LYNN VEACH
SADLER
Segue 9: Fall 10

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Granddaddy Bob is my mentor. No matter the situation, he urges me to “examine all facets, then choose among them—the only way to rise and move on.” In the case in point, I zoomed in on one word in his description of Grandmother Helen’s “physical besetting and heart-piercing news.”

Being good hasn’t kept Grandmother Helen from a mountain-load of grief. She’s as disappointed in my drugger father, for example, as Granddaddy Bob is. My Half-Aunt Marlene, Grandmother Helen’s daughter by her first husband, Mr. Moffitt (an alcoholic), has troubles of her own, including three sons she suspects of being gay. The dénouement (à la Ms. Ellerby, my favorite teacher) was a lot worse than you’re likely expecting. Bad but not to the extent, Granddaddy Bob and I don’t think, of what happened to Grandmother Helen, who, about two years ago, developed breast cancer. It was sort of like Linda McCartney, and there was so much about hers and about how broken up Paul was that Grandmother Helen went in the opposite direction. She didn’t let on or talk to anybody about it, not even her daughter, Aunt Jobie, who, of all the family, is closest to Grandmother Helen. Everybody in our clan, bears (e.g., Daddy) included, came to the hospital, but she refused to see them. Only Granddaddy Bob and Aunt Jobie (who seems to be to Grandmother Helen as I am to Granddaddy Bob) were allowed in her room. Not even Aunt Jobie’s husband could go in, and he and Half-Aunt Pharris’s and Half-Aunt Marlene’s husbands are special favorites with Grandmother Helen.

Grandmother Helen survived, thank goodness, but had to have one breast removed. But she wouldn’t take chemotherapy treatments and still won’t talk about any of it. And she wouldn’t have “reconstructive surgery” or get fitted for “special undergarments.” I mean, this was ultra weird. She wouldn’t talk about her health or discuss it with anyone but her physician, Dr. Mikey, but she went about—still does—with one side of her top parts flat. Anybody can tell something’s wrong. I have to agree with Granddaddy Bob that Grandmother Helen continues to need “therapy,” mental he means, but he doesn’t dare say that to her. We’ve been trying to come up with ideas, but nothing has worked. Grandmother Helen is one stubborn woman from the standpoint of her personal self.

I can tell you one thing, though, after what’s happened to Grandmother Helen and how she lets herself walk around so all unbalanced, I will never be a “breast man.” You can take that to the bank. My increasing interest in the breastworks of the female anatomy has plummeted. Ms. Ellerby had us reading The Tempest at the time, and, in honor of Grandmother Helen, I “reconstructed” it:

Full fathom flat her poor breast lies;
Its debt to disease now paid;
those are tears that wet her eyes:
That part of her that did fade
Hath suffered such a see-change,
The world finds her passing strange.

Grandmother Helen had always, apparently, been a tall, proud woman. Now she slumps, and people snicker and call her “Ole One Boob.” Even Doak, my best friend, passed me a note in English class, where we had moved on to Richard III, with a cartoon of a single-breasted woman.
Lynn Veach Sadler

(one of those Amazons who cut or burned off a breast to use their weapons better) labeled “Zy Slayter’s one-boobed grandmother.” Only “Slayter’s” didn’t have the apostrophe, Doak not being as fleet in the punctuation department as in football. (Granddaddy Bob, Doak, and I are a threesome.) The woman was saying, in one of those cloud-shaped speech containers cartoonists draw, “A boob! a boob! my kingdom for a boob!” He apologized later when he realized how offensive I found that particular brand of humor. I’m not ordinarily uncool or square, though geekish, but I don’t have any use for stuff that hits where people hurt and can’t help what’s happened to them. Neither should Doak. He’s a Black dude, if I have to spell it out.

Well, things went on like that in the family for quite some time. Grandmother Helen pretending nothing had happened and looking like everything had, I mean. Then something else did. This place came on her tongue. It was sore. It wouldn’t heal. The only person she told was Granddaddy Bob (who told me), but after she’d moped around for a couple of weeks, getting no better, he put his foot down. Which Granddaddy Bob can still do. He may be in his eighties, but he’s no “old dude” or “codger” and won’t ever be. He made Grandmother Helen go to the doctor, who immediately ordered a biopsy.

While the results were “pending,” though, Grandmother Helen insisted upon calling the whole family, my mother (who’s divorced from Daddy) included, in for a dinner. It was not a special occasion like a birthday or a holiday, so everybody was curious. Again Grandmother Helen didn’t give a thing away but was more like her old self than she’d been since before the first cancer struck. Granddaddy Bob took each adult in the family aside, separately, and told her or him the situation. It was like lightning ran through that house hitting everybody.

You see, Granddaddy Bob’s mother married three times, and Granddaddy Bob had one full sibling by her second husband and tons of half-brothers and half-sisters by her first (none by the third; they were both too old, I think). His brother was Thomas, and, if he’d lived, he’d be my, I think, Great Uncle Tom. (Wouldn’t Doak love that?) But he didn’t live because he came down soon after high school and marriage with CANCER OF THE TONGUE. Everybody in the family knew about Granddaddy Bob’s brother’s death by cancer of the tongue, and I suspect some joked about it, as in, “He talked so much, he contracted cancer of the tongue.” or “She talks so much to keep cancer from lighting on her tongue.” or whatever. But it was a frightening thought somehow, and they were surely whistling in the dark. I mean, can you eat anything at all if you suffer from cancer of the tongue? If you can eat, does the cancer bleed constantly into your food and beverage? Cancer of the tongue is one hard concept to get your thoughts around.

Cancer of the tongue is one hard concept to get your thoughts around. The enormity of the situation, I think. There was Grandmother Helen running around “normal” for the first time since the original cancer struck and having us all together again. There was this impending sort of sentence from Heaven. I mean, we all knew that Grandmother Helen wasn’t even remotely blood kin to Granddaddy Bob’s brother Thomas who had died of cancer of the tongue. But we were all gathered together to hear if Grandmother Helen was going to succumb to the same disease. Cancer is bad enough, Lord knows. CANCER OF THE TONGUE has to be thought of in all caps. CANCER OF THE TONGUE revisiting generations of a family, even the in-laws—well, you begin to have to consider that there’s some cursing going on and who’s being cursed. I think most of the family would agree that Grandmother Helen is the least likely member among it to call down a curse. So it just had to be somebody else. I looked around the room,
knowing full well that everybody in there, babies excepted, was thinking who among us the culprit had to be.

I had my own candidates for Chief Weasel in Grandmother Helen’s situation. They say the big diseases like cancer are brought on by or at least fed by fretting, stress, and worry. My favorite candidate for flooding Grandmother Helen’s life with forty log trucks full of those three (a lumberyard being the main business of the family) was Daddy. He seemed to sense that everybody was looking at him and went all flustery as usual.

What started gnawing at me, though, was the thought that it could be Granddaddy Bob that the Powers of Vengeance—I couldn’t think of it as God, certainly not if it was a case of Granddaddy Bob—were coming down on. I mean, it is usually the patriarchal figure who gets gone after in the Bible and all. I almost got pulled aside to wonder and investigate that phenomenon in Judaism, Islam, and Shinto. I expect that, as usual, I would have branched out even more, but it turned out I didn’t have to.

That very Sunday afternoon, right after we had eaten dinner (the term for the midday meal still used by the elders in Southern families like ours) and were sitting around letting it digest, Dr. Mikey called. Grandmother Helen and Granddaddy Bob are among his best friends, and he had worked hard to get the results back in record time. Aunt Jobie answered the phone and looked so funny when she turned it over to Grandmother Helen that we all sent our antennae (as Ms. Ellerby would spell the plural) up. Granddaddy Bob motioned for us to keep talking, and we got his message to pretend everything was copacetic, but we were all watching Grandmother Helen from the edges of our eyes. We saw her mouth twitch and then turn up at the corners. I could swear she started to glow. It was as if her halo, which we couldn’t generally see but knew was right there above her head, suddenly got switched on by God to show His defiance of the Powers of Vengeance.

I was thinking, after it was clear to me that Grandmother Helen wasn’t under the sword of Damocles any longer, what a good computer game could be made from God versus the Powers of Vengeance. They’d fight every game for a different soul. Sort of like never knowing at the beginning of Six Feet Under what person was going to die that night and how. That’s another TV show I’m not supposed to watch but do. Granddaddy Bob and I have the greatest appreciation for HBOPlus. Mother does not. I do realize that, in Devil May Cry (PlayStation 2), Dante runs a devil-tracking business, but it’s centered on combat, not storyline. I admit it has some neat features, like power-ups hidden throughout and a control button dedicated to taunting the enemy.

Grandmother Helen said “thank you” in a high, squeaky voice not at all like her usual one and put the phone receiver down very gently. Then she suddenly went running out of the room. Granddaddy Bob went after her. He can’t move that fast any more, of course. It was more like he was slogging through molasses. “Grandma’s Molasses”! (That’s a well known brand in these parts in case you don’t get the pun.) He shuffled on back to us in a short time. It was a case of literal bated breaths, I guess. He reported that the place on Grandmother Helen’s tongue was “benign.” What a wonderful word benign is. Most people don’t stop to think how often words carry around their own blessings and loose them like little time-released bits of blessing just by hovering around after we’ve thought or said them. Like endorphins, is it?, in the brain. Benign is what Grandmother Helen’s affliction was. Benign. I slipped off once Mother and I got home and looked it up in the computer’s dictionary. It comes from “Middle English via Old French benigne from Latin benignus, from bene
‘well’ + ‘-genus’ ‘born.’” Well done! For, if my Grandmother Helen isn’t, conventionally speaking, “well born,” she is as good as people come.

One upshot of the good news was that Grandmother Helen’s aborted problem with cancer of the tongue had another preventive effect on me. In the instance of her first cancer, I vowed that I would never be a “breast man.” In this second instance, I foreshowed tongue studs. Not that Grandmother Helen had ever even considered such an “enhancement.” I probably won’t get any part of me pierced, for that matter, though piercing is in even this far south. I don’t think I could appreciate kissing a girl with a pierced tongue, which would be too much like kissing Grandmother Helen with near-cancer of the tongue. The debate over to pierce or not to pierce is likely another nail in my coffin, for I am an admitted nerdy type. Have you ever seen a pierced nerd?

Given all the tongue and piercing words/thoughts, I remembered that I come from, on Grandmother Helen’s side of the family, a line of piercers. There’re pirates in our woodpile. A pirate proved his manhood by slitting his ear to receive an iron “earring” that he would, to show his success, eventually replace with a gold one. So, just maybe the scare this time wasn’t vengeance. To this day, in North Carolina, men descended from pirates wear a single earring. Now of course, the ears are crowded, the issue clouded (by earrings as identity markers for certain males who are not pirate-descended, though nothing prevents there being.) You have to understand ear language. When Ms. Ellerby asked us to write a poem taking on “an issue,” that’s the one I chose. Granddaddy Bob and Doak liked it, but I got funny looks from people at school. Even though it had come about, at least indirectly, because of Grandmother Helen, Granddaddy Bob thought it best I didn’t show it to her.

An Harangue of Earrings

I know people who know people
by their earring style.
Mostly, the people they know this way,
you say, are quite, quite gay,
though the precise nature
of their gayness, the people
who know these people
will not say.
This conundrum vexed me, 
sent me to inquire whence earrings, 
what their history. For some time past, 
the only males I knew with earring 
were piratically descended and were gay 
as gay mood took them, 
but that’s as far as I could see or say.

Now Genesis cites earrings, 
and from Time Past, 
people holed their ears 
to hang rings or hooks for pendants. 
Almost all high-born Ancients earringed. 
Egyptians favored filigree of gold. 
Greeks gorged on studs and pendants; 
Romans, simpler precious stones. 
Byzantines liked the busy byzantine, 
wear long and jeweled. 
Pre-Columbian noblemen chose earplugs 
or gold and turquoise ornaments. 
Mankind (earring wearers being mostly men) 
earringed on to pearl drops, diamonds, great gems; 
to ivory, jet, cameo; to paste. 
Would you believe?— 
Victorians mostly pierced. 
Even now, however, 
some Victorian-descended clip and screw. 
We returned to piercing 
in the sexy sixties.

From all of which, I do conclude 
the earring language Babel, 
not Babylonian. 
We cannot unravel it today, tomorrow, 
though we go to see all the wizards 
housed in Sodom and Gomorrah.

I still don’t know left from right when it comes to a guy’s earrings. 
Next, I moved on to the poetry of piercing. Granddaddy Bob gave me “nether parts” as he’d 
given me the chase after “all facets” in general and piercing in particular.
Piercing

Never been pierced
of ears,
much less navel, nose, nether parts,
lips, fore or aft.
Have no real body jewelry.

_Bawdy_ jewelry?
Equally unlikely to succumb
to tattooing,
to body branding,
don’t really want something embedded in my skin,
don’t really want to bring out something
presumably already there,
even if the pain is soothing.
I _will_ evince a certain admiration
for the lady who,
over a three-year period,
endured a two-hundred “strike” project
including a pyramid with sun rays.
The technique is “slash and burn”—
one-second exposure to
white-hot metal
for lasting art scars
and a stencil’s pattern.
Usually done on flatter,
fleshier parts of the body.

_Does_ that sound kosher?

Having such a hard-core rite of passage is not for me,
though I do admire the aborigines.

Aside from Granddaddy Bob and Ms. Ellerby, the only person I’ve discussed earrings and piercing with is Doak. He doesn’t personally go in for non-visible piercing but wears an ear stud, though he thinks a ring in a girl’s navel could be a genuine turn-on. He hasn’t seen one but keeps looking. He’s aroused my interest in such, too, but I doubt either of us is going to get too far in our investigations until we go off to college.

I can see it now. Doak and I are at Duke (where my family goes when it goes) for our final interviews. Mine’s for academics. The closest I get to sports, not counting hunting and fishing with Granddaddy Bob, is keeping stats for basketball and being “water boy” for football, and Doak’s responsible for my having both positions. Doak, a tall, fast dude, is there for basketball. He’s a great football player, too, and I intend to point out that he could give Duke a comeback in that sport. (Granddaddy Bob says, “Don’t let anybody kid you, Zy Boy, the biggest impact sports has made in America is all the people running around who can pronounce Coach Krzyzewski’s name.”)
Coach K says, “Is there anything else we can tell you, Mr. Shaw?”

Old Doak thinks to himself, “Now I told Zy I wouldn’t, but what the hell?” and lets it out: “Well, Coach, how many coeds are there at Duke with studded navels?” By rights, the panel should be disgusted or burst into laughs, but Doakum Shaw is needed. Coach K scratches his head (where coaches from lesser institutions of higher learning would scratch lower down) and responds, “Mr. Shaw, I don’t know the answer to that one, but we’ll have a graduate student from the Fuqua School of Business take it in hand. The results will doubtless be of interest to us all.”

That fantasy was “pierced” when Grandmother Helen’s cancer returned. It was then I felt that I’d maybe “inadvertently” called Vengeance or Calamity down. I remembered Jesus on the Cross being pierced with nails and spear. It was the first time Granddaddy Bob had to hesitate, tears in his eyes, before he could answer me.
Author Notes

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About the Work

“Full Fathom Flat” is “deconstructed” from my unpublished novel, My Computer Journal of Family Dining (which is far more experimental than the story suggests!) I’ve published many short stories, but they have not often run to “Southern” and “family.” In both the longer and shorter works, I suspect that I was slaying ghosts and trying to make sense of my own family. My parents separated when I was in the ninth grade at a time before divorce was accepted. I have never shaken off having to walk into school again with everyone “knowing.” I was an only child, both of my parents remarried, and I came to have half- and step-siblings. I know little of them but have always been curious.

Among the autobiographical elements here? My stepmother did have breast cancer; my father’s brother, cancer of the tongue. The latter died when I was a baby, but I grew up with horrific tales about and images of him. A half-brother went the druggie route. I, though female (and old), have much in common with the narrator, teenager Zy Slayter. I was a pre-nerd nerd, and my undergraduate degree is from Duke. I have spent much of my academic career on predominantly Black campuses and frequently offer Black characters (Doak in this story). Formally, my specialty is Milton, from whom I learned to examine all the alternatives before choosing—the philosophy of Granddaddy Bob that opens “Full Fathom Flat” and one that I always tried to apply as an administrator and still rely on in day-to-day upsets. Granddaddy Bob is the father-figure I wish my father had been, and he and Zy have the relationship I longed for with my father.
I don’t think we give youth enough credit. Today’s families are muddles, with teenagers closer to grandparents than parents, parents who have never grown up, etc. Throw into the mix cancer and the older generation’s sense of Fate; sports; teenage slang; Black, White, and Gay relationships…and the soup thickens. How do the young cope? And with such good spirits and wit? They seem implicitly to grasp humor as a coping mechanism, have the graciousness at least to redden, and generally admit that they overstep; Zy and Doak cannot resist the incongruity of cancer and punning but “know better” (if I don’t!). In “Full Fathom Flat,” I aimed to do more than sip the soup.

To the Editors of Segue, I offer thanks and admiration. “Full Fathom Flat” has attracted attention, but I was always asked to “lose the poems.” I refused, on the grounds that they are true to the character of Zy. An editor myself, I am generally not obdurate when confronted with editorial requests/changes; I was in this case. “They also serve who stand and wait.”