

Sixfold submission
April, 2023

Mr. Robinson's Funeral

At Mr. Robinson's funeral, I told him that I was sorry, and he comforted me. I regretted staying at such cold distance in the final years of his life. I remembered, at his funeral, that as we planted peas in the spring, Mr. Robinson had recited scripture from memory.

“Jesus said ‘let the little children come unto me, and hinder them not. The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these,’” he had said, and dropped four neon pods into a small mound of chocolate earth. “His kingdom belongs to such as you, Coco. And *this* is His kingdom.” He had raised his aged body, and spread his scarecrow hands across the crisp spring sky.

I believe that he sent me this memory as I sat with my mother at his funeral. My Mom usually avoided non-Catholic services, feeling their attendance to be an idolatrous affair. A gathering, however, to celebrate *Mr. Robinson's* life at the Kingdom Hall in Nevada, Iowa seemed unavoidably important. Mr. Robinson had been more than just a neighbor. He had been a special family friend.

As I sat on a folding plastic chair among the Jehovah's Witnesses, and listened to people talk about Mr. Robinson's remarkable life, many such garden memories resurfaced. A happy time in my childhood sprang to the fore, a time that I had forgotten, a time before I had learned to distrust nice old men.

Mr. Robinson died on December 16th, 2018 at the age of 90 while I was home from school for Christmas break. Mom had expected, over the past few years of his life, to be the one to find him dead of old age. She visited his home frequently. However, his daughter found him on the third day of a rare visit from South Georgia. She entered her father's home, and saw him seated at the east window, neatly dressed, hair combed, at equilibrium with his surroundings. He had become a passive, not active, force. His soul had followed his final gaze out the window, over the corn-acre and crick-scrub, toward the dawn.

He had grown up in the house where my family lived. It had been his home until the death of his wife in the 80's. After her passing, he moved a quarter-mile east to the old farm-hand quarters, his home until death. This little house overlooked the five acres where he had grown up, and where he subsequently watched me and my siblings grow.

I felt guilty throughout his funeral, considering the fact that I had shunned him for the last years of his life. I had stopped spending time with him toward the end of highschool, and through my college visits home. Despite our closeness when I was younger, I had offered no explanation for my souring towards him. I gave him only a mild attitude of undeserved disgust. He had mentored me. He had given me a treasury of beautiful knowledge, asking nothing in return.

The first time I ever saw Mr. Robinson, I had nearly burnt down his family home. On move-in day, to a farm-house half buried in snow, I had tried to cook lunch for myself, my Mom, and my five siblings. Mom, ever the advocate of self-sufficiency, didn't see a problem with giving an 11 year old free reign in the kitchen. I started a massive grease-fire in the oven that day. As Mom bundled us safely outside, the Nevada fire and police departments and all the neighbors crunched their cars through the snow to observe our moving-in festivities.

We kids huddled on the snowy gravel driveway, watching an old but cared-for truck rumble up the driveway for the first of many times. An old man with white hair combed into a perfect Italian ripple emerged. Everything about him was old. His old work boots, and creased old face, and the old holes in the corners of his Carhart pockets. He stared with tender concern past us kids at the smoke, billowing from his childhood kitchen. We knew who he was. We had seen him putting up snow-fence in the acre between our lands, and Mom had told us that we were moving into his old house.

He glanced down at us and smiled, asking, "You kids remodeling the kitchen?"

I was too scared and embarrassed and young, at the time, to note the grace with which he surrendered the home to us, with a joke.

Although he gave it to us happily, Mr. Robinson loved his land. Eight apple trees grew in a small grove to the east of our long drive. In the spring after our move-in, he took me and Julia, my older sister, and Peter, my younger brother, on a tree-tour of the five acres. He detailed the history of each tree. In 1939, at the age of ten, he had planted a dozen apples, of which eight now remained. His mother had shown him how to raise them up from saplings. She had planted the trees with him as he practiced his Scripture knowledge, reciting entire books of the Bible to her.

They sowed seeds that would still bear fruit in a new century. Together they had left us a legacy of the apples, two pears, two chestnuts, a cherry, and six mighty oaks now almost seventy-five years old.

Mr. Robinson would not see his land fallow, so in the spring he rumbled over on his tractor to plow our garden and teach us how to grow things. Peter and I were the only ones who really cared to listen, so Mom sent us out to profit by his tutelage. In the frozen days of March, he showed us potatoes. I still remember the instructions. Cut the seed-potatoes with an eye or two on each piece. Place four or so pieces eye-side up in a little mound of earth with three feet on each side, room to spread. Plant them on Good Friday, even if it's still frosting. The ground will refrigerate, but not freeze them at this time of year.

He showed us how to plumb a perfectly straight row of seeds. He tied butcher's twine to two stakes at either end of the garden, and hoed a row under the twine. His hoe was marked off at two feet with an indelible marker. Once one row was hoed, he used the makeshift ruler to move the twine-stakes over, and hoe another row. After a few weeks of planting corn, green-beans, squash, pumpkins, cucumbers, eggplants, broccoli and lettuces, cannages, beets, and onions, the earth looked natural and uniform. I wondered that anything could inhabit the wild brown soil before me in straight lines. In a few weeks time my wonder increased at the arrival of the neatest tiny green garden-beds, worthy of a Beatrix Potter book. Mr. Robinson knew what he was about, and loved to teach us how to foster vegetables and order.

As we planted, he taught us that our fertile minds could memorize pages of text. His favorite recitations were from the Psalms, and the parables of Christ. These dead texts never offered much amusement in Church or school, but coming from Mr. Robinson, they emanated originality and intrigue. He also slipped in passages that I believed, for years, to be Scripture. I

thought that Christ had said “the quality of mercy is not strained,” until I read *The Merchant of Venice* in high school.

A few weeks into the summer, we kids spent entire days outdoors, exploring every inch of our newly warm property. Mom rarely let us watch TV or movies, or entertain ourselves on the internet, so we occupied ourselves kicking around the calf-pasture, poking at cow-pies, and chasing ground-squirrels. We built forts dangerously high in the rafters of the corn-crib, and dug caves in the old straw of the haymow. One day, as Julia, Peter and I raced each other down our long driveway, we paused to watch Mr. Robinson across the field. He was clearing a pile of lumber away from his west window.

“He wants to spy on us better,” said Julia, “I saw binoculars by that window when Mom and I dropped off the gardening stuff last week.”

This struck me as curious, but I said nothing.

“He’s watching us,” she added, “It’s perverse.”

I knew “perverse” meant something bad, but Mr. Robinson’s doings didn’t bother me. I liked him, and didn’t care if he watched us play. I knew that his stiff joints longed to leap and frolic like us. He had told me as much on his weeding-visits. He had said that after life, we would “run like sparks through the stubble.”

Like sparks through the stubble, I had thought to myself. Peter and I tried to run like sparks through the stubble many times in the weeks after we heard those words, but learned that sparks are faster than people, even children. I admired Mr. Robinson’s strange prophetic poetry though. I felt that his binoculars watched over us like a kindly god, not a spy.

We told Mom about the binocs and the moving of the lumber, and she asked us to stay on our property, where she could see us at any given time.

“He’s a sweet man, he’s just a little nosey, and that’s okay in a neighbor sometimes,” she said. She followed her gut, and her gut told her that he was not perverse, and her gut was not wrong in his case.

From his home, Mr. Robinson observed Peter’s lonesome habit of throwing a baseball against the corn-crib wall, and came over to play catch when none of us wanted to. We watched Peter become a proficient pitcher through the days, and eventual years, of practice with Mr. Robinson. When Peter called from the Naval Academy two years after Mr. Robinson’s death, he told me that he had thrown a 95 mph fastball at tryouts.

“I was nervous, but I just pretended the catcher was Mr. Robinson,” he said, “except I threw faster.”

In order to be allowed to continue his friendship with my family, the Kingdom Hall elders (local Jehovah’s Witness clerics) required that Mr. Robinson consistently try to convert my family. A staunch Catholic, Mom would not be converted, but she respected Mr. Robinson’s institutional requirements, and wanted him around. She agreed to the terms of engagement, and they met at our kitchen table each Friday to battle out their theologies. Each other day of the week remained a cease-fire, free for gardening, and other non-combative occupations. They cared deeply for each other, and for the fates of souls, and so their conversations never led to burnt bridges, or hard feelings. I loved to make tea for them and listen to them argue about the three-person-God as a girl.

Mr. Robinson’s religion believed that heaven, for the few chosen, would simply be a return to earth. Heaven was very present for him. He found it in the garden, and in the fields, and out across the crick and railroad tracks, and in the warm house, snowed-in. This rang true to me,

for while my siblings and I suffered bee stings and scuffed knees, dead cats and dogs, and long hours of weeding, we could never wish for a better life as children. I have never come across Catholic theology (to which I still ascribe) that closes the door to a heaven on earth. When Mr. Robinson showed us how to tend to the property, he was obviously practicing for an eternity on that land. It inspired us to do the same.

When I was twelve, I began to take violin lessons from a new teacher, Mr. McElroy. He was another nice old man whom I trusted like I trusted Mr. Robinson. However, I remembered, for many years, that I had begun to feel uncomfortable with him in that little studio at the back of his house, and had asked Mom to take me out of violin lessons. She had immediately done so. She had grilled me about why I disliked him, but all I could muster at the time was the weak admission that I got the creeps from him.

In fact, Mr. McElroy had stolen my innocence, piece by piece. At those lessons in his studio at the back of his house, he looked at me in my nakedness, and forced me to look at him. He made sense in my young mind of the strange carnal stories of David, looking down on Bathsheba bathing, and desiring her. But I was no Bathsheba. I was a little girl, expected to rise to degradation unbearable even to adult women. Mr. McElroy took from me my blissful ignorance of cruelty. He took my sense of moral certitude, shaking an underlying knowledge, instilled by Mom, that I was good. He took that naive, yet foundational idea of relationships between men and women, that must be preserved in children; that avid hope in love that should last, even past the disillusionment of adolescence. I acted as a party to his crimes by concealing them deep within my own mind. I never outed him because each time I walked out of the violin

lessons, I walked out of a reality in which sexual abuse could happen to little kids. I washed my memory clean of any impossibly violent events, not to recall them for years.

Among other parts of My innocence, Mr. McElroy took from me my childlike trust. Because of Mr. McElroy, in the course of a year or two, I stopped being able to stomach the Friday visits from Mr. Robinson, and withdrew to my room when he stopped by.

I continued to work in my garden each year through middle school and highschool, but left it at the sight of his truck rumbling up the driveway. Something in my stomach twisted now, in his presence. I left these reactions relatively unexamined, not wanting to open a box in my mind that now tightly held both Mr. McElroy and all of his ilk, including the undeserving Mr. Robinson. Julia's initial distaste for him made this easier. Now I wholeheartedly trusted her instinct that had found him "perverse," and I looked for corruption in his every action.

Early on, he saw that something had changed, and allowed me my space. He knew his place in our family, and could not pry into my strange shift in attitudes. But I often came down the stairs after he had headed home, to find that he had left me little things; corn seeds, gardening gloves, butchers twine.

Gardening offered one of many distractions in high school. The feverish pace of challenging classes and athletics, learning to drive, new jobs, a changing body and new friends left little time for reflection. The distractions of this era cast an illusion of happiness in my life. Gardening's merits, at that time, were purely practical. Along with planting, weeding, and harvesting, I learned how to preserve the fruits of the land. My family ate pickled beets, pies, jams and relishes from our own acres during the winter. The therapeutic and order-bringing qualities of gardening had not dawned on my rushing mind. My years directly before college blur together in their flight.

Mr. Robinson and I interacted for the last time before I left for college one August. I was home alone. He drove his truck over and knocked on the door. I wanted to pretend that I wasn't home, but my car was in the driveway. He knew. I came to the door and reluctantly cracked it open, waiting for him to state his purpose.

"I noticed all that windfall in the apple grove. Thought your folks might like some help tossing them over," he said.

Each fall we tossed fallen apples over the fence to yearling cattle that pastured between our house and Mr. Robinson's. This ritual supposedly curtailed future insect and sucker infestations in the grove. It was also a pleasure to see the cows chewing something sweet.

I leaned reluctantly on the doorjamb. Mr. Robinson was obviously uncomfortable that I had answered the door, considering the icy treatment I had given him for months. And I was irritated, knowing that I had to go help him, the commonest of courtesies.

"Let me grab my boots and some baskets, I'll be right out." I replied. In a few minutes, we were walking down the driveway together.

We gathered the wormy apples in silence, filling basket after basket and tipping them over the fence. The calves swarmed the vinegary fruit, and the bees and flies buzzed around us as the sun began to fall. I dumped one final basket on the pile, and stood watching the feast, and Mr. Robinson stood a distance away from me, elbows on the fence. I could feel him glance over at me, but I could not look back. As so often at that time in my life, I was feeling something unnamable. The scene before me offered dusky autumn perfection. Even the dumb animals before me could appreciate it. Yet unfathomable anger filled my heart and brimmed over, and unfathomable sorrow. I swallowed a lump in my throat, and felt hot tears as I walked back up the driveway and home. I did not look back at Mr. Robinson as I walked.

This memory cut me, more than any other, at his funeral years later. I wished that I had known the source of my emotions. I would find out later that they shot from a deep wound. I repressed memories of serious abuse by Mr. McElroy until I was 22 years old. Although his actions were absented from my memory for years, they cast potent shadows. They made me act regrettably toward my beloved neighbor. I wish that I could have explained to Mr. Robinson, leaning on the grove fence that Autumn day, that I was simply mourning my innocence.

My memories would resurface eventually, but I went to college still oblivious. I wonder if a strange flight from reality drove me to a school far away from Nevada, Iowa. I fled to California to attend Thomas Aquinas College.

One evening during my Freshman year, I sat on a bench outside my dorm building late one Wednesday night, unable to sleep, but tormented by the desire to do so. I used insomniac times like these to get ahead on my studies. People passed infrequently, but on this night, someone with a guitar passed near me playing a Bob Dylan song. The moment dripped with nighttime melancholy, and though I had little apparent reason to cry, I began to weep. I wept on the bench for almost three hours, and could not stop the body-wracking sobs from coming. I returned to my room that night, and sobbed myself to sleep. The next morning I woke up in the same state, which proceeded through the weekend and into the next week. I either cried, or curled myself into the fetal position in my bed, unable to move my body, which had become inexplicably heavy.

I could not share my pain with anyone because I could not make sense of it myself, and I was ashamed to be so dramatic for no apparent reason. The sheer absurdity of my condition proved itself when, one morning the next weekend, I woke up and wanted to get out of bed and

wash my face. As quickly as I had been plunged into darkness, I had been brought back into light again. Periods of time like this one came and went in varying durations, and I learned how to live, or half-live through them.

The mind in trauma, especially the mind of a child, builds a world in which it can survive. In this sense, repression is a strange form of world-building. Some victims of abuse live in an alternate reality in which the abuse never happened, rather than letting the full pain of its happening kill them. Unfortunately, playing with reality is unsustainable work, because reality takes up our whole experience. It ever forces itself upon us. Reality forced itself upon me in the form of depression during my time at college. While my psyche assured me that I was alright, unharmed, it simultaneously rebelled, announcing my abuse.

One day, on a jog around the campus of Thomas Aquinas College, I took a path I had never used before. It led down a steep hill to the Hacienda, where the president of the school stayed from time to time, and received prestigious visitors. I had never toured the Hacienda grounds before, although students were allowed to respectfully wander the gardens. It felt too much like spying to me. But as I jogged down the path to the president's house, a peaceful world enveloped me. An orange grove sheltered my descent into the miniature valley. To my left and right were fenced-in gardens, not manicured and landscaped as I had expected. They were not for show. They were wild, beautiful zoo-creatures of gardens, bursting out of their bird-wire cages, ripe with roses and tomatoes. Such familiar things seemed happy here at college, and for a flash, I was very happy too. I could not help but slow my pace to pull weeds and smell leaves and petals.

My school, nestled in the California valleys north of LA, was verdant year-round, never suffering the burial of snowfall. After that remarkable jog, I stole down to the garden often.

Lindy Joyce, the groundskeeper, found me there one day, crying happy tears over a tiny pea plant, and he gave me a section of ground out of pity and confusion. There, I grew whatever I desired. While I thought little of Mr. Robinson himself, his teachings shed light into a dark period of my life at the college garden. There was a balm in seeding the ground, because the act proved that earth was not a sterile promontory. Life could be like it was in my youth; a heaven. Depression demands, often violently, some escape, and my healthiest escape was back to a belief that the world around me could become a paradise, if I only tended it well.

Mr. Robinson's funeral coincided quite remarkably with my full recollection of abuse. I sat at the service, a new person. Only days before I had driven by Mr. McElroy's house, and been bombarded by a barrage of evil memories. I do not know what strange force brought them back so close to the time of Mr. Robinson's death, but it seemed a divine off-chance. I could remember so much, now, both good and bad. Along with my memories of the hellish violin lessons, I could remember the mystical gardening and Scripture lessons. I had thrown the memories out all together, but they were back.

“My tears have been my bread, day and night, as they ask me every day, ‘*where is your god?*’” a different Mr. Robinson read to us over his brother's open coffin, “Those times I recall as I pour out my soul, when I would cross over to the shrine of the Mighty One, to the house of God, amid loud cries of thanksgiving—” The brother read excerpts of Mr. Robinson's favorite psalms that day. “—And I will go up to the altar of God; to the God who giveth joy to my youth—” They had never meant so much to me as on that day, when I felt the wholeness of my past washing over me.

I sat and apologized to Mr. Robinson for my absence. *I could have carved out time to sit with his frail frame, and make him tea. I could have thanked him for the skill that lightened my heaviest load*, I thought. As I looked across the room at his daughters, it occurred to me that he understood. I had never before thought of him as a father of daughters. I wondered why they had moved so far away, and if they harbored similar regrets to mine. I knew, though, as I thought of his words in the garden, “the kingdom of God belongs to such as these,” that he saw me here, remembering the days of my youth, and that he forgave me.

Always, now, the garden is Mr. Robinson’s heaven. He joins me there every time. We work under the sky, blue, or gray, or pink. We smell the lavender and the wormy dirt. My hands crack, and my knees ache, but his do not. The garden opens up a mystical wormhole, uniting my youth, with my presents, with my destination after death, when my body will no longer feel the pains of bringing order into my kingdom. There, together, Mr. Robinson and I bury seeds, and unearth the fruits of the soil, well practiced.

THE END