

Lon Otto

FEAST OF THE CIRCUMCISION

When my father lost his testicles, I was in Germany, but I was back home in St. Paul and available to drive him to the mall when he needed to be circumcised. His penis kept getting irritated and enflamed after the orchiectomy, my mother told me as I unpacked in my old bedroom. They thought it had to do with loss of hormones, she said. Or maybe it was the estrogen therapy, intended to inhibit further spread of the prostate cancer.

I didn't encourage her to talk about it, believe me. The less I knew, the happier I was. But she stood in the doorway, rattling on, laying medical information on me as if I could use it to save his life. She had a new haircut, a stylish wedge in place of the wavy cascade that had fallen to the middle of her back for as long as I could remember, and every once in a while she touched it automatically, fingering its slope, still not used to it. "You understand?" she asked, about what in particular I had no idea. I nodded, slid a dresser drawer shut, turned around, and saw the expression on her face. She really did expect me to save his life.

We left the house early in the morning, without a decent breakfast. Because of my father's high cholesterol, my parents had started eating fibery cold cereal for breakfast, who always used to celebrate my homecomings with waffles and bacon and eggs and hash browns. As we pulled away from the house, I could see through the kitchen window my mother washing the dishes. Head bowed, absorbed in the task. She'd never learned to drive, though recently she had started to talk about it again, Driver's Ed at sixty years old.

We drove in silence. Like my father, I had been spared the routine circumcision still inflicted on most American baby boys, and I was shaken by the thought of having it done as an

adult. It was nothing compared to the operation that had preceded it, but I hadn't been around for that one. I'd been overseas, preoccupied with problems of my own, and the horror hadn't really sunk in. It was sinking in now.

Slumped beside me in my rented Audi, staring straight ahead rather than jabbing his finger at this or that danger bearing down on us, this or that pedestrian I might have killed, my father appeared passive, stoical. He taught philosophy at a Catholic women's college in St. Paul, but he was far from being a philosophical man, and this quiet resignation was unsettling to me. When I was a kid, he'd been given to violent rages over my least mistake, my slightest lapse in judgment. Later, after I'd discovered a gift for statistical analysis and went from educational misfit to academic star, he would still argue with me stubbornly about every decision I made. He certainly would not have been able to understand the mess I'd left behind in Freiburg, where I had been doing research on the EEU and having an affair with a senior colleague's irresistible wife. My father had gone berserk over a briefly pregnant girlfriend—what would he say about Erik's attempted suicide after the blow-up, or Ilsa's expecting me to move in with her and their nine-year-old daughter?

In the matter of his own rebelling body, however, my father seemed to have achieved a bizarre acceptance. He wasn't slumped down in the seat, I realized—he was shrunken, he was barely there anymore. That was maybe what my mother had meant when she'd called me in Germany and told me I needed to come home. I had welcomed the excuse to leave and thought I was properly braced for the end. Only now, however, was I beginning to feel loss easing its actual and outrageous point into my heart. In a coffin he'd have been adjusted, corrected, restored. He'd at least have looked something like his real self. He'd have been my father again, though dead.

The clinic was a generic suite of offices in a suburban strip mall, State Farm agency on one side, Footlocker on the other. Mauve and gray waiting room, a dozen or so leatherette chairs. Curved, formica reception desk, behind which a beautiful, Hispanic-looking receptionist, long hair drawn back into a thick, sleek braid, was working on her nails.

We arrived thirty minutes before the procedure was scheduled, but the room was already half filled, and we had to settle for seats on opposite sides of a towering fish tank flickering occasionally with a glance of brilliant tropical fish. Distorted by the octagonal tank, my father's jowly face and bald head, fringed with still-dark curls, appeared to hang suspended in the water, something from the depths beyond sunlight, bulgy-eyed and massive. But when I leaned forward to say something to him, the man I saw was drained and faded and negligible. I sat back again, feeling abandoned, unfairly punished.

Patients continued to check in after us, until the room was filled with people bundled against the cold March weather. Most of them were old. They left their coats on and sat thumbing magazines or talking in brief, unhappy bursts or just staring ahead of them. After our scheduled time had passed, I went up to the reception desk, at first to flirt a little with the receptionist, who had a misleadingly open, inviting face, then to express my growing irritation about the long wait. After a while she wouldn't even look at me, scanned the room as if there were something there that deserved her attention, if only I would quit bothering her.

An hour and a half later, when my father's name had still not been called, I was startled from a stupor of hunger and boredom by the smack of an old *Discover* magazine he apparently had slammed down on the glass coffee table, with enough force that everyone in the waiting room looked up, including the chilly receptionist. This was more like it. This was the father I remembered. Encouraged, I went up to the reception desk, and, as before, the receptionist

wouldn't condescend to make eye contact, repeating to the air next to my head that they were doing all that they could, there'd been an emergency, everyone had to have understanding. That's how she put it, "We have to have understanding." I could smell the heavy musk of her perfume, but otherwise it was as if she sat behind bulletproof glass.

Oh, I had understanding. I returned to my father and said, "Okay, that's it, let's go," but he just shrugged and waved me back to my chair. Maybe he hadn't meant to slam the magazine down. Maybe it had just slipped out of his weakened fingers.

Finally, a middle-aged nurse came out and ushered him away through one of the waiting room's three doors. A pathetic sight. It didn't seem possible that this vague man had once been so monumental, such an infuriating antagonist. I reminded myself that after forty years of teaching he was still an assistant professor, having never finished the Ph.D., tenured only by inertia. A Swedish Lutheran farm boy in an Irish Catholic college, he'd never lost the outsider's edgy, self-defeating wariness. He'd never acquired academic polish, never had the ambition to publish. But he'd always seemed enormously powerful to me. And now he was being led off to have a baby's operation, a cultic ritual from somebody else's cult.

I studied a photograph of an intricately-chipped Maya flint in a *National Geographic* and thought about Ilsa, my lover in Germany. She'd known what to do with a foreskin. The first time we had sex, I complimented her on it, and she remarked that she'd never made love with any but uncircumcised men. At the time I'd felt part of a privileged club, but I wondered now whether there had been something anti-semitic in the comment. Her politics were liberal enough, but when things had started to get ugly between her and poor old Erik, her ruthlessness gave me the willies.

After a while, a white-coated doctor about my own age came out and asked if my father typically had problems with high blood pressure. Only when something upset him, I said. He'd been made to wait over two hours—of course his blood pressure was up. Later, I remembered my mother talking about the hypertension medicine he'd been taking for years, but I was sure that this time it was circumstantial.

“We'll have to wait for it to go down,” the doctor said.

“Waiting is what cranked it up there in the first place. How do you figure more waiting will bring it down?”

“We've given him a tranquilizer.”

Give me one, I thought as I returned to the magazine. Prostate cancer was in my own cards, I was sure of it. It ran in the family. I found myself compulsively visualizing the stupidly designed organ that evolution had strangled around our innocent urethras. Sixty-four years old. Not old enough to be so far gone. I shifted uncomfortably in the chair and turned to an advertisement for beef—real food for real people.

Although it was only about eleven o'clock, I had been thinking for some time about places on the strip where we might stop to eat on the way home. I've never outgrown the pleasure restaurant meals with my parents gave me as a child, the sense of privilege, membership in the adult world where you asked for something and they brought it to you. At thirty-two, I'd lived in some of the greatest cities of Europe. I'd been married for a while to a graduate of the Sorbonne, a gourmet cook. Yet the prospect of lunch with my father at Embers absurdly pleased me.

I checked my watch. You'd think they were doing a coronary bypass. Finally, my father shuffled out into the waiting area, did a little paperwork at the desk, and told me to get him out of there.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"Sore." He leaned on my arm as we walked to the elevator, an unaccustomed intimacy, and agreed with neither enthusiasm nor reluctance that we could stop somewhere for lunch. It was appalling, his lack of interest, his refusal to assert himself.

Instead of stopping at one of the highway restaurants, I drove all the way back into St. Paul, back into our own neighborhood, which had been rough when I was a kid growing up—breaking windows, getting into fights, desperate to prove that I was as tough as anybody I ran with. The neighborhood had turned around since I'd left home, and now the business area a few blocks from our house was filled with restaurants.

"There's a new place on Selby I saw when I was driving in from the airport," I said. "Not far from you. Maybe you and Mom have been there."

I knew they hadn't. She might have, if a friend went with her, but he would have thought it a crazy extravagance to pay for a restaurant meal within walking distance of his own kitchen, his own wife's reliable cooking.

He slumped beside me in the passenger seat, staring ahead at nothing for a while. Then he said, "Remember when Selby was nothing but bars." I couldn't tell if it was a question or a declaration. He spoke in a tight, wary manner, as if it were his tongue that had been clipped.

"You'll like this place," I said. "It's perfect." I parked in front and helped him out of the car. He moved gingerly, absorbed in his discomfort, head bent like somebody lugging a cross, and I wondered how long it would take him to notice, to get the little joke. I couldn't tell if he'd

registered the name painted onto the window, *Old Jerusalem Café*. When we stepped in the door, the warm rush of garlic seemed to straighten him up a little, but even when a waitress had seated us at one of the wooden tables and he had the kosher vegetarian menu spread open in front of him, he said nothing.

Only after the waitress came back and took our orders did he look up. “Very funny.”

“You’ve been initiated,” I said. “Mazel tov!”

“Very funny,” he said again, but this time I was surprised to see that maybe he did think it was funny. I looked around. It wasn’t noon yet, but the restaurant was loud with voices, the deli counter in back stood three or four deep in waiting customers, and most of the tables were filled. Not an especially Jewish-seeming crowd, the usual neighborhood mix, but there was an Hasidic family that would never have been seen around there when I was a kid, and our waitress had that ravishing Middle Eastern luxury of hair and face and figure. When she came to refill our coffee cups, she rested a hand familiarly on my father’s shoulder.

“And how are you gentlemen doing today?” Not much of an accent, just a trace, enough to tickle a little in your ear.

“You wouldn’t believe it,” I said. But she wasn’t listening to me—she was telling my father something I couldn’t make out in the din. I felt my face grow hot, and I told myself it was for my mother, eating her tuna fish sandwich or something a few blocks away. He was her whole life. After the waitress left, I said, “Well, Dad, how are you doing?”

“You wouldn’t believe it.”

I couldn’t read his expression. When he drew in like that, it was usually a trap, liable to hurt me before long. I pushed on, though. “It must be awful.”

He shrugged.

“Cancer,” I said. “The surgery.”

“It’s been no picnic.”

“I can’t imagine what you’ve gone through.” I’d tried hard not to. In the moist heat of the restaurant I felt dizzy. “The operation. How do you feel about it now?”

“Sore, like I told you. Sore as hell.”

“Not the circumcision.” How did therapists do it? I felt like shaking him. “How do you stand it, what’s happened to you?”

He was looking around, as if searching for someone he knew. Then he turned back to me. “Frankie, tell you a story. True story. When I was in for the operation, the big one, I got to know one of the nurses pretty well.” He stopped, and I struggled to think of something to say, but then he got going again. “We’d joke around. Little bit of a thing, pretty direct, and once we were talking about the medical term, orchiectomy, how it sounds like something with flowers, and she said they had a guy in there once, foundry worker—six-four, six-five—big, muscular guy. He was in for an orchiectomy like me, and he seemed awfully calm about it. She wondered if maybe he wasn’t clear about the operation and so she asked him, Mister whoever it was, had the doctor explained what they were going to do? And he said, ‘Sure. They’re going to take out my intestes.’ And she said, ‘Your testes.’ He shrugs, he doesn’t care how they pronounce it. And she says again, ‘Testes. Testicles.’ He still looks blank. Finally she says, ‘Your nuts. They’re going to cut off your nuts.’ And the poor guy faints dead away. He’d had no idea.”

I gave a shocked laugh. “Some story to tell a man in your situation.”

“No, I appreciated it. A fellow your age thinks it would be worse than death, but believe me, it isn’t. Your mother still loves me, I still have to shave. My doctor even told me it’s possible to have sex, though I don’t think so. I’m just glad to be alive. I’m still a father. I’m still a man.”

He drank some coffee, and the waitress arrived with our meals: a pita sandwich for me, and for him a huge plate of some sort of ratatouille and big gray knishes and a salad full of olives and rings of red onion. She touched him again, running her hand across the back of his faded old suit coat so lightly he might not have noticed.

“Still,” I said, “it’s not professional, telling you that sort of story.” It was so much stronger than any blow I’d thought to aim at him, I felt it stinging on my own cheek.

“I think she was doing what you’ve been doing, Frankie.”

I looked at him.

“She was showing me she knew I could take it. Bad as it was, I could take it.”

I stared down at my plate, willing to embrace that interpretation, for her, for myself. He began to eat his ratatouille, with more energy than I had seen him display since I’d returned home. Okay, I thought, I give up. If acceptance can go this far, effect such transformation, I’ll bow my head to it.

“Dad, there’s this woman I’ve been seeing in Germany,” I said, and began unraveling the tangled thread that trailed between me and Freiburg.

He put his fork down. His loose, gray face slowly surged with blood.