

What I should have told my father before he died:

A Reflection on loss and redemption: a leaving (Azores) and an arrival (Canada)

By

Emanuel Melo

My father, now that you are gone forever, I feel your absence; now that you have left us for more time than I thought possible, I miss you.

While you were alive, I was never able to understand you. I hid myself from you and you were never able to find me after the day you emigrated when I was still a mere child. On that day, you disappeared from my life and, being little, I didn't understand the reason why; all I knew is that you had left me alone with my mother: you had abandoned me. How was I, a child, to understand why you had to emigrate? There were reasons which only the adults knew and could understand. My mother told me, after I woke up without you by my side, that you had gone and,

my world of childhood crumbled in disillusion. You didn't tell me goodbye, you simply vanished.

And when you returned, after a long absence of three years, I was older; no longer the six year old boy you left behind, I was now nine years old. I had not seen you for so long that you appeared like a stranger returning from a faraway place, and instead of welcoming you back, I kept my distance. A few months later, you brought me and my mother to Canada. But only six weeks after arriving in our new country, my mother received a letter to inform her that my grandmother was very ill and needed her daughter. Very quickly plans were made for me and my mother to return to *São Miguel*. I was heartbroken. I had spent three years without a father and now I was being taken away from you again. I know that you cried inconsolably watching us leave but in my mind it felt like abandonment all over again. By the time my mother and I returned to Canada three months later, it felt like it was too late for you and me, and I just couldn't forgive you for the perceived betrayal of letting me go for a second time. I rejected you and could not look into your fatherly eyes.

It was only when I turned sixteen that I was able to make some peace with you. Still, during all the time that I grew up and became a man, I never understood that you were right there by my side; that you had returned after your three year absence. I imagined it as if you had never returned at all because the child in me had never forgiven your absence: the child that I was believed that he had lost his father forever. It is only now, five years after your death; five year without your presence, that I start to see the truth about what happened on that fateful day when you left. I believed that you didn't love me because you hadn't even said goodbye. But I had never known your side of the story.

Recently, I asked my mother to explain what happened on the day you left. She told me how you embraced me and cried over me, while I still slept. You didn't want to let go of me, on that morning that changed my life forever. Yet I thought that you had abandoned me by choice. If only I had seen your tears and felt the warmth of your tight embrace, perhaps then I could have understood and forgiven your leaving; but it wasn't so, and you paid a heavy price for that act of emigration. You lost your son who did not understand how you could have just disappeared from his life.

Now that you aren't with us, I want to tell you that I miss you, that I now see that you had never really abandoned me; that you loved me. I kept myself emotionally distant from you because I never got over that experience of you leaving me without showing me your sorrow in having to go away. The child inside of me believed that he had lost his father, but like a good father, you remained by my side, watching me in silence, resigned to pay the price for a crime which you had not committed: the crime of abandoning your son.

I want to thank you for all that you did for me. Had you not come to Canada, how different my life would have been back there on our island of *São Miguel*. You brought me to a land where I was able to have a life full of comfort and opportunities and all of it because of your sacrifice. Forgive me for not recognizing what you did for me while you were with us; forgive me my foolish impression that you had stopped loving me. I now see that you never abandoned me but, sadly, I distanced myself emotionally from you for most of my life based on a misunderstanding.

Your illness, however, brought me to you in ways that nothing else had before. When you got sick with cancer, it was me who you wanted to take you to all those tedious doctor's

appointments, each one bringing less and less hope that you would survive. I sat with you for countless hours in Princess Margaret Hospital, waiting in silence; you never complained or showed fear about your future. You sat there reading your Portuguese newspapers as if everything was normal.

When the therapy stopped working and there was no further hope of your recovery, in those last months when you lay on the sofa, unable to walk, I came to see you often. I sat with you and you smiled warmly and it brought me comfort. You became like a helpless child and I helped you get dressed, I held a urinal container in my hand while you held on to me so that you would not fall; when you no longer had the strength to get up, I wheeled you into the bedroom. You were always quiet and never complained.

Once, in the middle of the night, my mother called for help while I slept in the next room. You had soiled yourself and she needed help in cleaning you. We undressed you together in silence. I removed your grey undershirt, soaked at the back. I looked down on your naked body, helplessly flat on the bed, unable to move. It killed me to see you so vulnerable. I watched my mother try to make you comfortable but your face betrayed a pain you would not speak so that she would not worry about you.

I hated having to do your chores. It should have been you taking care of your recycling and garbage night. I didn't want to shovel your driveway or your front steps, I didn't want to do your grocery shopping; I didn't want to plan my life around your dying. I was angry at having to watch you die. The hurt was infinitesimal. It was tied up with my feeling for you all my life; our silences, our differences. I didn't even know who I was to you. Do you love me? I remember

thinking as I looked at your fading body. And all the doubts of my childhood came back to haunt me, confusing my adult mind once again.

You then took for the worst during Holy Week and we prepared for your imminent dying. The doctor gave me the brochure to read so that I'd know the stages of death. But you did not die that quickly. On Good Friday you became conscious again and lucid of mind. You called everyone to come and say goodbye. On Easter Sunday, I held you from behind while the homecare worker washed you. When she left, I was alone with you for a few moments. You asked me to bring you the statue of *O Senhor Santo Cristo* from the dresser. You held it in your hands and you kissed the Suffering Christ; and I heard you whisper your remarkable prayer: *Dai-me a Vossa Graça*. (Give me your grace). This was your only prayer in your time of need. And I still remember it today as a testament to your deep and simple faith. This was to be your last day at home.

The next day, I had to accompany you by ambulance to Grace Hospital where you were to die a few weeks later. We went alone; you and I, in that ambulance passing the streets you would never walk or see again. My knees were shaken as they wheeled the stretcher into the room where you would spend your last days. For the remaining weeks that you lingered, I came every morning on my way to work to feed you. Sometimes you were aware of me. Once you gave me a big happy smile. On the last days, you kept your eyes closed while I fed you porridge. I don't think you felt pain. You were resigned with your death the way that you were resigned to your life's joys and disappointments; the joy of having two granddaughter's that my brother gave you; the disappointment that I didn't.

When we received the late night call to say that the time had come, we rushed to be with you. I watched your breathing become shallower and shallower until you took your last breath. It felt unreal to watch you, the man who was my father, die as simply and quietly as you had lived your life: without fuss.

It's been five years since that day you died. I am still trying to recover from the loss of you. I had lived my life with the belief, false as it was that you didn't really love me. The impressionable young boy that I was misunderstood your leaving. But as much as I may have reserved my judgment on your love for me and my love for you, in the end, I think we lived that love, not through words but through the quiet actions and silences of a lifetime, especially those of your last years.

In my mind, I now return to that fateful morning when you left the island. I close my eyes and think of you again. I am six years old and you haven't left. Now I can smile.

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Emanuel Melo was born in Ponta Delgada, São Miguel, Açores and came to Canada at the age of nine in 1968 with his parents.