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[For Donald Barthelme]

Dizzy from the Turns

My father went down into the Chesapeake Bay when I turned 30. Life since then has been a tangled web of therapy and detox clinics. The long, loping strides of youth gave way to short, choppy footfalls on a path of self-destruction.

The Three Stooges, the Marx Brothers and even Chaplain lost their funny edge. I gave up pot, took up drinking, and pursued professional women to relieve the pain of that final abandonment.

All the letters, tears and pleading had fallen on my father's deaf ears. He simply didn't want to hear me. Mine was not a voice worth listening to.

Although I hated him, I loved him, too; the accompanying sense of relief I felt when I learned of his death did little to mitigate my grief. I cried and raged through therapy, est, and a host of New Age treatments that left me dizzy and exhausted. The burden of having to create my life over was too much. I no longer had to live up to his expectations, but whose expectations did I then have to live up to? The template had

been smashed. My protection, though thin, had been stripped, and I crumpled into a hopeless amalgam of conflicted emotion. To put it bluntly, I cracked.

Regression experientia was what they called it. Being new and untested, my medical plan refused to finance it. The state, however, seemed eager since they had plans to implement it in the prison population. The prisons were bursting at the bars. If it worked with me, they might be able to make respectable citizens out of the recalcitrant offenders.

So I became a ward of the state. In my humbled condition I accepted this handout gratefully.

The first thing they asked me to do was make a list of my traumatic memories. Since I had spent the last ten years doing just that in small, fluorescent psychiatrists' offices, I readily complied.

I told them about the turds. That's what my father had called them. "If you lay any more turds around the house, you'll eat them," he told me when I was three.

Dr. Spark, a short, fat mustachioed man with fiery eyes, accommodated by dressing me up in diapers and a room filled with turds. I took off the diaper and walked around on my knees. As I was wondering if I was doing it right, a stentorian Bronson-looking character entered the room and force fed me one of the turds. I slugged him in the stomach with all my might and he fell to the floor with a heavy thud. I threw up on top of him. It felt good. The therapy must be working, I thought. Truth is, I never would have struck my father. I was too scared of him. But I was now 40, and crazy, so what the hell?

Next came the doll episode. They dressed me up in children's clothing and put a few dolls in the room. I played with the dolls, making them talk to each other. A woman with long black hair and full lips entered the room. She was supposed to be my sister. "Give me my dolls," she demanded. Frankly, I wanted to play with her instead of the dolls. "No!" I clutched the dolls to my breast. We wrestled for a minute. The Bronson-guy burst into the room. "You give her that doll. Dolls are for girls. Is your name Mary? Should I call you Mary?" He pulled the doll from my arms and I slugged him. His head hit the tiled floor with a thunk. I smiled.

This went on for a week. Every day we re-enacted two or three incidents from my youth. The Bronson look-alike had bandages decorating his face by the end of the week. I marveled at his dedication.

"Your therapy ends tomorrow," Dr. Spark announced. "The final step is to face death. You're going down in the Chesapeake in a twin-engine Apache."

I was thrilled. So short! A week-long therapy with a definitive start, middle and conclusion. I would re-live my father's final moments. Was I supposed to empathize with him, I wondered, a victim of the human condition himself, not accountable for the monster he had turned into? Would this lead to forgiveness? They told me nothing. I was the patient, they were the doctors. Black and white. This had meaning, order, a *modus operandi* with a goal that was attainable: an invitation to rejoin the human race.

I was overjoyed as I boarded the plane. Up, up and away! I remembered my father saying, "When I fly I feel free, above it all," and then his last words, a haunting radio transmission: "I'm getting dizzy from the turns."

To my surprise, Bronson piloted the plane. I sat behind him as we climbed steadily into the wild blue yonder. We left, just as my father had, from Southern Florida and wordlessly headed north.

I searched my soul and my body for signs of recovery. When was I to feel the final burst of release? I felt nothing except the exhilaration of flight in a small aircraft. Maybe it was because the sky was blue and visibility unlimited. My father's plane had been caught in the swirling vortex of a freak storm spawned by a hurricane that was supposed to have been long gone.

Finally, the Chesapeake appeared beneath. The long, snaking bridge looked like the vertebrae of some submerged sea monster.

We began to circle. I waited. We circled some more. Suddenly Bronson cut the engines. Quietly, the plane began to plunge. We picked up speed. I fastened my eyes on the altimeter. At some point, I realized, we would be unable to climb out of the fall.

The altimeter read 100 feet when I began to scream. Bronson laughed. Just as my father would have. I flashed on a memory of my father driving me to school in his '64 Rambler and we skidded on the wintry ice, spinning helplessly, I in terror and he laughing, laughing, laughing . . . I felt a wave of anger surge from my belly to my fist. I slugged Bronson in the back of his neck with all my strength. I heard a sickening crack and he slumped forward. "Oh, shit," I said. We hit the water in a nose dive.

I awoke in a psychiatric hospital bed. Two broken legs, three fractured ribs and a shattered nose.

Dr. Spark was pacing. He quickly came to my side when he saw I was conscious.

"Am I cured?" I asked, my voice muffled through the plaster on my nose.

“Dr. Kevel is dead,” he said.

“Dr. Kevel?”

“The pilot.”

Dr. Spark looked as if he could use a drink.

“The operation . . .” I said, searching, “the operation was a success, but we lost the doctor.”

Dr. Spark smiled wanly.

Six months later they set me up in a condo in New York City. I eventually met the woman I would marry. Three kids, steady job. The prison cells are emptying out. I seldom think of my father now. They tell me I’m cured. And I’d believe it, too, if only I could stop beating my wife.