RONALD F. CURRIE JR.

Loving the Dead

AUTUMN COMES TO Maine, and I begin to hate freely all over again. Without notice, the morning air turns sharp. Barn jackets emerge from closets. Trees shed leaves, apples. People smile, tape witches and black cats to their windowpanes, turn up the thermostat, smile, check the balance of their Christmas-club accounts, drink warm cider from ceramic mugs, smile, wrap their shrubs in plastic and burlap, marvel when the sky spits those first few abortive flakes of snow, smile, smile, smile. As if they've never experienced any of this before. As if they don't recognize death when they see it.

Animals, it seems, have better sense than we do. Great flocks of birds burst from treetops with a sound like water splashing on pavement, then disappear until spring. Squirrels top off their winter stores and retire to their knotholes. Bears go to sleep. Even our dogs, bound to us though they are, grow thick coats and make clear their preference for the floor near the radiator.

The sun, so generous only a few months ago, now hoards its warmth. Early one Sunday, while we sleep, someone turns the clocks back an hour, and suddenly it's dark at five in the afternoon. And I begin to hate. Since I cannot bear to hurt the feelings of the living, I hate the dead.

I HATE MY grandfather, the son of French Canadian immigrants, who despised himself so much it took only forty-nine years for him to die.

I hate him on his wedding day, in a tuxedo that cost him half a year's pay, bangs swept back from his forehead so carefully you can see where each tooth of the comb parted the black hairs. He wears a dull expression of hope around his mouth so absurd in this place of chest-high snowdrifts and endless workdays. He smiles into the future with a slight cockeye, which he has passed on to me, and which somehow makes us both more rather than less handsome.

I hate his working, working, working for men who spoke English and who, in the absence of the niggers and spics and slants they preferred, used Canucks as commodities, as plow horses, as punch lines. He learned their language so eagerly as though it would earn him more money, or their respect. For them he drove a bus during the day and a cab at night for thirty-three years, until a week before he died.

I hate him for being a good Catholic and fathering seven children. He loved his children so much that he had no love left for himself. He said his prayers in French, which I could not understand. I want to know now what he said to God. I want to know what he asked, and what he asked for.

I hate him for taking pride in what little he had, washing and waxing the Ford he never really owned, painting his mother's house, in which his four boys shared one bed and his three girls shared another.

I hate his four packs of Old Golds a day, his bottle and his flask and his can and his pint glass, the rotgut on Monday mornings and the bourbon on Friday evenings after the checks were cashed and the rent was paid.

I hate his clothes, the worn elbows and patched knees, the busted soles taped together three times over and falling apart yet again, all so his seven children could go to school with the children of the men he worked for and not feel ashamed.

I hate his belief in America. I hate him for passing it on to his firstborn son, my father, who rode his faith in God and country all the way to Vietnam, but had to find his own way back.

I hate him at my parents' wedding, kind-eyed and defeated in his cheap suit, belly straining at the waistband, already bald at forty-three, a warm, bitter, ubiquitous can of Löwenbräu in his hand, drunk out of need rather than want.

I hate this memory I have of my grandfather: I am three, sitting on his lap, and he is tickling me and whispering, "Ti Louis, ti Louis," in my ear. He feeds me handfuls of candy—circus peanuts and chalky pink mints, old-people candy—until I feel sick, but I can't stop laughing, a high, screeching kid-cackle, the sound of distilled joy.

I hate him as he's dying in a hospital room full of his children and grandchildren. A homemade ceramic ashtray, crammed with soiled and folded butts, rests on the nightstand near the bed. Under the pillow is a pint of whiskey, three-quarters gone, smuggled in with the flowers and cards. In the chlorinated light of the overhead fluorescents, his bare, swollen feet are pale, bursting with clusters of tiny purple veins like fractals. Heartache and relief mingle in his eyes.

I hate, most of all, the moment when he dies. My older brother, six, towheaded, bespectacled, buries his face in my grandfather's lap. My grandmother and my father and my uncles and aunts and cousins crowd the room. My grandfather dies without a sound. And everyone is frozen there in their limp, feathered seventies hair, their powder blue shirts and butterfly collars, their thick glasses, their horrifying floral prints, their bad skin, their bad teeth, their shared grief and their tiny private miseries, so varied and yet so sickeningly alike—the same mistakes, the same laments—and all of it captured, frozen, preserved, because someone has actually brought a camera to this place.

I HATE MY grandmother, who lived fifteen years longer than my grandfather but, like him, died from self-hatred.

I hate her on her wedding day, in a dress that cost the other half of the year's pay. Her smile is not open and expectant, like his, but slight, reserved, as if she's not just looking toward the future, but seeing it clearly.

I hate her for giving birth to seven children and loving them so much she could not show it until years later, indirectly, by spoiling and doting on her grandchildren. She loved my Aunt Rhea more than any of the others—so much that Rhea believes to this day that her mother never loved her at all.

I hate her for standing by, as she thought a wife should, while my grandfather killed himself with work and alcohol and cigarettes and pride.

I hate her hands—pricked by sewing needles, scalded by wash water, burned by chemicals and casserole dishes, nicked by knives, scarred, creased, red and raw, clasped forever in prayer: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee . . ." (I know only the English, not the French.)

I hate the meals she made: crepes for breakfast, leftover crepes for lunch, *tourtière* for dinner. She made food for six stretch far enough to feed eight, but she never made my grandfather eat something, anything.

I hate how she kept her pride and pleasure hidden when she scraped together the money to buy my father and his brothers secondhand bikes. She never knew how the other boys in the neighborhood made fun of them, laughed at their chipped paint and wobbly rims.

I hate that she discouraged my Aunt Rhea from going to college, and I hate her reason why: Because she did not want my aunt to rise above her station. Because she did not want my aunt to be heartbroken when they did not accept her into that world.

I have many memories of my grandmother, and I hate them all: Sleepovers at her house with my cousins. Trips to Sunset Beach. The sickroom smell of Kool menthols. Vodka bottles in the toilet tank. My father's old board games in the closet. A worn, overstuffed recliner that had belonged to my grandfather. Her bedroom, with its cool blue walls and ceiling, silent and off limits, like a vestry. Her cats, and my allergies. Loud, animated conversations when women from the neighborhood would visit, the patois shooting back and forth across the kitchen table like automatic gunfire, the cigarettes smoking like gunpowder.

I hate my last memory of her: I am a senior in high school. She has been dying for five months, and I haven't visited her. I have been busy with my teenage business, which is more important than death. Before I enter the hospital room, my father pulls me aside and warns me how much she's deteriorated. But nothing can prepare me for it. The moment I see her, I want to cry. She was plump, pear-shaped, but now she has no shape at all; she is papery skin stretched over sharp angles. The flesh of her face has collapsed, and her eyes are huge, black, bottomless. She is seated by the window, and I sit beside her. She takes my hand and speaks to me in French. I tell her I don't understand, but she doesn't seem to know English anymore. I'm not sure she even recognizes me. Her voice is low, as in a confessional. Tears spill from her eyes and follow the deep creases on her cheeks down to her chin, where they perch, gather, and drop off. It is the first time I have seen her cry, and it will be the last. I will not visit her again before she dies.

At some point I pull my hand away, stand, and walk out, but I never leave that room. Because this moment, too, is frozen, goes on forever.

YES, I HATE my grandparents, and I hate what I find of them in me. I hate my strong back, my poverty, my taste for alcohol, my love and the despair it brings when the days grow short and the birds abandon us and the people smile, smile, smile.

But I will never tell this story. It is safe to hate the dead, but there are those still living—those of the feathered hair and floral prints—who would be hurt by this. So I'll keep silent. I'll take these pages, tear them up, burn them, dump the ashes in the Kennebec. The river will absorb and erase these words, as it has for years. I'll change my name, leave this place, become a Protestant, make a lot of money, and not think of it again. I'll have children who will call their grandparents "Grampa" and "Grammy," not "*Pépère*" and "*Mémère*."

But who am I fooling? I can hear my older brother even now, across the years, whispering in the darkness of our shared bedroom: *You think you are so smart. You think you are better than us.*

No, I am not better. I will not be spared. Instead I will go to the cemetery, as I do every winter, and find my grandparents' graves side by side under the snow. I will clear the snow away, first with my boots, then with gloved fingers, until I can read the stones set in the ground: just their names and two sets of dates. The stones don't tell any of this story, and neither will I. I will sit there in the snow, smoke a cigarette, drink from my bottle, and wait for winter to end.

TOBIAS WOLFF

Powder

JUST BEFORE CHRISTMAS my father took me skiing at Mount Baker. He'd had to fight for the privilege of my company, because my mother was still angry with him for sneaking me into a nightclub during our last visit, to see Thelonious Monk.

He wouldn't give up. He promised, hand on heart, to take good care of me and have me home for dinner on Christmas Eve, and she relented. But as we were checking out of the lodge that morning it began to snow, and in this snow he observed some rare quality that made it necessary for us to get in one last run. We got in several last runs. He was indifferent to my fretting. Snow whirled around us in bitter, blinding squalls, hissing like sand, and still we skied. As the lift bore us to the peak yet again, my father looked at his watch and said, "Criminy. This'll have to be a fast one."

By now I couldn't see the trail. There was no point in trying. I stuck to him like white on rice and did what he did and somehow made it to the bottom without sailing off a cliff.