## Father of Mine

My father died on a summer night in August. That was seventeen years ago. I had been out drinking in a neighborhood bar on the comer of 57th Street and Tenth Avenue. I was twenty-three and beginning to like bars and had never much liked my father. The Mets were on the tube that night. They had a guy named John Milner playing first base for them. The Little Hammer, he was called in the papers, suggesting that if he ever got his thing together he could be a big hammer like Hank Aaron, only from the left side. The Little Hammer hit a home run that night.

I was in my apartment a few minutes when the phone rang. It was my sister calling. My younger sister. "Daddy's dead," she said. Said isn't the right word. "Daddy's dead," she sobbed. She repeated the fact a few times.

"O.K. O.K.," I finally said, but she wouldn't stop. I felt like I was fending her off.

"Mommy is worried that you won't go to the funeral. Promise her that you will."

"Look. Enough," I snapped, and cut the conversation there.

The cab driver was a woman with a duck's ass haircut. She wore a purple tank top. Her armpits were hairy and her shoulders were pimpled. The hack license said her name was Hilda Gomez. I looked at it after I had given her the address and she had put the car in gear without acknowledging me.

Up on Broadway, in the eighties, there had been an accident. A VW had gone up on the island and struck a tree. The front of it was

smashed and the driver was still inside. Hilda rubbernecked as long as she could, before the cars behind us honked her along. "That's one dead driver," she laughed, breaking her silence, and sucked on her eyetooth.

She was in the room I had shared with my older brother when I was a boy. She had been using the room for a few years. The amputation of my father's right leg had something to do with the move. It just seemed an easier arrangement to sleep apart. The room had a lot of clutter, the kind I associated with my mother-boxes and piles of clothes. She wasn't a messy woman. It was a question of time and energy. "If only I had a few hours each day, we would live so beautifully," she used to say, when I was a child. What she meant was that her job responsibilities consumed her time.

"Hello, Mother," I said. She raised herself from the bed, where she had been lying. She had her glasses off. Without them she always looked different. Her eyes looked smaller, harder. Her face didn't seem as kind with her glasses off.

"Is that you, Mark?"

"Yes," I said, as I stood in the doorway. When I was kid I would put a leg on each side of the door frame and climb to the top to win her smiling attention, but now my head nearly scraped the lintel.

On the night table was one of those orange-colored prescription bottles with the top off. I took some medication so I could get some rest," she said. Then she broke down. "He was taken from me before I could even say goodbye." She cried uncontrollably.

I stood around a few minutes, kissed her goodnight, and fled.

On my way out, I encountered another sister, one of my three older ones, in the living room. Her name was Naomi. "Are you shocked, Mark? Are you as shocked as we all are?" She was drunk, or if she wasn't, I assumed she was, because she was always drunk and high on pills.

"I guess so," I said, and continued out the door.

The clinic was across town, in the east Sixties, and I had been going there for about two years. Had been going there religiously, I should say. My analyst's name was Dr. Gretchen Muller. A friendly, earnest, solid woman, she had been dealing with me on a three-times-a-week basis for those years. She had no great opinion of my character and told me as much. "It is your social scheme I object to," she hissed, when one day that summer I announced that I wouldn't be attending law school in the fall. I had a girlfriend from a wealthy family living in Boston, and what Dr. Muller was saying was that I had decided to let the girl take care of me sometime in the future. At least that's what I understood her to be saying. "You could go to jail, you understand," she also said, voicing another opinion, this one in regard to my occupation, or rather, the thing I did to pay my bills and allow me to fool around. She was referring to the six or so hours a week I put in at the renting office of the rooming house my family operated, and the money I was clipping. From the start it had been like that with her. I introduced myself by insisting that I did not belong in her presence, that I was unfit to be in treatment. I had brought a bag of bad feelings into that room. I see now that it was the building primarily. You know. Your mother's sister-your aunt-has this building in upper Manhattan she once owned but now operates on a lease basis. And you've grown up with stories of how the present owner swindled her out of the property and is now grabbing more money than rightfully belongs to him, like the store rents, because he's psychologically whipped my aunt and mother, who works there as a kind of renting agent, showing rooms to prospective tenants. You hear these stories of how he runs roughshod over them and then one afternoon, you're

walking to your meaningless job at a daycare center in Harlem following classes at CCNY and you say to yourself, I've been a fool. You belong in that renting office. They have been keeping you out, those women. They have been keeping you and your older brother and your father out. Your father has been working downtown as a cashier in various restaurants, like Jack Dempsey's.
Suddenly, you see it all too clearly. They have effectively kept him down, and you are determined they are not going to deprive you of what is rightfully yours. And it happens. One day you have no money, and the next you have a pocketful of cash, and soon you have a healthy and increasing bank account. You are claiming your patrimony, you think.

"I can't make you more intelligent, but I can make you more moral." That was another thing Dr. Muller said to me.
There were times she got annoyed, as happened the time I came in indignant because someone had told me I was nice. I didn't want to be nice. I associated nice with innocuous. "You are not nice!" she screamed at me. I thought she was going to get out of her chair and kick me. But .the one that really got a rise out of her was during the session following my father's death. I was angry. I was being controlled by an Idea. "I've been thinking that maybe my father Isn t my father. Maybe my mother had me by someone else."
She said nothing.
"I want to talk to my mother about this," I said, with some vehemence.
She got that look on her face she would sometimes get before she said, in a quiet but deadly voice, "I know you are sadistic, but If you dare to do something so low ..... She did not finish her sentence.
I smiled.

It's a feeling I get talking about my father that can still come over me all these years later, when presumably, I know more about the unconditionality of love and the subtle manifestations of plainspoken insanity. It is the pride of separateness, of imperviousness.
You can do me no harm. I do not even acknowledge your existence. You are relevant only to yourself. These were thoughts unspoken I held toward my father. And of course, the choice of separateness was made young, when it was I in the room my mother inhabited the night of his death. Dry your tears. Check your histrionic Impulses. Get real. Were these not thoughts of mine directed toward my mother and other family members? The death of a father can make a strong man cry. Cry, macho man, you with your deltoids and pectorals and ballooning biceps, weeping like a little girl because Poppa's bugged out, accept my gently spoken contempt for your bereftness"); thus, those with dry eyes are stronger than strong.

The funeral parlor was on West 72nd Street between Amsterdam Avenue and Broadway. It was a gentle, cloudless summer night with a soft wind blowing and I had chosen to take a walk through Central Park. The bandshell was empty and the chairs that were sometimes set up for concerts were put away. The park was lightly, mellowly, peopled by strollers from the real world and those from the lifer crowd, kids and older-than-kids who hung out-reefer Mary and hashish Harry and fierce Freddy with the cold, waspy, imperious face, all of whose 160 IQ went into the mastery of the aerodynamics of the frisbee he zinged through the air near the Bethesda Fountain-until the sting of winter on flesh and joints made them let go. I felt calm, as calm as the mild wind on my face. "You look like a different man," Dr. Muller said, when I showed

up that afternoon in a brown, double-breasted pinstriped suit, my one and only suit that was supposed to be my uniform in the real world before I became hooked on the building and the easy money (and low self-regard) it gave me.It was the same beam of approval she had directed my way after I had cut my hair, hair that used to spread around my head like a white man's Fro ("You're the only man I know who has seven parts in his hair," my girlfriend's mainstream sister once remarked to me.)

Picture yourself on a bus bound from the Port Authority Terminal to Newark, New Jersey. You are a fearful sort of man, though you don't begin to know the extent of it. At age ten you clamored continuously to come home from the Mickey Owen Baseball Camp in Missouri after two days with as much energy as you lobbied to go there in the first place, until you got your wish. Your sister Vera witnessed other unbearable bouts of homesickness that got you sent home from camp. You attended CCNY not merely because your family didn't have the means to send you to a private college but because you were afraid to leave home. And now you have tapered onto this building for your fix while others are marching steadily out into the world. Your whole life is one of dependency, and includes your morbid attachment to Sarah VanDine, daughter of wealthy, cultured parents and now residing in Boston. You tell yourself you are afraid of the pressures of law school and the consequences of such a demanding curriculum for your writing, for writing is truly your way out, your means for transcending the web of events and feelings that hold you down and raise your anxiety level to unbearable proportions. You need time to develop your craft, you say, the kind of time working a few hours a week at the building gives you. In fact, the more time you have, the more you seem to need. But then there is this bus ride to Newark, and suddenly the chains have been burst, you have moved into a larger vision of

yourself. Your being fills with the sense that you can and will do it You will enroll in law school and go on to be self-supporting. You will win the respect of Sarah; you will win the respect of your mother. You feel moments of indescribable joy, as if God is dwelling in your every cell and rejoicing with you at your step toward independence. But of course it is a lost moment. Something happens, and results, the next day, in Dr. Muller saying, "You chickened out. I believe in calling a spade a spade."

Which doesn't mean I wasn't changed by his death. There could be no doubt of a change. I had been moved to a different place. The fact of his passing would come and go from my consciousness. It would go away and come back, go away and come back, like waves against a seawall.

There was order in death. Soon he would be lowered into the ground, and dirt would be heaped on the coffin, a tombstone would be placed down, and that would be that He would have some peace now. With death came the only order available to a family such as mine. Death-that could straighten out tangled messes and bring manageability, I seemed to believe, and highly recommended it for some of my siblings, who were in a great deal of trouble, and my elderly aunt, and even my aging mother. Let it happen, I thought. Let it happen to everyone but me.

Because I was early I stopped in a bar on Columbus Avenue, an upscale place with plants in the windows and well-bred girls working as waitresses while seeking the break that would rocket them to acting stardom. A crowd surged up against the brass rail of the bar, and the tables in the eating area were also full. I wanted the sort of secular evening they were having. The service seemed merely a painful bother. There was, when I thought about it, very

little involving family that I wanted to sit through. From childhood on, I had found my happiness apart from them, and even now, my contacts were of the hit-and-run kind. I stayed a couple of hours a few nights a week at the renting office, would take the money upstairs to my mother's apartment afterward, would decline dinner with her, and race off. Not that I was so different from the rest. We all seemed to go our own ways.

Maybe it was the brandies and maybe not, but a girl of about twenty, a tall girl with a beautiful figure and long brown hair, came into my line of vision as I headed toward the funeral parlor. While waiting for the light at the comer of Columbus A venue, we made brief eye contact, and then, across the street, about ten feet from the parlor, I introduced myself. "I'm here to attend a service for a relative who passed away," I said, nodding toward the funeral home. She was a student at NYU uptown and was staying nearby for a few days with her aunt. I got the important thing, which was her phone number, and suggested maybe we could do something later that night. It was a strange moment, one in which I was all of one piece and speaking with a full confidence that made her acquiescent. Some sort of energizing drama was going on. Why not ask a pretty girl to be a part of it?

"Your father said he didn't know what would have happened if he hadn't met me." These were words my mother spoke to me in later years. I don't believe she was being boastful, but my mother did at times have a sense of her power. There was a dream she told me when I was back in grad school, a dream that had disturbed her into confiding in me. "I was in a robe of white," she said, "and standing on the seventh floor landing. Tenants, all of them men, came from their rooms and bowed down to me in a circle. I didn't

like it, Mark. I didn't like it at all." I could see her distress, her fear of having the very desire she professed to abhor, this craving to be worshipped.

"Your father was an agitated man. My, how he would walk. It was nothing for him to go on foot from one end of Manhattan to the other in a day. He would step into a movie theater and leave five minutes later. He had trouble sitting down and applying himself." Her point was that she put God into his life, so that in having Him he could have himself. "We are all lost without Jesus Christ. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." She said these words. She said them not once or twice or seventy-eight times. I mean to say that she said them a lot.

My mother and God were inseparable, and to me as a child or even as an adult, it was hard to imagine a time when this had not been so, though she said the turning point, the age at which she gave herself entirely, when she saw that she was a sinner and the world had no more allure for her, was on her thirty-second birthday. In her periodic witnessing for Christ to us, the words would just come out of her not as foreign and strange but of a piece with her nature. And though we would roll our eyes and groan and meet her words with crossness, she would only smile and remain undaunted, as if the possessor of some strength that would eventually wear us down. My father, however, was a late convert to God, and his conversion, in my mind, had everything to do with weakness. In his fifties he became sick with diabetes, and his religiosity followed. Judgments were made. He was using God. He was bargaining with God. If he turned to God, maybe God would take away his sickness. In various places and to various people I articulated these judgments of my father.

He found a church out in Astoria, New York. After work at Jack

Dempsey's restaurant, where he was employed as a cashier, he would go to Times Square and take the RR train a few stops. The church was really the garage of a private home, and every night he would get together with other men-and a few women-and they would celebrate their discovery of Christ. Christ Jesus, they sometimes called Him. When I was in grade school, my mother had me accompany my father to one of his meetings, where I heard him give a sermon that deteriorated into tears and emotionalism and left me tortured with embarrassment. There was something wrong with my father and these other men-men who didn't smoke or drink and so ready to witness. Such sunbeams for Jesus in the dusk of their gray lives. When you couldn't support your family and were reliant on my mother to do so, then you clung to Jesus. When you couldn't take your children to the beach once a year without slapping one before you'd gotten out of the house, then you clung to Jesus. When the smallest frustration brought flames of anger, then you clung to Jesus.

My father's name was in the directory in the vestibule of the funeral parlor, white plastic adjustable letters on a black felt background. Above and below him were Ross Delmonico and Abednego Thatcher on the fourth and second floors respectively. I thought of old movie marquees, of men getting up on stepladders and changing the letters when a new movie replaced the one from the previous week.

I took the elevator to the third floor and 'found what I thought I would find, a sprinkling of people in a small, gray carpeted room. My father of course was the centerpiece, lying peacefully in the open casket at the front of the room. He had a waxy countenance, and as I stared at him the girl's number went through my mind like

a ticker tape.

Those handful present were tenants from the building, solitary types with a religious faith. There was Mr. Thaddeus from 11B3, a shriveled white-haired man whose concession to the occasion was to wear a tie-a pink one-with his oversized denim jacket and baggy jeans. His left forearm was in a sling and pressed close to his chest under his jacket. Some years-many years-before he had been injured while operating a piece of machinery in a factory and lost a lawsuit, something he was still bitter over though he had given it to the Lord as best he could It was the only piece of personal information I had from him. Not that I talked to him about myself either. Oh, he did have things to say now and then. I believe that paying his rent was part of his spiritual program, paying it in advance, that is. "I'm paying three weeks. Three weeks in advance," he would say to me, turning over his cash as I sat in the renting office, and I could almost feel the swelling sense of goodness in him as he stood waiting for his receipt. There were others, of course, in the building who were clearly not so in alignment with the Christ within them, for whom the nonpayment of rent was a better deal than to live in accord with the Christ within them. I gave Mr. Thaddeus a pretty wide berth. He was a man of public as well as private prayer. I would see him in such a state, his head bent, while standing in front of one of the many scriptures my aunt had framed in the lobby of our building. I didn't want what Mr. Thaddeus had, and secretly feared that it could be catching. Then too, I didn't like Mr. Thaddeus, for he was in the habit of saying, pointedly, I thought, "A few good men. That is what your mother needs. Just a few good men around her to give her a hand." I know what Mr. Thaddeus was saying. He was saying, You are anything but a good man, you and that brother of yours.

(There was another who seemed to be giving my character a reading of sorts, a sour middle-aged man with a room behind the office who was studying religion at the Union Theological Seminary. I must have been developing a kind of armor, for when he said to me one evening after I had expressed annoyance that he wanted his mail just as I was trying to close, "You are not fit to be working there," I did not respond. His statement, said with deadly matter-of-factness, did not even send a shiver through me. In any event, he was not among the mourners.)

They were, if anything, friends or acquaintances of my mother. My father had no close contacts, none that I knew of. People did not come to our house for dinner or for Saturday afternoon tea. Not ever. My father's life was Jack Dempsey's restaurant and home and the church in the garage with the folding chairs and the extremely sober men who had made Jesus Christ their personal savior. Grace Banner was there, with her blistered red face and fat, fat body, uncomfortable to look at not because of her complexion or weight so much as the frightening lack of hair on her head. She had only sweaty gray tufts of it here and there. "Good to see you, Mark," she said. She had thin lips and baby teeth and a face forced into a smile or grimace, you couldn't always tell which, by the things that were going on in her. "Praise the Lord," Grace Banner, from Wichita, Kansas, said. She said these words freely and repetitively. Grace Banner and my mother were similar body types. She helped my mother with work in the building, such as with the laundry. You would see her with my mother in the laundry room in the basement, removing dripping sheets and towels and pillowcases from the giant tub and dropping them in the extractor. You would see them inserting the sheets into the rollers of the mangle. And you would see them going from floor to floor with the canvas laundry cart distributing the weekly change of linen to the tenants. "Grace

Banner is a woman who loves God," my mother said.

I did not go to her funeral the following year, when the cancer finally consumed her. She was just another whose life, because it was not happening, had "fallen in love with God," and when she clasped my hands in hers the evening at the funeral I inwardly recoiled, troubled to be touched by someone with exploding cells and an increasingly exposed skull.

Sister Hanasian and Sister Henry were there too, sisters steeped in God from the tabernacle my mother worshiped at. They would not have known my father except to say hello, I was sure, my father who I always saw in his own company, except for the gathering with the sober men, and even then he was alone, a solitary man suffering the affliction of separateness. They were also there to give support to my mother, and set off the memory bells of my childhood, for I too had been at that tabernacle to age thirteen and remembered their tears for the Lord and the frightened attention they, childless women both, would give to me.

The unfilled chairs were an embarrassment. They indicated the impoverishment of my father's life and of all our lives.
In the back of the room, a woman played church music on an organ elevated above the carpeted floor on a small wooden platform. She was playing "Where We'll Never Grow Old" and she looked bored.

From the top, these are the ones in my family who came. My mother, who wore gloves of white linen, with little ribbed strips, the same material I would feel when she would take my hand in hers on the way to the tabernacle, where she had us go so we would get the word of God and not stray from Christ Jesus, who is the light of the world, and so that if we should in future stray -should in future backslide-we would have Him to go back to, for once He was in us, she believed, there was no way we could tum our backs

on Him forever should we fall into the clutches of the world. My mother sat quietly, with a downcast look, and showed no inclination to speak with me, or anyone.

Hannah, the oldest of my four sisters, was there, a large woman who covered her bulk with a black trench coat that she chose to leave on, along with her dark green sunglasses. She brought along her son Moses, a good-looking boy of eleven whose father was unknown to him and never discussed. Because she lived at home, she had always lived at home, she was there before time began-her son was intimately acquainted with my father. She knew his moods, or his condition, as my mother referred to it, the condition that caused him to be, using his word, aggravated if a fork was dropped at the dinner table, a condition of anger at the overwhelmingness of life in a messy apartment with six children and even some of their offspring. Moses would have known him as the man who sat in the black wicker chair in the dining room with easy access to the religious pamphlets he received from Oral Roberts in Tulsa, Oklahoma, or any of the other numerous pieces of religious literature that came from other sources, stuff on cheap paper printed in blue and brown and red ink. He would have known him as the man whose grace at dinner could run long, so that the food my mother had patiently prepared grew cold as the tears flowed down his cheeks and he showed himself more hungry for his own words than for turkey and sweet potatoes, for Brussels sprouts and baked bread, until my mother would have to intervene.

My second oldest sister, Naomi, was also present, Naomi of room 7B3 in that same building, where she lived from one year to the next with her alcoholic husband Chuck. They had a room you didn't want to enter. Let me speak for myself, that I didn't want to enter. I imagined dirty underwear amid their bottles. Neither of them worked. They just lived rent-free in that room, passing their

lives however they could.

There was my third oldest sister, Rachel, a drinker too, sitting separately and keeping on her dark sunglasses. She was the hope of the family, a Vassar graduate, who now lived in an SRO and held temp jobs and wound up at Bellevue now and then, where Naomi was known to also have made a few trips. And there was my older brother Luke. Drinking was his most regular activity too.

Just die, I thought. Just all of you die along with the old man. You're just meaningless forms. Give up the breath and let some dirt be thrown on you.

A few years later I would seek out another psychiatrist, this after Dr. Muller was out of my life. I was worried about my drinking. It seemed to be getting out of hand. It seemed to be the thing I did with most of my time. I sat in his tastefully furnished office and told him my situation. I said the drinking was troubling me but that I didn't really want to give it up because I was trying to be a writer and writers drank. I mentioned as one of my examples F. Scott Fitzgerald. "That guy? That guy? Hey, drinking dissipated that guy's energy," the psychiatrist said.

He asked for a sketch of my family. My father was dead, I said. He hadn't been a drinker, nor was my mother. My mother and father believed in God and prayed to Him, I said. It was the children who drank. Not Hannah, the oldest, and not Vera, the youngest, the one who had informed me of my father's death. I talked about a couple of other sisters-Naomi and Rachel-heavy into booze and drugs and my older brother Luke with the same tendencies. I wanted to know from this doctor what the future held for me. Would my life be a boozy one and amount to nothing, like those of some in my family?

"How far does the apple fall from the tree?" he asked, intensifying my fear. Either way, he seemed to be saying, it would be bad.

I was doomed to be a drunk or in the Jesus bag.

At a sign from the funeral home official, who wore a carnation in the lapel of his suit jacket, the organ music stopped and a man stepped to the lectern, a blond man of about forty with pasty skin. He looked vaguely familiar to me.

"This guy's leading the service? Who is he? Do we know him?" I asked my mother.

"Shush," she said, but then went on to explain. "Pastor Nyborg couldn't be here. He's very ill, so the next best thing was to have his son fill in."

Pastor Nyborg was the organizer of the garage for the sober men living in and through Christ Jesus, and since he was unavailable he had dispatched his dearly beloved son Junior. Because of illness and the loss of a leg, my father had not been to the garage for some years, but through a call by my mother, memory of him was sparked in the pastor. (They had no special cohesion, these powerless men. They came together in the garage and dispersed, came together and dispersed. )

The eulogy was neither memorable nor convincing. His reliance was on inspiration rather than knowledge of the deceased, and so the air was fIlled with generalized rhetoric. "Dearly gathered, we have lost a great and most passionately loved man just the other day, a soldier for Christ who wanted only to spread His light in the world." He spoke in this inflated way at some length, a smile of satisfaction breaking out on his face when he was especially pleased with his uninformed words. "And what of Sister Sarian? What of his dear wife, this steadfast seeker of God's will? Will our prayers not be with her too as she undergoes this ordeal? Does she too not deserve our prayers and loving thoughts?" Before long he had her crying.

Then, to cap the eulogy, he said, "We will now have the deceased's loving daughter sing one of his favorite hymns."

From the back of the room Naomi came forward. A bloated woman with very white skin, she wore a sleeveless white dress with large black polka dots. She sang her hymn, "And He Walks with Me," in a faltering soprano. Was she thirty at the time? Her age was never accurately fixed in my mind, nor was that of Rachel, her hennaed hair in a bold duck's ass and a fierce smirk on her plastered face.

Naomi got partway through the hymn before quitting, her soprano voice cracking and dying. If she knew the words, it was only

because she sang while holding the hymn book. Her voice with its failings was not new to me or any of the rest of us. We had heard Naomi perform many times, in the lobby of the building or even out on Broadway. She wanted to believe she was the second coming of Judy Garland and sang things like "Over the Rainbow" and "The Man Who Got Away." She did not have the instrument to deliver the songs, but more importantly to me, she did not know the words. In her rush to be loved and esteemed, she had not bothered to learn the lyrics.

At service's end I recoiled to see my mother and my sisters bend to kiss my father's waxy face. Not that I didn't do my best to say good-bye. I placed my hand on his, but involuntarily pulled back on contact with cold flesh. And then I stole away.

When I was a child, my sister Vera tells me, it was my way to stick out my hand to women and say to them, "We're orphans. Could you give us a quarter?" Some would and some wouldn't. Then, as a young adult, I also approached women, younger women, and would ask them for something else, and wasn't always as successful as the night of the funeral. One evening a few years before I had tried to pick up a woman on Eighth Street in Greenwich Village. "I really believe this is quite astonishing. You're the same man who came up to me on this spot last year, aren't you?" She looked at me as if I had a clinical psychiatric illness.

Despite the trance, the automatic I seemed to be on, Sheila would not give herself entirely to me. The resistance started with her aunt, whom I could hear, as I waited in the vestibule of the apartment, saying to her niece in a back room, "But who is he? You don't know him from Adam," after giving me the once over from head to toe with a cold, appraising eye.

She was bored staying the obligatory couple of days with her aunt, she said, as a partial reason for being with me. I took her to a bar down in my neighborhood, classier than the one in which I had seen the Little Hammer hit his home run the night of my father's death. I drank a lot of red wine and she had a few sips. Back at my apartment, she helped me smoke a joint. When I made my move, she let me kiss her but I could go no farther. When I tried again later, she said, "You've gotten all you're getting," and stood up and grabbed her jacket. "Context is lacking," she said. "I don't see you in relation to anything. "

When everyone was finally present in front of the funeral parlor, the drivers tossed their cigarettes and slipped behind the wheel of their double-parked limousines. I envied their detachment. Our driver, a thick-necked man with an impassive face, in the course of the forty-five minute drive, remained silent. I couldn't stop seeing us through his eyes. I imagined scornful thoughts, and worried that we might do something to anger him.

My mother and I were pressed together in the back seat and I was irritated that our legs kept touching. I was reading her thoughts as well as the chauffeur's. What I seemed to be reading was that she had finally grown fed up with my disdain for my father.

My father's body would be dumped in some tacky graveyard next to a fast food restaurant, I began to fear, as the limo zipped along with Jersey swampland to either side of the road. Even with the windows rolled up because of the air conditioning, we got the stench of the nearby petrochemical plants.

About thirty miles from Manhattan the limousine swung off a main road and through a wrought-iron gateway and into the burial ground. Rows of tombstones stretched endlessly, rising up out of

the green earth. In some places the ground had been dug up and neat rectangular holes had been made for the coffins. Compact yellow bulldozers rested under the shade trees ready to push the earth back into the holes after the coffins had been lowered.

I wandered off and looked at some of the names on the tombstones, names like Citarelli and Rotondo and Antuofermo, and from a distance turned to look at the small group. In the light of day, as otherwise, we were a shabby crew. There was one exception, whom I focused on even more intently than I had the chauffeur. That was Vera's boyfriend, who stood self-possessed in a black suit of tropical wool in their midst. They had come in one of the other limousines. I resented her for having him there, this Columbia boy now composing music at Julliard, this intellectual from a wealthy Boston Jewishfamily. His smiling eyes saw everything with pitiless clarity and made you cower. He saw my zonked older sisters. He saw my booziac older brother Luke, who had showed up in a jacket three sizes too small and poorly shaven and without a tie.

Actually, no one else seemed very much aware of Vera's boyfriend. I knew there was only one reason she had asked him along, and it had nothing to do with moral support or any of that stuff. It was simply that she wanted him there to witness her grieving performance.

Pastor Nyborg was again present to say a few words. As he began to pray, my eyes wandered to the coffin, now sealed, lying some yards away. Canvas straps with hand grips had been attached to it. I then noticed workers casually laying out strips of white pine over the burial plot. When the prayer was over, the workers pulled the coffin onto the boards by the canvas straps. The boards were then slid out and the coffin lowered. A small bulldozer crawled forward and stopped near the mound of excavated earth by the hole. I saw the driver slip the gear into neutral and light a cigarette.

We crowded to the edge and stared down at the coffin, which looked small in the deep hole. After pausing a moment, we dropped our flowers down on to it and then stepped back. All except my mother, who remained where she was, clutching the bouquet of white carnations. I eyed the workers in their jeans and T-shirts and work shoes, some of them smoking as they milled around. Couldn't she see she was keeping them waiting, not to mention our limousine drivers? These were not people to play around with. They could get mad, the way father used to get mad.

I appointed myself to step forward. When I placed my hand lightly on her arm, she threw the flowers with an awkward toss into the hole, the way a baby throws a ball. I took her arm but she moved it free of my hand and gave me what I considered a cold look. It was an expression I had never seen on her face before, an expression of extreme dislike. My son, the murderer.

I know your types, of course. Well, I don't have a family like that. I love my daddy. And you will go and throw your arms around him while posing for the camera that will give your love nationwide publicity. I carry with me something my sister Vera said to me that day. As if speaking to the heart of the matter, and knowing where my fear was, she said, with a smile of triumph on her face, "I feel I have been chosen to carry on Daddy's name."

I found other bars in the coming years, Father, bars like Max's Kansas City on 17th Street and Park A venue South, where the sharp-faced owner did door checks while popping chick peas into his mouth. I was wild and free, and had no discernible thoughts of you at all in that particular bar, where I drank red wine and listened

to Rod Stewart sing "Maggie" on the juke box and wrote sentences to rock-and-roll music and was blessed with the experience of jumping into a cab with a woman just on the basis of eye contact and making love with her in her Prince Street loft. Father, she was a sad-faced woman. I woke in the morning looking up at a skylight and immobilized by the pain in my head in a Sheetrocked room with polyurethaned floors of golden honey. The woman was a painter from the state of Indiana. She had left her husband because he was an alcoholic, she said. You have to understand how that word grabbed me. "Alcoholic? What do you mean?" I said. "What do you mean by what do I mean," she replied. "The guy's a dipso-wipso. He can't stop guzzling."

I prayed to God that morning, Father, as earnestly as I could, while throwing up back home into the toilet bowl. It was an I'll-never-do-this-again prayer that you may never have used, since alcohol was not in your life.

On another night I also got lucky. I met two women in another bar but before I could go home with the one who wanted me, I had to take the other one home, as she was ailing. I believe she had a case of hepatitis. I walked with her up all six flights to her apartment, as she insisted that I hear a record that would have meaning for me. So I listened, trying to mask my impatience, but I was giddy -giddy with wine and the anticipation of being with the other woman-and couldn't concentrate on the themes I was supposed to find in the female vocalist's lyrics. I shrugged at record's end and made for the door, but she seized my wrists with an incredible energy. I remember her cold touch, her bad teeth, and her yellow eyes. "Don't you see? You're not the person you want to be. You are disappointed in yourself."

The year following your death, I was living with the woman from Boston. We took a Chinatown I0ft with a pressed-tin ceiling, worn floorboards, and minimal fixtures where, the plan was, she would achieve greatness as an artist and I would tap out my books while continuing to extract money from the building. A blond-haired girl from a wealthy, cultured family is the way I have always described her. She is not someone you would remember, though you saw her once on upper Broadway two years before your death, you with your walker and diabetic body, your lined face and fat-lensed glasses. I only came over to you because I thought you had spotted me. There was small talk of an uneasy kind for a minute, in which you were introduced to her. She did not think much of you. Don't ask me how I knew, but this is only the case. It had something to do with your decrepitude. More importantly, I had told her, in so many words, that I was my mother's son. She too was waging a battle against maleness, seeing in her father a cruel patriarch whom she must struggle against in order to survive. (Let me assure you that she didn't care for her mother, either.)

It was in this Chinatown loft, amid my girlfriend Sarah's canvases and strange sculptural forms, that I had my first calling to you, the first sense of your past beckoning to me. How can I tell you of the conviction with which it came to me that I could follow your path if only I found my way to the local baths, where men with giant penises waited to join me in homosexual sex. You were a lover of the baths; Mother told us of your fondness for them. It was traditional for men in Turkey to gather in such places, even Armenian men such as yourself. But you see, Father, it was given to me to know better in that moment. Your secret was right then revealed to me. You were there to interact sexually with other men. Do I need to tell you of the sense of wonder and exhilaration I experienced to know that I had received this breakthrough insight?

Picture It, Father. I am twenty-five, it is an early fall day, Sarah is out for the afternoon, and I am there with the Yellow Pages on the bed, praying for nothing more than the address of such a place, my body a fever zone of desire and longing.

Not quite the first time I chose a direction based on something you had or hadn't done, Father. That is the thing about the mind. It gets visits. Some of these visitors light it up. Make it brim with conviction. You know about Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus. Then see me on 133rd Street and Amsterdam Avenue one spring afternoon in 1968, three years before your death. I was a struggling student-not struggling with the books but with making ends meet-and on my way to that dreary part-time job at the nearby daycare center, where I was supposed to supervise lost and hardened ghetto children. Hear with me then this voice that declares, not says, as I walk a stretch of Harlem pavement littered with broken glass, "Sweet angel boy. Take it from the top and see what these women have been doing. They keep your father out of the rooming house business so they can maintain complete control. They give your older brother Luke no responsibility except to mop floors and act as the night watchman. But they let your oldest sister Hannah work in the office a few hours a week. To make matters worse, they give all the rent money over to the owner, when by terms ? If a lease that your mother says doesn't even exist, they only owe him a fraction of what they give him. Understand what they are doing. They are handing over your patrimony. Now go claim it" The voice was talking family history, Father. Perhaps Mother told you the same stories she told us children when we were growing up. You know. How Auntie Eve was a saint. How she bought this building with no other purpose than to further God's will here on the island of Manhattan by having a place where

missionaries could find inexpensive lodgings in their global comings and goings. How ownership was schemed away from her by an unscrupulous man who over the years came to impose his brutalizing will on Auntie Eve and her. What I'm saying, Father, is that in a moment of angry rebellion, I rose up against the masochistic tyranny of Mother and walked triumphant into that office. And in walking into that office I was walking into you.My freedom in that time with Sarah was knowing that I had beat you thirteen ways to Tuesday. We would go, Sarah and I, in my imagination, to an open field, where I would place-kick your head great distances. She of course was the holder, a willing one. Sons who beat their fathers have access to fortunes untold. There is no limit to the things they can do. This was a prevailing idea of mine, in those days.

I was not a big hit in the baths, Father. I was not Mr. Beefcake, Mr. Well-Hung. I had too a sadness about me that others could perceive if I couldn't. I was feeling the sweet poison of the speed pills I was taking, but what my fellow bathers were witnessing was a gaunt man with a depressed face who spoke in a monotone. "Jesus. You look kind of down." Those were the first words spoken to me at the baths over on First A venue. It was not a friendly observation but one designed to catapult the speaker of them into a superior position and to increase my vulnerability . Not that the man's remark kept me away. You would find me there after a night spent drinking in the bars in unsuccessful pursuit of women. An idea would present itself to me in words like these: Go where you belong and where you will have no hassles.

These baths, then, in those years were my only connection, and admittedly a skimpy one, to you. And if you want to know the truth,

I stopped thinking of you, at least consciously, in going to them. The idea had fallen away that I was following in your footsteps.

Sometimes, in the easy, associative way we have of relating or linking authority with the father, a fleeting idea of you might cross my mind, as happened at a theater where excitement led me to the men's room after watching the feature, a porno flick. I stood over one urinal masturbating and soon a stocky man materialized over the neighboring one. He had a messed up right eye. A big patch covered it under his glasses, and some kind of ointment oozed out from beneath the bandage. He flashed a gold badge and recommended that I drop to my knees and "finish him off." He talked in a gruff way, and grabbed a handful of my hair as I knelt Yes, Father, I did fInish him off. And though afterward I bolted from the theater, I could not run from the sense that someone had imposed his power on me. You were not a cop, of course, but I thought of you and the power of yours that I had successfully avoided all those years.

In my writing you would appear-"a man relevant only to himself," I would say. I began a story about a fifteen-year-old boy involved in a clinging relationship with a girl. They were not going "all the way," and to achieve sexual release by means other than masturbation, he would sometimes go to the men's room of the nearby university library, where homosexuals seemed always to be found. The boy was not enamored of his father. One day he had seen his father knock his older brother down and kick him in the face with his heavy black shoe. That same week he went to the bathroom of the homosexuals. The homosexuals had done a clever

thing. They had removed the screws for the toilet paper fixtures in the stalls so if you put your eye to the hole you could see into the adjoining stall. If the person sitting on the toilet was doing so with an erect penis, then you were in business. You would slip to the floor and the man in the adjoining stall would do the same. The partition between the stalls did not reach to the floor, so there was a space for the two to do what needed to be done. The moment of truth for the boy was to look in the next stall and see, of course, none other than his father, and then to watch his father's arm and hand straining through the opening between the floor and the bottom of the partition for his object of desire.

In this time, Father, an image formed-partly drawn from life of a young man, on the muscular side, with a chop of moustache and wavy, blow-dried hair and big white teeth. Ron Doug was his name and he drove his father's expensive car and came out into this world with all his father's values, one of which was to hit and to hit very hard in the course of taking all that he wanted. Ron Doug had a hardness in him that only a father could give him, a something that did not incline him to wrap himself around women in a clinging way. Ron Doug had no particular answerability to women. You would see Ron Dougs walking about in pairs and threes and fours. It was Ron Doug in triplicate I saw one night urinating on the sleeping bum in the doorway of a Little Italy building as their pink Cadillac idled at the curb. My attitude toward them as I passed was overtly deferential, but inwardly jeering. The unspoken words to them went something like this: Look at this world that welcomes you and encourages your hostility, but where would you be without Daddy's car? What I was saying was, when Pop suffers cardiac arrest, his expiration will bring you to your knees. You will know

fear, not triumph, you whom death can wilt.

When I was in the tenth grade, our English class read a play, Henry IV, Part One. The kingdom was in jeopardy. Northumberland's rebel army was advancing, and the king's son Hal was keeping company with Falstaff in low taverns. The king envied Northumberland his son Hotspur, who could ride his horse on the perpendicular, and sighed that his own son languished in pubs rather than engaging his enemy on the battlefield. You know the outcome, Father. You know that Hal rose up and stretched himself to the limits of his potential, that he defeated ftery Hotspur in mortal combat. You know what I am going to say, that I was moved to tears by that play, for it was about being redeemed in the eyes of the father. Not that my thoughts were turned to you, you in your dirty bathrobe around your weakened body, sitting in your comer in the dining room reading pamphlets stained with cockroach droppings from Tulsa, Oklahoma, the religious literature of Oral Roberts, Inc.

Sometimes I go to visit my mother. The children are all dead, except for Vera, my youngest sister, and myself. And so there have been numerous funerals. There was one for my sister Hannah after her death from cancer and another for Naomi when she was found dead in the Hudson River and still another for Rachel who jumped from the window of a SRO. The most recent was for my brother Luke, who got careless while at the wheel of his car after a night of drinking. My mother tells me what Jesus has meant in her life, and relives that time of renewed conviction when she gave herself entirely to Him. "I pray that all of my children will be there in

Heaven with me. It is a matter that makes my heart heavy to think otherwise. Life is short but eternity is so long." My mother is old now, and walks with a cane and her shoulders stooped. There is the pain of arthritis in her joints and chronic back pain from a ruined disk to live with. She relates once again what my father was like before he found Christ, how he was a wanderer. "He was very worldly. There is something I could tell you but I don't think I should," she says, but I coax the secret from her. "Once, he took me to a burlesque hall. The sight of those poor women was enough to make me cry. I wanted to go up to them and plead with them to take Jesus Christ as their personal savior so they could be saved from this life they were leading." Yes, that would be my father, open to all temptations and resistant to none, as with the sugar he would sneak into his coffee against the doctor's orders after the onset of his diabetes.

These are the living-in-the-light years that I have been spending peaceful afternoons now and then with my mother. They are years without booze and drugs in which slow healing is taking place. I tell her my dream, really a snippet of a dream. My father is standing in a line of people waiting to board a bus at a large city terminal. It is an old bus, and my sense is that we are in the 1930's or early 1940's, before the time of my birth. He wears a long wool coat and a brimmed hat and he clasps his hands in front of him. It is a posture of patience. "He was at peace in the dream. That was my impression," I say. "Yes, I believe you," my mother replies, as if she really does. What I want is for her to attach tremendous significance to the dream, but I can't say that she does. I would have her see the dream as my ongoing communication with my father, a rejection of the finiteness of this life.

Sometimes I will be in a public place, such as walking along the concourse of Grand Central Station or sitting on a bench in Central

Park, or I will feel the hot air from the subway blow up through a sidewalk grate, and I will picture my father in these same places, in a time before my birth, and wish that I too could have been a witness to that pre-me city. There will be a painful yearning at such times to be back there then, an acute awareness that it must have been a better time to be in the same place. And then I move out of that feeling into another one. What am I trying to say, Father, except that I couldn't kill you without killing myself, and now I'm trying, if it's not too, late, and how could it be, to join you.