

***From A Piece of Sky, A Grain of Rice: A Memoir in Four Meditations:***

When our together-tattooing actually begins, B is, by his choice, first up in Lefty's chair. Seeing him there causes me to reflect on how fundamentally grotesque it is to choose self-mutilation as a gift—and to have it inflicted by a stranger in a public setting while a family member watches.

The atmosphere in the tattoo parlor is a cross between the chilly sterility of a dentist's office—the antiseptic wipes, the latex gloves, the tipped-back, incapacitating chair—and a grunge hair salon in some trendy downtown location—the exposed ductwork, the uninhibited displays of narcissism. In either setting people pay for the privilege of undergoing a tedious, uncomfortable process while outsiders view the body and the procedures altering it dispassionately, and any emotions provoked by the body's vulnerability invite humiliation.

B, at sixteen, much concerned with being a man, finds himself in this awkward position in front of his mother.

I have no idea how to do this right.

Who is it You need me to be?

I last saw my mother alive late in the afternoon on New Year's Day, 2000. She lay propped up in a lounge chair alongside her hospital bed. She'd just undergone surgery for a broken leg, a pin now inserted into the crumbling bone above her knee. She had congestive heart

failure, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, arthritis, gout and more. She was wan and vague. She'd been rambling on about her father and my father; she called each of them "Daddy" interchangeably. The gist seemed to be that both of them mystified her. Both of them she'd tried "no end"—her word—to please. Both of them had bullied her and, I believe, abused her, and at the end of her life she didn't know why.

My question to her had been, "What do you remember best?" I'd wanted her sweetest memories, and I got one. A pair of shoes, green suede and high-heeled, with a wide strap and a large button, that her mother had given her the money to buy, so she could be special, stand out, at some event, some ordinary school or church social. "She always had a little bit of money," my mother said of her mother, "and she gave it to me so I could get some of the things I wanted."

My mother had done that for me, all my life, even after I slammed out of her house and stayed gone from her life for years. The clarity with which I recollected this was piercing.

I lay my head on her chest, partly the penitent child returning and partly in humble respect for her old, exhausted heart. For the first time in decades, what she said provoked my tears, and she didn't want them. In a flash of her old, bitter strength, she commanded me, "Don't cry." Violating her chosen terms at the very end of her days seemed inconceivable; our relationship had, after all, always been her way or no way. I sat up and took her hands and held them. She changed the subject. Later I held her hands again, cutting her nails and filing them smooth.

"That feels so good," she told me. "They'd gotten awful long, and nobody sees."

I had dinner plans with my childhood friend Margaret, who would drive me to the airport. My job, my children, my writing, my diligent life awaited me in Tampa. When the hospital's

automatic doors parted to let me out into a cold, flat dusk, the dregs of a day on which the millennium had turned, what surprised me was what I didn't feel. The frozen ground was dry, the sky empty.

In my mind's eye now, that moment is framed as I was. In a doorway. Me walking away from You.

What could I, what should I have done to stop your hurting?

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B lies shirtless on his stomach in the fully-flattened adjustable chair. He is goose-fleshed. Gray-fleshed. Concentration gels his expression as Lefty gets started. Swabbing the skin clean, applying by transfer the drawing of the tattoo. Pulling on new gloves, loading the gun with fresh needles and ink. The buzzing commences. When he outlines, Lefty explains, he needles deep to make a dark, clean edge, the sensation, he warns, like a fingernail drawn firmly across a bad sunburn. After that, when he fills in, the strokes will be shallower, quicker, less stinging.

I try to do what I think I'm supposed to do: offer B support but avoid embarrassing him. I attempt chitchat, sometimes with Lefty, sometimes with B, alternating a tone of nonchalance with one of calm concern I developed while jollyng my pre-schoolers through immunizations and dental procedures.

"Are you cold?" I ask my son. He shakes his head tersely. "You want a soda?" Yeah, he does. I pop the tab and place the can in his hand.

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At ninety-six, my father landed in the same hospital where my mother died almost four years earlier, but death wouldn't take him. The doctor assigned his case—having pronounced the patient had seventy-two hours to live, and having acquiesced to my sister Sara's and my instruction to withdraw all but palliative care—renege on his promise. He ordered an IV inserted to rehydrate a man taking too long to die because he was a tough old bird expiring of natural causes only. His immune system was failing, as well as all his organs, and he had a bladder infection from the catheter he'd worn for the last year or so, as an enlarged prostate slowly shut off his plumbing. The doctor put him on antibiotics, which he could not swallow.

He was miserable. He was disoriented. "Sometimes I don't know who I am," he told me, stating a simple fact.

When he was lucid, as he often was during the months preceding that hospital stay—me calling him dutifully every Sunday from Florida, sick myself with dread for the dead-end hopelessness of it, and him calling me anytime I came up in his squirrely mind at a moment he could find my phone number and get his fingers to cooperate in punching the right buttons, no matter the hour of day or night—he asked again and again in a way that seemed not the least bit rhetorical, "How do I do it?" He meant, How do I die? He was ready to go. Worn out with suffering and loneliness but still a man of prodigious will, he could not figure out why it was so damn hard to get across the threshold from alive to dead.

That day I visited him in the hospital he was not lucid. But he was calm. And in this mysteriously blessed interval of not-suffering from the thrashing and the psychosis the

rehydration set off in his body and brain, he cheerfully stepped from admitting confusion about his own identity to a child-like attempt to guess mine.

“Are you my sister?”

“No.”

“Sara is my mother?” he ventured, his tone so guileless it felt playful.

It seems pointless and unkind to explain to You your mistakes. I sit with You, Daddy, instead, inside the uneasy peace of your not-knowing who You are and my not-trying to fix that.