



Cassandra Robison

Smiling and Waving: Eulogy for my Father

By Cassandra Robison

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Late last March as my father lay dying in Florida, I drove Route 60 at 8 a.m. from Jamestown to Dunkirk—26 miles of two way traffic over the infamous snow ridge in a brittle sunshine. A grim sky had once again cast down nine inches of wet snow, all the more bitter and miserable due to its late arrival. Tiny birds hunched upon the snow beneath my neighbor's feeders, too dazed to eat.

I drove in pleasant enough reverie listening to Mozart on the radio until I realized a line of traffic in front of me had slowed to a crawl. I'm usually the slowest car on the road in bad weather, hugging my side of the white line. If these hardy travelers, many of whom commute daily to Dunkirk, Fredonia, and Buffalo in weather which mimics Alaska's had slowed to a snail's pace, something was definitely amiss.

At that instant, the road hurled up a chunk of wet slop that froze into a solid opaque sheathe across the glass. I knew then why the cars in front of me moved with such care. It was the nemesis of even the seasoned upstate New York driver: Black ice, the invisible predator pouncing without mercy.

For whatever reason, I decided to ignore it, to pretend I did not know, to say to myself, “It probably isn’t black ice at all,” to go on blithely listening to Mozart. This is unlike me, generally speaking. And I thought too: Is it neurosis or sanity?

That indeed was precisely the point?

As left brain locked into automatic pilot and right brain freed from its usual constraints soared into abstract, I thought of my father who was never far from my thoughts. I visualized him this way: Lying on a hospital bed, head thrown back, mouth agape, hands frozen into claws tugging at the hospital sheet. My beautiful father entombed within himself, locked in a final argument with death.

But just past that image, I see my father as I have always seen him, smiling and waving. Smiling and waving as he drove off in his car, smiling and waving as he boarded an airplane, smiling and waving as he mailed to me yet another postcard from his travels. My father, smiling and waving.

And I thought of another death defying incident in his life: My father on a December night in 1935 hurtling down Barrett Avenue hill on a brakeless bobsled, hurtling towards doom. For at the bottom past McKinley Street, past hospital curve, the bobsled slid wide on ice, skidded across Harrison Street and slammed into the rear hubcap of a passing truck. Five boys on that bobsled hurtling towards doom, five boys including my father. One of them his best pal – pulling the cap of dad’s head, shouting, “Here we go, Ray! Here we go!”

At the bottom, thrown like ragdolls in snow, two boys were dead, three forever changed.

In my father’s last days on earth, choking on death, I figured in some way he was on that hill again, over and over, the doomed existential hero careening down that final icy mile towards inevitable death.

Ice, I thought. Ice.

As I drove along on Route 60 in the pseudo sun of an upstate New York morning on black ice, I thought, We are all on black ice. We are always on black ice.

What is remarkable about that incident in my father’s life is that he was smiling and waving until the moment of doom at the bottom of the hill, smiling and waving as that bobsled hurled down the snow and ice-covered bricks, at the mercy of ice and fate. That fateful run down Barrett hill became his metaphor, his philosophy, his credo, both consciously and unconsciously.

And he never stopped smiling and waving, not until the very end. I think had he had one

minute's release from the frozen embrace of neurological disease, he would have smiled and waved goodbye to us all.

Once when I was a teenager, he told me never to worry that his airplane might crash because if it did, I was to imagine him smiling and waving all the way down. Sometime later in life, I found he had said that very sentence to my sister, Vicky.

My father understood the power of images.

Nothing speaks as clearly about who my father was than that imperative.

He savored life, every diverse taste every single day, and he made us all taste it too. My Aunt Marian, one of his three beloved sisters, said she always thought of her brother Raymond stopping the car on Route 5 that runs parallel to Lake Erie one day in fall, stepping outside and saying with a smile, "We've got to get out and smell the grapes!"

That was the kind of person dad was. He could stop time for a moment, a few minutes, an hour. We all grew to interpret life through his imagery. He gave us moments we never forgot—cherries picked with dad were the "sweetest cherries" he'd ever eaten, sand walked on with dad was the whitest and softest sand he had ever felt. He thought in superlatives. He talked in hyperbole. He constructed images.

I never met anyone like him or anyone with his absolute zest for life. I could say I never met a man with more *savoir-faire*, with more charm, with greater wit. He was, it's true, the Cary Grant of fathers. But he went deeper than that; he was richer than that. He was optimistic by choice, by deliberate choice. That is the point: to know there is black ice but to keep on smiling.

It is easy to be optimistic when life goes well, when nothing terrible happens or threatens those one loves. But this was not the case with my father. Several times during his life, beginning with that bobsled accident, doom came knocking at his door. Not just doom, either, but horror. He understood horror; he could smell its approach.

He told me, for instance, that he knew the precise instant when doom targeted his youngest daughter, Shannon. "It was on Vanderbilt Beach," he said, "at sunset. Until that day, it was my favorite beach." I remember his Nordic ice blue eyes locked on the horizon as he told me this.

"That beach's sand was silk on the soles of your feet. Every night you could witness the aquamarine splash the horizon as the sun dropped below the western horizon of the Gulf of Mexico. The South Florida breeze warm and sweet as a lover's breath. As I stood," he continued, "alone, suddenly a cold waft of air jolted me like potent: I knew instantly something terrible was coming. I packed everyone up and drove Alligator Alley to evade it, thinking perhaps I could outrun fate. But I knew soon enough, very soon, no matter what I did, I could not move us out of doom's way. That is the hardest knowledge."

It is horror to watch one's child die day by day, but my father did that; it is horror to visit

dying children with bald heads who lie in the darkness alone; he did that. He visited dying children in the St. Louis hospital ward after our Shannon died, to speak to them about death, to answer their questions, to hold their little hands in the dark, to hush their fears. He did not have to do that, yet he did those things. He said most parents can't bring themselves to speak of death or watch the horror of death seeping life from their child's face. "But such children, faced with mortal disease, want to know," he argued. "They ask me, they would say, 'what is dying like?'" And I would do my best to tell them. I told them it was quiet and beautiful. That people they knew would reach out for them through an amazing light. That it would not hurt. That they could wave goodbye."

And it is horror too to feel one's own limbs begin to quake. To feel the nightmarish grip of incurable disease that freezes limbs one by one, day by day, so that first you cannot walk, then you cannot rise at all, and finally, you cannot swallow. Swallow this, horror says, swallow this, and finally you can no more and death arrives in his own time, an ironic mercy.

So it's clear my father knew about the inevitability of doom; he recognized we are all on a blind skid. No blithe, provincial optimist he. He understood doom, and he faced it down in his own fashion. He understood life, and he met it with stubborn joy.

He never quit, my father. On the telephone one morning as he choked and coughed, as he lay dying, he mumbled to me, "I'm fine."

My mother, his first wife, said, "Your father has a certain cussedness that is indefatigable."

As my little yellow Honda swept safely past Sinclairville, past Cassadaga, and began the two mile descent down the end moraine into Fredonia, I thought of my father's grit, of that certain cussedness and refusal to quit that his Finnish mother Marta would call *sisu*. I thought of his singular optimism and passion for life, and I wondered, "Is it sanity or neurosis?" Is it sane, healthy, integral even to ignore the abyss, to pretend there is no black ice, to smile and wave all the way to doom?"

I don't know. But I do know this: I wish I had my father's insatiable lust for life experiences from the simplest morning coffee brewed just right to that joie de vivre with which he engaged every day.

I do know that as my father's body lay entombed by disease and his spirit rose towards death, even though we could not see it, he was smiling and waving.

The morning he died, April 7th, 1999, I walked the fields of spring with my two dogs. Two crows swooped past my head, cawing and cawing. I touched the first grey fuzzy willows of the year. And I heard my dad say, "Sandi, love your life. Fear nothing. Look at me. I'm still smiling and waving. Kiss me goodbye. Smile and wave back."