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2800 words

Published Eureka Literary Magazine, Eureka College, Eureka, IL - 2001  
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### Solutions

The summer my great choice was made for me, all the headlines asked if God was dead. Over dinner at my pal Julio's, we were discussing sacrifice.

Continuously sipping ice tea from a frosted beer mug, Julio's father, Anthony, described the night he gave up alcohol. He said that just before he did that impossible thing, a freight train had smashed into their pick-up, killing his brother instantly but tossing him clear with the firm, purposeful pressure of some large hand. I guess after that, it had been easy to quit, not like giving something up at all.

Wishing my decision could be made for me as swiftly, if not as brutally as that, I wanted to hear more. We cleared the dishes fast, and found Anthony outside looking up at the first evening star, but he limped off down the sidewalk with his hands in his pockets as if he hadn't heard us come out. Long after he'd turned the corner, I was haunted by the image of that bent, dark man cloaked in the glow of twilight, his cigarette smoke gently echoing his path.

I could still feel the steam in our faces, passing platters of enchiladas and Mexican rice, speaking uneasily about the impending birthdays that could turn both Julio and I into soldiers. There was no escaping the constant swirl of debate; burn your draft card or join the ROTC while still in school? Many of our friends' older brothers were bound for Canada or federal penitentiaries as we spoke. If the nightly news wasn't exposing Vietnam battle footage, draft numbers and casualty counts, then solemn, swollen, impossibly skinny victims of the Biafran famine stared forlornly out at us from the TV screen, strangely mocking our concerns.

Most of us in that neighborhood were raised by parents who'd been through their own strange, heady, bewildering times. There was no mistaking the surge of liquid memory in their eyes, the upwelling of dark emotion in their voices as they spoke of the deprivation, if not the horror of the Great Depression, or of fighting in the war, and we always knew which one they meant, having seen images of the mushroom cloud countless times. Their stories unconsciously instilled the underlying belief that life *might* be fair and equitable as long as you didn't ask for too much, didn't take the good things for granted and exercised caution with every choice you were lucky enough to get.

Even the guarded adult conversations around the kitchen table exposed a maze of obstacles waiting out there to take you down, from complexities like my namesake Uncle Daniel's gambling, to alcoholism as discreetly displayed in both sides of the family, or used car salesmen like the one who'd gotten his hooks into

Cousin Victor. These lessons in how people chose to live or accepted how their lives had turned out, were often learned months, years or miles distant from the moment.

My mother was an impulsive red-haired Irish Catholic often compared to the actress Maureen O'Hara because they shared a bright beauty as much as the same first name. The camera was always kind to my mom. My father, Max, was the first child born in this country to Russian Jewish immigrants, and had been raised to expect much from life. Perhaps my greatest claim to uniqueness was the blending of two religions. My parents agreed early on to expose my older sister Lisa and I to both cultures and let us make our own early, tentative decisions - with their guidance. But when that time came, they'd been divorced for a few years and both of them were usually working.

I remember Seder dinners with the Jewish branch of the family; the dark wine, the white linens, the warm and savagely quick humor. With equal passion glows the memory of the church where I served Mass, strangely hollow in the week before Easter, statues mutely swathed in purple velvet shrouds, every votive candle burning plaintively, the priest's whispered confessional voice still in my ears and gut, and the thin, tasteless sensation of the wafer on my tongue at Communion. I was both Confirmed in a hot church bright with candles and Bar Mitva'd in a room at The Regency. Max said they were just "covering all the bases."

Shaped by all of this, I was approaching my first major choice with silent,

wary caution. The glossed-over waste of Korea had prepared some people my parents' age for the gloriously failing excesses of Vietnam. It wasn't fighting or even dying for my country that bothered me, but the prospect of enduring that for the wrong reasons. Yet the few people I knew who'd traveled beyond U.S. borders all said the same thing in the same somewhat awed, desperate way upon returning; "You don't realize how lucky you are to live here until you go away." That seemed a pretty good reason to me.

My mom once said she'd married Max for all the wrong reasons. I remember blinking stupidly a couple of times at the virgin weight of being addressed as an adult before I managed to choke out, "Is that why you left him?"

She'd sighed deeply, her eyes unfocused and far away.

"Your dad is a man of great honor, great compassion, great love. Max is...I guess you'd have to call him a sacrificial man. A great person to have in an emergency. Cool of head, clear inside."

I nodded, feeling his quiet solidity reflected in the precise way he turned the big Oldsmobile's steering wheel or counted out the till at the end of the night. She looked at me then with so much grief and sadness that I swore never to have children of my own.

"He's great when everyone else freezes. But daily problems, just the damn thorns of life, those stop him in his tracks, Danny."

I knew she was right. In the habit of otherwise very practical people, he'd put personal knots out of his mind, blindly hoping when he came back to them, no

matter how reluctantly, they'd be miraculously untied. I got a chill remembering the afternoon I first really understood this about him.

I was only seven and we were just starting to settle into the routine of separate lives and places. He'd picked me up after school and seemed glad to see me when I got in the car, suggested we stop for ice cream like we hadn't done since all their arguments had begun. Those painful, timeless months crumbled in a cloudy mass with the dreamy slow motion of building demolition photography, where the whole structure spurts smoke in selective spots and then with unbelievable grace and dignity, falls in upon itself.

The sheer pleasure I took in seeing a small thing like my dad's old, easy smile again in the ice cream shop made me realize how much had gotten submerged in our lives as this great change had come and now appeared to be going. You live in the center of a crisis and only think about what to do next, not thinking what the event may be preparing you for.

On the way home he'd slowed, pulling the car over a couple of blocks from the house, turning to me with tears coursing silently down his face and I'd never seen him cry before. I didn't know what to do. I can still feel the last of my ice cream dripping on my hand but it was like a distant pinch when you are deep in sleep.

I tried to ask him what was wrong but my voice was so small it just got lost, swallowed up in the thickness of his agony. What was worse, I understood what was wrong deep in a child's place of no words and feared speaking about it, as if

the mere words would invoke the demon. Instinct told me my dad was trying to hold something inside and an attraction more powerful than magnets or even gravity drew me to him and I felt the tension in his chest as it surged and fell, surged and fell, squeezing with all my might when he did, letting up in unison and then catching my breath. Finally he broke into looser, rhythmic sobbing. My own tears flowed automatically, but quietly, darkening his shirt front. We sat that way in the idling car for a long time.

Finally he raised me up, wiping his eyes, struggling for composure, speaking in a tone whose certainty belied the flickering emotions on his face.

"I only want you to know one thing. I always loved your mother and always will. It's as simple as that. You know I still love you, don't you?" I nodded.

"You know our getting divorced doesn't change that, except maybe it makes me love you more because I miss you so goddamned much?" I sniffled, half-smiling at the forbidden word.

"Well, it's the same way for me with your mom. I just love her all that much more. It wasn't...it wasn't that I did anything wrong. It's just what I didn't do..." He trailed off, not realizing he'd forgotten me and was thinking out loud.

I wanted a thousand things. I wanted the car to keep going. I wanted everything like it had been. I wanted him to tell me the why of it all, not realizing he had in just a couple of lines. Now, with the perspective of the years, it's obvious that being able to put the problem into words wasn't enough for him to change .

Standing on the sidewalk in front of Julio's in a time of penetrating crisis, pensive with memories as tangible as his father's cigarette smoke, plagued by fear of the unknown, I wasn't surprised to see my own dad's yellow Oldsmobile slide up to the curb. My folks sat together, waiting calmly in the car as if this happened every day. I looked in curiously.

"Hi, you guys. How come you're together? Everything all right?"

"Sure," Max said. "Your grandmother told us you'd be here. Can you say your goodbyes and hop in?" He leaned forward, releasing the seat.

"There's just something we want to talk about so I thought we'd go over to Sid's and have a drink."

Sid's was the old man's number-one hangout, a bar Hugh Hefner would have loved, called The Harem. My vague nervousness was confirmed when, instead of taking our usual table near the bar where Max and Sid could shoot the breeze, we went to the upper level of tables back behind the bar. Though the room was covered in Egyptian-style paintings, and a mural depicting a giant Genie escaping his bottle spanned the expanse of one entire wall, the Harem really got its name from that back row of tables. They were round, deep booths flanked by little minarets guarding the sides of each booth and supporting a flowing, gauzy cloth across the top that lent them the look of a row of desert tents.

Thick, heavy black velvet curtains draped on either side and it was customary to pull the leaden draperies closed, insulating yourself into a plush little world. A small button box on the back of the booth signaled the waitress and if the light

over the bar didn't go on, no one bothered you. Years later I would introduce a daring lover to the secret joys that could be had behind the curtains in that very same booth, but that afternoon, I squirmed, nervously tapping my fingers, tight as a drum, unsuspecting of the thrills that awaited me there.

The old man was eerily calm, ordering drinks and lighting his Camel with a sense of ceremony in the smallest gesture. Once served, he closed the curtains, his immaculately manicured fingernails catching the light. He solemnly drew two envelopes out of his coat pocket. One bore the instantly recognizable seal of the Federal Government, the other was a heavy, expensive ivory stock.

"This..." he said, sliding the white government envelope towards me, "Is your draft notice. This..." And he pushed the other envelope closer, "is a way out."

My mother added, "If you want it." ignoring his sharp look.

On letterhead stationery was a statement from one of the names at the top, Dr. Henry Joshua. I'd often sat next to Dr. Joshua, but had rarely spoken a word to him, because we were always naked and sweating in the steam bath, where my dad companionably called him Hank. He stated in tall, thin, compressed handwriting that Daniel G. Jaffe, age 17, had been under treatment since the age of 15 for schizophrenia. There was more of a technical nature but even without glancing at another line, I could read it all the same.

I sat there looking at my father, wondering how much this had cost him, not even thinking about money. He leaned forward, the smoke from his cigarette curling around him like mist or fog.

"Let me tell you something, Daniel. Your grandfather who never lived to see you...he built up a hell of an empire here. The corner where the United Bank of Denver sits downtown? That was ours. You know where Pearl Drug is? That was ours, too. Or Bestway Bread? Now, don't nod your head so fast...not only did we own the land the bakery is on, that was our bakery until the war.

"Dad was gone and buried, your other uncles were still in high school and I was running the bakery. Well, I got one of these damned draft notices, too. Of course there was no issue then over whether the war was right or not. Hitler was Hitler. I applied for release as sole supporting son and they turned me down. You've got to remember this was before there were even rumors of the concentration camps. I spent half that goddamn war flying back and forth over the Gulf of Mexico training kids to shoot aerial gunnery in B-17's, when all most of them were able to do was manage to throw up in the buckets if we were lucky. I never saw a day of action, never fired a shot in anger, never had to kill a man...and I was grateful for that, don't get me wrong."

Here his eyes narrowed. The ash from his unsmoked Camel dropped silently in collapse on the table. I sensed Mother tense without even turning to watch her absently twisting a finger in her long auburn hair. Max's eyes had grown bitter, his voice crisp, brittle and tinged with self-pity.

"I got back and I'll tell you what I found. Half my friends had managed to get cleared and spent the whole war right here at home getting rich. Dave Weis cornered the pinballs and cigarette machines in three states and this year his

oldest daughter is starting college at Dartmouth. Abe Forman's flat feet got him a piece of every Chrysler that sold in this town for almost twenty years. My mom, she had to sell the bakery. That was college and a whole other way of life for you kids.

"I was made for that, son. Nobody's quicker at figures than me, and have you ever tasted a loaf of challah you liked better than mine? Your grandfather was so sharp. Oh, that you could have learned business from him!"

As if the thought of his father was all he needed to snap out of it, my dad sat a little straighter, lit another cigarette and when he spoke again, his voice was clear, stiffly determined and practical.

"Some things we can't change in this life. But others we can. We'll do this psychiatrist thing if we have to, O.K.? This family didn't give up any arms or legs or lives, but we gave up a whole way of life, a future for you kids. I think that's enough and it's going to stop here. With you."

Stunned, silent, I stared at the simple release I'd prayed for, so crisp and official in my hand, not knowing that before the end of the year, we'd be sitting in the same bar, at our usual table, trading relieved smiles as we watched otherwise grim footage of a fleet of helicopters landing, loading and still leaving all sorts of pushing, desperate people as the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam.

But that night, I looked at my father across the dimly lit table in The Harem. All I could see was the same man who'd dropped me off at the house so many years ago with drying tears and ice cream sticky on my wrist, and the way he

drove away; throwing a mild thumbs up out the window, smiling a melancholy smile, cloaked in an acceptance of things made possible by his aversion to conflict and his great love for his children.