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Bequest & Betrayal

MEMOIRS OF A
PARENT'S DEATH

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Prologue:

WRITING A
PARENT'S DEATH

Children begin by loving their parents. As they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them.

OSCAR WILDE, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

The origins of this book are inseparable from the loss of my parents. My mother's death was a shock. An athletic nonsmoker, she was diagnosed as having lung cancer days after her sixty-eighth birthday and died a few months later. But it was only in the years following her death, when my father became physically and mentally crippled by Parkinson's disease, that I began to think and to write about the end of life.

Death, literary critics have not failed to point out, is good for narrative. It gives shape to the messiest of plots and retrospectively conveys meaning to whatever has come before. In autobiography, the death of others always provides unexpected narrative benefits. It tells us something important about who we are, especially when the death is that of a parent. The loss of a parent and the work of self-examination—how we watch our parents die; how we live with ourselves, and them, after they are gone—lie at the heart of an astonishing number of contemporary memoirs. I'm writing here about how I've tried to make sense of my life as a daughter in the wake of my parents' death, and how reading the memoirs of writers coming to terms with their loss has helped but also complicated my task. As a reader of autobiography, I perform an awkward dance of embrace

and rejection: He's just like me, she's not like me at all. As I write myself into and out of other stories, in counterpoint to dramas lived on other stages, scenes from my personal history take on new significance. Can my story—or yours—ever be more than that: a dialogue enacted with other selves?

The death of parents—dreaded or wished for—is a trauma that causes an invisible tear in our self-identity. In the aftermath of a parent's death, which forces the acknowledgment of our shared mortality, loss and mourning take complex paths, since our earliest acts of identity are intimately bound up with our relation to the dead parent. But the closure produced by the end of their plot does not signal the end of ours. With the loss of the second parent, the child/parent dialogue moves into the space of memory and writing. When we become adult orphans of whatever age, our stories continue—sometimes on paper—now authored by us, with others listening. We don't choose our families, but we get to revise their myths.

Why write about the dead? Because the dead are alive in us, and in our face. We are inhabited by their desires, keenly attuned to the demands of what Virginia Woolf calls "invisible presences," the forces that keep the subject of a memoir "tugged this way and that every day of his life." A dead parent, Jacques Derrida observes, "can be more alive for us, more powerful, more scary, than the living." Haunted by our pasts, we are forged in relations of likeness and difference. Showing our faces, telling ourselves, cannot help but betray the others who live on in our heads and dreams. Writing about oneself entails dealing with the ghostly face in the mirror that is and isn't one's own.

Reacting to loss can take the form of a literary obligation: "I thought: my father is gone. If I do not act quickly," Paul Auster reflects in *The Invention of Solitude*, "his entire life will vanish along with him." But there is no single pattern of response among writers who, like Auster, set out to retrieve and restore the life of the missing parent. "I must remember accurately," Philip Roth recalls telling himself in *Patrimony*, "remember everything accurately so that when he is gone I can re-create the father who created me." Writing a

parent's death is a way to repair a broken connection. "I imagined," French novelist Annie Ernaux admits in *A Man's Place*, a memoir about her father's life, "that I had nothing else to learn from him. . . . Maybe I am writing because we no longer had anything to say to each other." The reparation of belatedness requires engaging with the dead.

Autobiography is fundamentally a democratic enterprise. As memorialists of the dead, writers join readers who find themselves caught up (as we cannot fail to be) in the situations of loss and grief that come with the territory of human ties. Whatever our singular destinies, such memoirs offer the reader an occasion to reflect autobiographically on the terms of these foundational relations: what it means to lose one's parents, and how to make sense of their absence—and continuing presence. (In a bookstore one day on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, I overheard a man ask the clerk where to find books on death and dying; the clerk directed him to the "recovery" section.)

Like classic autobiographies that chart an individual history from birth to crowning accomplishment, memoirs are documents about building an identity—how we come to be who we are as individuals—and a crucial piece of that development takes place in the family. This is not necessarily the good news. "When Tolstoy wrote that all happy families are alike, what he meant," Susan Cheever observes in *Treetops*, "was that there are no happy families. The family is as confining as it is nurturing." But happy or unhappy, families provide a scenario in which we get to try out and perform ideas about ourselves, who we would like to be—within limits. The limits set by the family constitute the blueprint of a self, the outlines of autobiographical space. We could also think of this as the family plot; especially if we include within this notion of plot a burial plot (the plot that ultimately awaits us all). Writing in the journal *Tikkun*, Art Spiegelman explains that *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*—his two-volume comic book account of his parents' Holocaust experience—supplied a "focus for dealing with the issues that were important to me: my parents, my ethnic background, the ghosts of the dead." Under many guises, the project of autobiographical writing is tied to

this intergenerational, historical, and spectral matrix of identifications. We elaborate an individual identity in relation to that set of finalities which are also possibilities, for the present and for the future.

But what happens to our idea of self when there is no generation to follow, when we are childless? What happens to the idea of mourning and legacy when the plot of generations ends with us? I want to insist on the inordinate power of that plot to shape our profoundest ideas of self and other, a power that emerges with peculiar intensity at the moment of a parent's death—for all, but with an edge of violence for those of us without children to follow. We need a language and stories for an exchange between generations that bypasses the body and the family: bonds of paper, not only bonds of blood. We are also connected by books and the friendships that grow out of them.

Unlike the trauma that can radically revise the course of a young person's life, losing a parent in middle age is a drama of a more subtle sort: fully embarked on lives of our own, sometimes with children, we are no longer young, and yet in that primal relation, we are still children. We expect our parents to die, especially when they are old and we are well into middle age. But despite our knowledge, their death comes as a surprise. The manner of death always seems to feel unexpected, a desolating blow. The end of life is not, as Simone de Beauvoir puts it in *A Very Easy Death*, natural: "You die from *something*." The pain of death resides in its details.

"Watching a parent grow is one of the most reassuring experiences anyone can have," Margaret Mead asserts in her autobiography, *Blackberry Winter*. "A privilege," she concludes, "that comes only to those whose parents live beyond their children's early adulthood." The countertruth of contemporary culture in which longevity has outstripped ethics is that watching a parent shrink is one of the most devastating experiences anyone could have. Parents, it seems, live too long or not long enough. "I don't want to be a burden on you girls," my father would say in the early days of his widowhood, hanging heavily on my sister and me as we staggered with him, shuddering at the irony of his words, but laughing with him all

the way down the steep hill to his apartment building on Riverside Drive. Then he was a burden—overwhelmingly—for several years as he first lost control of his body, then his mind. The end of life is not about what you want, certainly not about what you deserve.

Although national differences separate the writers of these memoirs, their books participate in a common project: telling the story of parents and children as adults confronted with the peculiarly modern horror of technologically advanced styles of dying—and living—that often make the experience of losing a parent more unbearable than the loss itself. In the face of postmodern indifference, these writers are passionately committed to the project of personal history.

Memoirs about the loss of parents show how enmeshed in the family plot we have been and the price of our complicity in its stories. The death of parents forces us to rethink our lives, to reread ourselves. We read for what we need to find. Sometimes, we also find what we didn't know we needed.