Bury Me Standing

Sister Mary Lorenzo didn't ask the social worker about my background, whether my parents had been struck by lightning or had merely left me on a doorstep, whether I was a scholar, an athlete, or a bedwetter. She only measured my height with a yardstick. A boy's height was proportional to the effort it would take to subdue him, and thus defined him.

The schoolhouse was a Victorian mansion divided into classrooms by walls too thin to hinder whispers. Together with a whitewashed rectangular barracks, it stood in the center of a well-groomed lawn dotted with oaks and mulberries. But the serenity was a deception. A chain-link fence, angled sharply inward at the top, encircled the grounds. And across the street, through a padlocked gate, was a church we attended every morning before school.

The fence, we were convinced, was electrified.

Saturday afternoons we shined our shoes and lined up in the day room. The couples, mostly young, wearing expensive wrist watches, arrived in four-door cars and entered the room holding hands. They passed before each boy in turn and engaged in small talk. If you had a name they could pronounce, and no visible deformities, you went to a foster home. I always said I had no name, or none that I could recall, and they frowned and moved on.

Evenings we spent on "facility beautification." After mopping the barracks floor we took the mops outside and leaned them against a wall, upended and evenly spaced, like dirty-blond stick mannequins. I imagined they were dance hall girls taking a break, chatting and smoking cigarettes.

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He was bald but for a few thin strands of hair, like the husk of a coconut. His skin was smooth, pink, and puffy. Altogether his head resembled that of a newborn baby. But in his case the baldness had resulted from a loss of hair, rather than gave promise of hair to come, and the empty gums from a loss of teeth. The aging process appeared to be acting in reverse, returning the old man to his infancy by erasing the tracks of time.

He walked down the line of boys like a general inspecting the troops. It was obvious straight away he was different; he asked no names.

"How about you, boy?" he said to the one standing next to me. "Staying out of mischief?"

"Yep."

"Yes *sir*," Sister Mary Lorenzo corrected him.

"Yes sir."

His eyelids lowered unevenly, as though he was peeking at the world from behind tiny curtains.

"Any good at climbing trees?" he asked the boy.

"Yes sir."

"Ever fall out of one?"

"Never!"

"Hmm."

He stopped in front of me. "Too little," he said, and moved on.

"And what's wrong with you?" he asked my neighbor, Billy, who was clubfooted. "You look like you've fallen out of a tree or two yourself."

Lorenzo spoke in the old man's ear: "Billy's … not been well."

"I once planted a tree," I volunteered.

"Speak when you're spoken to," Lorenzo ordered.

The man came back, stood in front of me, and peered into my eyes. They say the eyes are windows to the soul, and I gathered he was inspecting mine. His eyes, in as much as I could see behind the curtains, were dark mirrors.

Lorenzo muttered, "This one's been something of a problem."

"Did it live?" he said to me.

"No sir."

"Ah. Where did you plant it?"

"In the driveway."

He turned to the nun and pointed down the line. "Is this—all you have?"

"It more'n likely would've lived," I said, "if my father didn't run over it with his car."

They went into the office while we waited. His voice rose several times. "Too old? *Too old?*" He left by himself, but the next morning the principal, Sister Mary Delaney, called me in. I figured the old man had selected me because I'd impressed him with my tree planting, on account of this thing he had for trees.

"You've been using Billy's bedpan," the principal said.

"No Sister."

She massaged her temples. "*You've been using Billy's bedpan.*"

"Yes Sister."

"Why?"

"Well, Sister. I figured if I used mine I would have to empty it, and since Billy has to do that anyway I figured I would just use his, and it wouldn't make any difference to Billy, Sister."

She stared off at a faraway place. "Do you know what happens to boys like you? Do you know where they go? Do you have any idea? I don't think you do."

I did. But at least down there you knew where you stood. It was tales of Heaven that scared the hell out of me.

She said, "No, I don't think you do. You'll never be adopted by anyone. You'll never leave this orphanage."

That night I took a can of gasoline from the groundskeeper's tool shed and emptied it over my sheets. When I struck a match, the flames whooshed up and lapped the ceiling. It was glorious. Screaming boys scattered in all directions. I watched my reflection in the grated window as it was engulfed by the blue-tipped fire.

*

The old man's house was three blocks from the college campus. The neighborhood was planted generously with sugar maples, whose seed is a pod with a feathery appendage that spins like a rotary blade as it falls, slowing its descent to benefit from wind dispersal. The pod spins stubbornly to stay aloft, to avoid an end.

The old man and I made the most of our summer together. I think he sensed it would be his last. Every day, weather permitting, we walked down to a nearby creek to skip rocks. He never got the hang of it. He chose his stones poorly, and when they deflected from the surface, if they did at all, they immediately tilted over to one side and knifed the water. You have to choose rocks that are flat, but not too thin. I showed him how to do it. My stones bounced many times against the shallow current, then skimmed across the surface until they spun slowly down and settled on the bottom.

He liked to kneel in the grassy, untilled fields next to the creek and look for beetles. When he

found them, after carefully parting and combing the grass, he lifted them gently on his finger and said, “So delicate, so beautiful.” He loved spiders. Their poison-tipped fangs made them kings of their weedy jungles. You couldn’t find a better example, he said, of a creature that had mastered its niche and guaranteed as best it could the future of its kind.

On the way back to the house we passed among the maples and felt their pods crunch beneath our feet. Sometimes he reached down for a handful and threw them into the air, just to watch them spin slowly back to earth.

In the evenings we sat together on the porch, drinking iced tea, he with his legs crossed and I swinging mine under the chair, watching the students stroll by, carrying their books. He stared far, thought deeply, said little, napped often. Once I asked him why he had taken me in.

“Aren’t you handy with a shovel?” he answered, blinking his eyes as if he had just woken up.

Sure he had misunderstood my question, I asked, “Are you afraid of dying?” He answered without hesitation:

“I’m much more afraid of not living forever.”

The end of the summer came one afternoon in August while we were baking cookies. He stopped what he was doing. Dropped the spatula on the floor. Grabbed his left arm. Squeezed it between the elbow and the wrist. Flexed his fingers.

When he returned from the hospital he said, “Take me to church.” He’d never been. They had made me go every day at the orphanage so I knew how it worked: you sit on a long wooden bench and kneel on a low wooden beam. The trick is to know when to sit, kneel, or stand, as required by whatever ritual is underway at the altar. Generally someone in the congregation has mastered the choreography and the problem is reduced to one of close imitation. I preferred sitting over standing, and standing over kneeling. Lying down was not allowed.

Holding his cane with one hand and my hand with the other, he nodded to one side of the aisle and said, “What is that?”

“Um, holy water.”

“Why is it holy?”

“The priest blessed it.”

“You mean he muttered incantations over it while waving his arms.”

“Well, yeah.”

He thought about that for a moment. He asked, “Do you drink it?”

“Oh, no. Too many hands go into it for that.”

Then, “Why do they put it in birdbaths?”

He insisted we visit a funeral home, and there he got into it with one of the undertakers because the poor man couldn’t answer his questions: “How much longer will I last in aluminum?” and “Why don’t they make them in yellow?”

He sat on the front porch and watched the college girls walk by; he observed them with detached scientific interest. He hobbled onto the lawn, broke off a blade of grass, and chewed it. He stroked the bark of a box elder that shaded the porch. He wrote his thoughts in a notebook:

Every organism is programmed to die, so its species may survive and flourish. The key to the program is a biological clock, located perhaps in the brain, but more probably in each individual cell. The clock tells the body when to age; the program tells the body how to do it.

He woke often in the night and rapped his cane on the floor to summon me. Once I found him sitting upright in his bed, staring wide-eyed at apparitions fleeing the dawn.

“A black camel,” he said, pointing a bony finger across the room.

I followed his terrified gaze to the window, but the only intruder there was the meager light offered grudgingly by a drowsy sun.

“Do you need some water?” I asked. “Are you cold?”

His eyes softened as he came fully awake and whatever pursued him quit the chase. I eased him back on his pillow and tucked him in. He held his blanket tightly under his chin, leaving only his pinkish face and bony fingers exposed to lingering ogres. But both he and I knew the ogres paid little heed to blankets.

Eyesight and hearing dim, as if light and sound were receding down a long tunnel. Reflexes dull, accelerating perceived motion, and everything is over almost before it happens. Teeth and hair fall out. Bones turn brittle. The body becomes vulnerable in an environment to which it is intended to fall victim. Medicine compensates for some vulnerabilities, but though individual battles are won, the war is ultimately lost.

From then on, despite my youth and propensity for mischief, I assumed complete responsibility for him. He was still my legal guardian, but I was his eyes and ears, his guide and interpreter. I helped him up the stairs each night to bed and untied his shoes. I spoon-fed him at

meals when he lost the resolve to eat.

The thymus gland, which regulates the immune system, begins to shrink even before puberty. Even as the body peaks in strength and sexuality its disease fighting apparatus has begun to wane. In old age it almost disappears altogether, and with it, the body's cancer fighting armament. And if medicine were to win that battle there would be another. The organism is programmed to die so replacement and natural selection will occur.

Why, then, do species die?

Although some may vanish in an accident—celestial objects striking the Earth, say—there is also a program analogy: each species is programmed to die—to become extinct—so that life on Earth itself may flourish.

He came to believe he was my grandfather. He was certainly old enough, but I couldn't grasp his age in years any more than I could that of an eroded mountain, because like the mountain it was not so much time as weathering that had sapped him of his youth. In one summer, in one August afternoon, his youth was gone. I found it significant even then that little difference existed between very young mountains, freshly emerging from their tectonic foundations, and very old ones, denuded and retiring.

We held hands during our walks. I pretended that my presence on the other side of his cane lent some balance and support to his fragile frame.

The biological clock is probably contained in the genetic material of each individual organism. Youth is characterized by an expanding population, maturity by specialization. The chief vulnerability in old age is overspecialization, because a species that overspecializes is prone to extinction when its environment abruptly changes.

Replacement occurs with analogous natural selection. Species come and species go, and life, therefore, goes on. Not only must all organisms die, but so eventually must all species. There is no immortality to be gained by having children. There is no immortality of any kind at all.

Unless.

Unless.

Fall came. The leaves turned and drifted to the ground. He stayed in his room for weeks. Then it snowed. He watched from his window like a kitten as the flakes swirled and tumbled in their impromptu ballet. When it stopped he shuffled out the door and stood barefoot in the white

powder. The box elder was stripped of leaves, its naked branches reaching purposelessly into the sky. He knelt at its trunk and cried.

*

When they came to get him in the early spring I was away at school. I got home at dinnertime and found the social worker, tall, skinny, steely gray-haired, waiting for me in the living room.

"We'll have a new home for you," she said.

With bedpans?

"You'll be with people who love you."

Love was my mother's wet kiss and my father's stiff beard. I could still smell his cologne.

"People who will help you avoid sin."

My guardian angel was supposed to prevent me from sinning. Lately he had been slacking off. He was also supposed to protect me from harm, but I had fallen into the creek enough times to know that was a crock.

"I'm going to visit him," I said.

"No you're not."

I underestimated her when I bolted toward the door. She was good; they had sent one of the best. She beat me to the door, then covered the entrance to the dining room when she saw me eyeing it hopefully. Her ankle-length skirt was wide, and as she planted her legs apart and crouched, her knees stretched the skirt and made her look bigger and more intimidating. Like a blowfish. Like an alley cat fluffing its tail.

Only the coffee table obstructed my path to the stairs. I jumped right through the lamp on the table, knowing it would give easily, and came down on the other side in a somersault with tangled cord and crumpled shade and shards of thin hot glass. She hustled around the table, but I was already back on my feet and pounding up the stairs. Her footsteps were right behind me.

"You-you-you!"

I went through my grandfather's bedroom and climbed out the window. It was a two-story drop. I hesitated only until the social worker reached for me, then I jumped, landing in the grass on bent knees and rolling to absorb the impact.

She was in the window, looking down. If I hadn't known better, I'd have thought she was smiling.

*

"He's my grandfather," I said to the nurse.

She looked me over disapprovingly, then led me down the hall to an open bay sectioned off by curtains. She opened one of the curtains, and there he lay, wires emerging from his pajamas and rising to a monitor above his head. She closed the curtain and waited outside.

His breathing was labored and his mouth was open. I touched him on the arm—his eyes opened instantly. He turned his head slowly, as if it hurt to do so, and squinted at me through tears.

When he spoke it was in a breathy whisper. "The fear of death," he said, "is supposed to fade with age, yielding to passivity, or even, for some, grateful welcome." He closed his eyes and licked his lips. "They say it's one of the body's natural defense mechanisms."

"Don't go," I said. On his face was the look.

"I don't want to go."

"Then don't."

I had seen the look before, when my father took me hunting. A deer stepped out of the brush, its legs planted in the grass, splayed outward slightly like a knobby-kneed sawhorse. When my father fired his gun the deer's legs buckled and it collapsed in the grass. On its face was the look.

He clutched my arm. "Bury me standing. It's the only chance I have. Promise me you'll bury me standing. Promise!"

"I promise."

Then he cried, his fists clenched. So the retrogression was complete. The middle years were nothing more than a temporary departure from the genetic message. Those just after birth and just before death were the true portraits of man.

"The leaves will come back to the trees," I told him. "They always do. And you can talk to the trees the way you used to, and send me up to pick the acorns."

"I have to go now, my young friend."

"And you can throw the maple pods in the air again, and watch them spin real crazy down, and laugh at them the way you used to, and say, 'Silly pods, you can slow it, but you can't stop it.'"

"Call me grandpa one more time."

“And if you’d just pick the flat rocks that aren’t so thin, they’d keep going longer. I can teach you, Grandpa.”

“Keep your promise,” he said.

“Don’t you want to see the spiders drink the dew?”

The nurse came in and led me out gently. I had to hold her hand because I couldn’t see. A windshield in the rain without wipers.

*

Back at the house after the long walk home I watched from across the street, but there was no activity, no light. The social worker wouldn’t still be there; she got off at five.

The house was cold, so I turned up the heat. Dinner was instant mashed potatoes and peas. I plowed the mashed potatoes by dragging my fork over the top, and planted peas by spacing them neatly in the furrows. Salt and pepper fertilized the acreage.

Then I went to bed. After a fitful hour I climbed upstairs to my grandfather’s bedroom and crawled into the great canopied bed. The four bedposts stood like sentries. The blanket, pulled up to my chin, warded off ogres.

Keys rattled in the lock downstairs and the door opened.

I woke immediately. My first thought was that it was Steely Gray-Haired, come to snatch me in the night, and I poised to go for the window. But when the footsteps came up the stairs it was clear they didn’t belong to a woman. And by the sure, familiar way they came, I knew they didn’t belong to a burglar. I sat up straight in the bed.

He had not gone to my bedroom first but knew instinctively I would be in his. When he entered the room I noticed he didn’t have his cane, and he walked without his usual stomp, swish, thump gait. He knelt down by the bed. His eyes were bright and alive. Like a burden had been lifted from him. Or something deep had been revealed to him.

“Come, get up,” he said. “There’s little time.”

“Where are we going?”

“Hurry! It’s almost light.”

I slipped into my shoes and followed him downstairs. We left the campus and headed south to the woods. He trotted between the trees, gliding over fallen logs and ducking under low branches. We moved under the ever-darkening forest canopy until I could find my way only by

following his bobbing image in front of me.

"Are you sure this is okay?" I asked. "Aren't you very sick?"

"Hurry!"

We came upon a giant fallen elm that blocked the path. It was a healthy looking tree, and I didn't know what had brought it down until I peeled off a section of bark and saw the trails in the wood—evidence of Dutch Elm Disease. The roots were strong and supple and still held soil. They looked naked and bony, like fingers that had grasped the soil tightly when the tree was still standing and held it now in a firm, stubborn grip, long after the trunk had toppled over.

In the shallow pit that remained was angular, unweathered gravel. Next to the pit was a mound of soil the roots had tossed up when they were ripped out of the earth. And growing in that mound were three tiny maple saplings, closely spaced, each trying to take advantage of the space, the soil, and in the absence of the elm from the canopy, the available light.

"Remember your promise," he said low and urgently.

He was staring deep into the woods, to where individual trees diffused and blended in the pitch of night, like the generations of their cousins they would one day join in the till. Then he turned to me and grinned horribly. His face was a pale, iridescent blue. His eyes were sunken yellow pits. I stepped backwards, but he lunged forward and grabbed me by the wrists.

"I've got you!" he said.

*

"I've got you!"

It was a woman's voice. I opened my eyes. Sunlight streaming through the window of my grandfather's bedroom was blocked by a scrawny silhouette that held me by the wrists.

"You!" she said.

"My grandfather, where is he?"

"You fool. He's not your grandfather, don't you know that?"

"Where is he?"

"Dead. He went during the night."

I shook my head to clear it. "You mean this morning?"

"No, last night, after you left him." She yanked me out of bed and held me fast by the collar. "You're coming with me."

*

Billy told me he wanted to be a missionary, but only if it paid respectably and he didn't have to get up early. He said that since the world was infested with Protestants and other heathens there was plenty of work for both of us should I care to join him. Neither of us had ever seen a Protestant, so we asked Sister Mary Melusky about them. She told us Protestants looked pretty much like ordinary human beings; their flaws were concealed inside.

Most of my academic time was spent drawing pictures of Jesus and his ilk. I drew Jesus on the cross with nails in his hands, Jesus held at bay by Roman soldiers toting implausibly long spears, Jesus limp and lifeless, draped over Mary's knees. I drew Mary with large knees. My specialty however was burning bushes. I applied warm crayon hues to create a flame that seemed to ignite the paper itself. My burning bushes earned me a reputation at the orphanage. If you wanted a picture of a burning bush, you came to me.

At the wake Sister Mary Delaney urged me to kiss the old man goodbye. She pushed firmly on my back until I was leaning over the edge of the casket. Inside was a corpse. I didn't want to touch it, let alone kiss it. It used to be him, but now it was a dead thing and I didn't want to touch it.

During the funeral Father Malone spoke of his being "a true disciple of academia" and "a pillar of the department." About "decades of humble service." They lowered his casket into a hole and covered it with dirt.

Later I asked the school librarian for the newspaper, and located the obituary: "Retired Philosophy Professor Herbert Miller Dead at 79."

I went outside to the fence that faced the church. A breeze whisked down the street, carried high in the maples and mulberries, passed from one tree to another until it reached me and settled down with its load of loose twigs and leaves and its soft murmurs.

"Unless," I quoted him. "Unless."

*

I waited until the snoring started up, then I waited another hour. The darkness gelled within the barracks and suspended each boy stiffly in his bunk. I rose normally from my bed, as though to use Billy's bedpan, and seeing that no one woke I stole out through the window and into the secular world.

The mops outside were lined up properly in a row on the rail.

"Goodbye Madeline," I said to one, and ran my fingers through her hair. "Gwendolyn, take care of yourself. Try to put on a couple of pounds, will you? And you, Cecile, cut down on those cigarettes."

From the handyman's shed I took a shovel, a crowbar, and some rope. And a wheelbarrow in which to carry them. The gate in the fence came unlocked with a turn of the principal's own key.

I rolled the wheelbarrow through a cryogenic town. I first crossed the campus, passing slumbering dormitories and lifeless auditoriums, then entered a labyrinth of empty sidewalks and struggled to remember the way.

When I found the graveyard I paused outside under the streetlights. The stones crowded the fence like prisoners, but they were only capitalizing on the available space. Further inside, they appeared as soft blurs of white. I knew my time was short, so when I found the plot I started digging right away, and didn't stop except to wipe the sweat from my face.

An owl called once, then was silent. After a brief pause I continued digging. My shovel struck metal. I cleared the remaining dirt away to reveal the casket, then wedged the crowbar under the front lip and put all my weight on it. Finally I had to stand on it and bounce a couple of times before the lock would give. When the lid was up it wouldn't stay up, so I propped the crowbar inside to brace it.

His eyes were closed, his hands were clasped in a relaxed fashion over his chest, his legs were stretched out to their full length. It was an unnatural position for him; he had always slept in a tense crouch, ready to spring into flight should the ogres emerge from under his bed.

He was too stiff to fit into the wheelbarrow, so I let him lay across the rim, like a cracker too big for the soup bowl.

A wind lifted, thick with the night, and warned me that my time grew short. I couldn't be picky now but knew he would understand. Just two blocks and a rickshaw ride away was a small city park with a grove of maples and several benches strategically positioned on a green lawn. I picked out a healthy looking tree that occupied an out-of-the-way corner. It felt like the right choice. Its bark was smooth and its leaves were just returning to the fingertips of its branches.

"Here you go, Grandpa," I said. "I'm keeping my promise."

My shovel's blade struck bits of jagged stone, so a glacier had tread here too. The hole was

wide enough, but was it deep enough? Too shallow and the dogs dig him up. Too deep and he doesn't feed the tree. The impatient light was already spilling over the horizon; it would have to do.

I lifted him from the wheelbarrow, rolled him onto the bed of till, and tucked him in under the welcoming grasp of the exposed roots.

"I hope you like it, Grandpa."

The sunrise, now supplemented with a band of yellow, had achieved peak beauty.

"I think it likes you too."

I filled the hole and replaced the sod. Then I kissed the bark but the tree didn't stir. Maybe a small twitch of twig, a rustle of leaf. It was probably the abating breeze.

"I have to go now, but I'll come back someday, and—"

Maple pods. Brown and withered, they littered the ground. I hadn't noticed them in the dark. They were remnants of last year's futile flights, dropped from an older neighboring tree.

"—and we'll be together again."

*

Years passed before I was able to return to the park. It was a cold fall afternoon and the sky was busy with clouds gorged with snow. I sat on a bench and viewed the maple. Its branches were dense with leaves scorched with color.

There was a knot in the trunk I didn't remember from before, but the wood inside was twisted into a familiar shape. A knot in a tree is a window to its soul. Look closely within, and you'll recognize its ancestry, as well as the hope that rose with it from the immortal soil.

A tiny, enterprising spider had spun a web across the knot, to catch any bugs that might seek refuge there. I knew the old man would like that; he always had a thing for spiders.

Late in the afternoon a child approached the tree with a pocketknife in hand and tried to carve his initials in the bark. Before long he ran crying to his mother.

"It bit me! It scratched me!"

"Oh honey, don't be silly. It's only a tree."

On the other side of the park, far enough away for privacy, yet close enough for conversation, was a straight, sturdy sapling. I introduced myself. The trunk swayed a little, the leaves stirred. It was probably just the breeze.