Orphan: A Reflection on the Death of Parents

Victoria Smillie

Being an orphan isn't something you're expected to give much thought to at 45. The world you see is the same world, the job is the same job. On days like today the light is as clear, the colours as luminous in the sunlight as they would be were you not orphaned. Surely that is true. But there is a doubt there, an agitation of the mind.

Parents and children, they form a frame in your middle years. Parents behind, children in front, you in the middle. Looking over your shoulder you can say — that's where I came from — and looking towards your children? — no, not where you're going. Your children go forward by themselves. Leave you as you left your parents. Or do your parents leave you?

Father became ill gradually. Always busy on someone else's behalf, he found himself increasingly frustrated by his limitations: breathlessness, chronic indigestion, a lack of energy. Since his retirement ten years earlier he had delighted in each day. He told how he had thanked God as he threw back the bedclothes (regimented sheets, blanket, eiderdown, bedcover — none of the flaccid lack of substance of those duvets adopted by us, his children) that he had been granted another day's play.

For much of it was play for him. He played in the garden, played going for drives in the countryside, played with innumerable projects in his garden shed. He played being granddad and played, when we his children were available, at the long-standing game of being Daddy. He'd perfected most of the games with years of practice, and they gave him enormous pleasure. It was all the more frustrating therefore that despite those years of practice the one game he couldn't get the hang of was husbands and wives. He played with great enthusiasm, and would greet the promise of each new day's opportunity with optimism, but however hard he tried, the rules evaded him, giving a glimpse of their complexity only in his defeat. Was it surprising he sulked now and then? He tried so hard, yet not only were his efforts unsuccessful, they generally went totally unrecognised.

For mother, the object of his ardent, clumsy, lifelong passion, it had ceased to be a game many years ago. She had played the game earnestly as a younger woman. She had played by the rules, diligently improved her techniques, never kept anyone waiting, never let the side down. That she hadn't won the trophy

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she'd been playing for — affluence, security, her own car ('all I want is my own little mini'), a three piece suite to succeed the tenacious wartime utility survivor — was a constant affront to her principles of justice and fair play. The shy, sombre little girl looking out at the world from under her huge-brimmed Girl Guide's hat had diligently learnt the social skills and the pronunciation to qualify her for a place in the top team, wife and mother to the aspiring middle classes. But she'd chosen the wrong partner, all enthusiasm but no technique, and most damning of all, no ambition. Most wounding of all to her pride and vanity she had, in her younger days, had her pick of partners.

As his illness progressed father became debilitated. He found he couldn't eat as he had done. Food had always been his reassurance, his reward for deeds well done. Recognisable food, meat, potatoes, pies and cakes, and especially since having given up smoking after many years, chocolate and fudge. He found himself reduced to soup, to custard, jelly and ice cream, like a child recovering from a tonsillectomy. But he didn't like to bother the doctor, a busy young man with 'real' patients to deal with. At last under family pressure he dutifully went to the surgery, where he played the game of cheerful patient. 'Nothing really wrong, doctor, just indigestion. Only came for some peace at home.' And the doctor, a busy young man with real patients to deal with, prescribed antacids and told him he was in remarkably good fettle for a man of his age.

So father's face went peakier, and his eyes grew restless. His hug, though just as robust, became bonier. The enjoyment he'd always derived from the smells and sight of his food were an increasing torment now that he could no longer clean his plate with sighs and cutlery cracks of appreciation.

Mother's heart sank with apprehension as her indignation rose, witnessing the unwitting collaboration of doctor and patient. She tired of running up and down the sidelines with restorative potions, stepped forward and blew the whistle. Undaunted by the politesse of medical practice she abducted father from the familiar surgery and ensconced him in a new one. The move unleashed the demons previously held in check by ignorance and collusion. Father needed surgery and was to have it.

There was a most remarkable recovery from that first operation, despite the gravity of the condition it exposed. Father took up the role of good patient, cheerful, resilient, enthusiastic for recovery. But by Christmas he was unable to do little more than pick at his meals, his body shrunken in his best suit. Being driven home in the car he had to call a halt, and got out unaided to retch miserably into a ditch whilst mother and I averted our gaze to protect his dignity.

All too soon the remnants of that dignity were further frayed. Painkilling drugs distanced him from reality. His beloved car was taken from him, out of temptation's reach, yet postman and milkman found him fully dressed on an early Spring morning, busily searching for it and fretting that he was late for an appointment with my sister.

Mother, my sister and I came together for those last ten days, taking it in turn to sit with him, to sleep, to attend to the intimate details of terminal care. The little

house was a cell of concern. Sitting through the shortening night, listening to the noisy, rusty, riveting bellows of his breathing. Creeping downstairs to make solitary cups of tea in the small hours only to find mother dozing on the sofa, nursing her small dog, unable to face her bed.

He was distressed for a few days when still aware that the hands bathing him as he lay wasting in his bed were those of his daughters. Despite soothing words of love and affection he whimpered with unhappiness, but that soon passed into stillness.

Waiting for death is reminiscent of waiting for a birth, the family joined in a vigil for the inevitable. But there was no potential for joy, only for grief and distress. Father held on to life by increasingly feeble but resilient threads. There was a pervading air of unreality, of knowing what was to come, in some moments willing it to come to end the distressing, demeaning running down of the vital functions.

All that remained of father was angular boniness jutting through fine, tired skin, sore in places despite all our best efforts, with nothing, no flesh or fat to cushion bone against bedding. His breathing was irregular, his pulse almost indiscernible. It was hard sometimes to acknowledge that this was father. Easier to believe that he would walk through the door in those still, early hours of the morning and ask what was going on. Despite my earlier apprehension there grew a tender acceptance of intimacy with his half-naked, emaciated body. The intimacy became as familiar and unquestioning as that with a small child. Father was already lost to us, we had instead his relic, which elicited this tender response because it was all we had left of him.

The doctor and district nurse were clearly surprised at the tenacity with which he held on to a sort of life. On Thursday the expectation was that he might die at any time, yet Sunday came and he appeared basically unchanged. Frequently there were pauses in his breathing, and we stopped too, hearts clutched with apprehension, until there was a faint flutter of the closed eyes, a slight twitch of the hand, and he would draw breath again.

He no longer recognised nor acknowledged us. Mother, as if to assure the nurse he was not yet dead, put her face close to his and called his name. He stirred, frowned, and made faint sad noises as if seeking something. 'Hush', said the nurse to mother, 'don't call him back'.

As late as Wednesday night he had sent a whispered message to mother. 'Go and whisper "I love you" in that big girl's ear' was the request, accompanied by a faint, tired grin. They were his last coherent words.

I was with him on the morning he died. I noticed a change in the rate and depth of his breathing, and called my mother and sister to come at once. The three of us sat or knelt with him on the bed between us. And as we held each other and him he simply stopped breathing. We could still see the pulse in his neck, but then he made little gestures with his mouth and tongue — gentle movements, not of distress — and the pulse faded, and he was gone.

We called the nurse, and whilst she was with him I picked fresh flowers from the garden for his room. Then I went to the woody warmth of his shed and wept. The doctor came and embraced mother, telling her how brave she had been. There

was a hiatus whilst waiting for the undertakers and I had the chance to be alone with father again. I lay with my head on his still warm, bony chest. I stroked and held his fingers, which had turned the colour of ivory and were already cold. His forehead too was cool and his skin had lost the resilience of life. But his smell, the smell of his hair, of him, was still there.

They took him away too soon, his body hardly visible under the black shroud. The depression he had left in his mattress was still warm, I know, I lay in it for a while and slept in the bed that night to hold something of him to me.

Mother raged and grieved at his death, and at him. Such a good man to suffer such a painful end when other, evil men would likely die sudden or peaceful deaths. And why had he left her alone, why couldn't people go together after so long a time as partners? Children together, they had been married very nearly fifty years.

Although she was often despondent we had thought mother was gradually getting over his death. We went on holiday together that summer to the guest house where she had stayed with father in previous years. It was a good holiday, but when I look now at those photographs I see a tired face, with none of the vivacity of which father was so fond.

That Christmas I had my customary party, the house full of friends and family of all ages. As she left to go, mother collapsed in the hall. Only moments before she had been teaching a girlfriend how to rock and roll. I knew as I saw her face and heard her stertorous breathing as we waited for the ambulance that this was not something from which she would

wish to recover. The nurse in accident and emergency who came to tell us of her death had tinsel on her hat and decorating her sensible black shoes. When we went through to kiss mother goodbye she looked composed and peaceful, unscathed as father had been by the indignity and ravages of his illness. Her skin was silken soft and fragrant with face powder. She had had the death she would have wanted for him.

She was buried in the pair of raspberry pink silk pyjamas I had given her only the previous Christmas. Never worn in earnest, she had put them on as soon as she had opened the parcel and given us an impromptu cabaret, shedding the trousers, and in jacket and tights giving high kicks and pirouettes. Father had grinned with delight at her wanton, exuberant performance.

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