

Promise



The one thing my father had asked was to be scattered in that canal; now a light breeze was carrying his ashes as far as the nearest ailanthus. “My father!” I warned an approaching neighbor. “I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

This neighbor, a car salesman with whom my father had argued, lowered himself onto one knee, took up a fallen leaf and began scraping ashes back toward the urn.

“It’s not your family,” I pointed out.

“May I help you?” asked a third party. She wore a red velvet dress and party shoes. In fact this was the beautiful woman my father, watching from our window, had nicknamed Carmen. That Carmen isn’t anything like your mother, he’d say.

By now my father’s ashes were drifting into the street.

A car pulled over and three guys also from the neighborhood looked out. “Can we help you?” they asked. Actually these were guys my father had called *those good-for-nothing greasers*. An immigrant, he was proud to use such slang. With my mother gone, he could use it all he wanted. He could get drunk and talk about people all he wanted.

“You,” the beautiful woman emended. “I can’t stop myself,” she explained, “I’m a schoolteacher.”

“You ain’t a nun, are you?” one of the guys asked.

“Goodness, no, I teach public school.”

“How do you do, I’m Moe, this is Larry and Jonathan.”

Soon Moe was waving his big arms for cars to go around while Larry and Jonathan were gathering ashes onto the edges of a local paper. This paper was given away free in waist-high dispensers that had recently appeared. The world was changing again but my father wouldn’t be there to watch how or comment.

“He was a good man,” the car salesman abruptly said.

“No. Yes,” I agreed.

“He was a man of his times,” the schoolteacher suggested.

“I think he helped me get my car out once,” Moe said. “You remember that blizzard, Teacher?”

We all shook our heads, remembering the winter that refused to end, the April snow shower that turned into blizzard after blizzard. There were ashes then too, scattering across the snow so we wouldn’t slip. I suspected Moe of misremembering. Probably he had helped shovel out my father’s car, an old Buick hardly worth the trouble it caused.

“Here’s a tad,” a passerby said and flicked ash onto a sheet of newspaper.

“What now?” Moe asked.

“He asked that his remains be dumped in the Gowanus,” I told them all and placed the lid on the urn very carefully. The woman in the red dress adjusted her sateen shoulder strap. The car salesman began dusting off his knees, then stopped. Little bits of my father could very well have been clinging there.

“When I was a kid in nun school,” Larry said, “they taught us that the air we breathe is the same air Jesus breathed. It all gets recycled.”

“No wonder you have bad breath,” Jonathan told him.

“I tell you what,” Moe suggested, eyeing the schoolteacher, “we’ll escort you to your father’s final resting place.”

“Unfortunately I’m late for an appointment,” the car salesman said. He almost dusted off his knees again. I wondered if he was secretly glad about my father, who had never forgiven him for selling us that lemon.

I felt more comfortable talking about my father once the salesman had departed. Moe was walking in front and the schoolteacher walked next to him and the other guys and I watched them and the streets passing slowly into history. “My father never asked for handouts,” I said. “He came to this country a young man with a stolen passport. He often thought people were cheating him. He had no friends except my mother.”

They all shook their heads. Then Larry up and whacked me across the shoulder blades. “Hey!” I said. He’d meant it nicely, I knew, but the urn was sliding from my hands all over again.

“Friends,” the woman sighed and shrugged. Her black hair bounced as she moved along the sidewalk.

“You look nice in that dress,” Moe told her.

“Yes, but all people see is my physical beauty.”

“Shall we?” I asked because I could feel the rituals of life impinging on the rites of death. I wanted to tell them all something more about my father, but all I could think of was, after my mother left, my father used to shop. The more he drank the less he ate, but he still filled the shopping cart with snacks he thought I’d want: oatmeal cookies, bars of bittersweet chocolate, Dutch-apple yogurt. He would drag the shopping bags into his dimly lit bedroom and pore over every item on his receipt.

We walked on, a short cortège of strangers. People streamed out of the subway past the man who croons into his paper cup, “Girl, you must have been a rainbow.” Another man stood nodding. The neighborhood has changed, more young people have moved in, young people with money, but this listening man will still watch your tied-up dog for a quarter.

For a brief while my father worked at the veterinarian's clinic. He was the man who took the dogs away when they needed shots and brought them back the next day, or not at all. He cleaned their cages and made sure they were comfortable when they woke up, if they woke up. He'd always wanted me to succeed: I should go to school, become a veterinarian, what he would have been had things happened differently. I felt the blame in him and the lack of responsibility for his own behavior. I wondered how many animals he had personally put to sleep. Why was he always hollering about other people's cheating?

"I tripped," I explained to them all. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

"I think I remember your father too," the woman in red said abruptly. We were walking down Smith Street toward Second Avenue by now. "One day, when I couldn't get my car out, he stopped to help me, too. It was a long time ago, though."

"He was the guy who talked to the guy who watches dogs, right?" That was Moe.

I nodded. In fact, my father had stopped to talk with the dogs, some of whom he'd met in his brief professional life. He called the dog owners *putzes* and *losers*. He called our neighbor, the salesman, *that slimy bastard*, because he'd sold us the Buick. It was because of the Buick that my mother left us.

We'd reached Second Avenue and traveled beyond it toward the bank of the canal. A wild rose garden had prospered here in the days when fishes swam in from the sea. A subterranean propeller having recently whirred back to life, seawater once again flowed into the canal. But the sediment contained poisonous waste products and the water shone a strange shade of pink.

Nonetheless, all along the near bank, people were toiling

to replant the once famous garden. Even at this late hour, they pricked garbage onto long spears and dropped it into billowing garbage bags. These volunteers were also building a fence to discourage littering. There were, I saw, many used condoms on the ground; they reminded me of my earliest childhood when the mystery of such bright circles had not yet been revealed. My mother had not yet threatened to leave my father. She still believed he would stop accusing people and find a job.

I explained what my father wanted but the gardeners frowned. “Do you know how much garbage gets thrown here?” they demanded. “Not to mention raw sewage, all these years after we brought the matter to the city’s attention. The mayor just doesn’t care,” they insisted and shook their spears.

“My father never asked for anything,” I told them. “He liked animals better than people. I was unkind after my mother left. Perhaps you knew her—she used to love this place. She wanted the garden restored. But she didn’t like when people came here to do private things. She wasn’t understanding when it came to youth.”

“Youth,” the woman in the red dress sighed. She stood off to one side, looking beautiful.

“I tell you what,” the gardeners said finally. “You can throw in his ashes, but we won’t watch.”

“Thank you,” I said even as they’d turned their backs. My neighbors and I walked carefully around the newly tilled soil and little signs that read the names of plants and flowers and the dates of their planting. A shock of yellow iris brought me up short. “Were these growing here already or—?”

“A miracle,” someone joked. It was Moe, trying to get the woman in the red dress to smile.

“We thought they would look nice,” someone else explained without turning around. “We bought them at the Korean deli.”

I saw that the irises were actually cutoff flowers whose stems ended in pots decorated with colorful aluminum foil.

The sun was already setting. I'd promised to scatter my father's ashes within twenty-four hours of his cremation. Dying, he'd glared into my face as if daring me to break my word. He'd never wanted to talk about his childhood; if I was so curious, I could write to his sister in Jerusalem and she could tell me lies, lots of lies. The way he said it, I thought he was blaming history for our troubles, history and women. *An awful thing, he would whisper, my own neighbor.*

The past is the past, I'd venture. It was something my mother had once said.

The canal loomed. A duck floated down it. Farther north, toward First Street, a houseboat and another houseboat sat motionless against their moorings. I had last stood here with my mother, the day before she left. The air had tasted even then of snow.

The past is the past, Daphne, my mother said that day.

As if to prove her wrong, a large sign told us all about the past. Once upon a time, the sign said, the Gowanus Creek meant home to many species of birds and fish. Then the creek became a canal. Brownstone, transported on barges from New Jersey, was used to build nice neighborhoods such as Park Slope and Cobble Hill; lumber, fuel and cleaning products were manufactured. A tannery had stood on the opposite bank from where I now stood gazing. My mother, as it happens, had helped to make this informative sign possible. She had worked hard to disseminate facts about the canal and had even talked my father into a boat ride, funded as it was by volunteer groups and the borough of Brooklyn. My father wouldn't let me come but I could watch them shove off: they sat a little apart, their heads turned like tulips on the stems of their necks, away from each other.

The day she left us, my father decided to get his money back. My father said that lousy Buick didn't work from the day we bought it. Oil change, our neighbor said and smiled at my mother in a way I didn't like. *Adèle*, he called her. *What, what oil change?* my father shouted, *you can't fool me, Mister, in America a car runs on gas-o-line.* Suddenly snow was falling. My mother climbed in the car and began honking. Then somehow the windshield wipers got started, this way, that. She looked crazy as a bed, my father shouted. *Bedbug*, I told him later. The wipers stopped halfway and she got out and handed him the keys. *I'm sorry, Dellie*, the salesman said. Why did he call her that? You louse, my father said and swung his fist but it was snowing and he fell to his knees.

"I know a prayer," Larry said now and cleared his throat.

I didn't have the heart to explain about my father's atheism. It didn't matter, anyhow; Larry opened his mouth and shut it and shook his head like he had water in his ears. Moe stood gazing into the canal as if our futures lay in its not very profound depths or perhaps in the beautiful woman's vanishing reflection. The gardeners were growing restless. They had soil to mulch and flowers to weed. They had to attend a planning meeting and wouldn't get to go home and wash off until past dark.

I didn't meditate on my father's life as his ashes fell into the water. Instead I felt the confines of my own life like the narrowness of that canal. My mind swirled and eddied and flowed on to a place more like a sand bar. I wished I hadn't listened to my father quite so much. Perhaps Moe, Larry, and Jonathan would ride around as before; no doubt the teacher in the red dress would grow older; but something unexpected, something wonderful might also happen. For a moment even the great population explosion, as our childhood textbooks called it, seemed

such a happenstance. You had to think of us as one organism, the way trees or grass can be seen as one spread-out organism. Trees are only biding their time; grass is biding its time, spreading across the planet, seeding and going to seed. Each blade communicates without language with every other blade.

Wind stirred the reeds on the opposite bank. My father's ashes lay on the surface for a while, then, flowing south, began quickly to sink. The gardeners had begun once again to labor when the beautiful woman and the three guys and I turned west, toward where the sun sets, and began our own brief journeys home.