

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

Toti O'Brien
STEEL MAN

*an iron pot
an ancient bell
a set of ankle irons and links of chain
a primitive loom
a spinning wheel
a gourd for drinking
a leather whip with copper brads
— Ralph Ellison¹*

I received the first written note from my father when I was fourteen. I was still living home, though it wouldn't be for long. Sometimes I wonder if the impact of Dad's unexpected message precipitated my exodus. Did his words have such power? Maybe not quite, but they certainly left a mark.

Obviously, they took me unprepared. Why did he address me on paper, if I was on the premises? Couldn't he talk to me? The indirectness of the method created a strange, painful distance. He jotted down a few lines on a journal I kept in a locked drawer. That he had accessed it was itself a shock. I recall his handwriting, boldly engraved—the tip of his marker almost piercing the page. His small hieroglyphs pointed stubbornly to the left, unwilling to look forward, reluctant to all possible negotiation.

He sharply condemned my attendance to a concert, the night before, in the company of friends. I believed he and Mom had permitted my outing, but unknown by me something must have happened. Did they disagree? I doubt he would have conceded to her will. Did he change his mind, hatching his poisonous missive as an afterthought?

He substantially accused me of rebellion. I had revolted against his parental will, he stated, and terrible consequences would follow. His apocalyptic sentences upset me, tainting my simple joy (I had just listened to folk songs) with an undertone of damnation. His reproaches spoiled my pleasure, and they set a precedent. Each time I had a good time, since, apprehension of unforeseen punishment struck me. Not unreasonably, as such aftershocks kept falling upon me.

My adolescence had kicked in. I was a first daughter and Dad was experimenting. His poor, rural background didn't help him deal with urban teenage. Here's a birthday party. Here's a movie. What about an excursion to the beach? Mom, who came from middle class, saw nothing strange at those pastimes. She said yes and Father distractedly acquiesced. As he mulled upon it, doubt assailed him. Regularly, he worked himself in a righteous fury he then poured over me—the ignorant culprit.

It all started with that naughty letter, not only mean in tone, but so convoluted in style I hardly could decipher it. Was I truly the recipient? Were those fatherly words? A judge would formulate a verdict that way. A pope would use such expressions to condemn heresy. Dad had donned a dark robe, climbed onto a metaphorical podium to increase his authority. Did he think a cold, pompous tone would strengthen his power? On

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

the contrary, his pose alienated me entirely. It conveyed a lack of intimacy barely concealing hostility, faintly yet unmistakably reeking of hate and disgust.

I still vividly recall my reactions. First, rage and an urge to confront Father, claim my innocence and prove his unfairness. Then a wish to toss the letter, forget all about it. Oh, the beauty of avoiding resentment, the inutility of grudge-keeping, the nobility of forgiveness! My catholic education pressed on, choking me with its gluey rhetoric of goodness.

However pretty my intentions, no page was ever thorn from my teenage journal. After a lifetime of traveling—farther and farther away from the nest where poor Dad tried to keep me safe—it takes me one minute to find it. Here's the note. Here are some of the words Father used: *decay*, *disintegration*, *explosion*. Such threats I cast over my family, alas, due to an act of insubordination I never committed.

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For more than two decades, the mode of communication between Father and me was sheer silence. Soon after I turned forty I wrote him a letter.

Times were tough for me. My marriage was coming to an end, filling me with a sense of failure. I was horribly sad. I feared all my relationships might be doomed to disaster, and I assumed my poor interactions with Father (oscillating between absence and tyranny on his behalf, between terror and anger on mine) negatively weighed upon them. Luckily, I thought, he was still alive. Perhaps during my absence he had changed. Old age might have matured him, endowing him with wisdom. Should I try reaching out to him?

How naïve! What was I hoping to achieve? Did I long for a claim of responsibility on his part, maybe words of excuse? Or was something else unconsciously motivating me? Maybe I feared Dad's reaction to my divorce, even at a distance... Maybe I wished to prepare him, maybe to shield myself, negotiating a truce ahead of time. I most likely groped in the dark, looking for some kind of support, some kind of compassion.

I remember penning the letter in the solitude of my studio. I could summarize it as follows: "You weren't there for me when I grew up, if not to fight and chastise me. I have missed a fair, just, understanding father and I miss him still. Are you able to fulfill your role? It isn't too late."

The exact words have faded, but I sharply recall the unexpected panic I felt as I dropped the envelope in the mail. I realized I had walked straight into a trap, asking for something of the greatest importance—love, the lack of which had quite damaged me—to the person who had failed to deliver it. Chances were he still would, and by pleading I had made myself vulnerable. I had confessed how wounded I was, then exposed my wound to yet another blow. I feared I'd precipitate very low, should Dad's answer be as lacking as it was expectable.

But Dad, now in his mid seventies, had changed as I hoped. His life circumstances had improved. He had relaxed, while reaching an age when

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

he had time for enlarging his focus and embracing others, including his progeny. I recall reading his lines in the quiet luminosity of my studio, where I had written mine, and the soothing relief pouring over me. What I felt was peace. It must have been what I had sought.

Dad's reply was concise, clean and kind. In a nutshell, it said: "I understand. I am available. I will be on your side from now on". Can't I be more detailed? For inscrutable reasons, the missive giving to my life a turn for the best is nowhere. Strange, as I have treasured every single word from Dad, even those I should have thrown away. Then what happened? Irony would suggest I hallucinated the entire thing. Dreamed about it, built a myth for myself—but no. Those were tough and unstable times. I might have hidden the letter for privacy. I might have lost it.

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Not a big deal, as the change in nature of my interactions with Father is proved by a small stack of missives that he wrote afterwards. Only once on a while—he didn't become my pal, or particularly effusive. But we had precious exchanges on practical matters, and on various ideas I enjoyed exploring with him. Testimonials of those happy times are neatly stapled, duly archived. Pages covered by his unique handwriting are followed by impersonally typed ones. As he got more tired, he began scribbling drafts Mom copied and emailed. I printed them, eager for physicality, for things that I could keep, hold, and touch.

In those years we talked on the phone and we had conversations in person. In those years I had a father and I learned it was a good thing. Then he grew even older, and he wrote no more.

Or quite rarely. He composed a missive when my son, then in college, took a course related to Dad's field of expertise. On his grandson's request he sent bibliographic suggestions, a few opinions and questions. My son didn't reply. Dad resented his silence, as he angrily demonstrated when they later met. He was furious, outraged, and he very aggressively expressed it.

In spite of his age and of attenuating circumstances, a wave of revolt washed over me as I witnessed his behavior. I had read his note to my son, and it was unanswerable. It resembled Dad's first letter to me, though it had no punitive purpose. But the tone was equally dry, distant, frozen. Nothing pierced through the surface of icy scholarly terms, fancy syntactic turns. I mean no feelings, no humanity. Once again, whom was he writing to? Was he addressing his grandson? Or was he so enamored with his own voice, he had lost all awareness of his interlocutor? No one could have replied to such letter, I thought, and was tempted to scream in my father's face.

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As I leaf through the small collection of Dad's epistles, I stump into a piece of evidence ringing no bell. Look... the envelope is crumbling, destroyed by humidity. The ink has melted with dampness. I have a hard

time unscrambling the contents, not because of their abstruse nature, but because they are vanishing, which fills me with unbearable pain. I neither recognize nor recall this letter, dated from the silent years, my twenties and thirties. Yet it is addressed to me—in an unfamiliar tone.

I mean a familiar one. Dad is writing from the US. He is in Washington, where his slow and arduous career has finally brought him for an international conference. Success didn't come smoothly to Father in spite of his obvious talent, discipline, and commitment. Obstacles on his way were huge, yet he didn't give up. When the delayed honors were delivered, relief must have been profound. Joy must have flooded him, like whatever submerged this piece of paper I'm holding.

It's in joy that he writes, noting his impressions, observations, also emotions as he experiences the American capital town on his first overseas journey, and the company of international scholars where indeed he belongs. He writes without pride or rhetoric, with an open heart, as a regular human being confiding... in me? Am I the recipient?

He is eager of leaving the hotel. He seeks the sea that he thought the seagulls announced, but he finds the Potomac instead. Good enough. He needs freedom, an open horizon. Does he long for home? He feels somehow extraneous to international academia, as if asking himself if the goal painstakingly achieved was worth the pain. Slightly disappointed at the excess formality of scholarly interactions, at the limits imposed to expression, the scarce conviviality. He is frustrated of not being able to speak fluent English—a language he has learned from US soldiers in July 1943, vivid in his mind yet uneasily coming out of his mouth. He opts for his mother tongue, therefore losing impact over his audience. "No one listened," a colleague candidly comments. "Why did you even come?" He must ask himself the same question. There is melancholy mixed to his satisfaction—a sense of irrelevance, a suspicion of vanity. But joy is also there, a thrill of accomplishment, the exhilaration of having crossed the great waters in more than one way. How he wishes he could see the ocean, right now...

The letter is briskly interrupted. "I will tell you the rest of the story," Father says, "another time. It is six thirty already and at seven I must be elsewhere".

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Father, in his mid eighties, suffered from an extreme form of anemia, making it hard for him to breathe, walk, do anything at all. He didn't complain, as it wasn't like him. On the contrary, he kept stubbornly on task.

Thinking of his present state was excruciating, as he had been always endowed with excess vitality. I sent him small messages of support, tokens of affection—some of them comical in tone, as I tried convincing him to adopt an unsavory diet that might improve his condition. Unexpectedly, he sent back the funniest of notes. It read like a nursery rhyme. How was that? He had always been so darn serious...

*an antique sadiron, possibly goose handed
worn horseshoes, consumed by trotting on cobblestone
rusted barrel hoops, soaked in acid
a few stonebreaker's mallets*

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

*and woodcutter's pickaxes
Auschwitz's barbed wire
chunks of melting steel
medieval bell clappers
fancy festoons from wrought-iron balconies of the nineteen thirties
a complete set of stainless pots and pans...*

The above list described, Father said, the menu he had ordered for his birthday. I so loved it I memorized it. It reminded me of a similar passage found in Ralph Ellison's novel, "Invisible Man" — a book Dad, sure as death, never read.

*

The iron rhyme and the Washington vignette are two tiny windows, opening over a world of relaxed humanity Father liked to keep sealed. Even the missives he sent during our 'good years' had a verbal complexity spoiling them of intimacy. I liked them anyway, as they were attempts at communication and didn't contain hostility. On the contrary, they build bridges, maybe a bit tall, a bit uncomfortable, yet still aimed at connecting opposite shores. I guess I had grown accustomed to the scarce accessibility of Father's phrasing, to his cravings for obscure terminology, to the feeling that, right after the initial address all the way until the final greetings, I would disappear from the scene and he'd talk to himself, or to a wide, anonymous group of students.

In my worse moments, I said, I saw such impersonality as an unforgivable lack of respect and affection. I was wrong, but it took me a lifetime to understand it. Words, and the ability of using them, were Father's best asset. His deal with existence had been that he would cultivate himself, become a college professor in a highly theoretical discipline, hatch deep thoughts expressed in exquisite manner. Writing was Father's god and his demon, it was Father's everything.

Thus the formal missives he addressed to me were, of course, special gifts, the only ones he could conceive and produce. He wrought paragraphs as if he were hand-carving a wooden doll, baking a delicious pie just for me. Of course, especially as a child I starved for dolls and pies, and received complicated sentences instead. But those were Father's roses — the secret garden he had obstinately grown. The one thing he was proud of, without knowing he was.

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My dad was the son of a twice-immigrant, ambulant coppersmith. Since the age of three he helped Grandpa in the forge, and they traveled by cart to the markets where they sold their fare. Early on, dad decided he would study to become a philosopher, specializing in the fields of rights and politics. He succeeded.

¹ Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage International, 1980. p.181