

Crossing

In memory, his eyes are most readily available. Large blue eyes reflecting inner turmoil. Seemingly tranquil blue seas one moment, the next, violent storms. I became a student of those eyes.

We lived in a small town nestled in the Wasatch Mountains. Home was a 150 year-old farmhouse that offered no heat except what emanated from the wood-burning stove. No hot water except what you boiled on the stove. The pipes often froze in the winter forcing you to the outhouse. Clean clothes were earned in a bathtub full of icy water, detergent, and a worn washboard. It was from these amenities and the man behind the eyes that I would learn many of life's lessons.

My stepfather used the word "character" at every opportunity. He was long-winded on the subject. Whatever you did, even boiling water reflected your character. Our house seemed in on the lesson, having the conveniences of its birth 150 years prior. Two hundred dollars would have purchased a new hot water heater, but turning on the faucet wasn't an event that built character. A better spent \$200 would be on his leather boots. After all, how a man clad his nakedness was a reflection of his character. Shoes being the most telling aspect of true class. A man dressed nicely but with cheap shoes would be like having a spotless house until you open the cupboards. A man's true character Obviously did not reside in how he met the needs of his wife and children but in what other's thought of him. Lessons were often contrary to action.

It didn't matter what you did, it was how you did it that said who you were, what you were made of. Many things were repeated out of necessity like boiling water and chopping wood. His words were always reiterated as I walked out the door, "Remember who you are and what you are." It was his axiom for my life. No matter how hard I tried to deafen my ears to the timbre of his voice, these words always reverberated in my mind.

One evening he sought to share one of his inspirations with me, his favorite movie. He sat me in front of Country with Jessica Lange and Sam Shepard. As he was describing what I was about to witness I was filled with instant dread. A movie about poverty and overcoming great obstacles! Was he serious? Did he think I wasn't paying attention to our own circumstances? What was his attraction to suffering? I sat through the movie in wonder, not of the movie, but of my stepfather. At twelve the movie was a flop, I related to it in no way. When he eyed me intensely and asked me what I thought, I told him truthfully that I didn't like it. His eyes began to cloud. His mouth twisted and seethed. His voice dropped a few decibels as he repeated his question. He often repeated a question when I had given the wrong answer. I wasn't going to be bullied into liking the movie and stubbornly repeated myself. When lightning flashed behind the clouds, I knew my obstinacy was about to cost me. Insulting the movie insulted the man. Whenever I became too big for my britches, I had a hard fast lesson coming my way. Fist to flesh; I would be of good character if he had to beat it into me. He would demand respect and mistake fear for the prize.

I used to wonder at his characters. He was my Jekyll & Hyde; my barometer for what was both normal and demented. It was mesmerizing & terrorizing to watch the curtain go down on sanity. It was as though he had exchanged his own eyes with cold glass orbs. They became inhuman and vacant like a mask. Once the curtain was up, revealing the costume change, revealing the costume change, the audience was tumbled into an abyss. Over the years I would witness this complete shift in countenance numerous times. It never lost its effect.

I learned to read the scenes and watch for prop changes. Step lightly, work hard, boil water with character, and to cry only in private. From the time I was 11 until I left home at 15 I was sure that I had learned nothing worthwhile from my stepfather. I was sure I had learned only what I did not like, would not put up with, would not become. It was easy to forget that there were many dads when there were no storms. Easy to forget when the blue lakes were placid and I learned to dance, to "fight like a man" (box), to enjoy hard work and a job well done, that you don't quit, that 'can't' isn't a word, and that you're only as good as your word.

As an adult I would sift through memories and dust off only those that exposed the good that had lain behind the eyes of my childhood monster. In youth, I believed I was the sole author of my book and that no one else could write in a chapter or two. I believed that I could erase any contribution that I did not like, just as I had pretended those bruises did not exist and tears lived only in the eyes of babes. I cut myself off from pain and in the process, I lost joy. How odd the two should be connected. Finding forgiveness for my stepfather was like sunshine on the soul. I came to understand that while I could not erase what had been inscribed in my book, I could alter or change its significance. I could make it a whole chapter or simply a side note. I actualized, "remember who you are and what you are." I knew who and what I was.

As a child I could see only a monster in the man, as a woman I was able to see the angry and bitter boy. To forgive the boy isn't to pardon the devil.