



Father and Son

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*I will return them to their homes,
says the Lord.*

When I hug my son these days, I am conscious of his shaven beard, rough against the flesh of my neck; and my nostrils flare at the scent of the soap on his neck; and I'm but a sack of brittle bones within the absolutely ineluctable strength of his arms.

Matthew is thirty-six years old. With a greater ease than I had ever mustered at his age (had mustered for most of my life), Matthew murmurs into my ear: "I love you, dad."

This is the one who taught me how to express my love aloud without embarrassment. "I love you, too, Matt," I am gratefully able to say.

Nor does it trouble the man, my son, to lean back and look me directly and gently in the eye. Smiling. Popping his eyebrows, his black eyebrows like swallow's wings left and right, flights for either eye. The eyes themselves are black-coffee brown; they have a warm bedroom droop, an altogether reassuring gentillesse—and he can hold the affectionate gaze longer than I, even down unto the day of this writing.

Matt Wangerin barbers his own hair, cuts it so close to the scalp that the result is more shadow than bristle. Sometimes, while he holds his gaze upon me, I break the line of his sight by raising my hand and stroking the top of that head. I pet him, as it were, and thereby enter his being. The hand I remove tingles on the palm and the pads of my fingers. What have I just done? Well, it feels as if I've petted the smooth bark of the beech tree, tall, established and strong, planted by the rivers of water and prospering.

It is Christmas. Except for the years of deepest anguish, Matthew Aaron has made a point of returning home to spend this holiday with us, his parents and whichever of his siblings are able to come on by as well. With his nieces and nephews. Matt has never been married. His brother and his two sisters—these three have. Among them they've produced four nieces and three nephews, for all of whom "Uncle Matt" is a comet of infinite sparkle and adventure.

Christmas: and I've stepped out of the house to greet him.

When he's a tad self-conscious, he falls into that male African American rhythmic slouch and role. Even so has he come up to walk to me through sharp weather and hard snow, pursing his lips and flipping his eyebrows in a purely Matthean grin.

And then he hugs me.

Regarding that strength in his arms? Once when he was fourteen and his brother fifteen years old, I opened a bedroom door and caught Matthew squeezing Joseph's chest with enough force to suppress the older boy's breathing. Joe looked pale and a little frightened. Matthew stood behind him, arms enwrapping the rib cage, his strong fingers laced at the base of Joseph's sternum.

"Matthew!" I cried, angry at his uncaused and pointless aggression. Over and over the boy kept exhibiting his physical advantage by hurting his brother. Not out of malice, mind you; rather, out of something like an ill-controlled exuberance. Nor did Joseph ever blame him or tattle; Joseph has loved his brother from their first meeting together and has admired Matt's native talents.

“Matthew! What are you doing?”

I stepped into the bedroom and broke Matt’s hand-grip. I took his two wrists and, as if they were braided rope, snapped his arms behind him.

In those days I was a full head taller than my son.

I barked, “You want to know what it feels like?” I was serious. At that particular moment I was not out of control. I had come to believe that Matthew lacked a capacity for genuine empathy, neither to know nor to care how another person felt.

“Come here,” I demanded, spinning him so that his back was to my front. “You’re going to feel what you do to people, Matt!”

He did not smirk, nor was he insubordinate. I remember these things with clarity. He accepted my punishing responses as natural to the scheme of these things.

Now it was my turn. With my own two arms I encircled his chest. I slapped and grabbed my wrists against his stomach. Then, never questioning my superiority, I began to draw my adult embrace as tightly around him as I could: a wise is your father!

Matthew may have taken the discipline seriously. But this did not turn out to be a serious discipline.

All of the following I observed in a flash: his ribs did not bend inward, not so’s I could notice. Nor was his breathing in any way troubled—despite the breaths of exertion whistling in my nostrils. I was making discoveries, both about my son and about me. Under my forearms and under the flesh of each of his breasts, I encountered two imposing pockets of muscle which, when he flexed them (flexing too the sudden *latissimus dorsi* packed upon his broadening back), bid fair to break my hold! And yet the boy was willing to accept my behavior as a punishment of some sort. Or did he know that in that moment our roles had begun to modify?

On the chance that he had *not* recognized reversals in our dancing together, I straightway let him go. Perhaps I coughed in order to alibi the swiftness of the release (which was done before any signs of pain had appeared in

his face). Surely I pretended satisfaction in the choices and the accomplishments of my fathering:

“Joseph, you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Matthew, do you get it?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, good then. Good.”

Now, out in the midwinter snow, it is his strength that reminds me of our times past; and grateful am I that his strength is granted also unto me, causing me to be strong again.

My son—the man—releases me and we turn to enter the house together: “Unka Matt! Unka Matt is here! Hey, Unka Matt.”

It is almost exactly one year ago today, on the twenty-sixth of December, that I noticed a thick, sausage-long mass tucked along the inside of my left clavicle bone. At the base of my neck. I mentioned the thing to Thanne, then carried the news to our family physician, who ordered an X-ray which revealed, actually, three masses within me, one in the lower left lung, one under the sternum between the lungs, and, yes, that mass in my neck. The doctor who read the X-ray pictures termed them “suspicious,” and a swift biopsy confirmed it. I had a metastasized, stage IIIB, lung cancer.

By the best of good fortune, all of our children and all of our grandchildren had gathered for Christmas.

Therefore, one evening after supper—after putting a movie on for the little children—Thanne and I explained my condition as best as we could to our children and our children-in-law. I assured them of my faith and of the peace which attends it; I also, with an honesty undiminished to this day, declared that whatever was to come of this diagnosis, even the dying, would constitute my best adventure.

But when we had all said everything we could think of to say, and when people got up to clear the table and wash the dishes, Matthew did not move.

He had been sitting to my left.

During the explanation, he'd dropped his face down into his two open hands. He had said nothing.

I reached to touch him. "Matt?" I asked.

Without a sound, but keeping his face obscured, Matthew got up from the table and went into the bathroom and shut and locked the door.

All at once I felt a loss which I hadn't even felt with the diagnosis of my cancer. Was it his sense of impending loss that had been communicated into me? Were our spirits so intimate that one defined the other? Or was mine the loss of his intimacy?

I paced. Finally, after about half an hour and a quiet discussion with Thanne, I called through the door: "Matthew, I want to take a walk with you. Will you come?"

Noises in the bathroom indicated acceptance of my invitation: nose blowings, toilet flushings, throat clearings.

He came out. We put on coats and went outside into a winter's darkness.

We walked in silence a while. Among the children, Matthew would, of course, have a somewhat unique reaction. He goes home to an empty apartment. His three siblings all go home with company.

"I don't know," I puffed into the night, "what's to come of this, Matt." Our breathings hung like spirits in the snap-cold air. Our shadows lengthened before our feet as we passed beneath the pole light by the barn. Thanne and I live on some twenty-four acres, a small farm, woods, hills down which everyone toboggans upon good snow.

"I don't know what's coming, but I promise you, son, it's not going to trouble me. As for you, you'll find your feelings as they come. But I'd like to give you something which might direct those feelings. Okay? Matt, I would feel so proud if you could accept the task of watching out for your mother. I think about Joe and Mary and Talitha; but it's *you* who has the freedom for" — *and you who has the loneliness to be filled by* — "taking care of your mother. Will you take the task? Is this okay?"

Matt: "Yes."

Then, you see, he stopped walking and I stopped walking, and the whiskery man hugged me long, hugged me tightly enough to suppress my breathing.

Matthew? Matthew?

I lacked the air to call his name aloud—but in my mind it was a kindly, unpunishing appeal.

Matthew? Well, you see, I have lung cancer. We shouldn't be squeezing the living oxygen out of me these days.

Last summer—a half year after the diagnosis of cancer, and a half year before this Christmas—Matthew welcomed his mother and me into his apartment, Atlanta, Georgia, by shaking my hand, then taking me into his ropey arms and hugging me. I felt his rough beard against a new patch upon my person. Not my neck, this time—I felt it on the white, unsunny skin of my bald head. An odd sensation. I was only just getting used to baldness, a side effect of chemotherapy. Bald of all hair anywhere on my person: skull, eyelids, the bushes in old men's nostrils and ear-holes, armpits—well, you get the picture.

I had just fulfilled a commitment made long before my diagnosis, which was to deliver two extended speeches in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Then Thanne and I took the opportunity to drive the rest of the way to Matthew's place—where I would lie for several days in a trembling exhaustion. Together with my hair, I'd lost my natural energies.

Matthew (as he had promised me on the farm, upon a frozen earth) shared caretaking with his mother—each for the other, I mean, and both for me. He was a host, my son, a beneficent icon showing me his recent DVDs, grinning good health on these parents whom he loved: his mother. Me. Clearly he was delighted by our company. But I enjoyed something deeper than mere delight in his company.

For me in my extremity, my son's presence was a source of the conviction of the rightness of things in this turning world. Moreover, his

personal, filial love embraced me personally in that conviction. I, too, was a rightness among right things.

For, given our history, this father and this son might well have gone completely separate ways. The truest insight regarding our relationship was that we would become strangers each to the other, if not actual foes maintaining a wretched hostility.

For there was a time when Matthew yearned nothing more than to get out of our house for good and for all.

And there was an equally sincere time when I bargained with God—offering to give up my son’s love for me, offering to suffer his separation, his contempt, even his hatred—if only the Lord would intervene, helping him to survive this life. Better yet, O Lord, my God: *let the boy succeed*. Mine was a begging prayer, repeated often, just as one beats over and over against an imprisoning door. With all my heart I meant my offerings. This was, I believe, a measure of *my* love, that I would sacrifice his love forever.

And then there was indeed a day when my supplications hardened into reality, when loving him had locked me into a terrible loneliness.

But here: look!

I entered my son’s apartment.

He hugged me gently, crushing none of my unbendable bones. In spite of the jolt my hairless and haggard appearance caused in him, he smiled that pursed-lip smile and whispered in an easy creed, “I love you, dad,” whispered as much with moist warm breath into my ear, then rose on tiptoe to nuzzle my scalp with the jut of his chin.

An old man young in the love of his son.

And a son to this extent in love with his father: that when I carried home six or seven of his DVDs, Matt laughed over the chance to accuse me of blatant thievery. He turned it into a joke. This is exactly the same as turning wrongness into rightness. And he has kept his joke going for half a year by now. But you have to know our past in order to understand the marvel, the divine grace of this joke—for there was a time when it was I who made the accusation with an earnest grief, and he who was the thief.