

MY FATHER'S WIFE
Steven Bergkamp
Paradise Valley Community College
First Place, Essay

*If life is a highway, and the soul is a car
Then objects in the rear view mirror appear closer than they are*
-Meatloaf

MY FATHER WAS so stupid he didn't even know the difference between a fraternity and a sorority. I know this because my junior year he telephoned and, rather politely, asked what I was up to. We hadn't spoken in years, having moved away when I was 14. He hated everything and did awful things to us kids, sometimes to my mother. The single best thing he ever did for us in his whole life was to leave. We got by. Time passed. I went into the service, vanished for a few years, drifted back to the U.S. and fell into college. I was the complete iconoclast. Then came that call out of nowhere. How did he get my number?

I wasn't rude to him, just brusque: I told him I was attending university. I had a nighttime job in a restaurant. "What about meals?" he asked. I told him I was living in a sorority house where meals were provided. When I hung up I was angry. A wall had been breached. Years later, a very thin man, who said he had been my father's friend, came to his funeral and asked if I was "the one."

The one? *You know, the son that made it to college, "the one who was so damn smart he got himself a scholarship into a sorority."* I confessed. But no smile emanated from his lips. Instead, he took my hand into both of his and gazed at me with envy, respect. God, could there really be two such stupid people?

I never knew my father's second wife. In fact, I never really knew when they got married, where they got married, or whether it was a happy or perhaps a sad day in their lives. It must have been a little of both as they were each over fifty, a second chance after a few decades of solitude. And I don't know how or where they met. His wife was not the sort of person likely to go out to meet people. Not even in church. Just a tall, lonely, sad sort of old woman that would stand in a long line waiting to get her portion of something good.

My father used to say hunger was the best cook. He used to say that when we ate French toast for lunch and dinner. By that reckoning, the state by which his second wife measured time was that of loneliness. I could see it in her eyes. Those large, blinking eyes that didn't move from side to side, but gazed straight into me in a pleading way, like a scolded dog begging for a touch, a kind word. She was no stranger to loneliness. Or to silence. She wrapped herself in them like a cloak.

My younger brother knew her better than I did, yet all he knew was that she had been abandoned by her first husband, had two sons who once they grew up, moved away as well. Nobody talked about it, about what she lived on all those years alone in that farmhouse with its empty barn, empty hen house, and empty

rotting wooden porch that looked for miles and miles across the windy plains of West Texas. Unless a person ever lived in one, no one can appreciate how utterly lonely, depressing, and painful is that sound of a hot wind whistling through the window screens for hours, for days; banging the screen door and shutters, like rocks hitting the windshield, pieces of time flying off and striking the soul.

My father's second wife was as silent and conforming as a shadow: kind, thoughtful, helpful, considerate: and quiet. She never laughed, though sometimes she smiled. And she smiled only when she said something good about my father. She held back, stood in the background while my father spoke. But I only saw them together once.

I got to meet her during my last visit to Kansas. We were going to attend my younger brother's graduation from the same university where I had attended. It was a four-hour flight from New York. My brother had invited our father and his wife to the ceremony as well. My father had never been there. We thought it might be a treat for them both to get out of their house, take a long drive, and see some sunlight. Old people often keep to their houses. After the ceremony, I invited them all to a dinner at an expensive restaurant, the kind I could never afford as a student. We had just finished our meal and were about to leave when the waitress came by to ask if everything was all right. Everything was all right. We should have broken up and each gone our separate ways then and there.

But my father's wife was sitting on the far end of the table, quiet, as usual. No one paid much attention to her during the meal. It was just my father talking, asking me about the places I've been, or asking my own wife questions about New York. He asked my younger brother about his plans to work or to go to school. So when the waitress asked if any of us wanted more water, only my father's wife said yes. It was the first time she spoke all day. I looked over at her. The others kept talking.

The waitress was one of those clean looking Kansas girls with blond hair, tan legs and a disarming smile, the kind of girl that probably has no idea the extent of her effect on men. Some may call that innocence. I was trying not to look at her. I guessed she was probably the oldest child, maybe she was a second year graphics arts major working her way through school, a sweetheart who probably had never done anything for the wrong reason. Not yet. Because of that, she could still recognize goodness in ordinary people. I guess that is part of innocence as well.

As the waitress extended her water pitcher towards my father's wife, it was then that I saw her as an old woman who had nothing, asked for nothing, spent nothing and got nothing, someone who nobody talked to, who was once abandoned for twenty years but is now married, now here. At this moment she raises her glass silently and holds it out with two trembling hands. She looks only at her glass. She is too shy to look such a lovely girl in the face. She is too ashamed to ask for more water. When her glass is full, reluctantly, as though communion with God is over, she puts the glass down.

The waitress looks into the face of my father's wife with something like alarm, concern, kindness and awe; clearly moved by the degree of gratitude expressed in the old woman's face for such an ordinary act. Something passes between those two, from the young to the old, loved to the unloved, the decency of belonging that we sometimes take for granted. A feeling lingers. I see it.

And I can never forget it, her face. The way she stares at her water glass until she places it back down before her. Then stares at her empty plate. When I look away, only then does she drink. And maybe I imagine it, but she drinks with more dignity than before, and I get the feeling that she is proud to know that full water glass is hers, and that these people at the table are part of her too.

