



Photo courtesy Michael Kelly

## Parting Ways

Michael Kelly

**T**hey spoke of him as if he were a stranger to me, as if I hadn't grown up with him, as if I hadn't known him. They shared stories of his youth, of their visits together, letters, phone conversations. All the while I felt more and more like a stranger. Like I didn't know the man I was about to bury. Like I didn't know my own father.

He had been dead a solid week and was laid out all primped and prepped in a too small coffin, in a too cold room, behind the chapel at the Heidelberg cemetery. I stared at his face. There was something odd about him. He looked peaceful enough, but something gnawed at the back of my mind.

Something wasn't quite right.

He had always tried to look his best. Slacks instead of jeans. Button-downs instead of t-shirts. Loafers instead of sneakers. Always clean shaven, and always neatly coifed. He had been handsome even though he was two inches and some dental work short of justifiable vanity. Sadly, embalming fluid and undertakers' tricks only did so much to keep the pall of death away from a corpse. Already his body, normally so solid and stout, was beginning to wither. His lips that in life were so full and always smiling

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were drawn tight against his teeth in a grimace. Two little dimples showed under his bottom lip where the undertaker had tied his mouth shut; heaven forbid his jaw snap open while one of the aunties gave his cheeks a final rub. And his eyes, extinguished, were closed tight and sunken in twilight pools. I reached out and gently patted down the patch of hair that stood out at a funny angle on the right side of his head while I studied his visage.

My father sold everything and hit the road soon after my mother's death a few years ago. At that point, he was still healthy. He lived out of a suitcase and began his mission of revisiting his life, which in many ways, had been one big road trip. He left home at sixteen and joined the Irish navy. From there he worked the coalmines of northern England and eventually ended up in the US Army where his adventures continued for, according to his DD-214, another thirty years, six months, and eight days. Along the way he picked up a German wife, four kids, the occasional dog and parakeet, and a nasty case of jungle rot. I never saw my father sadder than when he left the army and bought his retirement home, and I never saw him happier than when he sold it.

I hadn't planned on holding vigil at the side of my father's casket, but I couldn't let go of the feeling that something was amiss, and so I kept puzzling over him. Friends and relatives flowed into the room, collected like flotsam around his casket, and then were carried off with the next wave. They offered condolences and shared cherished memories. They would straighten his tie and tell me how red was his favorite color, or adjust the lapel on his suit and tell me how much he loved blue, or how fitting it was that he died in winter, his favorite season. They would smooth down his unruly hair and comment on how soft it still was. They would tell stories that started with "He always..." or "He never..." and all the while I nodded and thought, *Yes, I knew him too.*

Paddy, my father's youngest brother and my favorite uncle, wheezed his way up to the side of the casket. He was puffy, sweaty, and red-faced. I realized with a jolt that, even dead, my father looked better than Paddy. I told Paddy that I worried he would be next, that his heart would give out on him for all the smoking and drinking. I hoped my father's silent presence would help punctuate my concern. Paddy told me he never felt better. Three months later Paddy would fall off a ladder to his death while adjusting his satellite dish. His heart held, but the rung didn't.

Paddy was the only one who didn't try to trump my memories with his own. He gazed silently at my father, took in a deep breath, and then let out a noise like a kettle just before it comes to a full boil. Then he reached out and thumped my father heartily on the chest and laughed at some private joke. I half expected my father to groan in protest or deflate like a ruptured air mattress, but he remained still.

My aunties, Annette and Collette, showed up and jostled Paddy out of the way. Annette was a retired nun who used to go by Sister Francis. She still prayed a lot and after a couple of minutes of oohing and aahing over my father and fiddling with his hair, she launched into a nice blessing. Collette followed that up with a song that she swore was one of my father's favorites, although I couldn't remember ever hearing it in my life. By about the eleventh verse she had forgotten the words but, undaunted, she sang on, "I don't remember the words, I don't remember the words, but my dear brother loved this song, so I'll sing it for him all day long, oh I don't remember the words."

After a couple of more improvised verses, she was shushed by Annette who pulled out a rosary and insisted we position it in my father's hands as if he were praying. "Your dad always loved doing the rosary," she said. My father played the lottery with more vigor than he attended church, and saying the rosary wasn't something I ever remember him doing. They insisted. As supple as his skin was, his fingers and hands proved less willing to flex. After a few minutes, we had the rosary beads wrapped around his

hands, but then Annette and Collette fussed over how to position the cross. Paddy paced back and forth behind them rolling his eyes and doing his teakettle impersonation. In the end, they settled on wedging it between his fingers so that it looked like somebody had driven a crucifix-handled dagger into my father's belly. If anything, he looked deader.

Then my own sister, Bernadette, showed up. In a lull between visitors, she reached across the icy divide of my father's casket, took a hold of one of my hands, looked me in the eyes, and began to tell me, apologetically, how she was his favorite and how she was a daddy's girl and how she shared some sort of spirit connection with him. The whole exchange gave me the heebie-jeebies. And then she closed with, "I'm sure you'll miss him too."

It was time. I gave my father's hair one last tease and wet my fingers with some spit to get the unruly ends to stay down. But they didn't. The attendant secured the coffin lid. The Army honor guard secured the flag. We proceeded to the graveside. Taps were played. The flag was folded. Words were spoken. My father's casket was hoisted and lowered into a freshly dug pit. And a grateful nation buried another soldier it really didn't know.

I wasn't sure I knew the man whose body was in the coffin either. He had been reworked, retooled, reformed, and regurgitated into a person I wasn't sure I had ever met. Everyone there knew a different version of him, and it was as if we were each burying a different person. They had each brought their own successive memories, which they layered on top of him like remembrance stones on a grave, obscuring him from me. I had to sweep them away, battle them down, to get back to the father I knew. In the end, what was left of my father I carried inside me. What was in the coffin was only the shell of the man.

One by one, everyone filed past the grave and dropped dirt or flowers onto my father's casket. It was as I dropped my fistful of dirt that I realized what had been so odd. What hadn't been quite right. What bothered me as my father lay trussed in his coffin. It was a simple thing really, and I actually laughed out loud as it dawned on me. Something so minor that nobody else noticed. It was the reason why his hair stood out at odd angles, and it wasn't because of a bad haircut. My father was sent into eternity with his hair parted on the wrong side. He always parted his hair on the left, while the undertaker had parted it on the right. It was a little thing, really, but it was one more memory.

And it was wholly mine.