

The Shave

Sometime in the early summer of 1963 when I was 19 and in my last year at college, I returned home to my New York apartment after a day at Columbia University. It was the late in the afternoon. To my considerable surprise, I encountered my mother in the third floor hallway of our apartment building. This was totally unexpected since she had been living for some months in Connecticut at the home of my sister Anne. My mother was, at the time, in a very advanced stage of the crippling disease, multiple sclerosis. She could hardly walk and when she did, she stumbled in a way that was usually mistaken as the lurch of the very drunk. She was emerging from the apartment of her friend and neighbor Josephine Sonley, and was working her way toward our apartment across the hall. After initial greetings, I was immediately concerned about the condition of the apartment, her home for 14 years, which was, I recall, quite a housekeeping disaster as only a 19 year old can manage. I steered her back to Josephine's apartment.

I do not know how she came to be in New York or to be in Josephine's apartment. I have never thought to ask my sister how she got there. She certainly could not have negotiated the New Haven Railroad from Rowayton to New York by herself. The eleven long blocks from Grand Central Station to our apartment would have been an impossible journey.

I saw that her physical condition was much much worse than when I had last seen her, several months earlier. But I never seemed to occur to me that she would be getting still worse. Nor could I see the obvious end of the progression. I was angry with her infirmity. It seemed to me a deliberate attempt to cop out, to be weak. I felt angry and rejected. I was not kind.

We talked for awhile. I got the distinct impression that she had come "home" to stay. This was quite disturbing, since it was clear that she could not take care of herself, and I, in my self-centered youthfulness had other activities on my agenda. This would never do, I thought. I had college to go finish. I had a full-time job. I had my social life. I did not have time to be a nurse maid. I was very cross.

Josephine, the neighbor, was making dinner. She too was obviously disturbed with my mother's physical condition. I made my excuses and returned to the apartment to straighten up and to study, leaving the two women to visit and have dinner.

After dinner, Josephine knocked on the door and asked me to come over to her apartment to help my mother. Much inconvenienced, I crossed the hall and found my mother seated in Josephine's living room in her bathrobe. She explained that she would like to bathe but was having "a bit of trouble" getting into the tub. Josephine was afraid that she might hurt herself. Would I help?

I was both irritated and embarrassed, but agreed. I picked up my mother like a husband would pick up his bride. She weighed almost nothing, at most eighty pounds. Her arms were like winter's bushes, bare and bony. She did not have the strength to help me. I carried her into the bathroom to the steaming tub. There was an awkward moment, "what do I do next"? "How do we complete this maneuver"? I place her feet in the water as she balanced on the rim. I removed her robe and lowered her into the water. Her nakedness embarrassed us both. I turned to leave.

She said, "Jonathan, I haven't been able to pluck my chin". She had always been very careful to remove the facial hair that grew all too quickly. In her disability, she could no longer manage this routine chore. I could see long grey hairs on her cheeks and chin. She had a pleading look on her face.

I was momentarily repulsed. "God no" I said "Am I supposed to be your barber"? I rushed to leave the bathroom to spare either of us more embarrassment. I could not help but see in her eyes the hurt that my comment had caused.

I would not be asked again. The next day she returned to Connecticut as mysteriously as she appeared. Six weeks later she died. I never saw her again. In the years since, I have relived a thousand times the imagined scene where we sit together, mother and son, while I gently shave her face. In my mind, we share a quiet understanding of our parting.

But it never happened and it never will. And I am much the poorer.

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