

The Great Man

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After the last breath, the body was just a long dark shape, the silver head turned toward the window, or perhaps toward a particular person, perhaps seeking something from one of his many children gathered in a tight mass around the bed, though we all agreed later how unlikely that was.

At last, I whispered, daring anyone to think I hadn't said *amen*. My sister Bitsy choked on a laugh. "You're awful," she whispered and squeezed my arm, then continued sniffing into her handkerchief.

We'd been standing for hours, some of us for nearly a day, I even longer, as soon as word went out that he'd taken a bad, perhaps a fatal, turn. The disconcertingly fresh smell of pine came in through the windows that opened onto the back garden, in sharp contrast to what had just transpired on the bed.

There was much to see to before all this was done. I was usually the one who did what needed doing.

And so the Great Man was dead. My brothers and sisters were gathered in the house where most of us grew up to see to his memorial service. We excluded from the preparations the participation of his current wife; she knew why and I was too much of a gentleman to air my grievances. Suffice it say that none of us needed any longer to shield her inexplicably contentious behavior from the world. "Let her sink," Bitsy said to anyone who'd listen.

My father was a Great Man but not a great man to most of my half brothers and sisters, with a few notable exceptions; it was common knowledge in the family to which of us I refer. To the circumscribed, publicized, petty, and frenetic society in which he moved with such apparent ease and pleasure, he was a "lion," a "mountain," his talent was "magisterial," his wit variously "dry" and "caustic," as a social commentator he was "without peer." As a result of this talent, this force of personality, this "greatness," he occupied many social worlds

and when the Great Man died there was an extraordinary amount of details to be arranged, having to do with strata, glamour, and personnel. Grief took a back seat to spectacle.

There was also a small but vocal cadre of naysayers who had long trumpeted their revisionist assessment thus: a small talent stretched to its limit, his books written with cynical calculation to seem tossed off and wry, sprinkled with easy and shallow aphorisms, bolstered by bookstore and the occasional television appearances that spotlighted what Americans liked to believe was a writer: homely but friendly looking, tall and slightly stooped, unrepentantly randy, with a big from-the-chest laugh, not averse to letting his fans know just what he thought of his competition, and winking to let everyone know he was helpless in the face of the truth.

“How much are we getting?” Gwen asked. “I mean, after it’s all divvied up. I mean, boo hoo and all that, but seriously, what’s the ultimate take?” She and Arthur were nibbling shrimp toast in the pantry.

“Even if it’s a lot, divided so many ways,” Arthur said. “Sorry, Henry. We must sound horrible. You should get a larger share. You deserve it.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want anything.”

“Want it or not, you’re going to get it.” There was an unpleasant edge to his voice; Arthur was always a bully. “I just never had the stomach to stay in the same room with him for very long.”

“You are disgusting, Arthur.” Gwen scooped up the last of the shrimp. “Why don’t you go and drink something?”

“Good idea,” Arthur said, adding: “Don’t sign anything, either of you.”

Greedy and legally entitled as they were, none of my brothers and sisters was prepared to deal with the details of the disposition of the estate. A chorus line of lawyers was even now tap dancing on the steps of the townhouse, each representing the interests of this or

that party. There were the former wives and common-law pretend-ers, the older estranged sons, the adored and adoring, wryly tolerant daughters, the under-tens who were taught his place in cultural history, the toddlers who knew daddy by the smell of Johnny Walker, the nieces and nephews he adopted, the strays he fostered, and others, strangers, the issue of liaisons not made public, who showed up on the days succeeding his death, most bearing the GM's mark: eyes, nose, mouth, gestures, repeated with minor variations, so that none of us felt completely unique; that quality was left to him alone and left to us was making what we could with the resemblance. Some of my brothers grew beards, others grew fat. Some sisters colored their hair or wore theatrical make-up, some even had their faces surgically remade. The Great Man commented publicly on the subject without referring to any of his offspring in particular but this omission was loud with bite; I spent many hours consoling my insulted siblings after one of daddy's rants appeared in an article in *Allure*.

The house was visited by the journalists, the photographers, the social analysts, the television news crews, the editors, the agents, the fans. There was too the unfortunate biographer, who was hand-picked by my father to do the legend justice, polite and eager and insistent, dismayed but not discouraged that none of the spawn would speak of the great and the dead. He was exiled to the garden to chat up former students of the GM who primarily seemed eager for their names to be linked in print to his, all the while burnishing the luster.

Should I have, could I have, did I even *want* to keep them out? There was daddy and there was the Great Man; it was an endless source of confusion and anxiety, a frightening, slightly sickening thrill, being a son and a fan.

The day I discovered who he was really was, at least to me, at least as far as I was concerned, began with my slow climb up the staircase following his voice, finally locating him in what was once, I believe, a dining room. I remembered the room from family meals when I had just learned to walk: the color of the walls a deep blood

red that was said to stimulate appetite but made me lose mine. The house was maze-like, and grew more so as the wives became younger and the GM less patient with fussing. Rooms led into rooms leading past mirrored hallways so that without him as a guide, I could never be quite sure where I was, even though I had spent the first fifteen years of my life there.

The GM had spiky white hair (gelled, to set the record straight), and had not yet quite perfected that air of loose-limbed affability his fans so loved; I did mention that I was a fan? He was wearing jeans and a pale blue shirt. He was very tall. Before we got down to business, my business, he made me listen to him read, from the reissue of one of his books, a new introduction by his pal John Updike, then brought out a box of photos, showing me one of him and William Styron and John Cheever drinking at the Cedar Tavern, another of him and Tennessee Williams running naked into the surf in Provincetown, another of him and Susan Sontag lighting cigarettes, and on and on. I was twenty-two. I had just spent what should have been my last semester in Davenport College at Yale instead at Austin Riggs, recovering from a nervous breakdown. I had come to hear his reaction to the memoir I'd written.

"What'd you want to do this for?" he asked. "Not to get my approval, I hope."

I looked down, around, not at him. Papers were everywhere. There was no desk. He wrote on his lap, using a stack of magazines to cushion the Docket brand legal pads to which he'd dedicated novel number eight. I sat in an armchair opposite him. He cradled his chin in his hands, elbows on his knees, waiting for my answer.

The silence went on and when I finally dared look up saw the slow shake of his head: once again I had disappointed him.

"It reads like a case study," he said. "Is that what you think you are? A case study?" He found a cigarette pack crushed under his leg, took one out, lit it and leaned back. "All this complaining about the past. A privileged past, I might add. You think I had anything when I started? You think I had your opportunities? I *made* my opportunities."

He pointed at me with his cigarette. "Let me tell you something you don't know. I married all my wives with a particular eye for siring good-looking children." His eyes were open very wide and he laughed. "Have you taken a look at your siblings lately? A pack of beauties, and that includes you too, Henry." He laughed again, that famous laugh, choking and wheezing and weeping. At the end of it he tossed my manuscript into my lap. "Write fiction, sweetheart. It's the only game in town for an honest man and I think, God help you, that's what you are."

He was right, of course. I'd held back the story I wanted to write, afraid to hold the truth up to the light, afraid that if I told the story of my life it would be clear that it was only my life with him I'd be telling. Narcissist that he was, that's what he really wanted to read. *What was it like being the son of the Great Man?* He wouldn't care what I said about him, what awful stories I might tell, what secrets I revealed. He just wanted me to admit that he was the star of my life, that all I could manage at that point was a supporting role. And of course it was inevitable that he would be my first reader but since that was the case, I couldn't write it. He'd have to be dead for that to happen and I told him so.

"At least you have something to look forward to," he told me back.

Can I be blamed for choosing myself over him? My siblings would understand. In fact, they'd cheer. I know they would. I'm sure of it.

As funeral preparations went on, I had managed to avoid being alone with my only full-brother, Ashton. He was the Great Man's oldest son; they had not spoken to each other for many years at the time of the GM's death. He was known among the rest of us as the Damaged One or the Most Damaged One, a disappointment, the biggest one, to the Great Man.

"We drank a lot together when I was a kid," Ashton said, cornering me on the stairwell to the basement where I'd gone to replenish the wine supply for the endless parade of sympathizers. "Cept I

turned out...well you can see for yourself, huh? A car wreck. A ruin.”

“Well...”

“You’re right. As usual. A ruin would suggest that I was something else once, something pure and worthy and ... and I wasn’t that, I was never that. Oh yeah, a pretty boy. Ha ha. Well, I saw to that.”

It was true; he’d lost his good looks a long time ago, carved them out of his face as sure as if he’d taken a knife to himself, but not before he’d married a series of women and had a series of children. Just like the GM. Ashton said, “You know what my problem was? No imagination.” He stared at me for a long moment and for the first time I saw that he hated me and how that hurt him. He raised his glass with exaggerated ceremony. “I still like to drink,” he said. “And I’m good at it.”

We didn’t speak for a few minutes but I sat on the step above him and put my hand on his shoulder and he gripped it and held it tight. “Jesus,” he whispered, then clumsily embraced me and climbed over me to get out of the basement.

I made several decisions over the next few days: There would be a closed coffin. There would be no viewing of the body by anyone but the immediate family, which was large enough, thank you. What was the point, after all, of letting anyone see the fingerprint of how he died? His agent and publisher were eager to be let in and I said no to them with the serene and unquestionable entitlement of the bereaved; and at the last moment, the limos lined up along the block, changed my mind and gave them both the nod. I was in charge. I knew how to play the scene. My brothers and sisters were glad to let it go to me. No one dared defy me now, and I quelled any nascent rebellions that made themselves known, mainly of the girls, protesting that daddy would like this or not like that or find something cheesy or pretentious ... the girls could go on like this all day. Given how the GM had won their hearts early on and left them now with only sentimentality mixed with their drink of choice, I was not surprised.

They wept on my shoulder. They knocked on my door late at night to talk. I could handle the girls.

Ashton stayed drunk for the next few days and had to be speed-walked to the funeral and propped up in a chair, almost as if it was he who had died. The others—Carlton and Frederick and Brick and Bing, the twins, Sylvia and Gregory, Flip (for Philip), Van, Earle—oh who wants to be bothered with the full list? It's so long it takes on a kind of comic fecundity that seems thoughtless on the GM's part, actually vulgar.

I arranged things with the funeral home. I drew up the seating chart. I ordered the flowers. I conferred with the obituary editor of *The New York Times*. I hired the limousines. I bought a new suit and brought in someone that morning to shine everyone's shoes. There were a lot of balls to keep in the air but it was in my interests to do so and I so did.

Afterward, my sister Char, hair in wild disarray and still dressed like the teenaged nymphet she once was, came to say goodbye. "Is this the same outfit you wore when you seduced Bill Mundy?" I asked.

Char laughed to be remembered that way. "One of the *triumphs* of my adolescence," she said and gave the skirt a little flick of her fingernails. Then she turned serious; someone had died, after all.

"The last time I saw him he was so..."

"The last time you saw him, sister, he was falling down drunk."

"Now Henry..."

"He landed on top of the twins, as I recall, and you told him you would never speak to him again and then insisted he get a car service to take you home."

"I simply asked if he would be so kind as to call a taxi."

"And you didn't flinch at the hundred dollar bill he stuck in your bra either."

She stopped crying. "You're terrible."

"I have a good memory."

"For irrelevant details."

"For salient facts."

She put her hands on my shoulders. "You're all he had, you know. Henry, the Loyal. None of us were any good to him. And now we just want his money."

"Who says I don't?"

"It's not the same thing," she insisted. "All the rest of us ... we're all monsters. I've always known that. But you.... You were better than the wives. You had such ... *patience*."

And now it's paid off, I thought.

"Oh look at you. Don't be sad, baby."

How did everyone so misunderstand me? Was my impersonation of the dutiful son so expert that it had crossed the line into true service? Char put her arms around me and pressed her face to the lapels of my jacket. She smelled like camphor and gardenia. "Come and see us soon. I'll invite everyone up to the Bay, and we'll all get drunk and talk about how we hated him." She gave me a quick kiss on the ear. "You're exempt."

Ashton died during open heart surgery a few years later. Most of my sisters live in the West or in Europe and those that live in the East hunker down, winter and summer, and aren't heard from. The brothers are hard, if uninspired, workers brightened by a few who make a profession of idleness and are on their way to whittling their inheritance to nothing. I became the de facto spokesman for the GM. I moved into the house, took up residence in the blood-red dining room, became his legatee, his heir, his face, in fact, for I came to resemble him more and more as the years went on.

And I wrote novels as he had challenged me to do. I gave up the idea that my life apart from his life could be anything anyone would find worth reading, and dove full time into the attention his name brought me. I even dared to suggest, as one can do in fiction, that his end was not as had been formerly assumed, that the accidental

fall might not have been accidental at all, in fact, that one of his children—but which? and why?—might have been at the root of it, its cause. Titillated as I imagined my siblings might have been, they remain silent on the subject.

As the GM's son, the interviews always begin, and I am glad to expostulate on all that experience has been. I rarely tell the truth. I suggest, for example, in all the blushing modesty I can muster, that perhaps the Great Man was not 100 percent responsible for all his novels. Who is there to hold me to the truth? Who knows any of it for fact, in fact, but former wives and a cotillion of disaffected brothers and sisters, none of whom currently owns the spotlight as do I? A borrowed spotlight? Maybe. Who's to say? His advice was to write fiction, wasn't it? So I'm making it up as I go along.

And as for the Great Man himself ... well, I do think he might have admired the way I've handled the only obstacle that ever really held me back.