Weathering The Winter

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Thick snow crusted the trunks and sides of the sprawling limbs, burdening the old elms lining Hampton Road. The exposed black bark outlined the gnarled trees with the fine black, almost artificial, lines. During the night the snow had turned to icy rain, covering the trees with a clear thin film as the temperatures plummeted again. Twisted limbs and branches sagged from the weight, as the weathered trees were bowed. As I lifted the bathroom shade, I was awed by the eerie sight of those frozen leaning trees. The lights of the streetlamps chased each other down the street, darkness was everywhere except for a thin streak of pale violet morning light on the far horizon. I shivered from the cold damp of the bathroom tiles and, clasping the collar of my bathrobe tightly closed for warmth, I slipped out of the door to my bedroom to get dressed for school."

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Weathering the Winter

By Margo Wixsom Barry

Thick snow crusted the trunks and sides of the sprawling limbs, burdening the old elms lining Hampton Road. The exposed black bark outlined the gnarled trees with the fine black, almost artificial, lines. During the night the snow had turned to icy rain, covering the trees with a clear thin film as the temperatures plummeted again. Twisted limbs and branches sagged from the weight, as the weathered trees were bowed. As I lifted the bathroom shade, I was awed by the eerie sight of the sprawling limbs, burdening the streetlight with ice. I was surprised to see the artificial, lines. During the night the streetlamps chased each other down the street, darkness was where except for a thin streak of pale violet morning light on the far horizon. I realized then that she must have been up for a long time during the night.

"Yeah, Ma." I replied, not feeling so good. Make sure they get their breakfast, O.K."

"Sure, Ma, I'll take care of everything." Pop had never been sick that I could remember. The image I had of my parents' timelessness wavered. I was surprised, almost annoyed, at the fault.

Joey and Todd were in a tangle of blankets. As I slapped where I estimated their hips to be, the cocoons moved. Two sleepy, groaning faces emerged. They were startled to see me. Todd objected sluggishly, "Get outta here! Where's Mom?"

"She's with Pop, he's sick."

"What's the matter with him?" Joey sat up blinking.

"I don't know. Ma just said he's not feeling well. You guys make sure you wash 'cause you're not getting breakfast till you do." I tried to perform my role fully.

"Yes, Mother!" Todd mumbled sarcastically. They both gave me disgusted looks and headed for the bathroom.

I dressed and hurried downstairs to get breakfast and make the lunches. As the CreamOWeat simmered on the stove, I made a pot of coffee — it would keep until Mom came down and she'd appreciate it. Printing our names on the small brown bags, I methodically filled each one, then sat down and had a bowl of hot cereal. Todd and Joey soon joined me and silently, sleepily, we ate together. Before leaving to catch the bus, I ran upstairs and knocked lightly on the bedroom door, waiting respectfully for Mom to give admittance.

"Come on in," her tired voice called. I realized then that she must have been up for a long time during the night.

"We're leaving now, Mom," added hesitantly, "You want me to do anything?"

"No, honey, everything's O.K. He's just tired." Her face was close to mine now, pale in the increasing light, her eyes sunken and tired with blue-gray circles underlining them. Thin loose strands of hair straggled down her cheeks and her ashen face frightened me. Just then she struck me as old. "Bye now, have a nice day." She leaned forward and kissed my cheek.

Joey and Todd had already left. Glancing at the clock, I scooped up my stuff and raced out the door. From the corner, they waved and shouted frantically, signalling that the bus was coming. Running to the corner was not easy. Each step broke the icy crust and I sank into the soft snow underneath. As Todd held the bus for me I made jerky progress toward the corner. "Poke!" he scolded in annoyance. "Next time move a little faster or get someone else to hold the bus for ya'." The driver whooshed...
the folding door closed with equal irritation. Feeling a little embarrassed, yet relieved, I made my way to the back of the bus while the twins romped with friends in the front — we always pretended not to know each other on the bus.

School dragged by and I was constantly drifting off, watching the spiraling snow outside. I wasn't really bothered by my father's illness. I shrugged it off easily. We weren't close. I even disliked him a little. He was always so strict and cold. We were two of a kind, thick and stubborn, so we never got along. I didn't accept him and his authoritarian way of doing things, but tolerated and respected both because I had to. We had a kind of peaceful coexistence; at least, I kept my distance. Mom was nice; at least she was kind and treated you like a person, but Pop was a hard man — he was the boss. Being the oldest and the only girl, I was expected to assume a lot of responsibility at home, and I resented it — it was just unfair. Todd and Joey got away with murder, but not me.

The sky was already dimming when I got home. I didn't like the darkness of winter — in the morning leaving home it was black and already dark again by the time I got home in the late afternoon. Swelling gray snow clouds hung low in the sky as I walked from our bus stop to the house. I grabbed a handful of cookies from the kitchen and headed for the living room to soak up some television. I was startled by Pop, asleep in a chair in the living room, the paper in his lap, his fingertips resting along the edges. His breathing was heavy, almost labored, and deep wrinkles creased his relaxed face. They were not the small crowded wrinkles around the eyes and mouth carved by a smiling happy life, but long dark folds in his forehead and heavy sagging eyebrows that revealed a sad and very tired man. His jaw hung open exposing a limp fleshy tongue and small yellow teeth. I realized that I had not noticed that lately he had often dozed in the early evening. A sadness, even pity, filled me as I saw how age had worn him thin. He had always dominated everything and I had no sympathy for his
success, but now I almost cried for the age that was burdening him, dominating him. I had always seen him forceful, strong-willed, absolute; now he was frail and weak.

He grew weaker, more listless with each passing day. Mom was always trying to rally him, reassuring him and us, and herself. Worry carved wrinkles into her face too. I hadn't liked home before, but now I longed to go back to the security and stability of those normal days. I desperately wanted everything to go back to the way it was before this cold, sapping sickness.

The Thursday before Easter Vacation I was called out of my third period class. I felt hollow inside as I followed the secretary down to the school office. My aunt stood in the doorway, her eyes heavy with pity. "Your father ... he's had a serious heart attack." She clasped my hand and patted it solemnly. Carefully I withdrew it and turned to my brothers who had already been called down from the Junior High. Pale and rigid, they sat on the gaudy lounge chairs and we simply stared at each other. As the twins rose, my aunt put her arms around the three of us maternally and I resented her babying. In the car on the way to the hospital, she chattered endlessly. We sat silently in the back seat, stunned, numb.

Mom sat outside the intensive care unit, pressing her hands together as she did only on rare occasions. Her eyes were small and had the slightest hint of puffiness. "Are you O.K., Mom?" I offered clumsily.

"As well as could be hoped for." She smiled slightly, a mere twisting of her lips. We sat together and relaxed into a bit of conversation, then came back to the situation. She squeezed her knees and sighed, "He doesn't look very good and the doctors don't have much hope." Then she straightened up. "Come. You three must see him while you can."

I remember vividly walking into the intensive care unit, the sterile medicinal smell turned my stomach, and the slurping whoosh of tubes and machinery mesmerized me. I didn't even recognize Pop. His face was sallow and the almost transparent skin receded around the bones. His thin bluish lips were parted slightly and his breathing was slow and forced. A small tube taped up his nose made me swallow. A frightening twitch in the muscles of his closed eyes horrified me. Death was so ugly, so miserable, prolonged. I wanted to run and hide and scream, to be held in my mother's arms and told everything was all right. We stood for what seemed like hours, breathless, frightened, until a nurse came and shuffled us out.

I lay awake that night, numb, except for the thought of what a lonely man he was. He died the next day. I shivered from the guilt of having often wished him gone and now he was dreadful, endlessly gone. The wake and funeral were like living in a soap opera, people coming and going, face after face, coming to see a dead body on display in a box. I hated the tradition, the exposing display, his body puffed and powdered in a ghastly, artificial way.

The day of the funeral, the weather was bleak, undecided between winter and spring, and a chill rain fell, rain mixed with tears. The long line of cars snaked along the winding cemetery road. The silent wet-eyed group huddled around the open grave. The flag was removed from the coffin and presented to Mom, then the coffin was slowly lowered into the grave and it was over. The sweep of umbrellas bobbed as our parish priest read from Psalm Twenty-three. I didn't believe the words, they were just words. Death was fearful, terrifying, and nobody walked with you; you entered that grave alone in a box and that was it: there was no valley, just a gaping hole waiting at the end.

On Father's Day I went with Mom to visit his grave. It was the first time we had returned since the funeral. Pop's grave had caved in and I had a horrifying feeling of the reality of death. The funeral had been hard, but this cold sunken ground was agonizing. My mother cried soft emotional tears. I asked for her sorrow and cried too. That day and the funeral were the only times I had ever seen her cry.

Long after that I felt as empty and cold as the bleak grey tombstones, fearing death and regretting the dislike I had harbored against my father. As years pass and the past seems to fade, I sometimes think the scars have healed until, every now and then, time wounds all heals.