. She looked bewildered and tired. We all looked tired. Faith raised her eyes slowly to look at me, and her mouth moved as if to speak, but she said nothing. I watched as her eyes became vacant and knew she was no longer looking at me, but at something only she could see. I turned away and crossed my arms, resting them on my pregnant belly. I couldn’t help her. I had no reassuring words to offer. I thought of Sarah, the baby inside me who

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had four months yet before she arrived in this world, and tried to convince myself that my father couldn’t die because he had to meet her.

I looked around the tiny room and felt it shrink even more when I realized there were no windows, only pictures, to interrupt the soft white plane of the walls. The décor itself was rather nondescript, and any specific details I may have noticed at the time are lost to me now, but I do remember that there was a small private bathroom to the right of where Faith sat, and a small couch, no wider than a loveseat, on the opposite wall, with square foam cushions that fell just short of comfortable. Filling two corners of the room, and touching the couch on either side, were two square, dark wood end tables, the tops of which were covered with beautiful foliage plants. I tilted my head back and stared up at the florescent lights, not knowing what to do with myself. I walked across the room – one step, two steps, three steps – and turned around and walked back to the couch – one, two, three. I tried pacing like this a couple of times before giving up and sitting on the couch next to the plants. Wow! They were nice looking plants. I reached out and lightly rubbed a philodendron leaf between my thumb and index finger, anticipating the waxy coolness of the thriving foliage, only to be disappointed by the cold indifference of pliable synthetic. Plastic! God, how my father would have hated that. I let the fraudulent leaf drop from my fingers. Disgusted, more with the fact that I thought the plants were real than with the fact that they were plastic, I went back to the doorway to stare across the ER with Cindy.

What the hell were they doing? I could hear voices coming from the room that housed my father, a man and a woman, a doctor and a nurse. Shouldn’t there be more people in there? As I listened, the nurse let out a high pitched laugh, a resounding titter, followed by silence. Thirty seconds later they emerged from the room and walked toward us, a middle-aged doctor followed by the tittering nurse, their expressions somber. I turned toward our little waiting room as if to leave, wondered briefly where I was going, and turned back toward the ER. The doctor approached the doorway, arms outstretched, ushering us inside. Cindy moved to stand near Faith, and I stepped backward, staying along the wall, as the doctor and nurse crowded into the room. The nurse, who I later found out to also be a grief counselor, sat in a plastic, cafeteria style chair that I hadn’t noticed before, and watched us intently as the doctor started talking: “We did everything we could… best of our abilities… 45 minutes… did not respond…”

I couldn’t feel myself shaking my head. I took another step back to get away from this doctor and what he was saying, only to bump into one of the coffee tables covered with fake plants. Why is this room so fucking small?
He was right about listening, though. I wasn’t a mechanic or a pressman, but I knew the sounds of the shop. Each machine, if it was running well, had its own rhythmic sound, a measured click, hiss, whir or thrum that changed tempo with respect to every job. It was a steady background noise to those of us who worked in the front room, more noticeable when it was absent. The sound of the press would be slow and rhythmic as my father set up to run a job, the sucker-feeds clicking on the empty sheet feeder, changing to a dull thunk once it was loaded with paper. Then the press would stop and start as my father adjusted the image to his liking. Card stock ran louder, coated stock ran slower.

Any interruption in the rhythm usually meant trouble. Sometimes the disruption would be loud, the sound of buckling vellum as a misfed sheet crashed into the blanket, with the other sheets racing behind it trying to do the same; sometimes it would be muted, the sibilant rasping sound of tearing paper as it was pulled back into the press on the chain delivery when an aberrant gripper failed to release the sheet onto the stacker; at other times, it would be abrupt silence… for a long time. That meant a wrap-around. A wrap-around is when a rogue sheet of paper hits the impression cylinder the wrong way and shoots up into the ink rollers where it attempts to disintegrate back into its previous pulpy form. A wrap-around meant having to wash the press down; it was almost like starting over. A wrap-around could even silence the singing that accompanied almost anything my father did. His singing was even more constant than the sounds of the equipment. My father sang when he was happy or sad, in a good mood or bad. Customers would come in and say that Bob sounded like he was in good mood as he sang with or without the CD player, belting out some Elvis or Lyle Lovett song, lifting his spirits with the Everly Brothers or commiserating with Woodie Guthrie in the Dust Bowl Ballads. “Actually,” I might say to the customer, “he’s pissed off because he just had a wrap-around.” The customer would laugh, not quite grasping the true essence of a wrap-around, and wave to him through the window to the pressroom, to which he would return, a wrap-around meaning a wrap-around. A wrap-around meant having to load the Windmill onto a truck. Instead of hiring a moving company, my father called on his family to help him move the equipment, his brothers and nephews and brothers-in-law, all of them construction workers and tradesmen in their own company, my father called on his family to help him move the Windmill because it was a solidly built, precision machine that, unlike the other equipment, never needed to be moved. Of all the equipment in the pressroom, the Heidelberg Windmill was my father’s favorite. When it was running, the Windmill sounded like it was breathing, sharp inhalations of breath through pursed lips when it pulled the paper onto the platen, softer exhalations as it released the paper; when cranked up, it sounded like a souped up respirator. My father liked the Windmill because it was a solidly built, precision machine that, in its time, had never made a mistake. It was a black behemoth of a press, weighing over two thousand pounds, and it could print, number, perforate, score, die cut and hot foil stamp. I believe it was my father’s idea of a dream machine.

I thought of the time when we moved the shop from its downtown location to the east side of Brockton, and we needed to load the Windmill onto a truck. Instead of hiring a company, he called on his family to help him move the equipment, his brothers and nephews and brothers-in-law, all of them construction workers and tradesmen in their own right, as well as his sisters, nieces and daughters, none of whom were strangers to hard work. The Heidelberg was the last piece of equipment to be moved, and the men gathered around it discussing their plan of action, the young men deferring to their elders in terms of strategy, the older men deferring to the younger in terms of execution. Moving the press across the shop and out the front door was the easy part, but the stress level rose as they discussed how to get the press from the concrete landing, onto the narrow loading ramp, up the slight incline, and into the back of the truck. I listened from inside the shop to the yells of caution and encouragement as the press slowly ascended the ramp, pulled by a winch from within the truck, pushed and guided on all sides from without. Before the Heidelberg was even halfway up, the ramp started to buckle. There was a frenzied scramble to locate some two-by-fours, and some tense moments as my father wedged them under the
ramp for support and my uncle Frankie banged them in with a sledgehammer. After the move it would take three of them to straighten out the ramp enough so that it would slide back into its pocket underneath the cargo box of the truck.

A few of the men lit cigarettes as they took a couple of minutes to regroup, the sound of their laughter loud and excited as they cracked jokes to relieve the tension. The women watched nervously from the doorway, or wandered idly inside the shop, remembering briefly that we were there to pack and move, but all of us too worried to concentrate on anything other than the long ton of iron threatening to crash to the sidewalk, and, we were convinced, maliciously crushing one of our loved ones beneath it.

I thought of the drunk man that walked by, a familiar character in downtown Brockton, stopping briefly to tell the guys that they were doing it all wrong, telling them that once the press started moving, they needed to keep it moving. “You got a winch!” he said, tipping slightly forward with the force of his exasperation. “Just crank it up, and when she starts movin’, don’t stop! Just run her up the ramp and don’t stop!” My cousin Bobby, Cindy’s twenty-three-year-old son, warned the man to leave, a barely concealed threat in his tone. The drunk just shrugged and walked on, throwing an “I’m tellin’ ya,” over his shoulder as he went. There was silence then, as the guys looked at each other.

“The drunk bastard is right,” said Frankie, and everyone laughed.

After checking the winch, the two-by-fours, the ramp, and each other’s position, they tried again. By now, a small crowd had gathered, and when the press started moving, people on the sidewalk accompanied its ascent with shouts of encouragement and chants of “Go! Go! Go! Go!” all the way to the top of the ramp and, finally, into the back of the box truck. A yell of success went through the crowd, a cry of relief went through the family. Cindy turned away and lit a cigarette. Ethel burst into tears. “Stupid ass should have hired movers,” she said, speaking of my father. I could only nod in agreement, being on the verge of tears myself. I remember being proud of my family then, and their blue-collar status, proud that with all their skills combined, they could build or fix almost anything – at least that’s what they believed, and that was good enough for me.

Thinking of that move made me realize even more the scope of our loss. For the family to come together to help my father when he needed them was not unusual, just as he had always been there to help them. I believe they would have tried to move a mountain for him had he asked. But a part of me also knew that he was the impetus of the family, and the glue that held them together. He was the patriarch, and had been since the age of sixteen. I was worried that without my father’s presence, the family would drift apart.

I turned away from the nurse and looked at the doctor. He was still talking. God! How long had it been since they entered the room? Forty-five seconds? Two minutes? I looked longingly at the closed door, wishing I could still see out into the emergency room. I wanted to see my father. I wanted to tell him I loved him and would miss him, and that I hoped he wasn’t scared at the end, and that I would tell Danny and Sarah all about him, and that their lives would have been that much richer had they been able to grow up knowing him.

I started to cry.

It was barely 6:00 a.m. when, first my sister Donna arrived, then my Aunt Ethel, followed shortly thereafter by my mother and my sister Eileen. After asking which funeral home we wanted to use, and prompting us to make decisions that almost seemed obscene at the time, the doctor released us from the tiny waiting room and filed us across the ER to say goodbye to my father. I entered the hospital room, feeling the emptiness of it enter my heart even as I stared at my father and laid my hand gently on his chest. All my words dried up in my throat; he was not there.