

What A Father Leaves

from the memoir *Revere Beach Elegy*
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On a June day when the world was at war, my father came into this life in a simple wooden house on Tapley Avenue, in Revere, Massachusetts. He died, without providing any advance notice, in a slightly fancier home on Essex Street. A little more than sixty-six years separated that birth and that death, a little more than a mile separated those two houses. Though he was an ordinary man in many respects, he knew extraordinary sorrow at an early age, and, later, extraordinary triumph, and among the tempers and memories he bequeathed me was the conviction that it is possible to find a solid bottom beneath those tidal sweeps of good and bad fortune.

His childhood was typical of the childhood of millions of first-generation European immigrants in the first quarter of the twentieth century; he was a small piece of a large family that was caught between the strictures of the old world and the promises and possibilities of the new. His parents — Giuseppe Merullo, a tailor, and Eleonora De-Marco Merullo, a housewife — had come to America from poor hilltop villages in southern Italy, settled briefly in Boston's North End, then married and moved a few miles north to the city of Revere — the countryside then — where they bought a house and began to fill it with children. My father was born in 1916, after Philomena and Carmen, and before Gloria, Violet, Anthony,

Joseph, and Robert, but no tangible proof of his existence has come down to me from those years, no snapshots of him as a boy, no school papers or early artwork, only scraps of anecdote passed along by his brothers and sisters, who remain close to each other and to me.

His family was, by turns, relatively wealthy and relatively poor. Giuseppe — Joe, as he came to be called — owned his own tailor shop and lost it in a fire, owned one of the first automobiles in the neighborhood and lost it to medical bills after a fall, owned the house on Tapley Avenue, lost it in the Depression, then bought it back again in 1938. At one point in the 1930s, Eleonora had to sell her wedding ring to buy food, and the nearest tailoring work Joe could find was in Rockland, Maine, a twelve-hour drive to the north, in a car with no heater.

The streets were dirt, street lamps shone beneath crimped metal hats the color of poorly cared-for teeth. The Merullo children slept two to a bed, kept warm in winter by bricks that were heated in the coal stove, then wrapped in a towel and placed beneath the blankets at their feet. The family put up their own vegetables and made their own wine and root beer. The boys tilled the garden, shoveled snow, smoked cigarette butts they found on the sidewalk; and the girls listened to opera with their father on Sunday afternoons, cared for the babies, learned to cook at their mother's shoulder, were courted by boys from similar families on chaperoned outings.

The Revere of those days consisted of clusters of plain wooden houses set among rolling fields, its politics controlled by men of English and then Irish descent, its underworld run mainly by Jews, its three-mile crescent shoreline (America's first public beach) fronted by amusement rides, food stands, and dance halls that drew tourists from as far away as the West

Coast, its social life revolving around a synagogue and a dozen churches, men's clubs, the Revere Theater on Broadway. Six square miles of salt marsh and low hills a stone's throw from the metropolis, home to Italians, Poles, Russians, French Canadians, Irish, English, Jews, Scots, Germans, and a handful of blacks, the city was unfortunately and perhaps unfairly — known primarily for political scandal, underworld dens, and racetracks. In fact, though, it was not much different from places like Brooklyn, Jersey City, and South Philadelphia: a certain rough humility, an emphasis on family loyalty and the vibrant, sometimes violent, life of the street, a brew of American ambition and European tradition that would, in future generations, bubble over into something more sedate and suburban, leaving room for different immigrants, new dramas.

It was in that hothouse of hope and defeat that the seed of my father's life sprouted. I know that he was a good, perhaps even a brilliant student, that as a young boy he cared so much about his clothes that he would take out his handkerchief and spread it carefully beneath him before sitting down on a neighbor's concrete wall, that he was baptized Orlando and went to school Roland, that he spoke Italian before speaking English but carried no trace of accent into adulthood. Those are the few puzzle pieces that survive. The remainder of his first eight-teen years is a wash of American history almost identical to the history of twenty million other Orlandos, Patricks, and Sauls.

My father belonged to the generation of Americans we are now in the process of forgetting, a generation that had the misfortune to make the leap from high school into adulthood with the chasm of a world Depression yawning beneath their boots. In 1934, he graduated from Revere High School with

honors, but there was no tradition of college in his family (his older brother and sister had dropped out of high school to help bolster the family income), no money for tuition, no clearly marked route along which his ambition might travel.

In the farms that spread across western Revere then, he found work with a produce company called Suffolk Farms, picking carrots and cucumbers for twelve dollars a week. Over the course of the next few years, he moved up to a public relations position, studied civil engineering in night school, and when he'd earned his certificate, left Suffolk Farms for a job on a surveying crew. "On hot days," he would tell me forty years later, "I couldn't stand to be out there in my clean clothes while the other guys were sweating with their picks and shovels. Some days I took off my shirt and climbed down in the ditches with them and helped them out for a few hours."

That remark speaks volumes about him, about the confusion of longing for better and loyalty to his roots that runs like a refrain through his life. Even after he'd abandoned pick and shovel and surveyor's transit and climbed up into the high, fragile branches of Massachusetts State Government, he could not bring himself to leave Revere. He still met his childhood friends at Wonderland Dog Track one or two nights a week for an evening of modest losing, still seemed to feel as comfortable lunching with judges and senators at Dini's in Boston as he did with city workers, plumbers, and bookmakers at Louie's corner coffee shop a few blocks from where he'd been born.

The remark speaks to something else, as well. My father was a gregarious man, and cared — sometimes to a fault — what impression he made in society. Like many Italian-American men, many men of all ethnic groups and races, he was shadowed by a societal definition of masculinity that has

more to do with being brawny and tough than with any of the finer attributes. He worried that his arms and hands did not look strong enough, he worried about how he had dealt with and would deal with pain. Surrounded by war veterans, star athletes, and street fighters, he was pricked by a nagging devil of doubt because he was none of those things.

I am taking liberties here. He never said any of this to me. Such tender introspection would have been as alien to him as corned beef to his mother's kitchen. And yet, I have a storehouse of small clues that stand in for his words. I see the footprints of that same devil on the carpet of my own home. I see the strength to be taken from traditional masculine stereotypes, as well as the wreckage they wreak in me, in brothers and cousins, in friends' marriages. Once in a while, in the midst of a discussion of the roles women have been made to play in our society, I hear an echo of my father's voice: "Sometimes on hot days —"

In 1940, he married, and began working as a draftsman for a Boston firm called Stone and Webster, his first real office job. The work consisted of designing power stations and submarine periscopes, and he liked it well enough. The following December, when America was pulled into the war, he tried three times to enlist, but was turned down because of a punctured eardrum, forced to watch as the world convulsed and bled and the men of his generation went off to face their appointed sufferings.

For someone who felt embarrassed about working in a shirt and shoes next to bare-chested men with shovels, the idea of being left behind while neighbors went to war must have been next to unbearable for him. But, other than to state the facts of his case — the punctured eardrum, the three rejections — he did not speak to me about it.

As fate would have it, his own sufferings found him soon enough: on March 26, 1942, his wife of thirteen months died in childbirth. Again, only small pieces of this woman's life have drifted down to me through the shifting seas of familial memory. In the few snapshots I have seen, she is a happy girlfriend and then a happy newlywed, thin, dark-haired, pretty. I know that she was waked in her wedding gown that, in the weeks and months after her death, my father's suffering seemed bottomless. "We would just be sitting down to dinner," one of my uncles told me only a year ago, "and the phone would ring. It would be the caretaker at the cemetery in West Roxbury, where Vi was buried, asking us to send someone over there right away because Roland was sitting next to the grave, weeping, and the caretaker wanted to close up and go home."

But the sense of this grief has reached me only third-hand, and only years after my father's death. Though I often wish it had been otherwise, he did not talk about grief and tragedy with me and my brothers. Every once in a while, during some poignant pause in the busyness of his life, he would be alone with one of us and make a comment like: "Someday I'll tell you everything. Someday we'll sit down and I'll tell you things." But what these things were we had little idea, and the promised "someday" never arrived.

Perhaps in deference to his second wife, my mother, he never spoke about his first marriage in our presence. I learned of it by a chance remark. Playing in the backyard one summer afternoon, I was summoned to the fence by our elderly neighbor, Rafaelo Losco, who handed over an armful of greens for me to pass on to my grandmother. Rafaelo had another man with him, a visiting brother or friend, and the man was running his eyes over my face with such intensity I felt as though a blind person were fingering my eye sockets and lips.

"What is your name?" he demanded.

"Roland."

"Roland's son?"

"Yes."

"I've known your father forty years. I knew his wife when she was growing up. His first wife, I mean."

I only nodded, and turned away with my armful of escarole, but the words claimed a place in my memory His *first* wife. I was old enough by then — seven or eight — to know something about secrets, to sense that this piece of information had been kept out of my reach for a reason, and I did not mention it, not to my parents or grandparents or brothers or friends, for close to two decades.

It seems peculiar now, that in all the times I must have been alone with my father during those years, I never asked about his first wife, or even let him know that I knew of her existence. It seems strange that he and my mother, and their parents and brothers and sisters, conspired in such a silence when it would have been so much easier all around to tell the story, once, answer the questions, and be done with it.

But ours was a Catholic world in which marriage was supposed to last for all eternity, and this was the 1950s and 1960s, when the ethos of emotional confession had not yet broken the polished shell in which we lived. And I believe there was an element of superstition involved as well, remnant vapors of an ancient stew of belief and mystery: to speak of tragedy would be to invite it. The closest any relative ever came to raising the subject was when one of my father's sisters asked me, in private, what I thought happened when people who'd been married more than once died and went to heaven. Which spouse were they in heaven with, did I have an opinion? Had I heard anything about this at Sunday school?

Whatever the reason or combination of reasons, the fact of my father's first marriage lay in the deep, undisturbed shadows of our family consciousness until the winter of 1978. In that year, I began knocking down, piece by piece and without spite, the edifice of expectations my parents had been erecting since my birth. I'd taken my college degrees a few years earlier, and, after a stint with USIA in the Soviet Union, I'd turned away from both an academic and a diplomatic career. With much fanfare, I joined the Peace Corps, went off to a primitive island in the Pacific, then quit after less than six months. Penniless, long-haired, hosting a menagerie of tropical bacteria, I returned to America and found work driving a cab in Boston, a job which seemed to crush the last of my parents' hope for me like crystal beneath a greasy work boot. In the space of eighteen months, I had gone from being a source of pride to a source of embarrassment, and in December I put the finishing touches on that swan dive into dishonor by announcing that I was moving in with my Protestant girlfriend.

As a boy, I'd seen a neighbor burst into tears at her daughter's engagement to *il protestante*, but it was 1978 now, and such "mixed" marriages no longer shocked Revere's papists. My parents had met Amanda before my Peace Corps venture, and approved of her from the start. The problem was not Amanda's religion or nationality (my mother, though Catholic, was of English ancestry, so that could hardly be an issue) or even the fact that we were having unblest sex. The problem was that, by moving in together, we were openly confessing to this unblest union, making it public, running up the flag of *disgrazia* for everyone in the family, in Revere, to see.

There were harsh words that night in the house on Essex Street, hurt feelings on both sides. My father, mother, and I shouted at each other across a widening chasm, tore at the

sticky filaments that bound us, took turns pacing the kitchen, accusing. It had a different feeling than other arguments, the words were sharper, the consequences heavier. I was trying to embarrass them, smudge their good name. They were trying to meddle with my happiness. After that night, my mother stayed angry at Amanda and me for several weeks.

My father was quicker to rebound. After we'd simmered for an hour in separate rooms, I said I was going to take the subway into Boston and spend the night with Amanda, but he offered to drive me, instead.

We left the house in silence, drove along Revere's dark streets, acting out our epic of stubbornness. It did not occur to me that he might have offered the ride out of anything other than his reflexive generosity, a trait I took almost completely for granted at that point. In our culture, stinginess — with money, time, or assistance — was second only to disloyalty on the tablet of cardinal sins: why wouldn't he offer to drive into Boston and back at ten o'clock on a Sunday night?

Somewhere in Chelsea he said: "I guess things don't stand still. I changed my mind on Vietnam. I guess I'll end up changing my mind on this."

I said nothing, determined to win, for once, as I had seen him win so many times. We were climbing the flat arc of the Mystic River Bridge, a cold darkness beyond the windshield, harsh words still echoing behind us.

"You know this will lead to marriage," he went on, and I told him that if this led to marriage, it would be fine with me. He gave one of his short, tight-lipped nods. "She's a nice girl, a family girl."

This high compliment changed the air between us, and it began to seem to me that something positive had come of our fight. We had somehow knocked a hole in the too-respectful

shield I'd put up around him, in the notion of father-as-king that brings so much stability to Italian families even as it nourishes the seeds of inadequacy in some sons and grandiose imitation in others. The trick was to thrust aside that notion without trampling on the man behind it, and we had somehow managed that. So I ventured a step into uncharted territory.

"You were married before, weren't you, Pa?"

"That's right."

"What happened?"

"She died."

"How?"

"In childbirth."

For a moment I turned my eyes away, touched, embarrassed, by the grief in his words, thirty-six years after the fact. It seemed to me then that, in two short sentences, I had an explanation for everything: his temper and frustrations, his fear that any telephone call might bring the worst imaginable news, his penchant — almost an obsession — for attending wakes and soothing the bereaved, his armor and distance and pride and stoicism, his superb, sometimes dark, sense of humor, his faith that the universe was ordered beyond any human understanding.

I had a key to him, at last. In love myself, the idea of losing a beloved struck me in a deeper place than it would have on some other night.

I was watching him now across the front seat, but he would not look at me.

"What happened to the baby?"

"The baby died, too."

"And then what was your life like?"

"Bitter," he said. "Until I met your mother. Bitter."

With that word, we buried the subject and never raised it

again. In time, relatives would help me fill in some of the details: After Vi's death, my father withdrew almost totally from the social whirl on which he'd thrived. For years and years he did not date. His easygoing personality hardened a bit. He sought solace in his church, his brothers and sisters, a small group of family friends. His parents sold the house on Tapley Avenue (he and Vi had lived in the downstairs apartment) and moved a mile west to Essex Street, and my father passed most of the 1940s that way, enveloped in a womb of sorrow, loneliness, and defeat, while around him the world was again at war.

Very, very gradually he emerged. With the assistance of my mother (a lovely physical therapist who spent two years at Walter Reed Hospital, rehabilitating men who'd lost arms and legs in the war, and then volunteered to work with polio victims at the height of the epidemic — in short, a woman who'd had some experience bringing a bit of light into the lives of the wounded and lonely) his bitterness faded enough for him to want to make another try at building a family.

In 1949, he and my mother were engaged. He went into local politics and was elected to the city council, ran for state representative two years later and was narrowly defeated. On Veterans Day weekend in 1951, Roland Alfred Merullo and Eileen Frances Haydock were wed, and, after a brief honeymoon in Washington, D.C., they moved into the four-room apartment above my father's parents.

In 1952, my mother suffered a miscarriage in her fourth month of pregnancy. In 1953, she bore Roland, Jr., the first of three sons. In 1954, with my mother and me waiting in the car, my father, who had been out of work for the past several

weeks, walked into the offices of the Volpe Construction Company in Malden, without an appointment, and asked the boss for a job. The boss, John Volpe, future Governor of Massachusetts, Secretary of Transportation in the Reagan administration, and Ambassador to Italy, gave him a job, not as an engineer but as a worker in the gubernatorial campaign of a man named Christian Herter.

There began an unlikely association that would radically change the course of my father's life. Herter was tall, lanky, and wealthy, and displayed in his speech, clothing, and posture all the entitlements and credentials of what would later come to be known as the White Anglo-Saxon Male Power Establishment. And my father was a big-chested, six-foot Italian who had never spent a week outside his neighborhood, who had not been to college, or to Europe, or even to Vermont, for that matter; a Republican in a nest of Democrats; white and male but entitled to nothing and wanting everything.

They became fast friends, and their friendship endured until Herter's death in 1964. A strong orator, very careful about his clothes and manners, my father was a natural on the campaign trail, a great asset in the predominantly Italian-American precincts north of Boston. When Herter was elected Governor of Massachusetts in 1954, he chose as his personnel secretary a working-class Republican from a provincial neighborhood on Boston's tattered northern cuff.

In any government, but especially in one as patronage fueled as the State Government of Massachusetts, personnel secretary is a position of vastly underestimated power. Acting by the rules on which he had been raised, my father found work for a long list of relatives and friends, filling the agencies of state with men and women he knew and trusted, or simply men and women who needed a boost in their lives, a steady

paycheck, a safe niche they could cling to until retirement age. In so doing, he accumulated a huge bank account of favors, an account he would draw on unashamedly later in life, finding summer work for nieces and nephews and sons, interceding with judges, lawyers, cops, making a phone call here, pulling a string there, tweaking and twisting and cajoling and sometimes shoving the many-limbed beast of state power.

At some point in my early twenties, I turned my back on that side of him, refused any further assistance for myself, cast a harsh eye on what seemed to me then little more than nepotism. We used to argue about it from time to time. When I interviewed for my first government job in the USSR, he half-seriously offered to pull some strings for me in Washington. "You do that," I said, "and I'll refuse the job if I get it."

"You don't think other people will be doing that for their own?"

"I don't care," I said, and I didn't. But how easy it was for me, with my fancy education, to cast a righteous and condescending eye upon his string-pulling, the survival by-connection ethos in which and by which the people of his time and place lived. And how clear it is to me now that solitary achievement is not the only measure of worth, that all of us are constantly engaged in a give-and-take of affection and advantage, doing favors and having favors done for us. But I was headstrong then, and full of myself, and, like many other twenty-four-year-olds, planning to remake the world according to my pure vision.

In 1956, Chris Herter went to Washington as Undersecretary of State (in 1958, when Dulles resigned, he advanced to the Secretary's job) in the Eisenhower administration, and offered to bring his personnel secretary along for the ride. But, for my father, Washington was too far from Revere, from his

brothers, sisters, and parents, from the faces and corridors he knew. He respectfully declined the offer and seemed, in later years, untroubled by regret. In 1958, the *Boston Globe* printed a picture of Secretary Herter above a story suggesting he would be the party's nominee for president. My father is standing beside him, gearing up, perhaps, for another campaign, revving up old ambitions, ready to give Washington a shot this time. But Herter was already in a wheelchair by then, stricken with polio and about to cede his front-runner status to Richard Nixon. The rest, as they say, is history.

Before Herter left Massachusetts, he offered my father his choice of several high-level if low-paying jobs in the state bureaucracy, among them, head of the Metropolitan District Commission and Director of the Industrial Accident Board. My mother talked him out of the MDC job, a prestigious, but high-profile position that came under regular attack from one camp or another: press, politicians, populace; he settled in as Director of the IAB.

It was a good job, and another man would have been content there, with a corner office overlooking Boston Common, weekly trips to the western part of Massachusetts to inspect safety conditions at state-insured factories, S. S. Pierce food baskets at Christmastime from the managers of those factories, extended lunch hours during which he'd prowl downtown Boston's bargain clothing stores and buy suits and shirts for his friends and brothers, whether they'd asked him to or not.

For a while, in fact, he was happy at the Industrial Accident Board, and from the late fifties until the mid-sixties his life settled into a tame pattern it had not known before and would not know again. He was president of St. Anthony's Holy Name, a member of the Knights of Columbus, the ITAM club,

the Children's Hospital Association. On summer weekends, he golfed at public courses with friends he'd known for forty years. He bowled and bet the greyhounds and played whist for nickels with his brothers, made the rounds of his sisters' homes for coffee and pastry on Sunday mornings after church. In the vacant lot next door to his parents' house, he and my mother built an eight-room, Colonial-style home, a grand structure by the standards of our street. They took my brothers and me on modest summer vacations — three days at Lake Winnepesaukee, a week at a friend's house near the Cape Cod Canal; they drove us to church on Sunday mornings, to Little League games.

There were smudges on this idyllic tableau, the ordinary frustrations and dissatisfactions of family life. His temper, short of fuse and short of duration, could be triggered by something as small as a spilt glass of milk, and our Sunday dinners were sometimes broken up by needless argument. He was not as careful with money as he might have been: I remember him hunkered down over a table covered with bills, puffing his pipe, unapproachable. And he might have traded a few hours of his social life for a few more hours at home.

But he paid his bills, and visited the sick, and came home sober every night. And he tried, without ever actually apologizing, to make up for his outbursts by taking us with him when he made the rounds of his sisters' and brothers' houses, or by slipping us a dollar or two when we left the house with friends.

My father protected himself with a kind of fake-gruff exterior which could be funny or intimidating, depending on the context, and which completely broke apart when his own father died, late on a June night in 1965. He summoned us to the table the next morning as we were about to leave for

school. I was twelve, my brothers nine and seven, and, while we knew our grandfather was ill, we'd had no prior experience with death. My father had had no prior experience bringing news of death to his children, and when he sat in one of the kitchen chairs and gathered us around him, there were tears in his eyes and, on his face, a sad twitch we had never seen.

"God called Grandpa last night," he said, after a struggle.

We had no idea what this meant, why God should be calling Grandpa up on the phone, and why it should upset our father so much. Washed, combed, and lit with the anticipation of one of the year's final school days, the last thing we expected was that we would never again see the man who had lived beneath or beside us every day of our lives.

"God called Grandpa last night," my father repeated. Now there was more trouble in his face, and my mother was wringing her hands as if to urge the words out of him, and his grief was so enormous and so pent-up, that even without any understanding of death we had a sense of something new and terrible invading our house.

"What do you mean, Pa?" I said, but by this point I was close to knowing.

"Grandpa died last night," he managed, finally. The fake-gruff exterior collapsed, the five of us huddled in its ruins, and wept.

Not long after that, the prestige and comfort of the Director's job began to lose some of its appeal for him. Perhaps it was the fresh sense of mortality he felt after his father's passing. Or perhaps there was some regret there, after all, at not having gone to Washington. My father had had a taste of the high life, a bit of fame and power, and perhaps, after a decade, the Industrial Accident Board had begun to look like just another sinecure.

Since his carrot-picking days, he'd cherished the dream of becoming a lawyer, and in the course of his duties at the Board, he'd rubbed shoulders with lawyers and judges day after day. And so, in 1966, at the age of fifty, he met with the Dean of Admissions of Suffolk Law School and convinced her to admit him without an undergraduate degree.

For the next four years he rose at six o'clock on week-days, left the house at seven-thirty, made the forty-minute subway commute to downtown Boston, worked at the Board until five or five-thirty, attended classes at Suffolk from seven to ten, then rode the subway back to Revere. My mother met him at Beachmont station and drove him home, set the table again, cooked a second supper. At eleven o'clock, she went upstairs to bed, and he went down into the basement room he'd refinished, and hit the law books there until one or two A.M.

At Suffolk, an average grade of seventy was required to pass. My father's average in his first year was sixty-nine. Suffolk gave him the choice of repeating the year or failing out of school. He repeated the year, moved his average up ten points, and made steady, unspectacular progress through the rest of his law school career. By the time of his graduation in 1970, he stood in the middle of his class, a B student, age fifty-four, with a family and a full-time day job as his extracurricular interests.

What a deep and resonant triumph it was for him, that graduation. What a party we threw. His mother, siblings, and in-laws came, all forty of our cousins, old family friends, new friends from law school, monsignors and mayors, bricklayers and hairdressers, neighbors who'd lived within shouting distance of us for thirty years on Essex Street without having any idea of my father's secret ambition. He rarely drank, but he drank that night. For the only time in my life I saw him slightly tipsy, dancing with my mother in the cellar room where he had

spent so many studious hours.

When the celebration ended, he took a week off to putter around the house, then returned to work at the Board, studying at night and on weekends for the Bar Examination, which he took for the first time that fall. A score of one hundred out of a possible two hundred was required to pass; the examiners told him he had scored "in the high nineties."

Still working full-time, still maintaining the house and showing up at our baseball games, he took the bar a second time, and failed again. He failed a third time and a fourth, at six-month intervals, and by then even his closest friends were counseling surrender. You've made your point, they told him. You did something almost nobody else could have done at your age. Let it rest. But, for better or worse, he was not the type to let something rest. Not even close to the type. His customary response to those who advised him to give up the chase was a not very facetious: "Go to hell."

The twice-yearly notice from the Board of Massachusetts Bar Examiners had come to be a terrible ritual in our home: the buildup of fear and hope, the arrival of the letter, the bad news, which my father took stoically, clamping his teeth down on the stem of his pipe, staring out the kitchen window in a gray-headed, 220-pound silence, ashamed beyond any speaking of it.

The fifth such letter was delivered in March of 1973, on a dreary Saturday morning. My father had just taken the curtains from the living-room windows, my mother was in the kitchen washing the floor. Steve, Ken, and I were doing a fair imitation of dusting when we heard the mailman's tread on the front step. I retrieved the mail, saw the letter from the Bar Examiners, handed it over to my father, and retreated. He stood at the window in the cold spring light and turned the

envelope over twice in his hands, preparing himself, stretching out those last minutes of hope. My mother waited in absolute silence in the kitchen. My brothers hovered near the top of the stairs; I stayed in the front hall, spying.

With an engineer's precision, he slid his letter-opener beneath the flap and drew out a single sheet. He unfolded it with one hand, scanned it, then looked up and out at Essex Street with an expression I could not read. Defiance? Anger? Reluctant surrender? For half a minute he stared out at the cars at the curb, the tilting telephone poles and rusting TV antennas, and then he pushed three words up through his throat in the general direction of my mother: "El, I passed." My mother shrieked, we ran to embrace him, we wept, we shook his hand, kissed him. For the rest of that day my brothers and I floated around the neighborhood in an ecstasy of pride and relief.

For several more years the sun of good fortune shone upon him. His many local friends sent him what law business they had, wills mostly, small troubles. One or two of the companies he'd worked with put him on retainer. He resigned from the Industrial Accident Board and accepted a part-time job as a Workers' Compensation Specialist at Revere City Hall, trying to sort out the truly injured from the professional fakers, wrangling with the city council on which he had once served, then, at home, earning more money in an evening than he'd previously earned in a week.

During the years of my father's law career, I was building up my own small business, a one-man painting and carpentry operation in northwestern Massachusetts and southern Vermont, three-and-a-half hours from Revere. Too poor, at

first, to afford a vehicle, I kept my tools in a knapsack and rode to jobs on a ten-speed bicycle with my handsaw twanging and bouncing over the back wheel.

For six dollars an hour I replaced panes of glass, scraped and painted the soffits of old garages, patched ceilings, peeled up tile from rotted bathroom floors. Nothing puzzled him more than this lifestyle of mine, this freedom and indigence. Here was a son who had earned both a bachelor's and master's degree from an Ivy League school, who had worked for the State Department behind the Iron Curtain, who, in his late twenties, held credentials admitting him to the choicest precincts of the non-Revere world. And what was he doing? Living in the woods re-building porches for old Vermonters, reading at night in the Williams College library because he and his wife could not afford to heat their apartment, nailing up clapboards in the freezing cold.

My claim that it was all temporary, that I was pursuing a writing career, made little impression on him. "When," he said to me during his one visit to the country, "are you going to take responsibility?" I thought of reminding him of his days climbing down into ditches, his pursuit — stubborn, illogical — of a life that suited him, in spite of the odds . . . but I made a joke instead, biding time it turned out I did not have.

The last time I saw him was in Revere in the summer of 1982. We'd bought a vehicle by then, an old repainted Sears van which he'd found for me at auction. Amanda and I had driven down to celebrate his sixty-sixth birthday, and I'd spent part of the weekend scraping and painting the front entrance of the house so that it would be more presentable to his clients. On the morning we were to head back home, I came down into the kitchen and found a hundred-dollar bill on the table and a note. Tender phrases were never a specialty of my

father's. He was not a rough man by any means, but neither was he comfortable with the more delicate aspects of human relationship, not, in any case, where his sons were concerned. (When I was going out on dates in my college years, he would watch me combing my hair and spraying deodorant, would hand me the keys to his Pontiac, slip me ten bucks, and say: "Be careful" — the closest we ever came to a father-son talk on sexuality.)

Tender expressions were not his specialty, but that note was filled with tenderness. How glad he and my mother were that we visited, how grateful for the work I'd done, how much they loved Amanda, and so on. All of this folded around a hundred dollars, the equivalent, in those lean years, of my weekly income. Amanda came downstairs and I said to her, "Look at this, will you? My father, huh?"

I didn't realize that he had not yet left for his job at City Hall, and was standing a few feet away at the back door, staring out into the yard. He made a small coughing sound, and I saw him, and we went through the usual ritual of me refusing the money and him refusing to take it back three or four times before I finally folded the note and cash into my wallet, thanked him, and kissed him good-bye.

For two months the note remained there. One day in July I decided I was being sentimental or superstitious — unmanly traits — and threw it into a trash barrel on a beach on Long Island.

Two weeks later I was painting a house in Williamstown, up on a ladder in the bright morning, when I heard a car pull to the curb and saw my wife get out. Amanda crossed the lawn and stopped at the foot of the ladder. "Be down in a minute," I said. "Just let me finish this piece of trim before the sun comes around."

"Come down now," she said.

"One second, I just —"

"Come down now, Rol."

I climbed down and stood facing her. "Bad news," she said.

He died in his sleep, with no sign of the struggle that had marked so much of his life, and for months and months after his death I dreamt of him regularly — straightforward, extremely vivid dreams that did not require the assistance of an analyst to interpret. In one, he was sitting in the back seat of a white limousine, at the passenger side window, and I saw the limo pull out of a drive way and sprinted after it, waving and waving, calling out, "Good-bye, Pa. Good-bye. Good-bye!" But he was looking straight ahead, smiling, and didn't see me.

Now, a few years shy of the age when my father decided to attend law school, I occasionally dream of him still. Sometimes we argue, sometimes I tease him about not visiting us. He often smiles in these dreams, but rarely speaks. Each year that passes, each incremental diminution of my own powers, brings a sharper understanding of the force of his will, the effort and self-belief and self-sacrifice and pure stubbornness that can be read between the lines of his resume. I have, it turns out, inherited a portion of his discipline, but what matters more to me is his gift of a sense of perspective, what he would have called his "faith," a certain spiritual or psychological ballast that holds a person close to some center line, even amidst the greatest victories and the deepest bitterness. I keep a framed photo of him on the wall in the room where I write, and say a word to it from time to time, when things are going very badly, or very well.