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The Witness

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My sister and I had a recurring joke that our father loved our mother the most, then us, while our mother loved us the most, then him. Our mother was the sun and he was a sunflower, always turning his head to find her, and our mother shone her warm loving gaze upon us all.

In the casual cruelty that's typical of children, I sometimes found my mother *too* accessible. She was a lab technician who dedicated much of her life to raising her four children. I have beautiful memories from my childhood, but I can remember feeling sometimes suffocated by her consistent presence and that my father was by comparison more mysterious and exciting.

My father was an extremely dedicated English and drama teacher who often spent evenings and weekends working. He would sit in on the fancy new couch in the living room with his family but was not fully present. With my father grading in the background, I would play Scrabble on the living room floor with my brother and our mother (who would suggest words for me, my brother groaning in protest against her helping).

When my father did bring his undivided attention to me, I felt the full force of his love. I would sit with him on the big, white bed in my parents' room, looking at an illustrated copy of Tolkein's

The Hobbit (1937), the classic fantasy novel. Curled up under his arm, trusting the warmth of his torso to hold me up, I'd stare, mesmerized, at our favourite full-page images, like the one of the dragon Smaug, its scaly belly resting on a golden horde of treasure.

Other times, we'd sit at the scarred, wooden kitchen table, and my father and I would take turns drawing a scene on scrap paper. He'd often sneak in a woman who I came to recognize as my mother, his artistic choice indicating his devotion.

These moments instilled in me my father's passion for literature and creativity, and many of my earliest memories are of disappearing into books. I would read until dinner, when my mother would warn me to put away the garlic salt (apparently not every meal needs garlic salt), and to put down my novel. As a teenager, I fell into the heady world of poetry, enraptured by each poet's ability to create something so much greater than the sum of its parts.

I was stunned by Emily Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" (1890) when I first encountered it in eighth grade, sitting in a cramped desk. The formal opening was initially intimidating: "Because I could not stop for Death – / He kindly stopped for me – The Carriage held but just Ourselves – / And Immortality" (par. 1). But the more I dug into the poem, the more it revealed itself to me. When I read it aloud, muttering to myself, I discovered a sing-songy rhythm and rhyme scheme that juxtaposed with the unsettling subject. I didn't know words could work like this.

Though I came by my love of poetry honestly, it also served as a bond between me and my father during a complicated period. As I experienced the teenage desire for more *and* less intimacy with my parents, my father was also changing. He was "thin, sort of stretched, like butter scraped over too much bread," to quote Tolkein (2012), but he remained a celebrated educator. When I attended the highschool he taught at, I could see why people worshipped him. He was attentive, kind, and spontaneous, but I sometimes felt that his delight in his students didn't extend to me. One day in the auditorium, we negotiated my use of the family car and that local celebrity persona faded, replaced by my tired father, wanting to be done with the exchange. I felt like a household chore he needed to check off his list.

What I didn't know at the time was that the problems were much deeper than daily stresses. When I was 16, my father and mother called me and my sister into their bedroom. They were on their big white bed, the one I'd spent so many hours in as a child. My sister sat next to me, her expression a mirror of what mine must have been—face red with crying, a look of frozen disbelief at what we were hearing. My father had cancer, had what I would eventually come to understand as non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

When I later spoke of my father's cancer, I became almost smug in my use of the term "non-Hodgkin's lymphoma." I pronounced it meticulously, showing off my newly grown-up vocabulary to my friends. I was distraught at the way cancer was breaking my father, but I also felt

a sliver of specialness from going through such a difficult time that, from my perspective, far outweighed my friends' worries.

My father had taken a leave of absence from teaching, beaten down by cancer and the treatments. I'd go to school and be inundated by people asking after him. Their expectations of my father—to be in good spirits, to be fighting—would come crashing against the reality I'd discover waiting for me at home. At times he would be shakily crying, lying on the couch that he used to work on. I might find him huddled under the blankets of his bed, and I would come into the dark room, uncertain how to help. I'd rub his feet through the blanket, hoping that I was doing enough to comfort him, not sure if I could handle it if he asked for more from me. Other times, the house would be filled with visitors, and a flash of my father's humour and energy would return.

I leaned heavily on literature as a coping mechanism, which proved an inconsistent support. In the same class in which I'd encountered Dickinson, I was assigned Karl Shapiro's (2021) poem "Auto Wreck," which focuses on a car crash and death in general. In his closing stanza, Shapiro emphasizes the horrific randomness of car accidents with a comparison that troubled me: "death in war is done by hands; / Suicide has cause and stillbirth, logic; / And cancer, simple as a flower, blooms" (par. 5).

When I read these lines, they felt somehow like a betrayal. I was already feeling alienated, from the fan club who didn't seem to grasp just how devastated my father was, from my friends

who had the luxury of making teenage mistakes, and even from my father, experiencing something I couldn't comprehend. Now I felt that Shapiro had misrepresented what my father and my family were going through.

Joining the class discussion, I responded with a shaking voice that cancer was *not* simple as a flower, but that didn't convey my churning emotions. I hated the poem for using my father's disease as a metaphor. I'd recently started writing poetry and I dedicated a new one to the ugliness of cancer; I felt my father deserved better than a single line.

My father was finding more comfort in poetry, but he clung to a poem that spoke to a similar anger in him as in me: W.H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1938). Auden's poem uses Pieter Breughel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* for a discussion of pain. In the myth, Icarus escapes a labyrinth with the help of his father, who constructs wings for him. Icarus defies his father's warnings by flying too close to the sun, falls into the sea and drowns. Breughel's painting focuses on the coastline, ships, and labourers, and in the corner of the painting Icarus's legs are barely visible, his head already under water. No one seems to notice the Greek tragedy in the background; as Auden notes in his poem: "everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster" (par. 2).

Auden used this startling painting as a metaphor: "About suffering they were never wrong, / The old Masters: how well they understood / Its human position: how it takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window / or just walking dully along" (par. 1).

For my father, this poem expressed something essential about humankind. He received excellent treatment from his healthcare providers, but he also sometimes felt like a background character in someone else's story. While he was undergoing chemotherapy, the nurses would be chatting about weekend plans and, though he understood that this was normal behaviour, he also wanted compassion and attention. He didn't want his suffering to be taking place while "someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along."

Though my father and I were on different paths, we were often united in our hurt and even resentment toward people who we perceived as minimizing his cancer and the way it impacted our family. Our shared resistance to the world "turn[ing] away quite leisurely" from our family's disaster only grew more complex in the years to come. After months of brutal treatments, my father's cancer went into remission. For years, reminders of his cancer lingered in things like his strange toenails, warped from chemo. In my early twenties, we heard the news that we were dreading: my father's cancer had returned. With it, returned the sense that our family was living through a tragedy akin to Icarus's, especially after my mother's diagnosis.

My mother had buoyed our family during my father's first cancer, but she began developing her own mysterious symptoms, losing words, twitching involuntarily. In between the cancer years, she was finally diagnosed with Huntington's disease, a degenerative illness that impacts motor and cognitive abilities. As her Huntington's worsened, my

father began caring for her, the sun to his sunflower. As a caregiver who was also a cancer patient, my father's identification with Auden's poem only compounded.

He didn't want his or his wife's suffering to be shuttered to the corner of a painting as Breughel does with Icarus. He wanted to be known, to be seen. My siblings had left home, and I was an obvious choice to be my parents' witness, a complicated role. There was an intense intimacy to staggering through trauma with my parents. My father once said to me, "We've really been through the trenches together," and I felt special and strong.

That closeness could turn to claustrophobia, though. Our house had thin walls, which was convenient when someone called your sister, and you could yell "PICK UP THE PHONE!" from your bedroom to hers. Later, it also meant that there was nowhere far enough away from my parents' sick bodies. I woke up at night to the noises of my father throwing up, and I celebrated my birthday with my mother bruised from a fall caused by Huntington's, trying not to betray how much she was hurting. There was still a deep sense of love, but I increasingly felt that I had to either witness my parents' suffering or run.

As I grew into adulthood, I moved across the country for graduate school, but there remained within me a belief that truly loving someone meant walking with them through their pain. It makes sense, then, that when I began teaching undergraduate English while writing my PhD thesis I assigned the play *Wit* (1999) by Margaret Edson. *Wit*, which was adapted into a movie, focuses on Vivian, a pro-

fessor of literature. She is diagnosed with cancer and *Wit* tracks her illness, treatments, and interactions with insensitive doctors. Vivian frequently delivers her lines directly to the audience, and we are forced to watch as she declines and dies.

When I watched the movie adaptation, it was devastating, especially with the similarities between Vivian and my father: their love of literature, their frustration with healthcare workers they felt lacked empathy, even Vivian's changing body. When I visited my father in hospital, he tried to smile reassuringly, but he'd had to take out his false teeth, a party trick that he would do when I was a child, my cousins shrieking in delight and horror. Now, it made his newly skinny face look even more like a stranger's.

Yet I found *Wit* validating in its ugly realism, especially in comparison to other movies that addressed cancer. *Wit* (Nichols, 2001) was released amidst a swath of romantic cancer stories, like *A Walk to Remember* (2002) and *Sweet November* (2001). My mother loved romance in pop culture, a trait I'd inherited, and I watched these movies despite my resentment toward their depictions of cancer. In them, the heroines are rosy-cheeked in their illnesses, and the healthy male love interests are forever changed by the cancer patients' lives and eventual deaths, which often occur with them still looking gorgeous.

I didn't watch these movies with my mother, but she would have been a sucker for them. She didn't share my outrage over misrepresentations of cancer. I can imagine her wiping her eyes at the end of one of them, chuckling at how much the

tearjerker had worked on her, before getting up to get dinner ready. By contrast, the first time I finished *Wit* I was left weeping and exhausted.

Years later, I forced my students through a similarly emotionally intense experience by assigning *Wit*, believing it would increase their empathy. As I once again put the movie on in a dark classroom, I wondered if my motivations were more personal than pedagogical. I had mentally accused people of avoiding my parents' illnesses, but I felt I'd been guilty of the same thing, turning away from them through escapism, through physical or emotional absence. *Wit* felt like a punishment and an opportunity to try again. If I hadn't been there enough for them, then I would be with Vivian. I wouldn't look away.

This sense that I should remain a witness from afar was hard to shake. There's something comforting in long-standing family dynamics, even when they've become tight and suffocating. In a move my father would have appreciated, I found a poem that helped me transition toward a life that did not centre my family's diseases.

I first encountered the opening lines of Mary Oliver's (2017) "Wild Geese" as a magnet on my sister's fridge: "You do not have to be good. / You do not have to walk on your knees / for a hundred miles through the desert repenting. / You only have to let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves" (par. 1). When I eventually read the whole poem, it was a revelation, a religious experience for an atheist.

Oliver's poem balanced Auden's, which criticizes a society in which suffering takes place in

the corner of a painting. Shecontinues, "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. / Meanwhile the world goes on. / Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain / are moving across the landscapes." (par. 1). The poem showed me that, as individuals endure trauma, everyone and everything carries on, and there's beauty in that. Oliver acknowledges pain but positions it in a world that "… offers itself to your imagination, / calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting," meaning that there's still opportunity for wonder, for joy, for communion (par. 1).

In my youth, I'd resented the fact that the world didn't break from my parents' illnesses, but in my adulthood I found Oliver's vision comforting. On days when it felt too easy to equate being a good person with guilt and sorrow, I repeated the poem like a protective ward. It helped me understand that, as much as I saw bearing witness as a form of love and compassion, I had to extend that same empathy to people "eating or opening a window or just walking dully along" while others suffered. If I could do that for other people, I had to do that for myself, too.

As I internalized Oliver's lessons, my father found ways to recommit to witnessing. He wrote and directed a play for a community troupe that explored mental illness. He became a respected thinker and speaker on the importance of empathy in health care. Recalling his latest conference, he recently joked to me that he'd been appalled when the preceding speaker referenced poetry—and Auden's poetry at that!

Today, my father has cancer for the third time, a new medical term for me to memorize: multiple myeloma. He's undergoing treatments with only the hope of prolonging his life, but he remains as interested as ever in words. I sit down in my living room with a warm cup of tea in my hands and FaceTime with him to discuss our latest read for our book club. "Hi dear," he says. "What's going on with this video? Oh, for goodness sake." "Press the camera button, Dad!" I shout, because he's forgotten his hearing aids again. His elfin face, older now, pops up on my phone, and we talk about Oliver's "Wild Geese," which I've sent him as an offer of hope. Time has passed, but for us literature is still a joy to analyze, a way to better understand each other and everything else. From the other side of the country, he says, "I love talking to you, dear. Keep sending me this stuff." "Love you, Dad."

After years of teaching *Wit* (Edson, 1999) to my undergrad students, I stopped assigning it in class. There came a point when I didn't feel the need to push my face or my students' against the brutality of my father's illness. When it felt more important to think of my father not just as a cancer patient, but also as the person who taught me to love reading and delight in silliness. As my father's daughter, I will never stop being in awe of literature's power, and that includes *Wit*. I am also my mother's daughter, and I have come to see that there is no moral failing in only encountering depictions of cancer in the romantic tearjerkers that my mother would have loved. That I can put the movie on, have a quick cry, and, when it ends, get up and walk away.

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