

x Memoir

The Producer

HER FATHER WAS A GENIUS AT MAKING MOVIES. HE WAS ALSO ADDICTED TO DRAMA—AND TO DRUGS. **KAREN SHEPARD** KNEW THERE WOULD BE NO HAPPILY-EVER-AFTER. BUT A LOVE STORY? OH, YEAH

In June 1998, I received a phone call I'd never anticipated, even knowing what I knew about my charming, crazy, self-made and self-destructive father.

My aunt and uncle called to report that a former girlfriend of my father (who'd had her own run-ins with drugs and alcohol), had told them he had invited her to dinner, excused himself and disappeared into the bedroom. Eventually, she had gone to check on him. The room was filled with smoke. He was on his bed, bent over a crack pipe. He was 82.

Two years before that, I'd discovered that the heart attack he'd had five years earlier was the result of cocaine use. So maybe I wasn't really shocked by the bad news, only by its extremity.

A MEMORY. My father and I are coming out of my building and turning down West Seventy-seventh Street. He hadn't lived in that building with my mother and me since I was three. Now I was nine; he was 59. It was 1975. We were heading for Central Park to bury my dead hamster beneath a particular maple tree at the entrance to the playground.

He offered his hand, and I took it. I skipped every so often to get our strides in sync.

In his other hand, he carried the shoebox with the hamster. I carried a plastic grocery bag with my child-sized gardening tools: a rake, a spade and a trowel, all with slender plastic handles the blue of an old lady's bathroom. I used them to dig the graves of pets—a

lovebird, a garter snake. And now Merlin, the peach-colored hamster. I'd called my father and invited him to the burial.

This had been a surprise to both of us. I'd performed the other services by myself. By myself was how I liked to do things. I don't remember what he said when I asked; I hadn't puzzled over why this time I was including him. I remember the walk. We held hands the whole way.

The tree was small enough for me to circle with one arm, as if I were putting my arm around its shoulder. The lovebird was buried in a hollow at its base. I hadn't known I was going to need to bury others.

My father was quiet, deferential. We knelt in the grass and began digging.

It couldn't have been that we didn't speak, but for once in my life with him, words were eclipsed by silence, the silence of breaking a fast. That silence moved back and forth between us, a needle and thread binding us together like a seam.

We refilled the hole, and I smoothed the dirt with my hand. We stood for a minute before walking home.

I don't remember the way back. But both of us remembered that day. I recalled it as all the things our relationship often wasn't: quiet and serene, even and smooth, with the love between us out in the open, acknowledged, like the smell of dirt, the quiet sound of Sunday traffic.

The memory came up often over the years. Our ritual, my father would call it. Remember our ritual? Yes, I would say. I remember. When I first found out about

the cocaine, I didn't talk to him about it. No one who knew him found my decision all that surprising. The contours of his sadness and self-destructiveness had always seemed unapproachable. Even as a child, I'd been able to see the black moods coming. They were usually signaled by his becoming uncharacteristically still, especially in groups when he wasn't the center of attention. His eyes stared at nothing or sometimes closed altogether. His limbs gathered density. The glass of wine or brandy he held on his knee was forgotten. There was no mistaking this state for contemplation or meditation. Approaching him was like approaching a child having a nightmare. You might be hit, mistaken for the figure in the dream.

I was his only child. I would sometimes try to distract him with a game of cards, or television, or an article I'd read in the *Times*. His usual reaction was to retreat even further. Other times, when I was living with him again in high school, I would ignore him, go about my life. "See this?" my actions worked to communicate. "I'm putting away pots and pans. Here I am, not noticing you or your moods."

This usually prompted a sigh, some movement in the chair. He'd volunteer that he was a little down; he hadn't slept well. I'd offer some insight, take a stab at psychological analysis, something I inherited from him. His body would resettle in a charged-up way. "You think you can help me?" he'd say. "You don't know the first thing about suffering."

I felt as if we were in a predictable and horrible maze. The only thing that sometimes worked was to tell him that someone I knew, or someone I'd run into, loved his movies. They could recite the whole script, I'd say. It happened often enough. When it didn't, I made something up.

Because his accomplishments always cheered him. He'd transformed himself from the undereducated child of Russian Jewish immigrants to the captain of an all-black army unit in New Guinea to the manager of a nightclub in Harlem to an Academy Award-winning producer. His first movie was *The Eleanor Roosevelt Story*, written by Archibald MacLeish and narrated by Eric Sevareid. It won an Oscar for best documentary in 1965, the year I was born. He produced Mel Brooks's first film, *The Producers*. It won best screenplay in 1968, beating out *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He made Woody Allen's *Take the Money and Run*, and Mel's *The Twelve Chairs*. The last film he made was *Catholics*, with Martin Sheen and Trevor Howard, and he couldn't sell it as a feature. It made its way to television and won a Peabody Award, which was framed on a wall between my Phi Beta Kappa certificate and the photo of him with Lyndon Johnson and John F. Kennedy.

But his favorite line from his favorite film, *The*

Producers, was Zero Mostel's "Look at me now! I'm wearing a cardboard belt!" He loved the way Zero's Max Bialystock met degradation head-on, with a kind of hysterical balance of self-sabotage and brio. It was a balance my father recognized.

As for the suffering part, his father died when my father was two, and when he was six, his mother put him and his brothers in an orphanage. He lived there until he was 15. His mother, her new husband and their new children lived on the other side of town. What do you do with a childhood like that?

AFTER I GOT THE CALL from my aunt and uncle, a representative from the co-op board of my father's Beekman Place building, where he'd lived for 30 years, phoned to say that "undesirables" were coming to the apartment at all hours. I called Eddie, the doorman. He'd heard screaming matches over money. One of my father's "young ladies" had moved in.

**"You don't tell me what to do!"
was something he had spent my
childhood yelling at me. And
"Don't you tell me how I feel."**

When I'd imagined my role in my father's old age, I'd envisioned filling out forms, visits to doctors. Not interventions, rehab and withdrawal. And those, it was becoming clear, were the better-case scenarios. If crises dismantle and then reassemble our sense of ourselves, if they show us what we're made of, what were these going to reveal? What kind of daughter was I?

I started making calls. I told myself not to get worked up yet, to see what there was to know and then decide what to do about it. His accountant told me my father had been spending \$12,000 to \$18,000 a month for the past two years. My mother (long divorced from him but still his friend) informed me he'd told her that his credit and ATM cards had been stolen; sometimes he asked to borrow a couple of hundred.

So I called him. I told him I knew the cause of the heart attack and asked whether he was doing drugs again. I said that if he wasn't, then something was really wrong and he wouldn't be able to live alone anymore. He admitted his past use and denied everything else. Swore up and down.

Did I know I was being spun? Yes. And out of some mix of hope and fear, I collaborated. I wrote conciliatory letters to the building. He helped with the wording and signed them. Months passed. No new episodes. "See?" he'd say. "Yes," I'd answer, "that's what happens when

you don't do drugs." He'd smile shyly, a simultaneous admission and denial, an ambiguity that I interpreted at the time as gratitude for my discretion. Now I wonder whether it had been an invitation to push harder.

A FEW MONTHS LATER, the co-op board was no longer just hinting at eviction proceedings. They'd found him naked in the courtyard, twice. He had defecated in the elevator. There was a bullet hole in his first-floor picture window.

I called his cardiologist, my mother, my cousin and my aunt and uncle. I called psychiatrist friends to ask about having someone committed. I called Payne Whitney, the rehab of choice for wealthy New Yorkers, and was told that if I got him there, they would keep him long enough for a full evaluation. The psychiatrist friends told me that if he wouldn't go, I could always call 911 and he would be taken to the public psych ward at Bellevue. Not Payne Whitney, but something.

The one person I didn't call was my father. I couldn't imagine the conversation and was worried that he'd panic and disappear. "You don't tell me what to do!" was something he had spent my childhood yelling at me. And "Who's in charge here?" (the producer speaking). And "Don't you tell me how I feel." The dynamics between us promised to be what our dynamics had always been but with the volume cranked.

So early one evening, the cardiologist and I arrived unannounced. My father answered the door in his bathrobe, a glass of white wine in his hand, his old leather slippers on his feet.

He became enraged, abusive, and concentrated on the peripheral: Why hadn't we called first? Who told us he was doing drugs? "Look at you sneaking around, trying to catch me at something," he said.

The cardiologist asked whether my father was trying to kill himself. Because if he was, fine, we'd leave.

It wasn't the approach I would've taken, but I was glad to have someone else out on point.

My father fired him. Told him to get out of his fucking house. The cardiologist looked at me, told me this wasn't going to work and walked out. It was like one of those war movies where only the corporal was left.

I was unclear about my next move. I grabbed him by the shoulders to try to make him listen. He said I was making him spill his wine. "I'm 82 years old," he said, as though surprised at the fact.

When he was like that, it seemed to me, there had only ever been two choices: either match his screams or retreat into a superior silence. The latter had always driven him crazier than the former, so I preferred it as a strategy. His unflappable daughter. His countermove

was to become quieter himself. "What?" he said, hushing his voice. "You think you're better than me?"

I laid out his choices: Payne Whitney or 911. He told me to fuck choices. "How dare you?" he said. I picked up the phone; he started pushing me around. His robe was coming undone. He was remarkably strong.

I called 911 from the doorman's booth.

I was crying when the police and paramedics pulled up. They brought him out dressed in his usual khakis and knit shirt and wearing the baseball cap I'd given him. It had the name of the college where I teach embroidered across the front. As he walked past me, he pulled himself up to his full height.

He waved as he was helped into the ambulance.

The police told me that there was no drug paraphernalia in plain sight. My father had confided to the cops that he loved me. "Christ almighty," one of them said, "I hope I'm like that at 80."

That night, the cardiologist phoned to say he'd made some inquiries. Bellevue had no way to keep my father: He had walked in one door and out the other.

People who cared told me what I already knew: I couldn't make my father get help; he was a grown-up. But in bed with my husband, I cried myself to sleep.

In the following weeks, people who cared told me what I already knew: I had done what I could; I couldn't make someone get help; he was a grown-up. It was what I would have said. But at night in bed with my husband, our children down the hall, I pictured what my father's life was like now and what I would say at the memorial service. I cried myself to sleep. I cried when I woke up.

I second-guessed myself about calling 911, as if *that* were the central issue. My husband let me fret and then said, "Suppose you hadn't tried even that? Years from now, do you think you'd feel better?"

I wrote to my father two months later. He called. I asked what he'd do if I were the one on drugs. He said, "But you're not."

Was he waiting (hoping?) for me to disagree? I thought about confessing some earlier drug use. But it seemed a comparison that was more about difference than similarity. Instead, I repeated myself: What would he do if I were addicted to drugs? He said he'd suffer agonies beyond all agonies. Those were his actual words. And he said he'd do everything in his power to save me. →

In terms of cries for help, it didn't get any clearer. I told him that I was trying to do what he would have done for me.

He hung up.

If he wouldn't admit a need, there was no helping him. I felt a certain relief in that. What I wanted to know at the time was how to live with that surrender. And what I want to know now is: Did I surrender to save myself? Or would he laugh at the idea that I had that kind of power?

I'D THOUGHT I HAD KNOWN how everything would go. And for a while, it went as expected. He lost the apartment, moved into a hotel. He liquidated his assets. I didn't see or talk with him.

From their home in Miami, my aunt and uncle continued to check in every couple of weeks. When they visited New York, they'd try to take my father for coffee or a meal. His hotel room was worse each time. On their next-to-last visit, there was trash everywhere, urine, feces stains on the bed. Appliances and cupboards ripped from the walls. My father said the maid didn't work on Sundays.

My aunt and uncle came one final time and got him outside by promising him \$200. He was emaciated, ashen, irrational. The hotel receptionist told them my father was stealing food from restaurants and grocery stores. Apparently, he liked green grapes.

They called me, wanting to know what to do. I said I didn't think there was anything to do. My uncle began to speak of my father in the past tense.

IN SEPTEMBER, HE CALLED. He needed my help. I had told him that whenever he was ready, I was there to help.

He needed \$500. It was very important.

I said no. He begged. I said no.

"I'm your father," he said. "I'm your father."

I said no one more time, and he hung up.

MY MOTHER LEFT A MESSAGE on my machine. He owed the hotel \$15,000. The city marshals were scheduled to evict him in a week. He'd be out on the street, literally, his belongings around him in garbage bags. I had to *see* him, my mother said. I had to sit across a room from him and *see* him, and then I had to *do* something.

That I didn't go was partly out of despair. Partly because I had been preparing myself for this, so it didn't seem to be a new crisis. I thought I was making the right decision, and *that* I still regret.

Instead I yelled at my mother over the phone. "Then *you* do something," I yelled. "You do it."

So she did. She tricked him into going to Payne Whitney. He had begged her for sleeping pills, and she'd

told him he didn't want those over-the-counter drugs, that he needed to go to a doctor for the right ones. She said she'd made an appointment for him.

She had laid a trap: He'd been involuntarily committed before he even got to the hospital. She waited with him for a while, made sure he was in custody, then left. He stayed on the locked ward for six weeks.

I WENT TO SEE HIM AS SOON as I heard. The elevator let me out at the end of a long hallway. There were double glass doors and a doorbell on the wall. I rang the bell and waited. Through the doors, I had a view of the common room. I scanned it nervously. He wasn't in sight.

The nurses each wore several keys and their ID tags on shoelaces around their necks. No one moved to the door. Finally, a nurse chose a key and opened up.

The dry-erase board next to my father's door said, in blue: Mr. Sidney G. His room had a huge picture window overlooking the East River.

He wasn't there. There was a wooden desk and chair, a narrow twin bed with a plastic-covered mattress, an

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armchair and a nightstand. The place was a mess. Yogurt on the linoleum. Crumbs and dried ice cream. Styrofoam cups, little milk cartons, empty cans of Ensure, opened single servings of applesauce and packets of sugar and Equal. Dirty metal spoons and forks in the sink. Sheets and blankets stained with everything.

The nurse wanted to make clear that they cleaned his room twice a day. I didn't know what she expected in response, so I just nodded.

He was probably being weighed, she said, gesturing across the hall.

Even on the scale, he seemed short. He was wearing a blue hospital robe and new leather slippers oddly like his old ones. His hair was thinner and grayer. His legs bowed slightly. His face had thinned and dropped, as if he had been led around by the chin. His mouth was ringed with dried chocolate. His false teeth didn't fit; I could hear him clicking them repeatedly into place.

I stood watching him, not ready to speak. What was he going to make of my seeing him here? What version of himself would he feature in his response?

"One hundred fifty-two," the nurse announced, writing on her chart. →

My father stepped off the scale, looked at me blankly and said quietly, “One hundred fifty-two—watch it, kid.” He made a vague punching motion and walked past. The warning and the punch were classic him; the fragility of his delivery was heartbreaking.

I followed him out and touched his shoulder. Even more than before, I could feel bone. “Dad,” I said.

He turned and looked. “It’s me,” I said. He continued to look. It occurred to me in a shock of panic that he might not recognize me.

The outlines of blue around his brown irises were wide and cloudy. His expression made me want to touch his cheek.

He took a half step back, as though I had pushed him. “Oh my god.” He smiled and said he didn’t think he’d ever see me again.

We sat in his room, he on the edge of his bed, I on the desk chair, leaning forward, our knees almost touching. The side of the desk was streaked with yogurt.

Every time a boat went by outside the window, he pointed it out. “Isn’t that extraordinary?” he’d say. “There isn’t a view like this in the world.” We were just north of his old apartment. I couldn’t blame him for thinking this was just the latest in a line of apartments with views.

He complimented the food but told me he wanted to leave. They were keeping him there for the money, he said. “Jesus Christ,” he kept saying, “I just came in for sleeping pills.”

Every few minutes, he’d look up and say my name.

He sighed and said, “So now what do we do?”

“We visit,” I said. “We talk.”

He wasn’t very good at small talk, he said.

I laughed, remembering him working a room, and he smiled.

He was weary, he said.

It was a word he used all the time. I suggested a nap.

“Well, OK,” he said. “If you don’t mind.”

Before he lay down, he said, “You know, we’re closer now than ever, after all these years.”

I smiled.

“No, really,” he said. “Now I’ll never forget you. No, I mean it. After this. Even with all those wasted years due to circumstances beyond our control.”

I didn’t know whether he meant his addiction or the divorce. Or my decision to stay out of touch. Or all three.

And then he curled on his side, his hand beneath his head, and I watched him sleep in the same position my children and I do.

I was remembering a letter he had written to me years earlier: “And let me add—for all the joy and pleasure you have given me all these years—thank you.

And for all the mistakes and unhappiness I’ve caused you—forgive me.”

THESE ARE THE THINGS THAT keep me going. I remember a childhood Thanksgiving in Miami. “That book is anti-Semitic,” my father is saying about the author of a popular novel. “That guy’s an anti-Semite of the worst kind.” My uncle tells him he’s a lunatic. “Maybe you’re right,” my father says. “I didn’t read the book.”

Or it’s a Saturday night the summer after my freshman year at college. “So,” he says to my new boyfriend, “you want to be a comedian.” He crosses his legs. “So give me five minutes.”

It’s the afternoon of my wedding. I introduce him to a new cousin, a guy with a ponytail, multiple earrings,

“For all the joy and pleasure you have given me these years—thank you,” my father had written in a letter to me. “And for all the mistakes and unhappiness I’ve caused you—forgive me.”

multiple nose studs, a couple of eyebrow rings. My father shakes his hand and leans forward conspiratorially. “Listen,” he says, indicating with a gentle finger to the cousin’s face. “You got some shit on your nose.”

It’s every morning my senior year of high school, the first year in 15 that we’ve lived together full-time. He’s standing at the kitchen counter, making my breakfast, so I can sleep five minutes longer.

It’s decades later, 1:30 AM, November in the Berkshires: the air cold and sharp. My three children are asleep. My insomniac husband is asleep.

I should be asleep. I’m looking through catalogs, Christmas shopping. It’s 1:30 in the morning, and I’m looking through the kinds of catalogs that do not contain what my loved ones would need or want.

I flip a page, and there’s a simple Irish winter hat, a fisherman’s hat, knit from Aran Islands cream-colored wool. I’m weeping.

I was with my father when he died. He hadn’t been eating well for months. I got a late-night call from the nurses at the nursing home. He had fallen. Did I want to override his living will, take him to the hospital, get some IV fluids into him? Did *he* want that? I asked. He had told them that all he wanted was for them to turn off the light. All he wanted was sleep. “Sounds like he knows what he wants,” I said. “Yes,” they agreed. “So,” they said. “We’ll make **continued on page 230**

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him comfortable, then?" "Yes," I said. "Make him comfortable." I got off the phone and made the half-hour drive.

He was 86. He'd lived long enough to get to know his grandchildren. As he often put it, he had received the highest accolades. He'd had, as they say, a full life.

When I called the family the next morning, a cousin said, "You must be relieved." I wasn't. I was grateful. I had been there when he left.

And here I am, two years later, crying over catalogs.

As you've guessed, the hat was the one my father wore. It sat in his coat closet in his one-bedroom apartment. When the cold weather arrived, he pulled it firmly over his ears and headed out for his regular constitutional. It had not survived those difficult last years. He moved to the nursing home without it. For a while, I'd looked for a replacement.

And here it is, years too late. OK, I think, I get it: It's sad. I'm crying. But this hard?

Had I done all that I could? Had I done the right thing? Had I tried everything?

I wish I could've found him that hat. He spent his last three Christmases with us. I wish that on one of them, he could have opened a carefully wrapped package with his thin, delicate, arthritic hands and seen it. I'd kept an eye out for that hat but hadn't thought to do more.

But I *had* tried. Isn't that what we'd both spent years doing? Isn't that what children and parents are always doing? Pushing and pushing in the hopes that the other pushes back? "How much do you love me?" one's always asking. "This much," the other's always responding.

And when you get down to it, sitting by a father who's leaving this earth shouldn't be easy. It's hard to tell him it's OK if he leaves when all you really want, when all you've ever really wanted, is for him to stay. **M**

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