

A short week in August

NANCY HENESON

On a morning in early August, my father was eating breakfast and reading the paper. A local story about an elderly man advertising for a wife struck my father as unusually funny, and he called my mother into the kitchen to share the laugh.

“Listen to this,” he said. “This eighty-six year old guy has a sign in front of his house that says ‘Wife wanted. Inquire within.’ How meshugge can you get?” He was laughing, and my mother joined him. Between them such synchrony of mood was rare. Which is why my mother can be forgiven for thinking my father was mocking her own assorted ills when, in the midst of their laughter, he clutched his chest, then his abdomen, and then told her that the pain was unbearable and he could not move his legs.

My mother hesitated only a moment. Then she called 911, held my father’s hand in the ambulance, snuck behind the curtain where he was receiving emergency treatment, telephoned her children, and then went to the hospital cafeteria, where she sat, dazed and dithering and drinking a Coke, until I arrived.

She handed me an old envelope. On the back of it someone from the emergency team had written the words “dissecting aortic aneurysm.” They had written it down for her, but she did not and could not understand. Five days later, when my father died, my mother still did not comprehend the physical event that had killed him. I, on the other hand, learned all that I could. That is a difference between us; that is how I am made.

Tunica intima. Tunica media. Adventitia. How soothing the sounds of the medical liturgy. The ripping pain my father felt was literal. The intima, the innermost lining of his aorta, had torn. Heart’s blood surged through the tear, stripping the artery’s middle layer of tissue, the media, from the outermost one, the adventitia. Instead of flowing down to its many tributaries, the blood streamed through a

newly created no-man’s-land, ripping the seams of its own garment as it traveled its futile course. For five hours, while the medical team probed, scanned, and consulted, my father’s major organs and lower limbs were starved of blood. He died, you see, after emergency surgery and the requisite brutal complications, of God’s bad tailoring.

I say that because it would have amused him. That I stood by his bedside with my hand on his head, reciting Hebrew prayers, would have amused him too, although in a different way. My father was a good Jew, but I do not think he expected piety in his children. Perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps he would have been proud, even grateful. Still, I said the words out of love, not piety. Who can say that they did not help him on his way?

During our days of waiting, my sister was often with me at my father’s side. She was tense, controlled, and practical. As she gazed at my father, awash in a morphine dream, I could not tell what she was feeling. Away from his bed, in the tiny family room, we talked about the medical details, approving of this doctor, excoriating that one. We knew our father was going to die, but we did not speak of him. Instead, we planned and prepared. For what exactly, we did not know.

After the day of surgery my mother came to the hospital only in the mornings for brief stays. Her arthritis was painful; she could not sit, she could not stand for more than a few minutes. She could not be quiet, she could not attend. She sensed that she did not belong, which is why, I suppose, she kept telling us, flesh of our father’s flesh, “He was calling my name in the emergency room! My name!”

The night before my father died I brought an old tape recorder to his cubicle in intensive care. The tape I chose had highlights of *La Boheme* on one side and of *Madama Butterfly* on the other. The nurse placed the recorder on the pillow next to my father’s left ear, the deaf one. With gentle urgency I corrected her. The music blended strangely with the clicks and beeps of the surrounding machines. It fought the maddening sound of rap from another tape player

Address correspondence and reprint requests to: Nancy Henson, 2121 Charles Henry Lane, Baltimore, MD 21209. E-mail: nheneson@comcast.net

in some other cubicle a few feet away. Well, I thought, that person has a right to die to the music he loves, too. But Puccini won the battle. All through the night, long after the rap had reached its end, the resident on the midnight shift kept my father's music playing. "I love Puccini!" he told me in the morning, and then we embraced.

The end, which seemed so distant during those days and nights of waiting, came swiftly when it came. There was no death agony, no rasping of breath. My father's kidneys shut down, his spent heart came to rest, and softly he died. I put my head to my father's chest and whispered, "*Shemah Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad.*" "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One."

The nurse removed the ventilator tube. It had left a sore at the corner of my father's mouth. I picked up the tape recorder, which now bore a label with his name and other data (thinking, even then, that some-

one might steal it now that he was dead), and cried into the sleeve of the hospital rabbi, who had come to be with us in the last few moments. My sister left to call my mother and then hurried to the funeral home. Her haste was necessary: A Jew may not be embalmed and should be buried within 24 hours of death. For if there is a resurrection, the Jew must come to it as he left life, ritually bathed, wrapped in linen, and, if he is a man, with his prayer shawl around his shoulders.

In the shtetl, a person's death was announced by pouring water into the street, after the words of the prophet Samuel: "For we must needs die, and are as water spilt upon the ground, which cannot be gathered up again." Until my father's death, finality was a word that came from other people's lips and experience; I merely listened. Now, as my spadeful of hallowed dirt falls upon the plain oak coffin, I begin to understand.