



# ANCIENT HISTORY

LINDA SWEET

Photo: Mark Townsend

*Mercy is a bridge from soul to soul.*

— Phoebe Finley Pack

**I PUSH** the lawn mower across the grass, and memories of my dad fly up like little green blades:

*Let's start up that mower. You've got to prime the pump first. See that lever? It adjusts the wheels up and down. Don't hit any rocks. Here, put these sunglasses on for protection. You don't want something to fly up and hit you in the eye.*

When I was seventeen I came home from school one day and found Dad painting a picture of a tree struck in half by lightning in our backyard. For canvas he used a piece of split wood. Two days earlier he'd been released from the hospital. He was very ill — in fact, he was dying.

I looked over his shoulder and said, "I like your painting."

"I've always wanted to do this," he replied. "I'm on my path at last."

What path was that? He'd never mentioned a path before. He had once told me, "All men need a purpose." Was painting his? Now, when his life was almost over?

The next week, early on Sunday morning, my mother knocked on my bedroom door and, in a strangely relieved voice, said, "Your dad finally died last night. He went peacefully. It was a blessing."

I stayed in bed, letting the news sink in. My father, whom I both loved and hated: gone. His death was a blessing. It *was*. I stared out the window at the gray Vermont sky. The house was quiet with the presence of death.

My mother wanted my younger brother, my sister, and me to carry on as usual

that day, but I refused. I dialed the jewelry store and said, “My dad died last night. I won’t be in today.” I could feel my boss’s shock but not my own.

Dad’s name was Camille Frank Vozar. Everyone called him Cam. His beginnings in Chicago were poverty-stricken. His father died when Cam was only six weeks old. His mother took in ironing from the church. Three older sisters dominated him; his early male role models were Catholic priests.

Cam was Catholic in name only. He sat at the head of the supper table, pausing to stub out a cigarette before beginning his mealtime antics. First he rose a little, spread his cheeks, and farted loudly. Then he announced, “We will now say grace”:

Our Father who art in jail,  
Eating peanuts by the pail,  
Along came the Holy Ghost,  
Who in hell ate the most?

He snorted and farted again. God bless him.

He was the type to cry, “Nyah-nyah-nyah-nyah!” when he was right and you were wrong. Annoying as hell, but that’s how he was.

Cam had the looks of James Dean. He drank hard — two cases of beer in a single weekend — and played hard, jumping up and dancing the twist, the boogie-woogie, the Watusi. “Limbo lower now,” Chubby Checker sang, and Cam just about broke his back going under the stick. A gut-splitting laughter, an extrovert, the life of the party. I could see why Mom had married him. On a good day he went around the house shaking his head and mimicking the Beatles: “She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah! / She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah!”

One time, when I refused to get him a beer, his soft brown eyes turned black as olives. He squeezed my arm meanly and said, “Get. Me. A. Beer. Now!” I buckled.

People didn’t use the word *dysfunctional* back then. I can imagine myself asking a mental-health worker — had there been one to ask — “Why is he this way?” Today I know that he was at least partially insane from toxic doses of alcohol.

Soft brown eyes and leathery hands. Only forty-three years old. Gone.



My mother was on the phone to relatives in Chicago, assuring everyone that Cam was at rest now, finally, at last. She was holding up pretty well.

Our neighbor Celine came over carrying a plate of warm cinnamon rolls. She was practically a member of the family. Spoons and cups clinked and scraped. Celine paged through the address book, deciding whom to call next. Mom put the phone down, dangled her loose hands over a stack of paper napkins, then began folding them, end to end. Celine and I helped.

Another neighbor came over. Full of purpose, Mr. Betit stood in the kitchen wearing a black overcoat and chewing the stub of a cigar. He held a plate of ham. His presence in our

house always meant something was wrong: a broken furnace, a flat tire, a clogged sink. Whatever the problem, he’d find a way to fix it. Mr. Betit gave my mother a long, sober look. “You’ve had a terrible shock, Lea. Let me handle this for you. The wife is putting together some supper for tonight. Have you called the undertaker yet?” My mother stepped aside as Mr. Betit made phone calls and arrangements. He even emptied the trash.

We took a night flight to Chicago, where Dad’s family cemetery plot was. The airplane was as dark as the inside of a coffin. How was Dad getting to Chicago? Was his body packed in with the luggage?

Dad took up smoking at the age of twelve and never stopped. He rode the Chicago subways endlessly as a boy because he liked to fall asleep in the rocking cars. I’ve often thought of him riding those cars, finding comfort in the soothing rocking sensation he couldn’t get at home.

Across the airplane aisle, Mom wore a numb smile creased with sadness. I imagined her thinking: *Look how well I’m holding up.* She whispered to a stranger, “My husband died yesterday. We’re going to his funeral.”

*Grieve*, I thought, but she wasn’t the sort of woman to do that publicly. Not in front of us kids, either.

My older brother and sister flew in from Detroit. We stayed with relatives in Oak Park. Evelyn and Elia’s house had dark columns and tall ceilings that reached for the heavens. The place felt like a funeral home. At the dinner table that night, there was laughter, gaiety. For dessert Evelyn served up a sweet cake, but then her face turned sad and she pushed her slice away. “Cam was so young,” she said. “Too young to die.” Silence followed. We sat at the table, all remembering our strange relationship with Dad. Then Evelyn, who’d known Dad in better days, when we’d lived in Arkansas, rescued the conversation with a funny story. I remembered some stories of my own.

*(end of excerpt)*