VOL. 11, ISSUE 4 · FALL 2021

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LITERATURE ART

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What Would Odysseus Do?

Remembering my father's stories

My father kept a world map taped to the wall above an old fireplace in his home study, where he analyzed patients on Saturdays. The corners were torn, and a crease marked a T across the world where it had once been folded into quadrants. He wanted to sail around the world, and he'd plot our journey, drawing imaginary routes in the air. As a young girl, I'd look up at him, mesmerized by his entirety—the spark in his kaleidoscopic eyes swirling with blues and greens just like the oceans he dreamed of crossing together; his silver hair brushed back in soft unruly waves; his mustache lining the smirk in his thin lips as he consulted me for my opinion: Should we sail to the Southern Ocean around Antarctica or to the Caribbean and through the Panama Canal? Or should we head north toward the coast of Russia or across the Indian Ocean? The possibilities seemed endless.

We didn't own a sailboat. We'd never sailed before. But those details were of earthly, insignificant concern. We were explorers. Dreamers—something that, as a psychoanalyst, my father valued greatly. He'd point out various paths, conducting his finger around large blocks of continents like puzzle pieces that seemed easy enough to navigate. When I asked how we would get food, or how long it would take to get from one point to another, trying to assess the possibility in my young mind, my father brushed these practicalities aside.

"Three days . . . three months . . . ten years! Think of Odysseus!"

As a Greek man, my father took Odysseus's journey personally. His father, my papou, took his own sailing adventure to America, across the ocean at age thirteen, leaving behind his parents and siblings and not knowing how to speak English until he showed up day after day to stand at the back of an overfull language classroom in Chicago. I grew up listening to my father tell me these stories alongside bedtime stories of Odysseus: blinding Polyphemus, driving a sharpened stake through the Cyclops's eye, thereby provoking the wrath of Poseidon; Calypso's luring promise of immortality; those Sirens' songs forcing Odysseus to tie himself to the ship's mast in effort to resist their temptation . . . As my father told and retold these stories, he became Odysseus, and I listened, both terrified and enthralled.

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As a young girl, what was more exciting than secrets? My father was the keeper of strangers' secrets.

On Saturdays, when his patients rang the doorbell, I would scramble to my bedroom window, which overlooked the side entrance reserved for them, and try to catch a glimpse of these mysterious strangers coming into our home. They left their cars parked behind our blue Pontiac station wagon and walked up our driveway, leaving foreign footprints in the snow. Through my window, I'd catch bits and pieces of these strangers—a man's gray trench coat, a woman's heeled shoes—before they entered our porch, where my father greeted them, welcoming them inside our home. I'd hear snippets of voices, small talk, as my father led these people down our narrow hallway to his study before he shut the French doors, blinds tightly closed, where, for forty-five minutes, they told my father all the secrets.

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As a young girl, what was more exciting than secrets? My father was the keeper of strangers' secrets. And I wanted to know them all.

But these stories were inaccessible, stowed in a faraway place, a land to which I could never venture. They were locked inside the vault of my father's other world. I wanted to travel to that world, a place that held the ultimate truths, the coveted unveilings of one another. I worried about what would happen to all those stories when my father was no longer there. Would they pass along with him, would all their secrets disappear?

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In my father's office there was a painting on the wall that my mother disliked. She said it wasn't good for his patients to look at something so disturbing. The painting was streaks of red and black strewn like blood violently across the canvas. My father hung it at the foot of his analyst's couch, directly in his patients' line of sight. I loved that painting. It seemed dangerous. It went too far. Wherever the patient might venture, the painting went a little further.

Come on, it beckoned, luring like those Sirens' songs. *crash into the rocks.*

My father didn't press wax into his patients' ears, he didn't tie them to the mast to help them control their urges; rather, he coaxed them toward risk. He wanted to guide them into the deepest corners of their psyches, tempt the devil from its shadows. This was the place he wanted his patients to explore. He wanted to take them there and show them it was okay, they were still safe. Turn on the lights. Look, it's just a shadow.

* * *

As my father plotted our trip around the world on that paper map, he verged into mythology. With all seriousness, he'd ask how we would navigate between Scylla and Charybdis—the six-headed sea monster and the giant whirlpool by which no sailor could pass. Which would we choose? What did Odysseus do? The line between our plans and Odysseus's blurring. So that what was real and what was imagined became permeable.

Yet, as I stood beside him, imagining sailing those open waters with my father, the keeper of secrets, I felt a sense of dread. Not at the impossible journey, but rather at the understanding that it only existed in the realm of fantasy, that I was witnessing my father envisioning something he knew would never come true.

I realize now he was teaching me how to dream.

But I was intrigued by something else. I was enthralled by the leftover marks of strangers, their imprints on the couch from the press of their head on the throw pillow; the single balled-up tissue left behind in the trash can; the lingering scent of someone's cologne; the pulse of electricity that hung in the room holding all that had been divulged.

My father held these secrets with a weight of honor around his neck. These were the things I wanted to know.

From the basement boiler room, I could hear muffled murmurs. From the stairwell, less. From behind the piano, a little more, but this was the most dangerous place to hide, the closest I ever got to those shut French doors without getting caught, before my mother shooed me away.

After their sessions, my father emerged, cut donuts into pieces, and set them on a plate to share; sometimes he drove me to the recycling trailer in town, where he let me run stacks of old newspapers from the car up the metal ramp and dump them with the others tied in bundles with string. I loved the smell of those old newspapers and the sound it made when I tossed them among the other discarded stacks; I loved the idea of stories being recycled, turning into something new, all the words scrambling into different orders. How many stories would be recreated? The possibilities, again, were endless.

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When my father died unexpectedly at the age of sixty-two, I thought about those stories. All the strangers who showed up at the hospital, who filed into the big Greek church for his funeral, were they mourning the loss of him or the passing of what they had shared, of what he had held?

A pair of oversized metal file drawers sat in our basement. They were full of manila folders holding his patients' notes. Each file marked *Confidential*. My mother was instructed by the institute where he worked to destroy them.

I peeked inside one of the drawers. Page after page of loose-leaf paper scratched over in my father's hard-to-read handwriting, detailing dreams, quoted dialogue, descriptions of hair, clothing, gestures. These were real people, not fictional characters my father had created. It felt like something sacred. Like I could bring these pages into the Greek church or the Jewish temple, hold them like others did their Bible or Torah. This was new for me. This sacred feeling. I slid shut the drawer, my heart racing.

My mother sat on a small footstool in the basement, feeding page after page written in my father's slanted doctor's script into the shredder. I wanted to grab all the files and run. I stood behind her and watched, unable to bear the sound of the shredder's motor. With each new page she fed into the machine, I cried.

* * *

Over the past twenty-five years, I've moved twelve times across three different states. All this time I've kept two of his files, tucked away, unread, hidden in the back of my own filing cabinet full of important documents that I never access, like old taxes, medical records, a will. Intentionally out of reach. Preserved, as though I have something of my father, even though they are notes on other people's lives.

* * *

I think of all the stories, this land of hidden truths, and grapple with its impossibility now as an adult. At the grocery checkout lane, I talk to the cashier about the intricate tattoo inked across their Adam's apple—I ask how much it hurt and what it means, but what I really want to know is what they've never told anyone. On the city bus, I want to talk to every stranger until they are familiar—where are they going, who do they love, what are they trying every day to forget, to forgive? I want to cup my hands around these things like water. And yet. Instead, I make up characters, fictional people with their own demons and desires.

Seven generations of Greek priests preceded my papou, and sometimes I wonder about what has been passed down—the desire to hear people's stories, to uncover something otherwise unknown? Or maybe I'm just looking for a thread that is woven through, connecting ancestors otherwise unfamiliar. I found a book in my father's study after he died: *The New Dictionary of Thoughts*, inscribed in 1975 from my papou to my father and "to future generations."

He wrote:

Love one human being, purely and warmly, and you will love all (Richter).

Love gives itself, it is not bought (Longfellow).

Keep on loving at all times.

With love, papou and yiayia.

Maybe it was as simple as this. Maybe this was what faith meant. Maybe it had to do with love.

My son has a similar world map hanging in his bedroom now, and I tell him stories about my father, his papou, though he never met him. My father and I were never going to sail around the world. But every day with his patients, he sailed across unchartered seas. And afterward, like Odysseus, he found his way home. I like to imagine them on these journeys, the dangers and risks he helped navigate as they confronted their Sirens and Cyclopes and wraths

of angry gods, the endless discoveries they might've made behind closed doors, the life-changing trips inside our own home, from the comfort of his couch, on Saturdays.

None of his patients' stories could be recycled. But maybe in the passing from one person to another, they were somehow preserved. Maybe they exist in another realm, one in which our spirits disperse when our bodies fail, where there's no language for words like *good* and *evil* and *right* and *wrong*. Where "no boundary exists between the sacred and the profane" (Thich Nhat Hanh). I like to imagine this place like those whirling oceans my papou crossed, the ones my father fantasized about sailing across, the ones he wanted me to learn to dream of along with him.

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Years after my father died, my mother sent me some letters she found in his desk drawer that I had written. They were composed in my shaky childhood handwriting full of misspelled words printed on his professional legal-sized stationary.

Dear Dr., I wrote. *Please help! I am so depressed, I can't stop crying.* Signed with fictitious names of patients that I'd made up. *Sincerely, Penny, Wanda, Earl . . .*

I remember writing these letters whenever my mother took me to his downtown office for lunch. I remember sitting at his large desk, my feet barely reaching the floor, working on a letter with utmost concentration before folding it into thirds and sealing it carefully inside an envelope. I remember placing it beneath a glass paperweight beside a letter opener and stamping the return address in the upper left corner. I loved writing these letters. I never waited for a reply. I imagined my characters coming to see my father in his office after I left.

My father kept these letters in his desk drawer the same way I keep the artwork that my son leaves in my office now. I wonder if my father saw these letters like this, like the beginning of my imagination at work, hints at his lessons taking shape, allowing for that dream life to take up space inside. We may not have sailed around the world together, but it was never a journey that needed a boat or an ocean or a map. Rather, it was one that we took every time we stood together in front of that paper map, making space for all the possibilities, planning all those endless routes.

Melanie Faranello's writing has been twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize and appeared in *StoryQuarterly*, *Blackbird*, *HuffPost Personal*, *Vestal Review*, and elsewhere. Her novel in progress won the Marianne Russo Award and was shortlisted for the Mary McCarthy Prize in Fiction, the Dana Award, and the William Faulkner–William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition. She works as a teaching artist in Connecticut and is the founder of Poetry on the Streets, LLC, a community engagement project using creative writing for social impact.