Man Shrinking

Published by

Rickel, Boyer.
Taboo.
University of Wisconsin Press, 1999.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/8796.

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Man Shrinking

I discovered one afternoon in 1963, two years after my parents' divorce, that a man could shrink. That night my father lay on his side in bed, snoring so loudly it did no good for me to sleep in the living room, a closed door between us, with a pillow over my head. The terrible human ripping sounds, the bellowing gurgles and choking gasps, penetrated walls and doors with ease. It did no good, even, to drag my blankets onto the front porch. I sat curled in a heap on the concrete slab, my back to the door, a sheet wrapped around my shoulders, to await sunrise. At one point, standing in the damp grass, I actually placed my hand on the glass of my father's bedroom window to see if it didn't vibrate.

It was Saturday night in a section of town given over to apartments for college students, young married couples, and bachelors. I counted each car slowing to a stop—someone home late from a party or bar, footsteps along one of the eight parallel curb-to-front-door concrete sidewalks on the block, the slap of a front-door screen—I counted each of these faceless human diversions from my sleeplessness a blessing, a tiny story to break up the monotony. And off and on, I considered the new possibility of a man shrinking.

My father's one-bedroom apartment was within walking distance of the college music building where he taught piano. One side of a duplex, it had tan linoleum tile floors and speckled tan tile on the kitchen and bathroom counters, which I'd scrub each Saturday as I cleaned the place—my visits a means, I understand now, of maintaining our domestic connection following the divorce.
Though utterly ordinary, much about the ritual remains vivid: beside his bed and bathroom sink the lacquered reed wastebaskets that I emptied, the swirl of pinks in the low marble coffee table that I dusted, and the gray German reel-to-reel we’d set between the couch and reading chair so we could listen after lunch to music from his extensive collection of tapes. Lunch was usually something simple that I could prepare—crackers with sliced apples, bananas, and cheese, or tuna sandwiches with glasses of milk. I enjoyed arranging our portions on the plates, as well as the plates and glasses and silverware on the table, in patterns that were pleasing.

This particular Saturday, as on several others, he placed, every four hours, a tiny green tablet under his tongue to ease the pain of a migraine. And in the afternoon, while I read in the living room, he lay down to rest.

He called me into his room after only an hour, oddly buoyant in his pale blue boxers and white undershirt, hair flattened on one side of his head. Stretching out full-length, he insisted I measure him, right there on the bed, head to foot. Four years from my own driver’s license, I’d studied his often, the deadening photograph and official numbers and seals the true ticket, I thought, to adulthood. Under height his read 5’11”. I knew this and the other bits of information—middle name (Pooler), birthdate (5/3/14), and so forth—by heart. So when the tape came to sixty-nine inches, only five-foot-nine, I suggested he get out of bed and stand next to a wall.

“I must be shrinking,” he said. “It happens to men as they get older.” (He was only forty-nine.) “My father was once almost six feet tall.”

I couldn’t believe it, not about my diminutive Gramps, who, when he barbecued, like a sweet, bald, leathered girl, enjoyed, after one too many Schlitz beers, raising the hem of his white apron to perform a little can-can. The Gramps I knew, with hunched shoulders and drooping eyelids, couldn’t be much above five-foot-six now.

Growing in bursts, all legs, knobbed knees, and lank, unrectract-
able arms, I found this possibility, that a man could shrink, more than unsettling; I was for a few days close to paralyzed mentally, obsessed with the thought that my father from here on in would become less and less, that someday this would happen to me.

Nearly thirty years have passed since those Saturdays I spent with my father in his bachelor apartment. Remarried shortly before I entered college, he suffered a stroke a year later, in 1970. Through intensive therapy and the dedication of his new wife, he appeared to recover almost completely. His voice, after several weeks of stumbling over common words, grew full and confident again. He continued his teaching and maintained his usual activities, though he no longer gave recitals. Only in his bearing, a leaning to the left to compensate for weakened muscles along that side, a bias that increased by increments over the years, could you see the stroke's effects.

Then in 1989, age seventy-five, he took a fall on a walk in the neighborhood; and then he took another some months later, in his home, when my stepmother was away for the afternoon. Though he broke no bones, he lay on his side, trapped by the weight of the weaker left leg atop the right, unable even to crawl to a phone. In the months that followed, he grew more frail, moving from a hardwood cane to an aluminum-frame walker. At present, wheelchair-bound, he must be attended much of the time. No longer able to stand on his own, he wears a small emergency button on a chain around his neck in case he slips out of the wheelchair or out of bed when he's alone.

And so it was that I drove two hours one recent Saturday morning—from my home in Tucson to Tempe—to care for my father, to spend the day with him; this would enable Carol, my
stepmother, to leave their house at dawn for a hike in the Superstition Mountains near Phoenix.

Upon my arrival, but before unlocking the door off their covered driveway, I reviewed Carol's written instructions—a step-by-step explanation of how to get my father from bed to shower, how to bathe and then dress him, how to prepare his ritual breakfast. I was determined to remember what needed to be done; the idea of consulting her notes in front of him struck me as vaguely shameful, as though taking care of my father were something like following a recipe.

He lay on his side, facing the door, eyes like tiny lights in the darkened room as I entered. "So how's my boy," he said, toothless, through sunken lips. (Getting his teeth in would be one of our first priorities.)

I have spent the last several months puzzling over the power of those few words: "So how's my boy." After hearing them, I felt changed, changed into someone I had not been for a very long time. Much about the day that had worried me—bathing my father, for example—became simplified.

My father's full height is now about four feet. He's so stooped, so utterly curled over on himself, that when he stands, grasping someone's arm or a walker for support, he must cock his head painfully to one side like a bird to speak to other standing adults.

But there was no strangeness in stripping down together, in guiding him by the arm into the special shower; no strangeness in running the cloth, soggy with soap, through the ripples of his flesh, his breasts hanging down over his chest; no strangeness in soaping his penis and scrotum and the crack of his ass as he gripped the metal wall-bars for balance. It was not like bathing a baby; it was not another example of an often-noted irony—the parent becoming the child, the child the parent.

He had called me in a special way with those words, rising
from his curled form the moment I walked through the bedroom
door; he had called me by an earlier name, a child-name—the one
who took pleasure serving.

After the bath, after rubbing lotion on his legs and hips, helping
him slip on socks and sweats and a pale blue polo shirt, and
then dressing myself, I made breakfast for us, boiling water for cof­
fee, quartering cantaloupe, while he explained from his wheelchair
exactly how he wanted each item prepared: half a cup of skim milk
stirred four or five times into the steaming instant oatmeal, and
orange juice just to the point he noted with his left index finger,
two inches from the rim. It was all a pleasure, this getting things
right. Being the son had not been for almost thirty years so
unthreatening.

For me and many of my middle-aged friends, parents calling
our child-names, or those names rising up within us spontaneously,
is one of the complications of returning to our childhood homes.
We spend half our lives, it seems, getting our parents to honor our
adult selves—an effort running parallel to the long process of our
coming to believe those selves do in fact exist. Bristling when they
attempt to help in our decisions, we ask ourselves in secret: But
when do I grow up? When do I take command in the way my par­
ents did when I was a kid? (Increasingly, I’ve come to wonder if my
parents’ self-possession wasn’t simply a child’s fantasy, fulfilling my
need for security.)

Since leaving home for college, how many Christmas dinners
at my mother’s have I thought I heard the impossible opposition of
my child and adult names being used simultaneously. Year after
year, as we slice the tomatoes, break lettuce for the salad, decide on
tablecloths and napkins and how to arrange the chairs, as we negoti­
ate these simple tasks (negotiations I can undertake effortlessly with
friends), my child and my adult seem to get all confused. I grow stu­
pidly angry if told what to do or if a decision doesn’t go my way.
Who do you think I am? I want to demand. And then, to myself,
Who am I? To my mother, of course, how could I be anything but both child and adult—I am her child still, after all.

Following breakfast on this Saturday with my father, I rolled him from the kitchen to the living room. Having locked the wheels of his chair in place and nudged the footrests to the sides, he planted his feet on the carpet, gripped the armrests, and scooted forward on his rump to the seat’s edge. Then, standing behind him, I lifted from the armpits as he used the strength in his legs and arms to push himself upward. Turning slowly to face me, he fell gently back, settling with a humph and a snort of laughter into the overstuffed reclining chair next to the couch.

Throughout the day we took turns listening and conversing, each of us having saved up something special to share with the other. I played the tape of my recent poetry reading, Dad concentrating on the photocopied texts of poems he held on his lap, smiling now and then, eyes narrowing, sometimes pursing his lips, eyebrows rising each time he licked his finger to turn a page. I didn’t hear a word of the tape, I was so taken up by the changes in his face.

Late in the afternoon, shortly before my return drive to Tucson, he read me a new favorite essay he had found, a dazzling meditation by Lance Morrow on the meaning of home. In it, Morrow writes:

Creation is an onion with many skins all layering outward from the child’s self. If he gets lost in the galaxy, he can find the way back, can fly through the concentric circles to his own house—from outermost remoteness to innermost home. Nostalgia means the nostos algos, the agony to return home.

After a silent moment at the essay’s conclusion, I asked him to please read it again—not to hear the words so much as to hold on to a new feeling, a feeling I could not at that moment name: beside the father, the child and son and man all in one.