

Under the Wheel

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I didn't really know that I was going to do it until I did it. If anything, I thought I wouldn't. I actually had a whole speech written out, one I had let my mother see and which she had pronounced "generous" and "kind." What she *meant* was that she knew the whole thing was a complete crock but nevertheless thought highly of me for being willing to deliver it in public without laughing out loud. I got that. But what she didn't know was that I *also* had a different speech ready, one I hadn't shown anyone, one that wasn't written down anywhere at all. And *that* was the one I was going to find out if I was brave enough to deliver to a room full of people whom even at the tender age of sixteen I knew perfectly well were going to be mad as hell at me if I did. I am not by nature such a brave person. I tend to avoid confrontation. (I am an only child, after all.) And yet, mild-mannered West Village junior hipster that I was—this all happened back in eleventh grade when I was rarely without a copy either of *A Coney Island of the Mind* or *Leaves of Grass* in my backpack—I found myself in those couple of days before my father's funeral uncharacteristically unwilling to behave as expected.

On the big day, I woke up early. My mother walked uninvited into the bathroom while I was brushing my teeth and still deciding whether or not to shave to tell me that "my" people—my two aunts and one of their daughters—were already in the living room and that, because they had come to support me, I was to be grateful and polite. My dad's people, presumably, were gathering elsewhere. Probably, they were nearby...but I had no idea where or, for that matter, who they might actually be given that my dad had no true friends. That, he had told me many times. And he had no family either, he used to say, except for me. I was blood. I was bone. I was his flesh. My mother was none of the above, of course. That, in and of itself, can hardly come as a surprise—they never married, never lived together, never even really dated and were so little part of each other's lives that my mom managed to be pregnant for nine months and then produce a child without him even noticing her swollen belly or,

eventually at least, its absence. So it's not like he and my mom were an item or anything. The truth is that they barely knew each other.

Interestingly, though, Lizi was apparently *also* not any of the above. And her, he actually did live with and actually was sort-of married to—in the eyes of God, he once told me, if not quite in the eyes of New York State. (How he could imagine himself married in the eyes of God without actually believing in God, he didn't explain. Nor will he now, obviously.) I can't remember what I exactly thought of the whole bone and blood thing when I was ten or eleven, but later on, when he would put his hands on my shoulders and tell me that I was his "entire family" and that there was no one else who was "of his flesh" alive in the world, I always wondered if Lizi knew that my dad had an entire family and she wasn't it or part of it. I don't believe it ever dawned on me to wonder if he was telling her the same thing, let alone any of her kids.

Mom finally left me alone to get dressed, but the rest of that part of the morning is a blur to me now. I didn't shave—I remember that clearly—and I must have eaten something...and then, suddenly, there we were at Levenstein's. For a long time, we were in some sort of fancy sitting room. My dad's people, mostly musicians and assorted hangers-on of various sorts, huddled on the side of the room with the casket and kept asking when the lid would be raised. This question they repeatedly put to the guy from Levenstein's who was serving as whatever they call maître d's in funeral homes, but he punted to Alan Benson, my dad's lawyer, who punted to me. As my dad's sole living relative, it was, he said, my call. (Later, when I actually read my dad's will I learned that he had specifically excluded Lizi from any decision-making role "should I die." I didn't know what to make of that then and I still don't. Not really!)

At any rate, I accepted my role graciously, asking only for a few minutes to consult with Mr. Dukakis, my English teacher and spiritual advisor (it was Mr. Dukakis who first introduced me both to Ferlinghetti and Whitman), and the sole person from school actually to show up at the funeral. Taking me aside into a kind of office down the hall a few feet, he told me to keep the box—that's actually what he called it, the "box"—to keep the lid down and the box closed. So that is what I told Mr. Benson we'd do and that, semi-amazingly, is what we actually did. I was relieved and, although some of my dad's people seemed to feel that they were being unduly penalized by not being granted a peek, I stuck to my guns and declined to revisit my decision. Mr. Dukakis had specifically predicted that I'd be bullied—or that some people would attempt to bully me—on the matter, but told me just to hold firm. No raised lid. No peeks. Jews, Mr. Dukakis said—he later surprised me with the news that only his

father was Greek but that his mother was a Jew from East New York—Mr. Dukakis said that Jews commune with the dead through the medium of memory, not by looking at them. I liked that idea...and eventually people just stopped asking.

We were in the room for a while when things began to pick up. The rent-a-rabbi showed up. He seemed nice enough, but he really perked up when I told him that I myself was going to deliver the eulogy and that he therefore wasn't going to have to cobble something together at the last minute. (For what it's worth, he appeared to have no idea who my dad was or why there were reporters from the Times and CNN in the lobby.) And he really didn't need to speak—I was going to give either my written or my unwritten eulogy, but Alan Duchênes, the head of Lincoln Center, and Brian Dirk, the New Yorker music critic guy, were going to speak first. Then it was going to be my turn. And then—this part no one knew yet—then, if he showed up and was able to slip into the building without starting a riot, Yo Yo Ma was going to speak and, possibly, play something from one of the Bach cello suites in my dad's memory. To wrap up, two of my father's students were going to say something, probably the exactly same thing, about studying under him and that was going to be that!

Where Mr. Ma was, I had no idea. But the others were in place. The students—two of them, both in their twenties, both Julliard types—looked dazed. Dirk looked stressed and unhappy; Duchênes looked ridiculous (in my opinion, at least) in his dark purple velvet blazer, white shirt (no tie), and grey slacks. Only I myself seemed fully to be bearing the weight of my father's death; even my mother looked confused, something like an actor who somehow wandered onto the stage in the wrong theater and was trying to improvise lines without knowing the actual plot of the play unfolding around her. Lizi, to her credit, did look sad...or at least sad-ish. (She also had the most to lose by my father's death, and by far.) Her kids, three girls I hadn't ever actually met, looked angry about something. Needless to say, the place was packed.

The service unfolded along the pre-organized lines. The rabbi read some very long prayer in Hebrew and English, then introduced the various speakers. Duchênes spoke first. Then, while he was stepping down off the podium and Dirk was coming forward, one of the guys from Levenstein's came up to me and whispered in my ear that Mr. Ma had arrived and that he had his cello with him. I was, I guess, pleased. But then Dirk finished—he basically said exactly what Duchênes had said, only with even less emotion—and it was my turn.

Suddenly, I felt a little queasy. I had an easy turn-off from my chosen route: the pre-approved eulogy was in my jacket pocket just waiting to be read. Even as I walked to the podium, I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I felt queasy, but also emboldened by...by

something. Maybe it was the actual presence of my father's casket, or maybe it was the unbelievable number of TV trucks and other sorts of media vans I had seen in the street through the greasy window in the men's room that I had visited eighteen times before the funeral actually began. But whatever it was, I felt myself outside the action in a way I think I had read about somewhere but hadn't ever experienced: I could almost see myself walking down the center aisle, purposefully unshaven and looking, I hoped, suitably somber in my black corduroy jacket, black t-shirt, and black jeans. I was even wearing black boxers...but, of course, no one but myself could have known that.

I took my place at the podium. The room, as noted, was packed to overflowing. For show, I took the printed-out eulogy from my inside jacket pocket and dramatically, I thought, unfolded it and smoothed it with the heel of my right hand. And then I looked up, just as Mr. Dukakis had suggested, at the crowd. Then I looked down at the casket. Then up again, this time at my mother. Then down again at the "box," imagining (Mr. Dukakis hadn't suggested this part) my father's lifeless body just a few inches beneath the mahogany lid. In my mind's crazy eye, I think I imagined him winking at me, urging me forward, telling me to be a man, to speak the truth.

I looked up at the crowd one final time, then pretended to look down at my text. "My father," I began, I hoped, forthrightly, "was one of the world's greatest cellists, but he was also a drug addict." That certainly got the room's attention. You could have heard a pin drop. I felt encouraged as I waded further into the swamp of my own devising.

"So far both our speakers have dismissed his death as an accident because he wasn't specifically planning to kill himself last Thursday," I said. "But that's not exactly the whole story. What he did last Thursday *before* he died is part of it too: his regular guy being temporarily incarcerated on Riker's Island and therefore unable to conduct business as usual, my dad chose to improvise, scoring some low-grade dope from a guy on Avenue C he didn't really know and had no real reason to trust. And then he went home to inject it into his veins anyway. Did he know he was about to die? I'm sure not. But my dad wasn't a fool...and he certainly wasn't crazy. He made a decision, and if you all want to honor him today then you have also to honor that decision...his decision that being here for me, for any of you, for Lizi or her kids, for my mom, for his students, for his handlers at Sony...for any of us...being here *at all* was less important than getting high. And so he rolled the dice...not accidentally as Mr. Duchênes politely said but fully aware of what could easily happen. What was likely to happen. What, in fact, actually did happen. He shot poison into himself and, as poison does, it killed him."

Someone in the back of the room coughed, but it was otherwise totally still. I felt a sudden chill creeping over me. I still could have turned off and somehow segued into my prepared text, but now I really couldn't see the exit ramp at all clearly so I just kept on driving straight ahead. As I was speaking, it suddenly struck me to wonder how exactly I knew that Nick, my dad's dope-buddy, had been telling me the truth when he told me the whole story of my dad's death, a story he also told me that he was specifically *not* planning to share with the police. For a moment, I felt a wave of serious doubt wash over me. But then I recalled how kind Nick had been to me—he had actually hugged me and told me he would always be my friend, just as he had been my dad's—and I willed myself to dismiss even the possibility that he had been anything but fully honest with me as he told me details I could only ever have heard from him personally.

"So we have two options, basically," I continued. "We can say that he was a wonderful dad who always put his kid first and who accidentally killed himself. Or we can say that he was a dad who put his kid—and the rest of the world—second, right after his love of getting high. Oh, I know you're not supposed to think that. It's a disease! That's the ticket! He wasn't just someone who paid with his life for making a really stupid, bad decision, for taking a chance that he was plenty smart enough to know could lead directly to where it actually did lead. He was sick! Drug addiction isn't a choice, after all...it's a *condition*. He couldn't have helped himself even if he had wanted to. He didn't really kill himself anyway, did he? The heroin, or whatever crap was in that syringe, that's what killed him. He wasn't a suicide, therefore—he was a victim, a poor little guy who was gunned down in cold blood by...by whom exactly? By the guy who sold him? By the people in rehab who failed to wean him off his drug of choice? Or maybe by the cops who haven't yet managed to make Manhattan a poison-drug-free zone! But if not any of the above...then who? Or maybe "what" would be better than "who." The syringe killed him! The needle killed him! The universe killed him! Something killed him!"

I was about to vomit, but I kept on speaking...propelled by some demon that I knew wasn't going to let me go until I was done. I could almost feel Mr. Dukakis putting his hand on my shoulder and telling me to finish what I had begun. Like a man.

"But none of that is true, is it?" I actually looked up to see if anyone was going to answer, which it would have been insane if anyone did. And then I looked down again and continued, after making believe I had found my place. "If my dad had put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger, no one would call it an accident just because guns sometimes misfire so he could conceivably also not have died. And that's exactly what happened here. He put a

gun to his head, figured it probably wouldn't kill him even though he knew perfectly well what happens to addicts who shoot garbage they buy from strangers into their veins. And so he died. Not willingly or intentionally, perhaps. But at his own hand and only because he cared for all of us too little to worry about the possible consequences of his actions."

And now for my big finish. "I won't be saying Kaddish for my dad. And I won't be attending his burial either. After I'm done here, I'm going back to school. I suppose I'll eventually need some therapist to help me figure this all out. But for the moment, all I have is a broken heart and a dad who was too self-absorbed to put anyone else's needs above his own need to get high. And now, it is my pleasure to introduce you all to one of my dad's best friends and most highly esteemed colleagues, Mr. Yo Yo Ma, who is going to play a little something in my dad's memory."

There was a collective gasp in the room, but I couldn't tell if it was in response to my eulogy or to the surprise visit of a first-tier celebrity like Mr. Ma. I had met him a few times over the years, but even I was surprised when he actually appeared in the doorway, cello and bow in hand, and came forward. He was supposed to say a few words about my dad, but instead he just sat down on the chair that had been provided for him and began to play the Sarabande from Bach's Suite in C minor for unaccompanied cello. It was gorgeous, actually. I was entranced. Everybody was entranced. Years later when he played the same piece on the first anniversary of 9/11 as they read out all the names of the people who died, I felt like it was some sort of memorial to my dad as well. But that thought, of course, was years in the future when I was first listening to Mr. Ma play at my dad's funeral in the chapel at Levenstein's.

The students were up next. They spoke briefly, but I wasn't listening and don't have any clear recollection of what they said. Then the rabbi chanted something and it was all over. I suppose I probably should have gone to the cemetery with Lizi and my mom and the others, but I just didn't have it in me to care. No one spoke to me, not even Paul Duchênes or Yo Yo Ma. I suppose I had forfeited the right to any words of heartfelt condolence, but it still surprised me that no one felt obliged at the very least to congratulate me for my honesty. I waited for a few minutes in front, then I retrieved my knapsack from the coat check, went out the front door, and walked to school.

Mr. Dukakis, who had slipped out right after I was done speaking, was waiting for me when I arrived and together we walked down the corridor towards my locker. (I had about ten minutes before gym, my least favorite class of the week.)

"So how do you feel?" He actually turned to look at me.

“Okay, I guess,” I said tentatively, not sounding even to myself like I meant it.

“Are you proud that you spoke honestly?”

“Not so much. All I did really was to dump on my father at his own funeral, which most people would think of as an example of precisely the kind of self-absorbed behavior I so eloquently attributed to my dad.”

“That’s not entirely fair, Jack. You didn’t tell any lies at all about his death or about his life. Everyone else did, but you didn’t.”

“Mr. Ma didn’t either,” I said softly. “But only because he didn’t say anything at all.”

And then the bell rang and I went to gym class, which was the usual complete waste of time. I went right home after, but they were all still at the cemetery—it was going to take hours to drive all the way out to Farmingdale and then to get back—and I had the place to myself. I felt more numb than anything else. I spoke the truth, but it didn’t feel anywhere near as virtuous in the remembering as it had in the planning. I hadn’t wanted to speak ill of my dad, only to be honest. Wasn’t he the one who was always telling me to be honest, that the only way to be a great musician—and he truly was a great musician—that the only real way to be a great musician is to play honestly, to play straight from the heart? So that was what I was doing, I guess, or trying to do. But it didn’t feel right or good. If anything, I felt cheap and stupid, like I had somehow fallen into a hole that I had dug myself without realizing what I was doing, without understanding what the consequences of digging that particular hole might conceivably be.

The weeks passed quickly. My mom and I somehow managed not to discuss the funeral even one single time. I saw Lizi in a supermarket on Seventh Avenue once, but she made believe she didn’t see me and I wasn’t up to confronting her. (And besides...what exactly was I going to confront her about?) I went to school. I kept up with my schoolwork. Mr. Benson helped me through the details concerning my dad’s estate, including the sale of his super-valuable 1720 cello. Lizi was in the will, of course, as were her kids. My mom got a small gift, enough to make her grateful but not to change her life. I myself inherited a fortune—by the time I was done paying all his bills and authorizing Mr. Benson to send checks to the other beneficiaries, I got the almost two million bucks that was left in the estate, which I invested in some mutual fund Mr. Dukakis recommended. Other than knowing I was super rich, though, my life didn’t change much. I went to school. I did my homework. I read *Leaves of Grass* for the eight-thousandth time. I was a freak, I guess. But I was a really rich one and

that kept me from being made too much fun of by anyone at school. Or anyone else, for that matter. Plus you get a lot of pity credit when your dad dies and you're only in eleventh grade.

In July, Mom rented a cabin in the Catskills in a place called Swan Lake. It was quiet and peaceful, but I was antsy and ill at ease. I read a lot that summer, including for the very first time both *Journey to the East* and *Under the Wheel*. (My obsession with Hesse, just beginning around the time of my dad's death, continued well into college and even beyond; even today I can feel the influence of his books on me in certain specific ways.) I was, as noted, rich as Croesus—my dad liked that expression, by the way, and used it all the time, always making me think of the creases in the folded bills in his wallet—but all my money was invested away and we ourselves continued to live as we always had. It was a quiet summer. Mom worked on her watercolors. I smoked the occasional Marlboro down by the lake but otherwise kept my nose clean and devoted myself to my books and, occasionally, to helping with the laundry or other chores.

I thought about my dad now and then, but mostly when my mother put one of his CDs on and I could hear the music filling the cabin and flowing out the windows into the world. But then one night I was down by the lake smoking and thinking about Hans Giebenrath, the hero (so to speak) of *Under the Wheel* who gets kicked out of school when he starts screwing up under the influence of his malign friend, Hermann Heilner. He has no friends. He's lonely, disconnected, isolated. His family's solution is to get him apprenticed to a blacksmith so he can learn a trade, but all he really wants is a friend to talk to, to hang out with, to listen to him. It's a really, really powerful book with a terrible ending. Years later, when I was a senior in college, I actually re-read the book in the original German. But this was when I was still in high school and college was still a few years off. So there I was, just sort of standing there in the dark, smoking, looking out at the lake and up at the stars. I was feeling lonesome, I guess. Mom had said I could have invited a friend to come along, but I hadn't taken her up on it...and now I was sorry I hadn't.

I considered for the first time what it really meant that I had no brothers or sisters, and no dad. I had a mother, of course, but she and I were increasingly on different pages about...everything. She loved me, of course. I really did know that, but standing there in the dark smoking and watching the occasional shooting star I suddenly felt alone, fatherless, friendless. And I felt something else too, something draped over me like a kind of unwanted cloak: embarrassment that I had spoken so shamelessly about my dad at his funeral, that I had outed him in public and in front of his stepdaughters as a drug addict and, even worse, that I had accused him of loving me less than he loved getting high. It was weird how little

blowback I got for that speech—my mom never mentioned it, Lizi was completely gone from my life, Mr. Dukakis thought I had behaved admirably, and none of my friends from school had been there to react one way or the other. But now that I thought about it carefully, I felt truly ashamed of myself.

And then, completely unexpected (and totally uncharacteristically), I began to cry. Not to whimper either, but to cry like a big baby with big salty-tasting tears flowing down over my face. It felt as though some sort of gate had been opened that I was powerless to close as I sobbed quietly, not wanting my mom up in the house to hear. But it wouldn't stop...and as I cried I felt the loneliness enveloping me and making me as cold as my face was wet.

For the first time, I truly missed my dad, narcissistic crazy person that he was and all, and really couldn't imagine living on in the world without him. I heard myself praying for him to rest in peace, something I hadn't ever dreamt of doing, something I don't remember even *considering* doing. Once I started, I couldn't stop either...I wasn't even sure whom I was praying to, but I couldn't stop this deep wave of emotion from seizing control and making me—and trust me, I know how weird this is going to sound—from making me into this huge flesh-and-blood prayer for my dad's safety, for his peace, for his repose. I liked to think sometimes that he was in heaven playing duets with Casals or Jacqueline Du Pré, which fantasy I somehow found soothing even though I didn't really have it in me to believe in heaven. I certainly didn't believe in God. But it wasn't even as though I was praying, not really—it was really more of me myself being the prayer, being this vehicle of...of yearning, of this deep wish for his safe passage from this horrible world of lonely boys and dead dads to whatever there is on the other side. I know how crazy that sounds now, I really do. But it was totally real then and didn't feel at all like a dream or *just* some ridiculous fantasy.

Eventually, I calmed down. I smoked my last cigarette. I dried my eyes and my face with the bottom part of my t-shirt. I looked out at the lake one last time and stared into the darkness, then went back to the house.

I said something to my mother, then brushed my teeth and went right to bed. I fell asleep instantly, exhausted from that whole weird scene down by the lake. And then it was morning and the room was filled with light. If I had had any dreams, I didn't remember them. I pulled my boxers on and went for some reason to stand by the window and look out at the lake. And there, in the middle of the lake in the clear light of morning, I saw my dad. He was dressed in his normal khakis and this bottle-green flannel shirt I remember him wearing all the time. He wasn't doing anything, just standing on the lake, hovering over the surface of the water. I rubbed my eyes, thinking I was probably just dreaming that I was

awake. But I somehow knew that wasn't true, that I was fully awake in a way I don't believe I had ever experienced before or have ever experienced since, fully *there* in the moment in a way that the word "there" doesn't even begin to describe adequately.

For a long time, nothing happened. I felt myself filled with regret so real it was almost palpable, with love for my father and anger at my father and, finally, a kind of acceptance I hadn't ever imagined I could bring to the contemplation of my father's story and particularly the story of his stupid, selfish death. For a long moment, I just stood there as the sea of seething emotions in my heart slowly calmed and, for the first time since I skipped going to the cemetery, let me be. And then my dad raised his arm to me in a gesture of reconciliation I hadn't really earned and certainly didn't deserve...and then he was gone forever from the world, never to return.