

Erin Ryan Burdette

CIRCLES

I walk down the corridor lugging my 4-month-old son in his car seat, innocent gurgling, past elderly men and women in wheelchairs stationed in the hall, past small rooms with TV's playing loud to the near death and bedridden. This is one of the nicer homes we looked at that had a Medicaid bed. I can't comfort myself with the idea that this is one of the worst. They keep things clean. The staff is nice. The food isn't horrendous. Yet as I walk down the hall, my stomach in knots, carrying my infant son, I can barely bring myself to look in the eyes of these mostly forgotten people. The air is vaguely vulgar, the smell of death impervious to cleaning products. And in the long ago they were somebody's baby, like my baby, someone's treasure, like my exquisite son. A mother's hopes and dreams deliriously rolled into chubby appendages, hopelessly pale, perfect, new, and full of possibility.

My father-in-law sits up in bed with a cigar dangling from his mouth, white hair cut short and clean. Everything about him seems almost to shake, trying to hold on. Dr. Phil blares in the background as my father-in-law clutches the Sunday paper, not exactly reading, just sort of staring off. I wonder fleeting before I speak, should I? Is it better when he is lost in the tangle of thoughts than when he is forced to remember?

“Hi, Grandad,” I say false bright and over-loud, setting down the car seat with a relieved thud. He breaks into a gummy grin. He breaks my heart a little every time I see him. He is a cross between an old man and a little boy. All hurt and hope and broken pride. Limbs brittle braced for the sound of losing under the eventual weight, those maybes that never came to be, that break us finally.

His roommate has the blue curtain drawn around his bed for seclusion, making my father-in-law’s cramped quarters even more claustrophobic. The TV is angry blaring, but his roommate’s stone silence screams louder than that. The roommate is forty-four, missing a leg due to hospital negligence (or so he says) and he’s pissed about it. It’s the kind of anger that grows in direct proportion to each day he sits with an empty space where his limb and life used to be. He says he receives the only physical therapy his insurance will allow by staying here, in a nursing home, even though he “ain’t that old” (and he’s pissed about that, too).

“Boy am I glad to see you,” my father-in-law stage whispers, leaning forward conspiratorially. “You’re the first family to visit me in weeks.”

“I’m glad to see you too,” I say, replacing the blanket from where my son has joyfully kicked it off. “But that’s not true. Your wife came yesterday to see you.”

“Mother?” He asks, brows wrinkled.

“No, not your mother, your wife.” I gesture toward a picture on the dresser of my spunky little mother-in-law. She is, even on her worst of days, dressed to the hilt in heels and hose. It’s not that she isn’t nearly as old as he is, that she hasn’t been through as much, that in her own way she’s any less fragile, yet life has been more forgiving to her somehow. My father-in-law looks at the picture and nods slowly, trying to remember.

“She’s not my mother?” He asks, big knobby fingers clutching his cigar, trying to jog some piece of something in the labyrinth of his mind.

“She’s your wife.”

Until her husband came to live here, my mother-in-law had a more active social life than I did: playing bridge with the ladies in the rec room, getting most every answer to the weekly Sunday crossword, visiting estate sales for that random unnecessary but nonetheless wonderful purchase, making “bruised berry pies” with perfect crusts to the delight of fourteen grandchildren. In the sitcom stereotype, the wife kvetches about her annoying mother-in-law, but my case is the antithesis. I knew she was a keeper at my wedding shower. Eating thumb print cookies and sipping tea, she gave me unparalleled advice.

“Never forget who has the power,” she said, eyes twinkling to peals of my friends’ laughter. There was no doubt who she was talking about that had maintained the power for 52 years. But she hasn’t been laughing much these days. Guilt makes you

tired.

I lift Jack out of his seat and he smiles and stretches in that baby way, and I hug him close instinctively, smell his fresh baby skin and sweet baby breath. His blue eyes sparkle as he gurgles, bubbles frothing forth on his sweet baby lips. My father-in-law puts his big gnarled hands on Jack's tiny fist and holds on, to catch some of the life his grandson pours forth just by virtue of being, with every smile and every shriek of happiness. Jack is so delighted he doesn't know what to do with himself. He gurgles and coos and yodels happily, discovering his voice. People are mesmerized by him. I am. The way he takes to life with such wonder, such reckless baby abandon, such fearlessness.

At 85, my father-in-law stares at Jack in amazement, and you can almost see it melt slowly away, the bitterness. And here and now, no doctor screwed up the gall bladder, the stinkin' government isn't trying to take his monthly check, no fog cobwebbed his brain to freeze, he's free to live. We sit like that for a while, the three of us, Jack talking in baby tongues, my father-in-law and I smiling in awe and clutching at him.

Jack has the secret of total present tense, some crystalline way of living, some infectious baby genius: without regrets there is no fear. You never said the thing you can't take back, never made the fatal move that ended it all (whatever it was at the time you lost that made you feel you would never recover). That pit is not in your stomach

over doing too little or too much too early or too late. You do not wince in hindsight. There is only the future to look forward to, the top of the mountain is all that is in sight, you haven't ever fallen from grace and that makes you strong, even if you don't know how to walk yet. So you are free, you blow raspberries through your lips, you make sounds because it feels good, you cry when you want, and you do not care who is looking. You do not know shame. You are brave as Superman. You are beautiful.

“You're his mother,” my father-in-law says, squeezing Jack's tiny hand, looking at me. “He loves you.”

“Yep, I'm his mommy.” I answer, settling on the edge of the bed.

“Why do you want to take my mother?”

“I don't,” I say.

“But you said she isn't my mother.” He looks toward the picture of his wife on the dresser.

“Well, you had a mother and you have a wife. Two different ladies. Your mom was Lucilla. No one is trying to take anything away from you, okay? I promise.”

I gesture toward the picture.

“Your mother wouldn’t let you chew that old cigar,” I point out, nodding toward the ever present prop gripped in his calloused swollen hand, stained by the years an old and dingy yellow-brown.

“It’s not lit,” he protests, grinning, taking a chew to prove it, peering sideways, and I can see who he was, the younger man hiding in the old, the flirt who talked to ladies in line at the post office, the salesman who got away with it. When my husband was a kid, my father-in-law would sometimes take him along to sell the insurance policies, and my husband still laughs at the way his dad would talk to anyone about anything. He made people comfortable instantly; suddenly they would drop their guard and comment back, in spite of themselves. He gave away calenders, coins, and pens to practically strangers. He just loved to give things away. There is a fabulous picture of my father-in-law, and for some inexplicable reason, I have it tucked in the drawer of my night stand. In the photograph my father-in-law is probably no older than my husband is now, 39; he is sitting in a boat clutching a fishing pole, an inconsequential fish dangling defeated from the hook; my father-in-law is wearing a white tank-shirt with what looks to be a faint coffee stain, a huge grin beaming on his handsome face, cigar hanging unlit from his mouth. There is something about this picture that says it all, in the way an image sometimes can.

“I know, I know, it’s not lit,” I smile, surveying the cigar. “And you know she is your wife. For 52 years.”

He considers this and seems to accept it for a minute. I see him concentrating hard, trying to make it work in his mind. How he hovers there, on the edge of understanding, finally knowing only that he doesn't know. Sometimes there is quick flash anger at the injustice, but today he stops before it starts.

"It's my short term memory," he decides. "Ever since the car accident I can't remember."

The car accident he refers to is something that actually happened in the fifties, but he gets it confused. Sometimes it is today, and he knows who is President, and what state he lives in; other days it's Roosevelt or Truman and he's in Dawson, Pennsylvania. Five years ago he had a stroke and no one thought he would make it. He spent ten days in the ICU and came out of it to everyone's surprise. He had polio as a kid, and had been using a walker for years, but after ICU he came home to bed and never got out again. While he was in the coma, his wife sold their home, reasoning he couldn't climb the stairs anyway, watching the hospital bill grow larger and larger.

And when he is sad, or when he is confused, his eyes narrow sometimes and he says, "She never even asked me. My house, I put thousands into it, she sold it right out from under me. I fixed the plumbing myself. Fixed everything. For her. And she sold it."

My husband will wince and shake his head, "No dad. No. It wasn't like that."

Sometimes my father-in-law will go on about the repairs he did, listing them with startling clarity, able to recall down to the size of every nail he hammered, the shade of every can of paint; sometimes he'll shake his head, the fog leaving his face in a whisper, look you in the eye, and come out of it.

“Oh well,” he will say on good days, with a shrug. “What’s done is done.”

But you never know what kind of day it is going to be.

After the stroke and before he came here, they lived in a retirement facility. My mother-in-law has always loved to call it “the home”. She kept putting it off, in their family way, bringing him his meals on a TV tray, responding to an insistent little bell he would ring for service, trying to keep her resentment at bay. Their children paid a nurse to come in a few times a week, but sometimes circumstance would necessitate my mother-in-law clean the occasional accident, signing up by default for a job made exclusively for nurses or mothers, never for wives. Her children helped her finally come to the decision. A family meeting made it real, the elephant in the room acknowledged finally to heavy sighs and never tears. The night they told him, he seemed to be in shock.

Then the next night it hit him. I sat on the edge of the bed and held his hand as my husband stood close and helpless. My father-in-law cried like a baby, tears streaming down his face, “Please don’t do it, sweetheart. I’ll be good,” he kept saying, “Didn’t we

have such a good day today, honey? Didn't we? They're trying to pull us apart."

She turned and left the room, and I followed her into the front of the apartment, the living room and dining room the same small space. She steadied herself against the old mahogany chair, drew breath, her back to me.

In the bedroom my father-in-law's tears gave way to anger finally, which narrowed on my husband.

His voice a hoarse whisper, a desperate hiss, "You are the youngest. We gave you everything. Private school. Expensive college. This will be on your head. This will be on your conscience."

My husband came out of the bedroom and collapsed crying in my arms, the floodgates flown open.

"Don't," she said carefully, smoothing her skirt. "Don't. It makes it harder for me." My husband obeyed instantly and the tears were gone. How awful to be a man.

Two days later the emergency vehicle came to get my father-in-law. He's been in the nursing home for the past four months.

It would be one thing if he had forgotten everything, sad if he didn't recognize his children, his name, or where he grew up. But there is a certain undefinable horror to the

way his mind goes in and out, the way he remembers, then just as quickly forgets. His face twists trying desperately to hold on to the facts, giving up when he realizes he's lost them again. He is just well enough to know he isn't well. And it's killing me.

I want to be a law-abiding Christian. You know, I want to believe, I do. But looking at this shell of a man, who cannot wipe himself, take care of his most basic needs, the overwhelming humiliation makes my heart skip a beat. And I look up to the sky, or I hear a song in church, and I am overcome with seething anger, the horror of why. Why God? Why not just take him? Why must you give him the part of his mind that realizes with despair the part that is gone? Why come full circle to get to this, the swan song closing accidental on a feeble note, like a clumsy musician dropping his instrument, when it started with the singing of angels. It makes a mockery of the past, doesn't it, when this is the way it ends? How am I to believe in a merciful God?

As if in answer, Jack lets out a sudden howl of restlessness, squirming indignantly, bringing me back to the present. He does not let me linger long; he's ready to go. The future is now, and he can't wait to get his chubby little hands around it, squeeze it for all it's worth. My father-in-law smiles and reaches out to pat Jack's head as the circle completes. He's ready, too.

Sometimes when I look at Jack, he looks so wise. Some brilliant little Buddha, the world his monastery. A smile breaks over his tiny face as they stare at each other. It's like they are sharing a secret. Without his grandfather, there would be no Jack. My

husband never born. The man in the photograph has given my child his clear blue breath and every possibility. His past is in Jack's future. And that is how there is God.

My son charges forth for all of them, on perfectly chubby, new and wobbly legs, unafraid to fall, eager to catch his own fish.