

Thomas Beller

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A single room. Airy, pleasant light filtering in through windows that felt churchly, as though placed high on the wall. The visits were always an occasion. I never tried to grasp what he did in that room, but understood that I had free range of a kingdom that was otherwise gained entry to with much patience and, though I didn't think it explicitly, money. Even in the high drama of mid-Seventies New York, the address felt spiffy; all the neighborhood shops embraced this distinction by naming themselves as some version of the neighborhood's telephone exchange. Thus: Carlyle Chemists, Carlyle Camera, etc.

The furniture was dark—a brown armchair, a wooden desk with a faint whiff of mid-century modern, a standing lamp. And of course the couch. It was brown leather. Otherwise nondescript. More or less the same as my grandfather's couch. My father and my mother's father were in the same profession. They were psychoanalysts.

Of all the objects in my father's office, the couch alone did not make the journey into our lives. Why, I do not know. The apartment where I grew up, and where my mother still lives, is filled with objects accumulated from other houses, other interiors. His desk, for example, was my desk. I wrote a story (fiction but not entirely, as is my style) about a young man trying to fathom his dead father by virtue of the leftover traces. I focused on the detritus that could fit in a drawer—old cigarettes, pipe cleaners, pipes, eyeglasses—but it did not occur to me to include in the story, or to even note to myself, that the desk on which I wrote had once been his.

There was one curiosity in my father's office to which I affixed a lot of importance and which gave me a lot of joy at the time: the tiny kitchen, hidden behind shuttered doors, in which sat a small fridge and a stove. The fridge worked. The stove was a plinth upon which several gigantic towers of magazines, mostly *New Yorkers*, tottered. It was a tiny space but I think I liked it because, for one thing, it was a special place accessible only to the king and his intimates, and for another because, between my parents, it was my father who seemed more orderly, conservative in dress and manner, and this discovered pile seemed to indicate something wild and disorderly within him, a bit of chaos.

Then he died. I was about to turn ten. At some point in the following months, or maybe it was just weeks, various bits of the office arrived like pieces of a shipwrecked boat; they were dusted off, and situated *in* various corners of the house, where they have sat ever since.

Much later, as a grownup, I had two chilling epiphanies, as follows:

1. I had gotten myself a shrink who was also a member of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute, as my grandfather had been. Why had I chosen my grandfather over my father? I didn't even like my grandfather.

2. Shrink wrote; my grandfather wrote; I had witnessed my father writing or, at least typing. But there was no literature from my father. He was a well-respected teacher at Columbia—they even have a prize for him, ironically or not, given for the best graduating thesis, The Alexander Beller award. But no trace of his writing.

This second matter sent me into a bit of a cold sweat that persisted for some time, until it occurred to me to ask one of his colleagues. Every kid of a dead parent will have a special relationship with his parents friends; it's as though both parties know the friends are responsible for looking out for the kid a little bit, if only by transmitting a bit of the flavor of the lost parent. I went to Don and Helen Meyers. These were typical figures of my youth in one respect: utterly wholesome family-oriented professionals who turned out (as I only realized when I became a cogent citizen of the world) to be preoccupied with scandalous matters. Helen at least was from Vienna, like my father, and therefore held within every syllable the possibility of perversity. But Don was the soul of goodness, and wholesomeness, and it took a while for me to absorb his book on masochism when I eventually read it.

Don and Helen gave me a gigantic gift when I went to them with my concern—understandable, if you are a writer—that my father was some blocked thwarted figure, churning away in unfulfilled ambition while his father-in-law produced learned and lapidary papers for the psychoanalytic quarterly.

What you have to understand was that at the time he died, none of us at Columbia had published anything," they told me. "We were too intimidated by everyone at the New York Psychoanalytic community! It wasn't until five or six years later that we started to publish."

The implication being that had he lived, he would have begun publishing too.

It took a few more years before I rushed back to them for further explanation about the other epiphany. By then, Helen had passed away. But Don was still there.

"I've had the worst realization," I said. I chose a shrink from the New York Psychoanalytic Institute! I chose my grandfather's place over my father's."

"No, no, the truth is your father and Helen were both kind of snobs and would have probably been part of the New York Psychoanalytic if they could.

I root for psychoanalysis like I root for the Knicks or the Jews. Like a team, which isn't even particularly lovable in its losses (in that sense very much like if they like Knicks). I have wanted, in an abstract kind of rapid response team, the sort of thing you see in political campaigns, so that whenever there is a Swift Boat moment, the counter-punch comes loud and strong.

But no. It was not to be. I recently read a piece by a psychologist saying therapy takes too long. I wrote to Don and Helen's son saying his wife, also a shrink, should write a rebuttal. But word came back: "She half agrees."

I loved that "half."

—Thomas Beller