

"Loss"

[an excerpt from *My Father's House*]

by Sylvia Fraser

The following is an excerpt from "My Father's House," a memoir published on September 15, 1987 by Doubleday, Canada, Ltd.

Danny's way of surviving was to cut off the past. After our divorce in 1977 I respected his wish for total privacy, though that made our break more an amputation than a parting.

Only once did I glimpse him during the next ten years. As I was shopping near our former apartment, I saw him park the red convertible we had owned, now filled to bursting with white chrysanthemums. I had been told, several weeks before, that he was remarrying soon. Instinctively, I knew he was festooning the home we had shared with flowers for his wedding. My first impulse was to rush over to wish him well, but a wiser part of me held back, knowing I must not allow my shadow to fall across his wedding day.

That poignant image of the little red car, abloom with white flowers, stayed with me for a long time.

Frequently, over the next few years I dreamt about Danny. Not as he was, but as he had been — a mate and a trusted friend. This did not indicate to me any longing for the past, only the honoring of our inner bond. On those rare occasions when I did dream of him as he was now — a man married to someone else — we would hug each other, weep with pleasure at our reunion, then go our separate ways.

My "separate way" included the wounding revelation, blocked for forty years by amnesia, that my father had sexually abused me throughout my childhood. Before retreating to California, where I could heal and integrate and perhaps write this story, I had a strong desire to see Danny. I wanted him to know that he had been the best mate anyone could ever want; that I had been compelled to leave him to struggle with demons far nastier than we could have guessed; that he had made survival possible by giving

me faith in myself.

We met at a downtown Toronto restaurant, full of dark panelling and good leather, one stormy afternoon in late November 1984. He looked the same as always — handsome with an affable almost cherubic smile, his light brown hair only slightly grayer and thinner. One thing was different and I noticed it immediately — a gold wedding band.

Danny's first question — "Do you still write?" — indicated this might not be the easy meeting for which I had hoped. My career was a noisy one, spawned in the same city. Such detachment seemed unnatural. When I offered him a copy of my latest novel, he politely declined. His avuncular stance was the sort used to humor a difficult legal client who insists on special attention. It seemed impenetrable.

I struggled to stick to my agenda. Eight months had gone by since my hidden past had exploded into my present. I thought I had been over this ground often enough, with enough people, to be dispassionate — even clinical. However, this special telling, with this special person, touched on a level of grief so deep I found myself unable to speak without the certainty of breaking. Fumbling in my purse for a purple felt pen, I began writing on cocktail napkins in block letters: I HAVE SOMETHING STRANGE TO TELL YOU. Eventually, in this peculiar way, my story was related.

Afterward, in a wet courtyard, just receiving the afternoon's first murky rays of sunlight, he held me tightly for several seconds. Then he touched my shoulderbag with a whimsical smile. "Thanks for my book."

I have always loved cats. My intense relationship with these animals began at age seven when my father threatened to kill my pet Smoky if I told anyone about our incestuous secret. As an adult I have owned four cats and, in every case, the

loss of one seemed to be an omen for loss or death or change in my own life.

Last December, as I was sorting papers in my California flat in preparation for my return to Toronto, I came across the birth certificate of a cat that had vanished a few months earlier. Of all the cats I've owned, this was my favorite, and I had mourned it with almost indecent grief. As I stared at its birth date — January 6 — I felt myself break into a cold sweat. It came to me that January 6 was the birth date of Danny's father, for whom he was named. Impulsively, I wrote on a piece of paper: LOSS or CHANGE or DEATH. JANUARY 6. DANIEL. Then I continued packing.

Back in Toronto, while I was revising my completed memoir for publication, an announcement appeared in a Toronto paper, making that day starkly different from any other:

"Suddenly, on January 6... Loving husband of... Dear father of..." Danny — my Danny for twenty years — had died of a heart attack at age 55.

Oh Danny, now I know the meaning of the verb to keen — to wail, to lament. A friend phoned me to spare me a colder shock. A quarter into a newsbox brings my confirmation. How important that quarter seemed as I fumbled it into its slot — twenty five cents to purchase official word of a husband's death.

I pick flowers for you at the florist's — painted daisies, the same as I carried in my bridal bouquet. It seemed important to choose each one myself, then to circle our former apartment block, looking up at our twelve lighted windows.

The newspaper says your family is receiving at the funeral home from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. and from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. I arrange to be there at 5:00, supported by a mutual friend, who knew us as a couple, who even shared our wedding anniversary. No one else is in your lying-in room — a small chapel set with an elegant mahogany casket. At first, I think I've

stumbled into the wrong place, the wrong life, the wrong death. I do not recognize the corpse in the coffin. Not even after staring. An old man with gray flesh lies in your place. Not one recognizable feature has made it through death and the cosmetician's art. How can this be? You looked yourself when I saw you two years ago. I know you died all at one time, all in one piece... Chest pains after a normal day at your law office. Next morning your wife phones the office to say you are fine. Half an hour later, you are dead. LOSS or CHANGE or DEATH. JANUARY 6. DANIEL. A ruptured heart.

Now I touch your hand. Your flesh is cool and dense. Dead, really dead. No comfort there. And yet, as I look at this mock up of you, I realize your corpse is the best advertisement for "something more" that I have ever seen. You are not here. That I know for sure. I am looking at your remains — that which is leftover. Dead and *gone*.

I grieve over what you have left for us. I speak to your corpse as if my message might get through. I tell you once again how grateful I am for our twenty years of intimacy, fifteen of them as man and wife. I wonder: what did you make of our last meeting? Did you learn that it was no offence to your present loyalties to love me in my proper context, our past? I regret that you never knew my better, wiser self, yet even as I form this thought I know you were attracted to my troubled spirit. I, your flock of one, your rescuee, was also your shadow, your sinner, your way of contacting your own rebelliousness, too deeply buried to touch. You lost a vital and valid part of yourself on the slippery slope to perfection. That part you found in me.

Why do people have to die before we begin to see them whole? Well, we played happily together, we worked hard together, we had adventures together, we took risks together. We laughed at the same things, had dozens of private jokes, spent hours and days and years with our hands on each other. You called me your Little Friend, and for many years I was. I sensed — as you did — that yours would be a short life while mine would be long. Some fragility there, not a long-lived family, whereas my great grandfather bought his last motorcycle at age 80.

My companion joins me at the casket. She speaks of you as "a gentleman." That epithet surprises me. It's a word reserved for our elders — but now, of course, we are the elders. I take a step back, see you through her eyes. Yes, it's the right word meaning far more than your three-piece

navy suit, your red tie and matching handkerchief. A gentle man. One who practised the truth of good manners — formalized compassion.

I take another step back to explore your habitat. A photograph offers the confirmation I have been seeking — there you are, exactly as you should be, beaming with optimism, your arm proudly encircling your son, age six, with your young wife embracing a daughter, age four. I don't recognize many of the names on your floral tributes. That gives me no pang. It's as it should be. Another life.

You are to be buried at 11:00 the next morning. I wasn't going to attend; finally, not to do so is unthinkable. The twelve years of our separation have melted. The twenty years of our union are fresh upon me. Some part of me has stayed married to you all these years. This will be my divorce as well as your burial.

Dressing for the occasion is fraught with pathos — the black bride, ritualistically preparing for her last date. The stockings I will wear, the black velvet coat, black muff, black boots — all acquire a mystique through association. My companion picks me up in ample time for your service. At 10:48, we discover we are at the wrong church. An anxious race across town brings us to the right church at the wrong time — simultaneously with the casket. I had intended to arrive with everyone else, sit toward the back, participate with stoicism and leave with dignity. Now, a side door allows us to slip into the very back row. Another friend, male, slides into the pew beside me. Your official mourners are on the aisle from left. I am on the aisle back right, supported in compassion by both the male and female principle. Appropriate, but a little too showy.

Yours is an Anglican church with gothic ceiling and an altar arched in stained glass. Now your casket moves slowly up the long central aisle, led by a white choir carrying a golden cross. At the first sound of those voices, high and haunting, I am lost... I am lost...

The hymns are unfamiliar. Did they mean anything to you? Last I knew you saved your skepticism for heaven and your good deeds for the earth. Did you change? The eulogy, given by your legal mentor, gracefully states your creed. "Daniel loved people. He saw the best in everyone..."

Your casket is drawn from the church, followed by your children, eyes sweeping the crowded pews, still unaware their father lies in that shiny box, stone cold.

Your young widow is dressed in white. She has a lovely face, full of an unspeakable sorrow. I, above all others, know the measure of her loss. My grief today is sharp and deep and clean, like the cutting of a knife through flesh to bone. Her grief has yet to die a thousand deaths. For me, this is closure.

As your long procession of mourners passes, I see that most of their faces, like the names on your wreaths, are unknown to me. Legal faces, correct and clear-eyed, used to containing grief. I am still trying to be inconspicuous, but so obviously in pain, as I grip one male hand and one female, that I'm becoming harder to miss. One or two mourners do make that difficult crossover from the formal line to embrace me, to say: "I'm glad you came." Their unexpected kindness, though deeply appreciated, unhinges me. It's been a cruel time, as well as a sorrowful one. Nobody's fault, no callousness intended. Your death took us all by surprise. I'm one wife, one widow too many. No one knows what to do with me. I don't know what to do with myself. I'm not supposed to feel pain while your funeral procession, with measured step, marches over me.

The last mourner leaves the church. No more need for artifice. I break.

I'm going to the cemetery, against all advice. It's necessary to see your body go down into the earth. Both of my companions have other engagements. I'm left outside the gate of Mount Pleasant Cemetery, watching your long cortege, headlights lit, from the wrong side of the street. By the time I make it through the traffic, the last car is rounding the first turn. I struggle to catch up. Now that last car is rounding a second turn. Now I am running, in full awareness of my absurdity, spared nothing there, the shadow of the lady in white, stumbling after your hearse, twelve years late.

Dare I cut across the graveyard, avoid some of the loops of the road? Wouldn't that be even more absurd, to come groping through tombstones? I think of my mother's oft-repeated refrain: What will the neighbors think?

The truth is, yours is the only prohibition still with the power to hurt. Yours was the voice that laughed away my social outrages, for which I'm sure this qualifies, yet yours is also the voice that told me I was no longer wanted in your life. And yet, and yet, no one can possess all of someone else. Not one wife or another. Not a mother or a father. Not a child. No one. I will be burying a different set of

memories, a different person from everyone else. What I'm doing now is no one's business but my own. Not even yours.

The braking of wheels on gravel. I stop running, grab for the tag ends of dignity. A blue sports car, door open. "Come on, get in." A colleague of yours, someone we both like. He rescues me, as I believe you would have done, drives me to the right place as your surrogate, steers me to the edge of the crowd gathered under your canopy while a few more words are said and your coffin plunges into the earth.

Afterward, we talk about you.

It's not quite over, not yet, not this long day. I've finished with one funeral in time for another — a memorial service for a compassionate friend and fine novelist: Margaret Laurence, 1926 to 1987. Ironically, here I am to sit with the family. As I walk up the aisle, no longer needing to be invisible, I encounter a rope marking off the first four rows. Paralyzed, I stare at it, unable to breach one more barrier, feeling myself begin to faint. A friendly arm

reaches out, pulls me in. Now I can cry fully and freely — for Margaret, for you.

I believe the only way to overcome loss is to absorb the good qualities of that which is lost. Surely that is the meaning of the Eucharist: "This is my body, this is my blood." I look forward to the dubious blessing of old age with your gentleness smoothing my rough edges, with your voice still sweet and clear in my ear: "It's O.K., Little Friend. Now, try again."

BRONWYN WALLACE

Anniversary

(in memoriam, Pat Logan)

The road turns off
just where it always does and rising
comes out to the second corner
where the graveyard is.
Your grave. You. Behind us,
in one of those reforestation stands
the government plants, the pines
grow taller in their narrow columns
as if to show me how there can be order
in returning what we owe.
I remember what someone told me
of a woman whose husband took her ashes,
as she'd asked him to, and with their children
travelled for a year to scatter them
all over the world, a gesture
that tries to say what death allows
in each of us, no matter how we meet it.

It makes me want
to tell you everything:
what I ate for breakfast,
my son's French teacher's name,
how my basil's doing this year
or the deal I got on this Lincoln rocker
from an antique place I've just discovered
on the Wilmer Road. The man there — you'd like
him, Pat — who told me how he'd farmed
for years and years and then risked everything
on something else he loved,
his hands stroking a desk or chair
just as they've bumped the right curve
of a cow's belly, learning the season
of the calf within, listening to wood now,
what to bring forth
from layers of decisions made by strangers,
for their own good reasons.

Remember that day you taught me
how to look for four-leaf clovers?
"Don't try so hard," you kept saying,
"just peek from the corner of your eye,
like this," running your fingers
through a patch and coming up with one
every time, surprised as I was
and with no more faith, but opening
your hand out anyway, that gesture
which belongs to any gamble,
no matter how crazy, the movement
by which a life gets changed
for keeps, a reach
for what we only hope
is there

just as this yearly journey reaches
deeper into what I only thought
I understood: your death
is final, and touching that
brings out the colours — certain
as the grain in oak or cherry —
of a wider life that grows
through the small demands the present makes
pushing me back to the car for the ride home,
already planning the sandwich I'll get
at the truck stop on the highway; empty now,
the woman who runs it taking the time
to put her feet up, sink back
into the knowledge that will hold her
until I arrive; my wave, her smile
what we'll begin with, the common
courtesies, as if they were nothing
to be surprised by.