

**SAVE THE GREEN ONES FOR LATER**  
**Linda Pressman, Paradise Valley Community College**  
**Honorable Mention, Creative Non-Fiction**

**O**N MARCH 1ST, 1975 my father was standing in the back room of the produce market we owned in south Scottsdale haranguing my sister Denise for putting out the wrong box of bananas. *Always put out the yellow ones, dummkof*, he said, *save the green ones for later*. Then he clutched his chest and fell to the ground face down, dead of a massive heart attack.

I was unaware he had died until later that evening. I was busy shopping and shoplifting at a mall, as fourteen-year-olds sometimes do, and so didn't know anything had happened to make this day different from all the other days of my life, until no one showed up to drive me home. My sisters were riding in ambulances that day, they were waiting in hospital chapels with my mother that day, and they were watching as mourners began descending on our home that day.

My father's public persona had been that of the jovial proprietor, the good businessman, a man's man. In our home we saw something different. At his best, he hadn't known we were alive and at his worst he was an angry disciplinarian who stormed into the house and threatened to take off his belt and whip one of us. And once in a while he did. We tread lightly when he was home and knew not to mess with his slippers, with his newspaper, with his T. V. shows, his favorite recliner and his round, not flat, tooth-picks. At the time we thought he was just a typical father of the 1960's, busy working himself to death making a living, but here and there we'd glimpse other types of fathers, fathers who knew their children's birthdays, fathers who talked to their families.

As little girls we had watched each evening as Mom would rush to the door to kiss him hello, only to have him turn his head and push her away, until she no longer tried. We had watched as she cried in a chair at our dining room picture window, looking vainly down the street for his station wagon to appear. Those were the nights he "went out with the boys" without telling her, finally coming home late at night smelling of beer and perfume and yelling at her in the quiet of the midnight house, *You shut up. I'll do what I want or I'll leave you*. We took his callous treatment of her personally; we all stood by the window, we all got shouted at, we all got pushed away.

Dad treated me better than he did my six sisters, which earned me their enmity. Once he realized that he would never have his longed-for son, he attached the ambitions he was reserving for a son onto me. I was the only one told I would attend college and was convinced while growing up that I might just end up being both the President of the United States and Miss America. Watching me waste away from asthma in the Chicago winters motivated Dad to eventually pack us all up and move to Arizona, ostensibly to save my life, though he lost his in the process.

When he died it was like someone had dug up our family room, leaving a huge hole in the middle of the house. One day he was there and the next day he wasn't; he disappeared overnight. And we jumped over the hole each day, clinging to each other, eventually building a bridge over it, as families do. But our bridge was constructed by my mother's bitterness at Dad once she finally had a chance to reflect and fume over the way he had treated her during their twenty-four year marriage.

Back in those early months after he died, we all made a commitment to Mom never to honor Dad's memory. We didn't swear solemn oaths, our hands crossed over our chests, rather our promise would come out in little verbal slings about Dad and how different life was without him around; life was better without him around. We forgot him. No visits to his grave, no lighting *Yahrzeit* candles on the anniversary of his death, no memories of "Grandpa Harry" told to the fifteen grandchildren he never met.

Until one day, I broke that promise. My dead father came knocking on my door and I began doing things that were different from what had seemed so right so long ago. To belong in our family I had to hate Dad, there was no allowance for forgiveness, not even for someone gone twenty-seven years.

By the time we were adults, we all knew that Dad had another daughter—actually his first daughter—in Germany. My parents had met in a Displaced Person's camp there after the war, but after he saw Mom safely on board a ship to America, Dad ran wild, riding motorcycles, working in the black market, chasing women. Eventually, he became involved with a German woman who gave birth to my half-sister, Rina, on March 31, 1951, six days after he married my mother. There was never any question of him staying in Germany and marrying Rina's mother. Dad married Jewish, but he cheated Christian, like it didn't count.

I emailed my half-sister and apologized for never contacting her. There were no words that could adequately explain how immobilized I had been out of loyalty to my mother. Rina wrote back and attached a picture of her family that showed my dad's Polish Jewish face somehow reproduced perfectly on the faces of her tall, German Christian sons. And she was gracious, forgiving easily, and telling me that she had spent a lot of her life angry with him.

She never met Dad, she tells me, and it was difficult to grow up in post-war Germany, illegitimate and half-Jewish. Her mother was bitter too, considering Dad to have been her one great love. Rather than blaming my father for abandoning her when she was pregnant and sailing off to America, her mother instead spent years hating my mother for stealing him away by some nefarious method.

Each year, one letter from Dad would fly into Rina's life in an international envelope with a twenty-dollar bill stuffed in it, until suddenly they stopped. She came to Arizona years later, searching for him, calling my mother's house, Mom hanging up on her over and over again. After tracking down some relatives in Chicago, she finally met her father, years too late, at the cemetery. *So this is what happened when the letters stopped.* She mentioned to me what a strange coincidence this is, that we have finally come in contact on Dad's birthday.

In her correspondence, Rina calls my father her father, easily calls me her sister, inquires after her other half-sisters and asks how many nieces and nephews she has. I am not used to letting anyone in this club. Being one of seven sisters has been an enormous part of my identity and I've spent much of life proud of the novelty, posing for "seven sister" pictures, thinking that we were in some magical sisterhood. Even knowing

of Rina's existence, I never thought of being one of eight. I find the new verbiage awkward but I use it because she deserves her place among us after all these years. I decide to see what I can do to bring Rina into our family.

I find out soon enough that there's no talking to Mom about Rina. Mom has mixed up Dad's premarital infidelities with his post-marital infidelities —now all contained in one big file she has labeled "Your Rotten Dead Father." She remembers Dad writing those letters, she remembers the sense of betrayal, and she remembers those twenty-dollar bills. Dad made a mockery of her own life with these actions, she says, caring more for a woman he loved years ago than for his own wife. She threatens me, saying she will never speak to me again if I meet Rina.

One day soon after as I'm driving away from a downtown doctor's appointment with my children in their car seats behind me, my son asks me if we can go see Grandpa Harry's grave, as if Dad himself was sitting in the backseat and had whispered that suggestion in his ear. And I say yes, jumping on the Black Canyon Highway and jumping off again on Van Buren, right under the interchange. I travel down the skinny cemetery roads and find the Jewish section at the northernmost edge, the tangle of freeway off-ramps flying through the air above. Below it is peaceful, his grave is shady, near trees and a bench. He is alone here where we left him.

This is the first time I have ever visited his grave. Looking down at his name I feel twenty-seven years of hard feelings and twenty-seven years of resentments fall off me and I can smell freedom all around. And as I stand there with my children, I introduce them to their grandfather, using their Hebrew names.

*"Dad, these are your grandchildren, David ben Chaim and Rivka Zehava bat Chaim. Daniel, Rachel, this is your Zaydie, Grandpa Harry."*

I realize then that honoring my father's memory and welcoming my half-sister are the right things to do, even if they betray my mother's trust. She should not have imposed her disappointment in her marriage on us so many years ago. She could have allowed us to find our own way, picking through the bad and the good of our memories, and arriving at our own understanding of him in our own time.

And so, finally, I have forgiven Dad for failing me as a father and I have forgiven myself for failing to honor his memory and I find I can even forgive my mother for loving her resentments more than she loves me. And I realize that sometimes there is no clear right and wrong, and that my family is not what I expected it to be.

