

CHAPTER 7

I shall hear in heaven.
--Beethoven

It's a beautiful day in June, eight days before the day my father dies. I leave L.A. at six a.m., fly into Boston and, in the waning light of late afternoon, drive north through the city, the suburbs, into the dense woods and rolling hills of southern New Hampshire. In an hour, I am pulling with a complicated mixture of nostalgia and dread into the driveway of my parents' house. The yard is usually as neat as a pin, but today the crabapple needs pruning, and it looks like the lawn hasn't been mowed in weeks.

I take in the kitchen at a glance: the blue cat dish by the radiator, the pot of ivy over the kitchen sink, my mother--plainspoken, dry-eyed--waiting to greet me. "*Nothing's changed,*" I think with relief as we hug. Then, over her shoulder, I spot the box of Depends, the walker, the IV pole huddled in the hallway, and the sight of these alien objects, invading the family abode like soldiers from an occupying army, takes my breath away. "Be prepared," everyone kept saying over the phone, "he's really gone downhill," but nothing has prepared me for this.

I turn back to Mom, my eyes a silent question, and she nods toward the dining room. I take a deep breath and snake my head around the doorway. He's sitting in there, his back to me, in a wheelchair—a *wheel*/chair. Nine months ago, the last time I was home, we'd visited the Fuller Rose Garden, taken drives along the ocean down through Ipswich and Gloucester. Now his stick-like limbs swim inside paisley pajamas, and on his feet he wears Frankenstein shoes, outsized slippers of dark blue canvas with Velcro-fastened flaps.

I stand frozen for a minute, then steel myself not to cry, and walk in. "Hi, Dad," I say softly. He turns his head—he turns his head so slowly now!—and when he lifts a liver-spotted hand and smoothes it back over his forehead, the hand moves too slowly, too.

For one terrible moment, I'm afraid he won't recognize me, but then he says weakly, "Hi, Heather." That's it. Not, How was your flight or, At least you made it safe, the way he's said every other time I've come home in the last nine years. Just Hi, Heather, warmly enough, but with no affect, as if I'd blown in from next door instead of 3500 miles away. I sit down, put my arm around him and press the side of my head against his. A little plastic plate of cut-up pieces of watermelon sits on the table before him.

"Are you hungry?" I ask.

His hand moves blindly for the fork.

Ever since the scare two years ago last Christmas—we almost lost him then, but he rallied—my seven siblings and I have been on tenterhooks: calling each other, debating the best course to take, praying. Now he has kidney failure, congestive heart failure, diabetes and blood circulation so poor that the ulcers he started getting on his feet nine months ago have turned into full-bore gangrene. A recent vascular bypass operation not only almost killed him but also didn't work. The gangrene is inching up both legs, but he doesn't want them amputated and he probably wouldn't survive another surgery anyway.

Now the time for debate is past; now everyone's been notified; now we come home to sit vigil. Those of us who live farther afield drift in, one by one during the next few days, and set up camp in our old bedrooms: Allen, Ross and I from L.A.; Tim, back from Bangkok for the first time in nine years; Meddy, the baby, from western Massachusetts. The ones who live closer by, who have borne the brunt of the horror and grief of the last year, drive over every morning: Jeanne from the adjacent town of Greenland; Geordie the 17 miles from Eliot, Maine; Joe from Portsmouth, a few miles up the coast. All eight of us are together and accounted for, for the first time since anybody can remember.

In the living room, plastic basins of medical supplies occupy the space where the rocking chair used to be, the couch has been pushed back to make room for the plastic commode, my father's world has shrunk to the distance between the hospital bed and the orange wingchair. We sit with him, not knowing at first it will be for a week—time in abeyance, normal life suspended—our existence reduced to eating, fitful sleeping, trips to the pharmacy, incessant phone calls, waiting, waiting, waiting.

In another life, we range in age from 33 to 54; in another life, we have jobs, responsibilities, families of our own. Here, we are just our father's children again, vying for his attention, cracking jokes, telling stories to our all-time favorite audience. The air is thick with cries of Dad, Dad, Dad, a name we can't say enough because we know in a little while we will never have anyone to say it to again. Are you cold, Dad? Are you too hot, Dad? Daddy, how about a sip of ginger ale to wash down that pill? Hey Dad, remember when we used to go out with you after work and pull lobster traps? How about that time we stayed in Bar Harbor and had a pajama party, that was a blast, wasn't it, Dad? Hey, remember that fat girl Dawn, that nurse last time you were in the hospital. What a jerk, huh, Dad?

He nods obligingly and echoes, "Yeah, what a jerk," and on his face is the shadow of a smile, as if he were remembering something that seemed funny a long time ago. When silence falls, he looks around at us, his eyes foolish with love, and says, "Well!" His feet are wrapped in white Kling bandages, perched like mummified egrets on his silver wheelchair rests, so tender he winces as soon as anyone gets within a yard of them. The big toe of his right foot is as black as charcoal, the nails of the others yellowed and retracting, the swollen skin

seeping blood diluted with watery pus, like flesh that's been burned. Two, three, four times a day we call the doctor and beg him to up the dosage on the pain medication.

"I'm sorry it hurts so much, Dad, I wish I could do something so it wouldn't hurt," we tell him.

He squeezes his eyes shut, shifts his tailbone on the seat of the wheelchair and whispers, "It's all right. Don't worry about that."

For the first few days, he's restless: feeling for his glasses, fretting at his pocket for a Kleenex, shooting his pajama cuff every two seconds to look at his watch. He has a vague notion that since so many people are around he should be playing host, planning a party. At seven in the morning he comes to and regards us blankly, as if we're of strangers.

"It's Ross, Dad," Ross says, "and Joe and Heath are here, too."

"Oh," he says and, after a minute, "How about if I take you all out to lunch?"

"I've got an idea," he says, fifteen minutes after we've eaten a huge dinner.

"What, Dad? What?"

"How about having everyone over for fried clams, my treat?"

At nine p.m., he gets a sudden burst of energy. "What are we doing now?" he fidgets. "Are we going out for a ride?"

"No, Dad, not now, it's almost time for bed. Aren't you tired, Daddy?"

"That would be nice," he sighs.

When we were kids, Dad showed us how to fish for mackerel and dig clams. Geordie, a commercial fisherman, inherited his love for the water from my father, and it's always been an almost sacred bond between them. After months of licensing snafus and bureaucratic tangles, just a few weeks ago Geo closed on his own 40-foot Bruno-Stillman. Nobody's been prouder or more excited over this turn of events than my father. Disoriented as he is, one phrase is still guaranteed to perk him up: "GEORDIE'S BOAT."

"We're taking him out one more time if we have to carry him," Geo says bravely, so Saturday we bundle Dad up, prop him pygmy-style in the passenger's seat, and drive him up to Kittery. Geordie's made arrangements with the owner of a private pier that has a series of wheelchair-friendly ramps, and the boat's docked at Badger's Island, just over the Maine border. Tubs of pink petunias bank a fishing cottage of weathered gray shingles, and the air smells of creosote, but we're all so emotionally overwrought it's hard to see the scene as picturesque. As Joe and Geordie push the wheelchair down to the Sea Witch, Dad's head bobs gently; the rest of us trail behind with blankets, coolers, cameras. While the "boys" figure out the logistics of getting him aboard,

he gazes across the river to Portsmouth's waterfront: black-and-gold tugboats, brick warehouses.

"What a day, huh, Dad?" I say.

"Can't think of anyplace in the world I'd rather be," he quavers, raising a shaky hand to readjust his Red Sox cap.

Geordie and Joe hoist him over the railing and set up his wheelchair in the choicest spot they can find, an opening on the starboard edge.

"Where do you want to go, Dad," Joe asks, "out to sea or upriver?"

He thinks for a minute, then, with an odd glitter in his eye, points straight up, to the sky. We glance at each other. What is he saying: that he's ready to check out; that he wants to go to heaven? Upriver, we decide he means.

Geordie maneuvers us beneath the Piscataqua River Bridge and we swarm around checking out the new boat: a snug cabin below, smelling of kerosene; a pale blue hold for the fish; coils of tarry rope. It's a perfect New England late spring day, the maples in full leaf, the clapboard houses gleaming with new paint, the greenswards of rich people's lawns, as green as golf courses, sloping down to the banks of the river. We take turns crouching beside Dad: hanging on to the back of his wheelchair, zipping and unzipping his jacket, offering him a sweater, a glass of juice, a bite of muffin, a pain pill. He lifts his face to the sun as the breeze ruffles through what's left of his hair and, every so often, raises a trembling finger and points. He's down to one-word descriptions: "Pelican," he observes, or "Barge."

"Where's the Seawitch?" he wonders halfway through the trip.

"Uh, Dad?" I tell him gently. "We're on the Seawitch."

But it doesn't matter if he knows exactly where he is. He can smell the salt air. He can hear us as we surround him cracking our usual lame jokes. I wonder for a second whether we are doing this for him or whether he's doing it for us, but then I realize it doesn't really matter. Every few minutes, as if to reassure himself, his gaze strays toward the wheelhouse to drink in the sight he's dreamed of for so long: his son, Captain Geordie, at the helm of his own boat.

For the last eighteen months, my mother's been bringing him in for dialysis—three days a week, four hours a day. The first Friday we're there, we drive him to the center for his usual treatment, but it's awful. Anyone who's been in a similar situation knows it raises all kinds of thorny questions. Could it possibly contribute to a dying man's dignity to prop him up in a chair for four hours, slowly drain every drop of blood from his body, and then slowly pump new blood back in? Is it compassion to keep a person alive for another week or two just because, with modern medicine's sometimes violent, invasive procedures, you can? What does it mean to die with dignity, anyway? The very question prompts me to look up "dignity" in our old Webster's and find it's from the Latin "dignitas," meaning worth or merit. In that case, isn't it impossible to die *without* dignity? In God's eyes, don't we all have merit, no matter what kind of shape

we're in? Because I wanted to remember my father when he was vibrant, coherent, pleasing to look at and listen to. But while it wasn't working out that way, it had never been clearer that I loved him not because of what he could do, know or understand—but because he existed at all.

One of our health care system's other delightful mores is that the excruciating pain of one's last days—the man's legs are rotting—is to be preferred over the hideous prospect of becoming a drug addict. He's eligible for at-home hospice care—one of the major benefits of hospice being that they're allowed to bring on the pain meds full-bore—but the Catch-22 is that he can't get hospice care as long as he's still undergoing a "life-sustaining" measure such as dialysis. So over the weekend we have a series of family pow-wows. We talk to the people at the dialysis center, who say he's so weak he might not survive another treatment; we arrange to go to the hospital; we crowd around the conference table while his doctor confirms that there's no hope, either way, and explains that without dialysis, he'll probably go into a coma and die within a week. As it is, he's becoming more incoherent by the hour. Monday morning—it's the most wrenching thing any of us has ever done—we make the decision not to bring him in again. The good news is we're able to call the insurance company and immediately switch over to hospice. Right away, the nurse gets him a prescription for morphine patches.

We run to the drugstore to fill it, run back, paste one, pale as a communion wafer, to his chest. Within minutes, he seems to rest a little easier.

All day long the screen door bangs open and people from our past come through, bearing gifts, like Magi. Our longtime next-door neighbor Vicki Fish, at 83, still wearing dangly earrings, diamond rings and gold lamé flats, brings two perfectly roasted chickens. Mrs. Luff, Meddy's old friend Alex's mother, brings peonies cut from her garden. Joe the Barber brings his little brown bag, drapes a towel around Dad's neck and gives him a trim. My old friends the Cushings come: Marynia with a shepherd's pie, Janet with a fruit basket. Dick and Diane Jones, our neighbors from forty years ago, drop off a pan of ravioli; Nellie Richards, whose kids Jerry and David I used to babysit, leaves a raspberry coffee cake; Freddie Pridham—he and my father, both bricklayers, worked weekends together for years—arrives with a loaf of stoneground bread. At 70, he is still built like an ox with a mouthful of big, blindingly white teeth, a chest like the prow of a ship, and mammoth arms forested with hair. He looks like an axe wouldn't fell him, but after visiting with my father, we say goodbye and watch him stagger out to his pickup, lean against the door, and collapse, sobbing.

After a few days, we get the bright idea to start rating people's offerings: 10 for home-made veal parmigiana, 5 for store-bought muffins, 2 for the cheapskates who come empty-handed. This is quintessential Dad humor, used to hide emotion: pretending not to be grateful when you are really so grateful you could cry. In fact we are moved to incoherence by this outpouring of

support; stunned by the affection our father has engendered in his friends. We hold half-hour phone conversations with relatives of my mother's we've never met, we catch up with people we haven't seen in twenty years, we lean against the kitchen counters to drink in familiar faces grown weathered by age, everyone with their kind words, their reassuring hugs that smell of wind-blown laundry, their own stories of loss: the daughter gone to leukemia, the brother to a stroke, the grandmother who was two months in a coma.

In the end, they all say the same thing: *You never stop missing them.*

I begin to understand that cliché about the resemblance between old people and babies. Life reduced to bright colors, basic concepts: hungry, thirsty, do you have to go to the bathroom? Talking loudly when people come over to visit, as if that will help: It's ARCHIE MCKINNON, Dad. You remember MRS. BASSETT, don't you? Watching the treacherous progress of a spoonful of ice cream as it makes its way from the bowl to his small, birdlike mouth.

And also as if he were a baby, I have some primal urge to touch him: to run a comb through his thinning hair, swab his mouth with a sponge, feel his breath on the back of my hand as I feed him a pill. It's the sacrament of flesh, this making contact, as intimate as sex, or the intimacy we long for and so seldom reach in sex. When he can't stand up any more, my sister Jeanne, a nurse, teaches us how to pair up and form a human chair by gripping forearms across his back and opposite forearms under his knees: "Put your arms around our necks, Dad, that's right, watch your shunt, one, two, three, lift--DON'T HURT HIS FEET!--pivot, easy, easy, push the commode *this way* Mom." I feel a rivulet of sweat run down my back, not because he's heavy but because he's so light it's scary. We set him down like a rag doll, pajama pants around his ankles, his worn face startled and set, like the only survivor of a plane crash.

With all that, he never succumbs to despair. Every so often, he'll snap out of a doze, gaze around at whoever happens to be hanging around his chair, and sigh in his New England accent, "Ahn't I fohtunate, having you all home like this." Mom putters around in the background cooking, cleaning, letting us have our day with the old man. She corroborates how much it means to him that we're here. "It's all he talks about," she says. "Every time we're alone he looks at me and says, 'We're awfully lucky to have such nice kids.'"

Having never been exactly what you'd call a demonstrative family, we bask in this reflected warmth, emboldened to let out all the stops. We have always depended on him, but now he is gripping *our* hands, grabbing *our* shoulders, accepting *our* help. The effect is transformative. We, who tend to communicate by ridicule, are blurting out, "I love you, Dad"—right in front of everyone. We, who in childhood came to fisticuffs over such weighty issues as whether we were going to watch "Green Acres" or "The Beverly Hillbillies" are coming together to lock arms and carry our father to bed. We, who have always prided ourselves on our sarcasm, are reporting back to each other on his

every word and move, in voices hushed with reverence. When we look at each other, tears flow so spontaneously it's like breathing: after awhile, we don't even bother to wipe them away anymore.

My husband Tim, also a nurse, takes a few vacation days from his job at L.A. County Hospital and flies out to help. Some people are good with children or dogs: he, we all see immediately, is good with sick people, lifting and turning and talking to Dad with just the right combination of authority and gentleness. Desperate for a reprieve, we instantly appoint him liaison to the cavalcade of doctors, pharmacists, and nurses who march across the landscape of our days.

But even Tim sometimes strikes out. "If one is no pain at all and ten is the worst pain you can imagine, where on the scale are you, Al?" he asks.

"That's true," my father replies.

The two of us dose him with Oxy-IR, give him a Restoril, prop him up on his wing chair—he prefers his chair to the hospital bed, we think because when his feet are hanging down they hurt less—and sleep on the pull-out couch beside him. A pilled pink blanket bunched over our sweating bodies, my father breathing raggedly beside us, I curl into Tim's warm, familiar body and fall asleep thinking, *This is the sacrament. This is what marriage is really about.*

Tuesday morning I wake at five, dress and drive down Atlantic Avenue the four miles to Ocean Boulevard. Rhododendrons bloom, mist rises from open fields, and, fanned out along the ocean, are the summer "cottages" of rich people from Massachusetts, with their sweeping picture windows and colonnaded porches; their empty lawns. I walk along the boardwalk, fine needles of salt spray cooling my face. Beach plums are alive with deep pink roses; the stone walls bordering the mansions blaze with hollyhocks and foxglove. It is a scene—and time of day—my father, both of us early risers, would have loved. Brown seaweed spreads itself out like hair over the barnacled rocks; gulls send up plaintive cries. Waves lap in with a tongue of foam and recede, the smooth weathered rocks clattering like bones.

By Wednesday, he is starting to hallucinate. In the hospital bed, his hand strays again and again to the guardrail, as if groping for a phantom limb. "Can we take this down?" he pleads. "I won't fall out of the car."

His eyes are stricken, wild: "The lawnmower's wet!" he bursts out. "Watch out, Jeanne, there's something sticking out of the floor!" "I see a head!" "Whose head?" Meddy asks. "It's Janet," he says. Janet is our mother.

He's had false teeth since he was thirty, but this is supposed to be a big secret: none of us have ever seen him without his teeth. That afternoon four or five of us are hanging out, as usual, and Dad is sitting in his chair, staring fixedly into the cold fireplace.

"I was thinking..." he says. We all lean forward but he trails off, his finger pointing at some invisible spot in an invisible dimension, the thought dissolved in the ether; unfurling, if at all, light years away. And then he very calmly opens his mouth, reaches in with both hands, and extracts his dentures. It's like that scene at the end of Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* where Rubashov drops his glasses, hesitates for a moment, then, realizing he won't be needing them any more, gropes his way to the firing squad without them. After awhile Allen, my oldest brother and my father's namesake, stands up, walks over, and takes the teeth gently away.

It's been six days since his last dialysis treatment, but, Thursday morning, amazingly, he still recognizes us. "Hi Ross," he says in a faraway voice. "Hi, Jeanne." The hospice nurse tells us she thinks he's "holding on" for some reason and suggests we go in, one by one, and tell him it's all right to "let go." A week ago, the thought of sitting down beside my father and telling him it was okay to die would have been unthinkable. Now, it simply seems like the next indicated thing to do in this reality-suspended time. *We'll take care of Mom*, we tell him. *You're the best father in the world and you always will be. Everything's going to be all right.*

Tim has to get back to L.A. and that afternoon, Meddy and I drive him to the airport. When we return, Mom, Jeanne, Ross, Allen and my brother Tim are all gathered around his chair in the living room.

"Look at the skin over his cheekbones, how tight it is," Mom says.

It's true. In the space of just a few hours, he's faded: he looks like a bouquet of flowers you've kept a day too long. His skull seems to be pushing out from the inside, stretching the skin taut and deepening the hollows of his eyes. His mouth is slightly open, his tongue is curled, and he is breathing deeply with long intervals in between: Cheynes-Stokes breathing, Jeanne tells us; a sign the end is near.

Allen is holding his left hand; I sit down on the piano bench and take his right. We watch him in silence, inhaling and exhaling along with him, our bodies in communion. Someone says, We should call Joe and Geordie, and someone does: they are on their way down from Portsmouth.

He takes a deep, ragged breath and winces. "Okay, Daddy," Med whispers.

A few minutes later, he takes another breath, lets it out—and then he doesn't breathe any more. We sit in silence for what seems like an eternity. Finally, I tear my eyes away and look down at my brothers and sisters and mother. Their faces are white.

Jeanne gets her stethoscope, snakes it down the front of his pajama top, listens for a second or two. "It's all over," she says, and with some elemental instinct, we form a circle, join hands with his, and begin: "Our Father, who art in Heaven"...

That night I slept in his bed, the hospital bed we'd set up in the living room, the ones my brothers laid him out on to bathe before the people came from Remick Brothers. Watching the hearse back down the driveway and onto Post Road—the last time my father would leave this house he'd built, the house he'd fathered some of us in—I found my right hand going up to lay itself over my heart. I'd seen photos of firemen, their hats laid over their hearts for a fallen comrade, but I'd never known it's instinctive: not only the making of a final salute; but this gesture buried deep within us, to let the person know our hearts are bound to theirs, forever. I could have slept in another bed that night, or made his up fresh, but I didn't want to: I wanted to be as close as I could to him one last time. Lying there on the pale orange sheets, spotted lightly from my father's wounds, I knew that we are loved absolutely, that suffering is collective, that like Christ, he had somehow died for all of us. We want to hide death, we're afraid of death, but it has so much to teach us.

We took a lot of photos that morning on Geordie's boat. One in particular grips my heart. It is a picture of my father, his head framed by the pale green river behind him, his shoulders stiff with pain, his hand clutching a thigh. Half of his face is in shadow, the eye drooping closed; the other eye is wide open to the light, a fixed, blank look to it, as if it were staring into a world way beyond this one. His expression is a mixture of terror and the dawn of an awful peace—as if, on the far far horizon, he was just beginning to glimpse what it might mean to have borne his suffering to the last drop.

I have no way of knowing what that means myself; no proof that the last will be first, that the meek will inherit the earth, that the poor shall enter the kingdom of heaven. I only know that I have looked at the face in that photo so many times, I no longer see just my father. I see myself. I see my mother and my brothers and my sisters. And every so often—on a good day—I am even starting to see you.