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## Tales of a 43 Year-Old Runaway

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# Tales of a 43 Year-Old Runaway

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*Valerie Allison-Roan*

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At 43 I ran away from home. Looking back it is impossible to know if I waited too long or perhaps should have fled sooner. I knew exactly what I was doing, but a lot of my friends and family believed the lies I told them about leaving in order to pursue my professional aspirations. They thought I was going away to be the college professor I had always wanted to be. But I knew my primary motivation was leaving where and who I was, *not* being somewhere and someone new.

I had to get away from my father. And the only way to do so was to tell others the time was ripe for me to leave my job as an elementary principal in favor of a professorship as a teacher educator 2,000 miles away. Over the previous two years I had become trapped as the primary caregiver for my chronically depressed father and was being held an emotional hostage by his repeated attempts on his life.

Before my dad's downward spiral, I would have argued that I was the author of my own story: that I had and would maintain the course I had set for my personal and professional life. More recently, I have come to appreciate my story's interdependency, the ways in which it is written through intersections with others (both intimates and strangers) and their stories. Each day the context of life stories me, revising in a 'dialogical give-and-take process' my identities and relationships with others (Eakin 100). As John Wall posited, 'My narrative includes my story with others. Whether I like it or not, my time in the world is shaped by others in the near and distant past' (78).

Not only was my transition to a new community and identity a reaction to a familial and personal crisis; once in my new context, relationships with others and my selves from my earlier life shaped my efforts to narrate a new life. Relationships with others, as Wall puts it, have the power to constrain or expand individuals and their courses through life (59–60). In my case the others included family, friends, and associates, as well as strangers I came to know only through their written work.

Following are four creative non-fiction vignettes I wrote over a four-year period beginning in 2009. They describe pivotal moments in my life's intersection with my father's depression and eventual suicide. Weaving together the vignettes are my explanation and analysis of how my father's depression and suicide attempts impacted my entry into academia. I describe how I experienced his death within broader personal, familial, and social circumstances. I conclude by interrogating how his suicide and the context of my family and new life constrained my grieving, impacting my healing.

The vignettes originated in response to my compulsion to make a permanent record of what I had lived through. Paul John Eakin would assert the drive to write was a means to 'face down' my father's and my own mortality (129). At the time I did not imagine the vignettes would have an audience beyond—someday—my children. What I knew was a need to speak my truth, even if it was not heard. Much later, through considering Louise DeSalvo's writing, I recognised the personally therapeutic value of my writing. As I began the work of making sense of the vignettes, I was influenced by Carolyn Ellis's and Lauren Richardson's autoethnographic work, particularly those occasions when they wrote narratively about their lives and then revisited the narratives with analytical lenses informed by their expertise in communication, education, and sociology. My analysis is informed by Ellis and Richardson, as well as by authors in psychology, religion, and writing.

Below the first vignette, 'Entangled', describes my unanticipated recruitment as my father's keeper. Prior to that moment I had lived with an illusion of my independence from my family of origin.

### Entangled

Until the morning of June 26, 2006, I had functioned with measured detachment to my father's and my stepmother Judy's aging and what I saw as associated maladies. I had noticed Judy's declining reasoning skills and memory, but I had not considered the consequences for my dad in living with her. Likewise, I had noted Dad's slowing and his increased fixation on his ailments—which I much later recognised he read as foreshadowing a downward spiral into a life of dependency.

I had my own concerns: four children to raise, a career to manage, a husband to attend to, and a dissertation that needed to be finished before the start of the school year. I never imagined my dad and stepmother, who had made the barest of effort to support and nurture me as a child or through tribulations of my adult life, would become my obligation: that I would be summoned *and* feel compelled to care for them.

At around 6:30 a.m. I received a phone call from Judy. In hushed voice she reported my father had woke her in the middle of the night with a pistol in his hand. She claimed he had told her he wanted to kill himself and said he had a bullet for her as well. She told him she didn't want her bullet and somehow talked him into giving her the gun. Once she had it, she hid it. But now she couldn't remember where, and she was scared he might find it.

Despite my tumultuous, painful history with my dad and Judy, and the dysfunctionality of their relationship, Judy's story was unfathomable. I drove the mile and a half between our houses in a bedroom community of Salt Lake City believing Judy had dreamt the events she described, and because of her moderate dementia, she couldn't now distinguish between dreams and reality.

She greeted me at the front door and once more outlined the story. My skepticism slid away. *Where was the gun? Why did Dad want to kill himself? What was his current state of mind?* It was more than I could process or contend with on my own.

I called for 'back up'. First, I called my husband Michael. He was closest and would be the most confident dealing with matters involving guns. The second call was to my stepsister Jan. Of Judy's kids she lived the nearest, 10 miles away in another suburb. Besides she was the stepsibling I would have naturally selected to weather a crisis with. Despite Judy's efforts to keep the children of the two families from bonding, Jan and I had become sisters.

While I waited for Michael and Jan, I attempted to interact with Dad. He was in bed, lying atop his rumpled bedding. Seeming to confirm Judy's story, he lamented how he hadn't felt well for months, how Judy's cognition and memory were deteriorating. How was he to cope with it all? One night recently she had made him a dinner consisting of a can of baked beans and a can of green beans. It was more than he could bear!

Initially, he admitted to having a gun out. As the moments passed waiting for Michael, his story shifted, he stonewalled me, and then he seemed to feign sleepiness. My efforts to quiz him were hampered by Judy hovering in the bedroom, so I turned my attention to locating the pistol.

*Where would Judy think to hide a gun in the middle of the night?* She couldn't recall and the more I pressed her, the more agitated she became. She sensed she wasn't in control and she began to back pedal. She assured me my father would never *really* want to hurt himself or her. They just needed some rest. I should go home or to work. My dad had simply had a bad night.

For my part I tried to sooth Judy by offering affirmation to all her assertions, 'Yes, I'm sure you're right.' Meanwhile, Michael had arrived and was in the bedroom loudly grilling Dad about where in the house he kept his firearms and how many he had.

Interspersed with smiles, head nods, and verbal comfort to Judy, I was searching the living and dining rooms—under the sofa cushions, in the china hutch, behind the stereo cabinet—every nook and cranny where a woman with dementia might hide a pistol from her suicidal/homicidal husband in the middle of the night.

Judy left me in the living room to check on the ruckus Michael was raising. I opened the bench of Judy's electric console organ and Jan walked through the front door precisely as I picked up the offending pistol and pointed its muzzle into the air above my head.

'Good morning, Jan! I'm so happy to see you!' The gun might have given her a mixed message.

Before Judy realised I had the pistol, I handed it off to Michael as he headed out the front door past Jan with two of Dad's long guns over his shoulders. In total Michael gathered up a half dozen guns and carted them home to secure in his gun safe. If Dad were going to kill himself, he'd have to do it without adding to US gun violence statistics.

Over the next several months my life was consumed by competing demands of my children and husband, my career, my doctoral work, and my dad and stepmother. After Dad's first attempt, he and Judy quickly lost control of themselves and their futures. During the next five weeks, Dad made repeated attempts on his life and repeated trips to the psychiatric ward. Eventually he was involuntarily committed to a care facility and court ordered counselling for a period of 90 days. Judy's dementia progressed rapidly, and she was unwilling or unable to allow others to assist her. As a diabetic she faced life-threatening consequences as she lost her capacity to manage her sugar and insulin levels. By the first week in August, she ended up in the psychiatric ward herself and was then transitioned to an Alzheimer's care facility. Unfortunately, she was not as carefully supervised as her children would have wished. In early September she attempted to escape the facility via a second floor window and sustained critical injuries. Shortly after Judy's accident, the judge deemed Dad was no longer a risk to himself or others, and he was allowed to return home with no further mandates for counselling.

Each night Dad came to my house for dinner. He dragged himself over near six o'clock every evening. He appeared in the doorway with his shoulders slumped and his hound dog eyes, a hat of one sort or another perched precariously atop his lean frame; it always seemed he devoted a good deal of energy to being tragic. At the dinner table he consumed whatever was placed in front of him while decrying his lack of appetite and enjoyment of eating. He resisted all attempts to goad him into being appreciative and complimentary to me (for cooking) and to his grandkids (for feigning relentless cheerfulness). He slipped back out of the house (usually after finding some reason to quarrel with the three-year-old or criticise the 16-year-old) and ventured down to the care facility to visit Judy.

Following her fall, Judy's cognitive capacity deteriorated exponentially. She was fitful, vengeful and paranoid, not capable of understanding the events that had led to her situation or the kindness my dad and her children demonstrated in caring for her. Dad simultaneously held himself responsible for Judy's dementia, and by extension her injuries, and he lamented the burden of her all consuming self-absorbed dependency. His nightly visits to her side served to fortify the cycle of self-pity and self-loathing that trapped him.

I had had a very difficult relationship with Judy, and my dad's 30-year-long marriage to her had been turbulent. Four months after falling from the window Judy passed away from her injuries, and my siblings and I hoped, against reason, Dad might finally be free to be the father and grandfather we wished for. From January 2007 until June 2008, I continued in my role as my dad's primary

caregiver. While he maintained his own home, he continued to make nightly trips to mine for dinner. Some nights he was more talkative and upbeat than others, but generally he was sullen, quarrelsome, and resisted attempts to involve him in life-enhancing experiences.

A friend who met my dad once at a party in 2007 was dismayed to hear my description of him. For that evening, Sandy had found him to be ‘charming and gregarious’. Looking back, her comments point to the frequent invisibility of depression. I later came to realise that in the moment of that party Dad had likely felt some fleeting joy, but when the moment was passed, he could not hold onto it. The joy was chased away by the two-headed monster of self-pity and self-loathing. Because I had not yet fallen prey to depression, I could not truly empathise with how outmatched he was. Like others who have not experienced depression, I naively believed overcoming it was a matter of will, and I was often frustrated and impatient with him for not shaking it off.

Mirroring Haug et al.’s (531–2) findings on caregivers’ assessments of their own mental health, over time I felt like I was slowly slipping into the lair that held Dad. Demands of work, children, and Dad left little time or space for me to release stress. As the months passed, I found I was more easily frustrated at work, overly sensitive to criticism, and unable to sleep at night. Paralleling Sandy’s impressions of my dad, I was able to keep up appearances for those not intimately connected to me, but my resilience was eroding. I began to plot my escape.

I rationalised: I was the youngest of Dad’s seven children; it was time for one of the others to take responsibility for him. Plus, I didn’t actually enjoy being a principal; it was something I had fallen into because the pay was better than teaching. There was too much bureaucracy, no time to write, and long hours away from my children. Finally, I reasoned it was a good time to pursue an academic position. After all, my dissertation was still fresh; my daughters, Hannah and Tessa, at five and seven, were young enough to relocate without too much drama; and my sons, Preston and Addison, at 22 and 18 were old enough to make up their own minds to follow me or stay in Utah.

On June 30, 2008, three cars and a moving van pulled away from our home in Northern Utah and headed for Central Pennsylvania. I was running away from what I had tried to fix but could not—my relationship with my father and his depression. The plan among my siblings had been to move Dad to Montana to be near my oldest brother Rich and his family. Unfortunately, Dad and another brother, Mark, unravelled that plan before my family and I had reached the Utah border. The result was my father stayed in his Utah home and my twin brothers Mark and Mike moved in with him. Given Mark’s own battle with depression, it was not a positive turn of events.

Regardless, I was free and I hardly looked back. I immersed myself in recreating myself in a new place and career. Hannah and Tessa were enrolled in summer camp and then school. Addison started his freshman year at the university where I was teaching. Michael’s employer transferred him to an Eastern branch.

On paper it looked as if we had managed a successful fresh start. In reality, it turned out to be a hard transition for us all. For me, friendships among colleagues and neighbours did not naturally develop. After 30 years in the same community, I missed my extended family, our old neighbourhood, and my friends. I had plenty to keep myself busy with, but I was lonely. Still, I held onto hope; perhaps I just needed to give things more time. I had one semester behind me and was just beginning my second. With some collegial teaching experience to build on, I imagined I would be more efficient in preparing for my classes, thereby freeing up time to become involved in campus activities. Surely a network of acquaintances and friends would follow.

The vignette ‘Swing’ marks a pivotal moment in my life that ironically coincided with a historic day in the US. I will always remember the day but not for the reasons I had imagined.

### Swing

At a campus workshop recently, the presenter discussed how dates of emotionally distressing, historical events get seared into people’s memories, into the consciousness of a community or society. Everyone in the US who was of reasonable age on September 11, 2001, can describe precisely where they were, what they were doing, and the emotions they felt on that date. The same is true of John F. Kennedy’s assassination and the first space shuttle disaster. But the phenomenon also occurs with positively charged events. English citizens will likely be able to recount years from now how they spent the day Prince William and Kate were married.

Sometimes these monumental moments are important, or more important, to a subsection of a population than others. Black Americans born before the mid-1950s can probably describe the day of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. Gay Americans eager to marry will likely recall the day same sex marriage was legalised in the first state.

And of course, sometimes the same event can be imprinted into people’s memories for dissimilar emotional reasons. Some people (mostly Republicans and/or conservatives) will remember January 20, 2009, because they were distressed by the Presidential Inauguration of Barack Obama. Others, Democrats and/or liberals, will remember the date as historically significant, a time of jubilation.

I count myself among the latter group. So, in the early evening of January 20, 2009, I positioned myself to watch the ceremonies of the inauguration while exercising on my stationary bicycle in my bedroom. I wasn’t getting much of a workout (it’s hard to simultaneously work up a sweat and weep happily). Instead, I was content to be spinning while I watched the pre-recorded footage of President Obama’s inauguration speech, the procession to the White House and the other ceremonial traditions my country has for peacefully passing the torch

of leadership. It felt monumental, and I couldn't imagine not remembering where I was and how I felt in those moments.

I had opted to watch the pomp and circumstance upstairs while exercising because I'm married to Michael, someone for whom the inauguration felt disastrous. I was pedalling along captivated by the images rolling across the TV screen—definitely of the opinion that what I was witnessing would mark a change in my country's history. Pessimism and discord were on the verge of being vanquished. I felt light and hopeful.

Michael appeared in the doorway. He wore the look he reserves for the most solemn of occasions. *Okay already! I know he's not your president, but why spoil the moment, the ceremony of it all for me?* Then I saw the phone in his hand and I stopped pedalling.

All he could manage was, 'I'm sorry. I'm...so sorry.'

On the other end of the phone my brother Mark, 'Dad's dead.'

'What?'

'Dad's dead...I came home from work...found him in the garage.'

'What!'

'Valerie!...He hung himself...in the garage...Mike and I were gone.'

'No...Oh, Jesus, NO!'

My first thought, Dad had chosen today, of all days, to finally *really* kill himself. He couldn't stand the thought of living in a country with a black man as President.

And then, 'Oh, No! Oh my God, I'm so sorry.' The realisation came. Today was my twin brothers' 49<sup>th</sup> birthday. They discovered him—hanging—dog's leash—rafter—garage.

Swing. One moment I was feeling euphoric—a new age and hope were dawning. Across a span of puzzlement, disbelief, denial, in an instant I was recoiling from news that changed everything.

Two days later I flew back to Utah alone. I did not want Addison missing classes; I worried if Hannah and Tessa went with me, I could not insulate them from the circumstances of their grandfather's death; and Michael needed to stay home to care for them. Preston was still in Utah, and I would be with my siblings and friends. I shared with my department chair and the other three department members the circumstances of my dad's sudden death. Beyond the assurance that someone would cover my classes during my absence, they seemed mute. They did not know my history. Perhaps out of discomfort or respect, they erred in favour of not prying. Much later I learned none of them spoke to anyone else on campus about my situation. My dean was not informed, nor was the campus chaplain or faculty in the counselling centre. In the months following my return from the funeral, I wondered why no one sought to extend sympathies; I did not receive the customary bereavement card signed by my superiors or acknowledgement of my loss in other forms. At the time I interpreted the lack of outreach as my new community and supervisors being uncaring, and I lived with that impression for more than two years. It was not until a meeting with my dean

following my third year performance review that I learned she and others had not been told. At which point, I struggled to reframe my earlier interactions and impressions.

Upon reading an earlier draft of this manuscript, a wise friend, Donna, gently questioned my decision to hide Dad's cause of death from Hannah and Tessa. Her questioning challenged me to consider my culpability in perpetuating a family dynamic of silence. If I am honest with myself, I must admit that I have been an active participant in reinforcing the norms of my family and broader communities that support un-emotive responses to emotional wounds. While I am quick to point the finger at others for standing by, for not speaking up or reaching out, I have not examined my reticence to be forthright within and beyond my family. Arguably, Hannah and Tessa would have been more able to understand my own later struggles had the circumstances of their grandfather's death not been kept from them. Below, 'Rope Burn' captures the nightmare I found myself in, confronted by the self-inflicted brutality of my dad's death.

### Rope Burn

Educators would describe me as a visual learner. I remember what I see; I notice visual detail. Large portions of my lived experiences are contained in mental snapshots, including countless random events of seeming insignificance. Nearly always the snapshots are of high resolution...

It was a day,

*maybe it was two,*

after I flew into town. I arrived alone at the funeral home in Salt Lake in my friend Julie's car and was met by my brother Rich and sister-in-law Chris. My stepbrother Dave and my stepsister Jan also came along.

*If Jan's husband was there I don't remember. To be honest, I can't say with certainty Jan was there.*

Chris had my dad's United States Air Force dress blues uniform with her, fresh from the dry cleaners.

*Then again maybe the uniform had been dropped off before, or perhaps there was talk of it being delivered later.*

The funeral home was large, formal, and startlingly crowded for a late afternoon. I had the impression there were at least two viewings or memorials underway. A lot of chatter was happening around me, and I didn't know what to tune in to. I tried to give the appearance of attending, of meeting others' expectations for a grieving daughter. But I just couldn't seem to find my way in the moment. Instead, I fell into my well-worn role as a silent observer, a researcher in the field. This wasn't really my affair, my family, my horror. I was merely tagging along out of morbid curiosity.

The simultaneously too sombre, too practised, too hurried assistant funeral director lead us down a wide flight of stairs to a darkened corner parlour in the basement. It was an excess of space for the four of us and the stretcher.

*Or was my father's body in his casket at this point?*

It,

*whichever it was,*

was in the room already.

*Again, was he, the body, lying there in the dark room? Had the sheet been pulled up to his/its chin as if he were sleeping? Or had his/the head been covered too, like portrayed on TV?*

I was struck by the unearthly yellow-green of his skin, by the uncharacteristically flat expression someone had constructed on his face. Just visible above the top of his shirt collar the deep maroon seared ring around his neck.

It is the only detail I see with certainty, with clarity, the fact that marked me.

*Why can't I clearly remember the rest of this memory? Why is it veiled, hazy, something I might have dreamt?*

The abrasion that would never heal, it is indelible—a verdict, a sentence, a condemnation.

I was raised as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormon). That being said, my upbringing should not be held up as a positive example of Mormonism any more than Joy Castro's memoir, *The Truth Book: Escaping a Childhood of Abuse among Jehovah's Witnesses*, should be held as the definitive example of Jehovah's Witnesses. Long ago I stopped identifying myself as a Mormon, but still the cultural images and my childhood understanding of the doctrine are deeply engrained. As presented to me as a child, Mormon doctrine, like Catholicism, depicted suicide as an unforgivable sin. It is the shedding of innocent blood. My father's soul would be eternally excluded from the glory of God. Not in the sense of dwelling perpetually in a fire and brimstone hell. The images of Mormonism's Telestial Kingdom or Hell are not as ominous as some other Christian religions. Instead, the Telestial Kingdom is described as perpetually uncomfortable and not fulfilling, much like many individuals' earthy existences. Those who are relegated to the lowest kingdom through their mortal actions will never dwell in the presence of God and Christ or be reunited with their earthly families.

Only recently I learned my childhood indoctrination was not consistent with published articles written by church representatives (e.g. Ballard 6–9) on the subject. Accordingly, the eternal consequences of suicide are not absolute; only God knows and can judge the hearts and minds of his children. Once I took the initiative to research Mormon doctrine on suicide, I was stymied by the contradiction between my childhood understanding and what I found. Since I am a non-believer and my father before his death declared himself a non-believer, neither my childhood understanding of the church's doctrine nor my new understanding *should* have held sway over me. But my grief continued to be coloured by my early indoctrination, and though I do not believe in the Mormon

version of the Hereafter; I could not erase the image of my father suffering and alone through eternity.

Beyond the religious condemnation of suicide I experienced, a flood of regret, guilt, rejection, shame, and loss confronted me. Christopher Lukas and Henry Seiden conclude, 'If there is one pervasive reaction that survivors have to suicide, it is guilt. Suddenly, there seem to be endless reasons to feel responsible for the death' (39). A well-meaning family member told me multiple times in the days between my return to Utah and the burial service that Dad had missed me tremendously after I moved away. I felt deeply my failure to stay with him, to somehow save him. He had relied on me, and I had abandoned him. Couldn't I have tried a little harder, been more assertive about finding helpful mental health support, about getting him involved with others, and about his reconnecting with his other children and grandchildren? As two close friends independently pointed out to me, I had been thrust into a position of mothering my father. The pain of my failure to protect him was akin to that of a parent falling short in protecting her child. Despite my friends' and eventually a therapist's assertions that it was irrational for me to hold myself responsible, the sense of guilt persisted. I knew my blame and could not forgive myself.

Lukas and Seiden state, 'Survivors are traumatized by the notion that someone has rejected them in this fashion' (21). This was true for me. I felt somehow I was not loveable enough, was not reason enough for Dad to choose to live. Beyond that, the suicide brought to the surface other painful, unresolved memories—times he had communicated through his actions he could not or would not work to maintain a relationship with me, stretching as far back as my parents' divorce when I was eight years old. In the months following his death, I was visited by countless memories in which my dad had fallen short. The times he had not been present for important accomplishments, when he had failed to protect me from others, and when he had not known how to nurture me through emotional injuries, all haunted me and reinforced a self-image of being unworthy of his, and by extension others', love and attention. Again, friends and a therapist tried to reassure me that his death was not about me. At an intellectual level I knew this was true, but in my emotional core it felt like him turning his back on me one final and irreversible time.

If my dad had died by other means, I would not have felt the stigma I attached to suicide. Death by suicide is not mentioned in polite conversation. Because of social norms, acquaintances are disinclined to inquire about a lost loved one's battle with depression. To have a family member end his life feels like an indictment: shame on the individual for not being mentally stronger and shame on those near him for not seeing the signs and/or preventing it (Lukas and Seiden 29–30, 39). Some of the shame certainly stems from a legacy of religious condemnation of suicide as a sin akin to murder (Lukas and Seiden 29–30; Szasz 78–80). Additionally, historically in Western civilisation, mental illnesses and disabilities have been cast as shameful and frightening; sufferers were to be hidden away and avoided (Wahl 13–5). Perhaps cultural norms or religious beliefs were the reasons members of my department did not extend themselves to

support me in my grief. In truth, I did not feel safe reaching out. Fearing the stigma attached to mental illness (Wahl 11–5), I was apprehensive that as a newcomer my dad’s suicide would mark me as less than emotionally stable or as someone who did not come from the right background. I feared it would define how I became known among my peers and those overseeing my tenure pursuit.

Unwillingness to be frank extended to my siblings and stepsiblings who were adamant I not allude to the cause of death when writing Dad’s obituary. Doing so would have been gauche; we were not so lowbrow as to air our family’s dirty laundry in public.

Jumbled up with the other emotions were my grief and loss. He was my dad, and in spite of his imperfections and inconsistent parenting, I loved him and craved his affirmation. After his death, I found myself repeatedly wishing for one more clumsy hug, one more peck on the forehead, one more story of his childhood, or another tidbit of car maintenance advice. Whom would I now call when I needed someone to hear me boast about my children and their accomplishments? Losing my father brought into relief the isolation I was experiencing in my new community. It is impossible to know if I had stayed in Utah if I would have fared better through having an established network of family and friends to grieve with.

My father, as a retired member of the US Air Force, was entitled to military honours at his funeral.<sup>1</sup> The bishop from the congregation where Dad had once been active blessed the gravesite, but no one spoke in eulogy. My siblings and I had no language for summarising what Dad’s life and death had meant. Furthermore, we were too fractured to come together even temporarily to speak our grief. Our inability to put into words, to allow others to know our hearts, we had learned from our father. He had been masterful in avoiding the dangers of genuineness and vulnerability through alternating manoeuvres of silent stoicism and biting flippancy. Through his example we had learned that telling others what we felt gave them not the means to nurture and support us, but instead to disappoint and hurt. As Ellis details in writing about her brother’s death, funerals, in theory, serve to honour the dead while wrapping the bereaved in a supportive community (131—40). For Dad’s funeral, we, his children, carried out our duty without permitting ourselves to succumb to the embrace of community.

### Flagged

Gray clouds created a low ceiling over the Salt Lake Valley beyond the cemetery. Bagpipes played as we made our way down the icy slope. Brothers and sons guided sisters and mothers. Others kept their distance. The briefest of graveside services, Father’s bishop offered a prayer. I bowed my head and said ‘amen’ from habit.

The honour guard, two male and one female active Air Force service members, was called to the ready.

*What inappropriate remark might Dad have made about the heavy black woman among the honour guard? Would he have been disrespectful of her gender, weight or race? I was dismayed his bigotry lived in my head in this moment meant to solemnly honour him.*

Three times unblinking I tracked the rifles as they were snapped to their shoulders. I marked the call and the chambering of the rounds. Still, with each volley I recoiled unprepared for its reverberation through me. James, second from the oldest, reached out to steady me. I fought the instinct to throw off his touch.

*A little too late to play the role of 'caring big brother.'*

The flag was ceremoniously folded as snow fell. The unbearably young officer approached extending the triangle to me, Father's youngest. Mouthing an obligatory 'thank you,' I cradled it to my chest. Flanked by five of six siblings, I was alone. The one to receive the flag, the one to stand for grief.

*What would have happened if I had simply broken ranks, deserted?*

Over the shoulder of the officer, I studied the wall of distant relatives. Cousins and nieces and nephews I scarcely knew. I tried to read their expressions of pity and expectation.

*Was there some way in which to do this right?*

I let my eyes fall to the now bare casket and watched as a handful of mourners came forward to pay their last respects.

Afterwards a step-cousin I couldn't name, the nephew-in-law of my deceased stepmother, approached to advise me to unfold the flag when I got home, so it wouldn't mildew. I was irritated by his invasion and condescension.

*I never could face unfolding it. I feared having it and me come undone.*

The next day a triangle of the flag poked above the top of the green canvas tote Julie had given me as a carryon. In response to my request for a shopping bag, she had dug the tote out from a pile of castoffs destined for the Salvation Army. It was a more dignified option than a disposable shopping bag. The tote's squared bottom and sides gave the flag support on two of its three sides, and the newspaper containing his obituary, the one I had written, slid easily down beside it. The precisely folded flag, a conspicuous symbol of bereavement.

The airport security officer made eye contact with me over the top of the luggage-screening monitor as it came along the conveyor belt at security. She acknowledged my pain with a sad smile. I lowered my gaze.

I took my aisle seat beside a retired, though not yet elderly, couple. Their manner with one another seemed evidence of a lengthy, comfortable relationship. She had packed food and once the jumble of the loading process had calmed, but before our attention was demanded by the flight attendant, she began organising their in-flight picnic. With more gestures than words, she solicited his input. As she held up the snack-sized can of Pringles, he smiled. 'Yes, please' and 'thank you' were implied.

*The tenderness of their unspoken communication served as a foil to the emotionally stifled silence I experienced in my relationships with*

*my father and other family members and the apathetic silence I would live in in the months ahead.*

Flight at altitude, seatbelt sign off, and flight attendants beginning the first beverage service, the co-occupants of row 19 finished their lunch. Packing away their leftovers, the woman's brow furrowed, spying my flagged tote stowed under the seat in front of me. She turned toward me adding her silent condolence to the security officer's. I opened the book in my lap and pretended to read through clouding vision.

Upon returning to Pennsylvania I was immediately absorbed by the responsibilities of work and family. No one asked how I was doing, and I did not know anyone well enough to initiate a conversation. Mostly I felt untethered. Over the span of six months I had moved away from my community of 30 years, friendships there were slipping away given the distance and life's hectic pace, and now I was fatherless. My connections to the world seemed like the tired frayed lines of an abandoned hot air balloon. The sense of floating away, being somehow emotionally separate from the rest of the world and the daily events at home and work, enveloped me.

As for my husband, because of myriad factors—his own family history, my childhood history, the circumstances surrounding our move to Pennsylvania and the reality of his recent displacement from his own profession due to a debilitating back injury—he was hamstrung in his ability to reach me. From my perspective, I felt like I was floating farther and farther away, and he was not willing or able to throw me any fresh lines. From his, it felt as if I was actively, intentionally pulling away, slicing through the remaining tethers.

To my few distant friends and to the people I worked with, I seemed to be more or less intact—scarred, bitter, 'more angry than before' (one friend shared, and then qualified by saying it wasn't necessarily a bad thing); but they would not have described me as 'in crisis.' After all, I went through the motions of work and family. Tasks got accomplished, more or less.

The hollowness in my core felt unbearable, and I wished I could simply cease being. No activity I engaged in seemed to have meaning. Each simply marked the passage of time opening up the next moment in which I was sure to be confronted by further disillusionment. I remembered my dad repeatedly describing the disappointment in waking up each morning, and I understood. I had worked my whole life trying to make something of myself, to be worthy of others' respect and love. It was all for naught. If my dad could not, no one could. I felt damned.

Dad had left no written explanation for leaving, a fact that had hurt my brothers Mark and Mike more than the shock of finding him. I would not let that be my legacy. I needed to make a written record, so others would know, so my children would not hold themselves responsible. So I began to write, not the academic manuscripts needed to secure tenure (although some of that happened too) but narratives I hoped would capture what it felt like to live through the last 44 years.

In the fall of 2011, I walked into a workshop on my campus in which Joy Castro was speaking to creative writing students and faculty about her memoir. There

was another workshop in the adjacent room I had planned to attend, but I ended up in the wrong room and then was too self-conscious to leave. My staying diverted my path. I had already written a number of non-fiction vignettes and personal essays about both my childhood and my relationship with my father. But, it was not until I heard Castro's response to a student's question about writing about personal trauma that I saw the connection between my compulsion to write and my healing from my father's suicide. Castro referenced DeSalvo's work in therapeutic writing. From Castro and DeSalvo, I followed a string of writers from diverse disciplines. As I articulated at the outset, this manuscript is the offshoot of ideas Ellis and Richardson germinated through their work in autoethnography.

I have endeavoured to interrogate what I experienced in losing my father to suicide and how my experiences shaped me and were shaped by my context and my relationship with others. I experienced my father's depression and suicide within a unique milieu that included our history as father and daughter, the family dynamics of my birth family and my current family, the religious doctrine of the Mormon church and its practice by those near to me, and the context of my old and new communities.

My effort to capture memories associated with my father's depression and death I hope portrays not only a fuller version of him, but also how his life and death shaped me. In writing about my father's suicide I have moved to a place where I can now give it its appropriate weight in my life narrative. It was a defining experience, but it is not, will not be, the fabric of my 'metanarrative' (Richardson 181). 'People tell stories about events in their lives; the meaning of the event changes through the invocation of different implied narratives...A life may have a "plot line," but not everything lived—not everything of import to the person—fits neatly into "a" plot' (181). While I have been shaped by the context of my life, I need not be its pawn.

In the years following my dad's death, I longed to but could not speak to others of my trauma. Writing became the avenue for carefully and thoroughly saying what it meant to me. I broke the silence and have reclaimed the tethers that bind me to others. In so doing I have expanded my own life and I hope demonstrated to those close to me the value of speaking our truths.

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## Note

- [1] Military honours include a bagpipe player, an honour guard, and the firing of rifles in a military salute. In honour of their service, coffins of military service members are draped with an American flag. Prior to burial, the flag is ceremoniously folded and presented to the next of kin, usually the spouse or oldest child of the fallen.

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