

Truth in the Service of Memory

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Abstract

Sometimes, life presents us with situations where we act in one way because it's the right thing to do but we wish we could act differently. There are also times when our emotions and memory alter and confuse the way we think about an experience, leaving us unsure of what actually happened. What follows is a creative nonfiction piece which expresses the effects of memory, and the ambivalence and ambiguity of emotions resulting from a history of family trauma. Abuse always involves power dynamics. This is a story of what might happen when power changes hands.

“The truth I have no trouble with, it’s the facts that I get all screwed up.” — Farley Mowat
(interviewed on CFRB Radio, Toronto, December 14, 1975)

It was seven degrees Celsius, drizzling and getting dark. By the time she called me, he’d been gone four hours.

“His shoes are here in the hall... with his jacket.”

I knew from experience that if my mother was calling me for help, there was reason to panic.

My parents lived in the country about ten kilometres outside of town on densely forested property with a fast-flowing creek running through it. My dad had wandered away from the house while my mom was napping.

I called 911 and two of my brothers from my cell while driving out to the house search. The OPP dispatched the K9 unit immediately. Wearing one sock, a soaked t-shirt and fleece pants, my dad was found in a thicket of tag alders a half-mile from the house.

While my dad lay beneath warm blankets in the back of the ambulance, a paramedic pried his glasses from one very stiff, clenched hand. The paramedic then used a white hospital towel to gently wipe



Dad's face and hair. A second paramedic told my mom that once he warmed up, other than a few scratches, he'd likely be fine. They discussed bringing my dad to Emergency to be checked more thoroughly and monitored overnight.

Mom asked, "Is that really necessary?"

I urgently whispered to the one with the towel, "Please, oh please, let it be necessary. Can you tell her it's best? Protocol, even. Is it protocol? Tell her anything."

I hoped I would have a chance to speak to the ER physician about the possibility of having Dad admitted to a long-term care facility emergency bed. Maybe Mom would listen to a doctor's insistence and give her consent for him to finally go.

They did.

She did.

He went.

I am five. I lie on my belly in our family room on a small plaid sofa, in front of a large bay window. Bathed in the warm late-afternoon sunlight, I watch brown nuthatches flit about the feeder. I hear my dad's footsteps approaching from the hall. He has a dirty Pigpen cloud all around him and his caustic voice hisses something harsh. The back of his hand strikes the back of my head. I tumble forward off the couch and hit the floor hard. I am winded by the fall. I try to push myself up off the floor, but his other hand hits my ear. A pinging sound with a long echo overflows my head and I shut my eyes tight, waiting this time. I curl into a ball. He hits me until he is tired or perhaps until he tires of it. For today. I lie still in the sunlight, afraid to move. When I do, my body aches and the skin of my cheek sticks to the floor a little. Shaking, I stand and head into the kitchen to find my mother.

"Dad hit me." I tell her.

"What?" There is a pause. "He did not."

As usual, she has no ears to hear me, yet I still try to tell her.



“No, he did. He hit me. My head hurts, Mom.”

“He did not.”

Without looking up, I entered the four-digit code written on a piece of card stock taped above the door of the locked ward at the Golden Manor Extended Health Care Facility. I waited the several-second delay and gave the door a solid shove. It yielded heavily, and I passed through.

I headed down the hall to my father’s room. Not finding him there, I took a moment to check for clean clothing and sheets. All appeared sanitary, but the place still carried the aged whiff of inefficient bodily functions in the same way that even the tidiest of garages cannot deny its years of oil changes and corroding car parts.

I stepped around a mattress on the floor beside his bed knowing its purpose was to provide a soft landing. He’d likely been trying to get up at night, again. Dad had Stage IV Parkinson’s Disease and presented with strong repetitive compulsions. He’d fallen and fractured his hip a few months back but being unable to walk didn’t keep him still.

He was not in the hall, so I headed over to the TV lounge where I found him strapped into his wheelchair. He’d been shuffling his feet, pushing himself around the room backwards but had run into a corner. He sat quietly absorbed in an ineffectual struggle with the buckle on his seatbelt. I kissed his head and struggled for enthusiasm I didn’t feel.

I let, “Hi, Dad?” fall out.

I squatted and pried his hands from the buckle. Through the spotty lenses of his glasses, he looked up and to my surprise, greeted me with what seemed like recognition. A thin remnant of his voice squeaked, “Hey kid! I saw Doug Howie.” He continued, “He’s running for President.”

“Oh, good for him!” I exclaimed.

There was a pause and I blurted out, “I borrowed your chop saw. I’ll return it when we’re finished putting up the trim around the new windows.”



I was about to start telling him random stories about the kids when he lurched toward me in his chair. Tears slipped down the wrinkles in his cheeks and onto his t-shirt.

He stuttered, trying to speak: “Wh-wh-here’s Mama?”

He continued in an urgent low rasp, “Wh-wh-wh-why’d she leave me? She-she left me...here. Doesn’t she love me anymore?”

I was totally unprepared for this sudden, agonizing combination of lucidity and confusion. And I’d never before seen my father cry. As if begging me to take even his very helplessness from him, he lifted a wobbling hand. I stilled it gently between my own.

I remember walking down the hallway, sobbing, in a blur of emotion. A nurse stared at me with a softhearted look as I passed by. Frantic to get out, I attempted the code several times. Finally, I looked up and methodically copied the numbers from the card stock. I yanked on the door twice. There was a soft click and it yielded mercifully, on the third try.

Just over a year after his admission to the Manor, Dad had lost ninety pounds and was no longer able to speak. He had become a barely recognizable, wizened version of his former self. Eventually, he stopped eating altogether. After few days, he became too weak to sit up, and stopped breathing through his nose.

I sat at his bedside, keeping his lips and tongue moist with conditioning towelettes. I took off his glasses and placed them on his bedside table. For a time, his body became wracked with fierce twitching. I checked his feet and legs, monitoring for the purple veiny-looking mottling of the skin that the nurses explained would creep slowly upwards from his feet.

I called my mom to tell her he was really fading.

She didn’t believe me. She thought we had more time.

“It will still be a couple of days...I’ll come tomorrow or the next day.”

Though I tried to convince her, she still lacked the ears to hear me.



So, I alone stayed with my father the day before he died. My mother-in-law looked after the kids, so my husband could be with me. We packed Dad's things into the car and the staff moved him out to the ward room designated for palliative care. In the evening, my husband went home to put the kids to bed.

At first, I rested on a daybed covered with circa 1980's dusty rose flowers and teal greens. After a while, I sat in a chair beside him. I held his hand and quietly told him anything and everything I could imagine I might later wish I'd said to him now. I wished out loud that he'd lived a life with more love in it.

Around midnight, two nurses came in to turn him. The twitching had subsided some and he seemed more peaceful than the night before. They looked at his mottling ankles and with their best guess, assured me he would be twelve hours or more. Maybe Mom was right, maybe there was some time.

Two a.m. came and went. I lay down again, but was unable to sleep. What if he died while I was sleeping? I felt like an impostor. I wished that at least one of my siblings had come to be with him, to be with me. I wished my mom was there.

I thought of how long a day tomorrow was going to be. With all the phone calls and details to attend. She had refused to prearrange things. And I was already so tired.

Eventually, I gave up. Examining the mottling, I found its progression still at his ankles. I gently swabbed his open mouth, kissed his head and quietly said, "Goodnight Dad." I slipped out of the room and headed home, passing the door to the locked ward as I went.

At six a.m. the voice on the phone belonged to my father's oldest friend, Bill, who was accustomed to visiting my dad before his early morning walk. We had made arrangements for him to relieve me of my night long vigil.

"I thought you'd be here. Come quickly, Lisa. He's leaving."

Before I was even dressed, he called back saying, "There's no hurry now, dear. He's gone."

I wished I had been able to get there. I wished I hadn't left. I comforted myself thinking it seemed somehow fitting that Bill was with him instead. My dad had been a crappy father but a great friend.



When I arrived, I found Bill outside the room where my father's body lay. He quietly hugged me and I thanked him for being there. He briefly told me my father had been very peaceful and then left me alone to see his body.

I pushed open the door and approached the bed. I sat down, oddly feeling the need to be completely silent so I wouldn't disturb him. I stared for a few minutes. Scientist-me took over and I began to look at him more closely, noting details. His eyes were closed and he appeared quite normal. His mouth was slightly pulled back and his teeth were exposed only a bit more than usual. His skin was still quite pink, even. I had not so much the thought, but the sense that everything had changed, but outwardly somehow nothing really seemed that different.

I touched his cheek, first with the tip of one finger, then my whole palm. Finding him still warm, I had to check to see if he was breathing. Just in case. I strained hard. Leaning in, I willed my ears to hear a breath or my eyes to detect movement. Eventually the silence and utter stillness convinced me to call my mom. She asked if I could call everyone before they all left for work.

Everyone local came immediately to say goodbye before the cremation. The others made their flight arrangements so I could plan the visitation and service. Someone drove out to pick up Mom and when she arrived, I took her in to see him.

I led her to the bedside and together we leaned over him quietly, looking. I helped her touch his face. We felt how cold he'd gotten. After a time, she nodded wordlessly, accepting that he was really gone.

The nursing staff needed a time to schedule his transfer to the crematorium. Mom needed help with more phone calls, the funeral arrangements and obituary. None of us had eaten breakfast. I needed my husband and the kids.

I was thankful after all that I had slept a little.

The passage of time shadow-shifts our memories so they slip just out of focus. Is it possible things went differently the day my dad cried in the TV lounge? For a long time, the version of this story that I remembered had me answer him before I ran out.



“Of course she loves you!” I insisted with soft alarm. “Oh, Dad! It just got too hard for her to look after you. She brought you here so you would be safe.”

But did I really say anything at all? My memory plays tricks on me. Perhaps I sat silently unmoved, offering him nothing in the way of consolation. Which telling is the real truth telling? What is the most telling truth?

I clearly remember his question, but the truth is, I really have no idea what my answer was.

Can I decide? Do I get to make it up as I go along? Memory is indeed fallible, and research shows that we unconsciously alter our memories quite regularly. But when accurate recollection of facts interferes with our truth telling, do we then have the right to consciously mold the past so it better suits our present?

Why not?

This is a very different story if I just walk down the hallway, punch in the code, and leave.

I do hope I wasn't capable of that. But do I wish I wasn't capable of that?

How different hopes and wishes can be. And memory doesn't serve me.

Lisa Schultz is a former card-carrying member of the sandwich generation, now working on her return to life outside the family. Earning her MAIS degree fulfills a lifelong dream of advancing her education and is the stepping stone to her next phase of life... stay tuned!
