

## Reading My Father

My father's last words were left in a voicemail message: a request to download a review of *The Lost* by Daniel Mendelsohn. He had called my brother from the hospital room where he was recovering from cardiac surgery. I see him still, on his bed, tethered by tubes, too thin for his own good, a copy of Philip Roth's *Everyman* resting on his stitched and sunken chest. He went into respiratory failure early the next morning and died later that day.

The funeral was held a few days later, which gave my brother and I time to write our respective eulogies. Our sister entrusted us with the impossible task of distilling eighty-four years of life into a few pages. Before I put pen to paper I knew that I would make room in my thoughts for Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. My father's appetite for the arts began when he was a young man, a self-educated intellectual who left school at fourteen and forged his own lifelong curriculum. He took frequent train trips from Montreal to New York to absorb the best of the city's theatre, including the original production of Miller's classic.

The play had a profound affect on my father and I set about to find a particular passage that I knew would make for a fitting tribute. What I didn't expect to find was a tattered, first edition copy of *Death of a Salesman* on a bookshelf in my parents' apartment, with penciled annotations my father had made long ago. Many of his books are festooned with underlined words, marginal notes and checkmarks as distinct as his handwriting. He made it a habit of marking passages that struck a chord with him, for one reason or another. I'll never know those reasons, but I can take small pleasure when I come to rest at a word or phrase he once flagged.

My father's copy of *Death of a Salesman* held a surprise on the title page, a sub-title I had long forgotten: Certain private conversations in two acts and a requiem. In the absence of the private conversations we never shared, I have had to settle for private conversations my father had with himself. "Flashback-within-flashback" he wrote on an inside leaf filled with page numbers that read like cryptic clues. Early in the play, when a diminished Willy tells his wife he's "vital in New England", my father underlined 'vital' and wrote: He really believes it! In the second act of certain private conversations - as a desperate Willy is about to lose his lifelong job - my father underlined a line of dialogue with pencil and marked it with a blue-ink X: "You can't eat the orange and throw away the peel - a man is not a piece of fruit." Other notations jump out. Lied all his life? my father wondered about Willy.

As my eulogy began to take form I searched for a specific passage where Linda Loman speaks with an urgency to her two sons about how "attention must be paid" to the likes of Willy. My father, I told all who had gathered at his funeral, had taught his three children to pay attention to the voiceless, the overlooked, the Willy Lomans of the world who may never get their picture in a newspaper but make quiet contributions worth noting and appreciating.

As we sat shiva for my father I took some time to scan his bookshelves in order to get a measure of the man. Never one to uncork his emotions, the titles speak of his breadth and passions, including a gift for sculpting. *The New Dictionary of Modern Sculpture* and *Henry*

*Moore Remembered*. Poems by Anna Akhmatova. Paul Robeson's *Here I Stand*. Stanislavski's *Building a Character*. Philosophical Sketches. The Company of Critics. Fiction by Flannery O'Connor and J.D. Salinger.

In his later years my father found sustenance and community in book clubs, perfectly suited for his impulse to leave no argument unturned. To grapple, to challenge, to dispute: in his hands, books were to be wrestled with as much as they were to be read. We all expected he would he would leave the hospital and spend a few months in rehab, where my father planned to read every book on the reading list of a course my mother was leading at an adult education institute. His plan was to discuss each book with her, one-on-one in a book club of two.

My father never lived to read *The Lost*. His reading list remains as unfinished as a conversation that falters and then fades. In the years ahead, I will read the books that resonated with him, and listen for the echoes. *The Golems of Gotham* by Thane Rosenbaum. Ian McEwan's *Saturday*. Joan Didion's *Year of Magical Thinking*.

A year after my father's passing we gathered to unveil his tombstone. His name is carved on the cover of a book, the pages set in stone, the spine marked "Book of Life". An image of one of his sculptures has been etched onto a corner. The footstone is an open book with a rabbinical quote on social justice, a quote my father lived by. As I looked at the carved text I saw something was missing. There are no marginal notes, no underlined words, none of his distinct checkmarks. The monument, like wordless love, is beautiful but incomplete.

Emil Sher

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