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Pamela Reitman

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Lost Keys

by Pamela Reitman

My father's sixty-four and brain-damaged. He arrived from Paris last summer with a briefcase of important papers and one large suitcase containing all of his possessions. I found him a place to live nearby where he could be on his own. He lasted less than a year.

Most of his later life he had been an actor. The last five years he had tutored French students in the English language. Now he's in the grip of paranoid hallucinations.

It's 1984 and I should feel lucky to have just secured a place for my father in one of the few existing Alzheimer's special care units. But I can't help feeling how awful it's going to be for him there. During my morning visit I saw patients lying rigid in contorted positions on Naugahyde recliners. Others swayed from heel to toe, endlessly spitting the same phrases into the air. All have substantially less mental capacity than my father does. This is what worries me: Dad having to live among the horrific forms of his own impending demise.

I have to pack him up for the move. His seventy-two hours in the emergency psychiatric unit run out tomorrow. At the end of Lyon Street, stone steps lead up to the three-story, turn-of-the-century mansion, which has been converted into a board-and-care for a handful of independent elders. The front lawn, long, rectangular, and bordered by a sidewalk all around, is a hefty piece of real estate in its own right. The grass, mowed short and watered to an intoxicating green, contrasts with the adjacent woods, the eastern edge of San Francisco's Presidio Park. The pungent smell of eucalyptus floats in the April breeze and mixes in the treetops with salty air blown in from the ocean.

My father's two small rooms on the ground floor, formerly servant's quarters, have always been quiet. Today they're tomb-like, filled with his absence. Everything appears to be in order, except for the unmade bed, abandoned in fear, the night before last. I imagine him tossing the covers, bolt-

ing out, oblivious to the hour, midnight, and his bare feet. My mind's eye still sees him, clad in his blue-and-white striped pajamas, gray hair spiked out in all directions, banging at my door in the dark of night. He thought he had come to save me from "them," people in his house who he was sure were out to kill me.

I pull his suitcase out from under the bed and spread it open on top.

When the emergency room doctor asked Dad if he could go home, he yelled, "No," with such vehemence it seemed the pressure of his voice would split the midline seam of his chest wide open. It was best for him to stay in the psychiatric ward, I keep telling myself. I couldn't have managed him in that state.

I take his good gray suit from the closet. Where he's going, he won't need this.

I found the special care unit in less than forty-eight hours. It's all happened so fast. One day Dad's independent. The next he's paranoid and psychotic. Now, the doctors have determined that he can no longer live on his own.

It's a handsome suit, the one he wore to our joint birthday dinner. Maybe he'll wear it again someday.

I pull a shirt from a hanger. It's wrinkled and exudes an unpleasant odor. The same is true for all the shirts. I open his drawers. The underwear is soiled. I'm disgusted. And panicky. He was always so fastidious. What was going on here? The balls of socks are separated by color. I unroll a pair and smell. Ugh. I go to the closet and spot the laundry bag in the darkest corner of the floor, empty. Why didn't the house staff tell me that Dad hadn't had any laundry to do? How come I didn't detect it?

I take the suit out of the suitcase and start to throw all the dirty clothes into it. At the bottom of the sock drawer, there's a glint of silver. It's a key. I hold it up, go to his front door, and try it out. It fits.



I remember telling him, the first time he lost his key, "Keep this one in a safe place, Dad." He must have taken pains to hide it. After all, his freedom to come and go was at stake.

Being here is as though I'm inside his brain the way it was these last few months. I'm so shocked that I momentarily become him: keep the key safe, she said. Here's safe, under the sock pile. No one will see. Ah.

Holding the shirt in hand, I imagine him thinking: where does this go? Am I getting dressed? Or, undressed? Here are other shirts on hangers and one free hanger, so, ah, this must be it. I'll hang it up. Yes. Maybe.

The mind source of this thought stream is a place that emits little bubbles of fear in a constant, steady stream. I imagine that in every waking moment, he fears the loss of memory, fears so profoundly that the fear itself may blot out the brain's remaining capacity to retain the event that has already happened. Then, in the absence of memory, the fear remains, unhampered by the mind's attempts to grasp at the past. It becomes a fear in, and therefore of, the present, fear of reality, of experiences that are not really happening because they're not making a neural impression that can be reconstructed.

Sometime later he wants his key. He doesn't rummage through drawers, because he doesn't recall having hidden it. The key has mysteriously disappeared. Or, perhaps, someone has taken it. And if that can happen, all reality is unpredictable. It's not difficult to see how a person would become crazed.

I'm troubled by how much I haven't understood, how happy I was to accept his eager smiles as meaning that all was well. Perhaps I should have been more willing to penetrate his privacy. Perhaps he took pains to make sure I wouldn't, to protect me. I'll never know. What hovers here is more than the stale body odor of an elderly man. Still stifling the air, it's the noxious fume of fear in all its forms, from shy timidity, through honest panic, to bald terror. It's an acrid smell, the bioeffluvium of paralysis, as my father stood motionless, shirt in hand, unsure of what to do.

There are other finds, two more keys and blue aerograms from Camille, the woman he'd been living with in Paris before he became ill. I gave him

the letters to keep, after reading them aloud, hoping her handwriting or the stamp might evoke a pleasant recall. Here's also a letter he attempted in return. Only one sentence, painfully scrawled, an introductory remark on the weather, followed by an unfinished phrase, "These days I've been . . ." How many hours did he sit with pen in hand? Why did he save it? So that someday she might know he had tried?

There's a page from his sketchpad, a small exercise. Short strokes, mainly yellows and oranges, pinks and greens — all light, bright, and airy. I would cry, if I could, over such delicacy and sweetness buried deep in this dark drawer. Both the letter and the drawing are remnants of abilities now entirely gone. I ache for the rest of the letter, the fully realized pastel.

I haul the suitcase and boxes to my car and head over the hill to see him. Knowing that life inside him flowed in the direction of love and art gives me some small courage.

When I arrive at the psychiatric ward, Dad appears from a doorway, as if someone pointed him in my direction and gave him a little push. He's heavily slumped in the shoulders. He looks down at the floor in front of him. Each step is labor. His slow motion peters out to a stop before he reaches me.

I walk over to greet him. His face is shrunken and wan. His dull eyes remain cast down. Little gray and white bristly hairs protrude from his skin, which has lost some elasticity and its high color. I want to believe he's playing the role of a senile man and doing a stupendous job of it. But his days in the theater are over. He's on the stage of his real life. Heavily

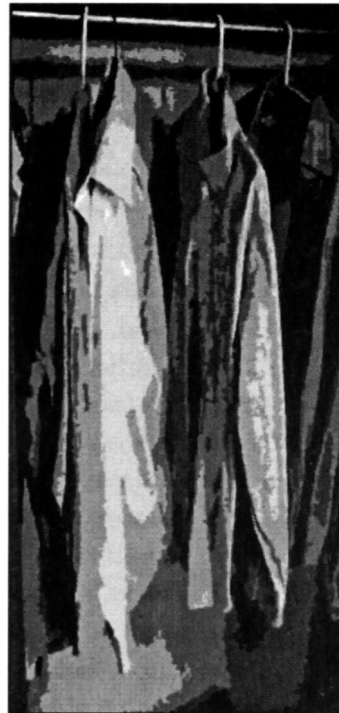


Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall



medicated, rendered too subdued to go mad again, he stares at the floor as if that's where he'll find his lost mind. I realize he hasn't been outside for two days.

"I'm taking him for a walk," I explain to the duty nurse. I lead Dad back to his room, pull his charcoal-gray cardigan, which has become shapeless and pilled, onto his limp body.

On the street, I'm not sure where to go. This isn't a pretty neighborhood. Dad may only just make it around the block, so that's what it's going to have to be. Maybe the fresh air will revive him. Instead, he recoils against a late afternoon gust of cool air, which has blown in strong from the ocean, preceding the fog. He puts an arm around me, not in his accustomed manner, but holding tightly and leaning his weight on my much smaller frame. I wrap both my arms around his waist to give him the support he needs. We walk this way, clinging to each other, shuffling forward slowly. Overnight, he's become old-man frail. Whipped by the wind, it feels as though he might perish in my embrace.

We walk to the end of the block, alongside the dreary walls of medical buildings, and round the corner. He has few words.

"I forgot to tell you . . ."

"Tell me now, Dad." Silence. We walk on and there's nothing of interest to point out. Not a flower, nor a tree. The noise of the commuter traffic assaults us.

"The way it is . . ."

"Yes? Tell me how it is, Dad." He only blinks, to moisten his eyes, dried out by the air. We're at the end of the block. Across the street is a small city park with a grassy field. He hasn't enough energy to make it there and back. Besides, it's a wide-open space, with no shelter from the weather. We continue around the block.

"Even so . . ." His words are severed from thought and blown away on misty wisps of fog into the colorless sky.

Back on the ward, I sit next to him on his bed and rub his back.

"I found a new place for you." He might not understand, but I feel obliged to tell him anyway. I speak slowly and pause between each sentence. "It's a nursing home. But it's a special place for people who have

Alzheimer's. You'll get good care there."

He nods slightly, but I can't tell whether it's a real response or an empty gesture.

"Tomorrow you'll go there. Tomorrow. I'll come get you."

His face is blank. I take it in my hands, hold my palms against his scruffy cheeks, still cold from the outdoors but with a faint warmth underneath. I kiss his forehead. No response. I bend his head down toward me and kiss the top of his head, pressing my lips gently.

"It's me," I whisper, "your daughter."

I move my lips slowly over the top of his head from one side to the other, covering the whole expanse of his bald crown with soft kisses.

"I'm here."

I tilt his head up and kiss the bridge of his nose between his brows. My lips barely land on each eyelid, then on his cheeks, nose, jaws, and chin, my kisses defining his face. I hold mine squarely in front of his, a few inches away, and reach down with my eyes into his vacant ones.

"I love you dearly."

There's a little quickening from the dark netherworld and the smallest rise of flesh on the top of his cheekbones.

"I'll come for you tomorrow, Dad. In the morning."

Back at home I sit on the couch, while the washing machine churns its first load. The fog piles up against the back door to the garden. From out in the bay the foghorn moans. My thoughts are scattered by a tear in formation, not in my eye, but in a crevice of my chest. Water molecules coalesce there into one large, pear-shaped drop. It hangs, as in a well, cradled against my heart, awaiting a force of emotion to press upon it and energize an upward flow.

Sorrow is slow, seepy slow. It washes back against the cleaved heart. The low groan of the foghorn invokes the might and power of the teardrop. But it continues to cling to the inside, afraid of its own release. Even as I sit here, the neurons in my father's brain sputter and fizzle. I feel abandoned. I seek to be free from loss. Bring him back, my heart calls. But there's no answer. Only the fog's lament. And unwept tears.

