

A LIST OF SONGBIRDS

The scrap of paper fell from the pages of an old copy of Sherwin Nuland's *How We Die*, a book I had begun in graduate school but never finished. I'd somehow left it at my parents' house of thirty years, the house I'd grown up in, then reclaimed it during their move to a condominium an hour north of Boston. Reading on a train to work, I was engrossed by Nuland's eloquent account of his own learning to greet death as an inevitable chapter of life, rather than a battle to be fought, when the scrap slipped out.

My father didn't read books; it wasn't his bookmark. I must have scrabbled around for something to mark my place, and tore a page off his scratch pad, not realizing he'd written on it.

The three-by-four-inch rectangle was unremarkable but for my father's distinctive cursive, a left-handed script so jagged it reminded me of teeth or of cuneiform writing—letters incised with a hammer and chisel. I'd seen the bladelike script on checks, billing invoices, the birthday cards my mother made him sign, and once in a note—not a letter, just a note without a greeting—during my first year of college. Then, he'd ripped out a lined sheet from a spiral-bound pad to tell me that I had disappointed him tremendously and that I would have no one but myself to blame if my life tanked. What I had done to anger him was host a male high-school friend in my dorm room for a weekend. That my own friend was two years younger than I was and like a brother made no difference to my father. The note was blunt, angry, and written with such force that the letters embossed the paper like Braille.

"You weren't raised to be a *butana*," he had written, borrowing a forbidden word from my Sicilian maternal grandparents. My father is Nova Scotian. The Italian word for *whore* was about as far from his vernacular as *charmuta*—the Arabic word with the same meaning—is to mine. He used it because he understood its particular power to shame.

But the scrap of paper that fell from the book wasn't a missive, it was a list. It said, simply:

High St '07

Cardinal
Nut Hatch
Sparro
Chickadee
Wren

House Finch
Junco
Wood-Pecker
Mocking Bird

Each name was capitalized. Sparrow lacked the *w*, *nuthatch* and *mockingbird* were two words, and *woodpecker* was hyphenated.

I recognized it immediately as a catalog of the birds my father had seen alighting in the feeder that he hung in the crabapple tree, planted the year I turned fifteen. The prior winter, the car driven by my sixteen-year-old boyfriend had slid off the icy driveway and skittered across the front yard, wiping out a sapling that had begun to flower the summer before. We had just moved to the “High Street house,” as we’d called the place they had just vacated, and my father was livid. All winter we’d been stuck with the ragged stump of the broken tree jutting from the snow like the splintered bone of a lost explorer. Digging it out would have to wait until spring.

It was a reminder to my father that while beloved young trees could be broken, frozen ground could not, and a reminder to me that even when I wasn’t at fault, in his eyes, I was.

I tucked the list in my bag. Later, I would tack it to the corkboard over my desk at Boston University, in a building that practically straddles the Massachusetts Turnpike, which he, as a young immigrant, had helped to build. Then he had been a truck driver, one of many that lined up daily to cart away dirt removed by steam shovels to make room for the new highway. By the time we lived in the High Street house, he had a license to run heavy equipment—front-end loaders, backhoes, and mammoth excavators. Eventually he bought “the Machine,” as he called his secondhand red backhoe, a fossil compared to the bright yellow Caterpillars and distinctive green John Deeres then appearing on the scene. But that intrepid red backhoe worked on the Boston Garden, Northeastern University, the Big Dig, and the Harvard Square subway station, where I first saw my father at work.

The memory is as bright and clear as the day it happened. I was sixteen years old and skipping school so I could shop for poetry books and posters at the Harvard Coop. It took two buses and two subway lines to get to Harvard Square, the gathering spot for the Cambridge elite. I knew that I—a working-class kid, chubby in dungarees and clogs—would never fit in there. That awareness enabled me to move through the square as if I were invisible, like a foreign tourist, until I turned onto Brattle Street and happened upon the red backhoe chomping at the earth.

My feet carried me forward, arms flailing, before I remembered that I was truant.

“Dad, Dad!” I yelled.

He had on ear protectors and couldn't hear me. I stood outside the perimeter fence, jumping and waving like a windmill, until he caught sight of me. He pulled a lever, and the Machine coughed to a halt. Then he jumped down and trotted over, his face set and his body rigid.

My thoughts were some variant of, I'm in the shit.

But as he approached the chain-link fence, he broke a bright smile.

"How'd ya know it was me?"

"Because of the red," I answered, knowing that was what he wanted to hear.

"You don't see many red ones, do ya?" he laughed.

My father was a beacon of pride, and I picked up on it like a human antenna.

Sudden tears burned my eyes.

I don't know if he saw.

"Tell Ma I'll be late for supper," he said as he trotted away.

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My tears that day were the same tears I would later shed almost every time I gazed at the tacked-up list of songbirds. Songbirds—feather soft, light in the bones, little more than flowers with wings—are everything that heavy equipment is not. A backhoe or an excavator or a crane is as near as human beings can get to dinosaur-power, monsters that bite into rock and soil that shovels and pickaxes can merely dent. Passersby see only dust-covered boots and hard hats, if they stop long enough to notice the operators. But the work of the people in those hats and boots is sacred: they build the world in which we live. I have often thought, as I've observed the operators of excavators as tall as a house or of cranes pivoting several hundred feet up, that there is something divine in their harnessing such might. The crane operator sees the horizon in every direction as well as the human activity below; the operator of a three-story excavator thrills to a power that we can only imagine.

Such persons share an enviable seat, one with a view on both the puniness and grandeur of humanity. I would come to see them as modern-day pyramid builders, exercising dominion over the earth and pointing the way to the stars.

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But human or godlike, their work is also strenuous, exhausting, and costly. There is constant noise, not insignificant risk, and exposure to heat, cold, and precipitation. The work stops only when the ground is frozen, and forges furiously ahead in the fiercest heat. The operating engineers—as construction workers are called—are baked, frozen, sweated, and soaked. Their eyes are pinked by dust and red rimmed by goggles; their skin is often leather.

My father endured probably one serious work-related mishap a year. He dislocated his ankle jumping from a tire the height of a man, twice. He operated a crane on an old pier and had to be rescued when the pilings began to sink the Machine, with him in it, into Boston Harbor. Falling cement chunks pelted the Machine in the same Central Artery tunnel from which ceiling bricks eventually fell and killed a woman driver. He got stuck out in the famous 1978 blizzard when state troopers commandeered his backhoe to dig out cars on the highway. He didn't come home for three days, sleeping in the unheated cab of the Machine in the middle of winter.

If there were one feature that attested to the work I did not witness until I was a teenager, it was his hands, perennially cracked, grime etching every crevice, as if he could never get them entirely clean. I was drawn to those hands, strong and square and capable, at the same time that I feared them. They wielded a hammer or paintbrush with the same skill they applied to the levers of the Machine. But they also inflicted the sting of anger and the grip of rage. In my earliest memories, my father was a man who could hurt me, whose temper burned in the coal of his eyes, and whose power exploded in those hands.

At the end of the day he would hop from his truck, the laces of his boots already loosened, shed them in the basement workroom, and sack out on an armchair before and after dinner. If my sisters and I squabbled, or someone had gotten in trouble earlier in the day, I—the eldest—would “catch hell.” Sometimes I was so terrified by the anticipation of the strapping that awaited me that I was unable to eat my dinner. If I tried to run away, he chased me, usually into a corner where I reflexively peed my pants. “I promise I’ll be good, please don’t hit me,” I would beg, but it never worked. Down came a meaty backhand or the grip that left marks where he held and shook me.

Sometimes the hands snapped a leather belt that bit at my legs.

Worst of all, I was expected not to cry.

“Don’t you dare cry, mister,” he would shout, “or you’ll get it again!”

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The tears for the list of birds are not the same as those shed for my school-aged self, a little girl who believed her own iniquity was as fixed as freckles or eye color. I did not know then what I would later learn, and I could not say what I would have said if I had. It wouldn’t have been “I promise I’ll be good.”

It would have been, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

I could not have understood that a list of common songbirds, noted as if they were rare and treasured sightings, told as much or more about my father as the rage that seemed to fill every room he entered for decades.

My own life would have been entirely different had I known that rage is often evidence not of indignation at wrongdoing, but of vulnerability. I think of the bird carcasses left in my yard by my predatory cat; the bones are translucent and hollow, the porcelain-like chassis for a winged vessel of song. Birds, especially the small ones—the chickadees, juncos, nuthatches, and sparrows—are like a kiss in flight.

Long after I left college, I would have a son, and he and I would play a game. He would kiss his fat toddler hand and blow the kiss to me, and I would catch it. Then I would send one back. I like to think that, standing by the window and putting the names of those birds to paper, my father was doing something similar—taking for himself what he needed and longed for, but would not reveal to me until he was an old man. Even then, the wound was so raw, the words came out like hard pits of fruit that attested to his once, too long ago, having tasted something sweet.

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He was seventeen years old when he left Nova Scotia; this I knew. As a child, I often took the ferry across the Bay of Fundy to spend a few weeks of summer with my grandmother. I slept in my father's old bedroom on the second floor of a tiny cottage overlooking a bluff and, farther below, a picturesque fishing village. Afternoons I would stand on a stool and look through a kitchen telescope, as my father had, to scan the horizon for my grandfather's lobster boat, and evenings, I would listen to the clack of my grandmother's knitting needles and the sigh of my great-grandmother, who sat like a plump hen in her corner chair and pieced together fabric scraps for quilts like the one I slept under at night. I ate homemade brown bread and preserves, and dried pollock from Grampy Vic's line in the basement, and loads of fish chowder. I picked strawberries for jam and watched my grandmother hand-knead bread dough, enough for four loaves, more quickly and cleanly than the messes I would later make with a stand-mixer. I saw her carry and hang heavy wet laundry and observed the steady stream of fishermen's wives and kids who wandered through her kitchen, as they did all the kitchens of the other village cottages.

It was a very different life from the one in suburban Boston, and if truth be told, at the time I didn't very much like it. The salty fish wasn't anything like the Sicilian peasant food I had grown up on, and I detested having to use the outhouse. The fisherman's wharf was postcard perfect, but it smelled of brine and chum and gasoline. Life was smellier and grittier in Nova Scotia, even if the sky seemed brighter and the ocean, blindingly white.

But those are the same things I would grow to love as an adult. At the age of thirty-three, during what would be my last visit before my grandmother's death, I asked to see photographs of my father as a child. Grampy Vic—her second husband, and not the man

who raised my father—had long since died, as had her third husband. But much of the early family history remained sketchy. I knew only that my grandmother had remarried within six months of her first husband's death. Right around the same time, my father quit high school, opted not to be a fisherman, and emigrated to the United States, where he got a job at a printing press.

Despite sleeping in his bedroom and wandering his village, I encountered scant evidence of my father's childhood, and had seen only one photograph from his boyhood: a wall hanging of a knicker-clad kid with a cowlick and a few missing teeth, his shoes polished and knee socks pulled high. It was easy to believe he was my father. The boy in the photograph looked just like me.

The day before I left, I sat on the floor with a leather-bound album, shards of brown glue collecting in the cracks as I flipped the black pages. I had crawled into the eaves to dig it out from among the boxes of quilts and Christmas decorations. I knew as soon as I saw the round baby sitting on a porch, reaching for a kitten with eager hands, that I was looking at a snapshot of my father. Sobs that I hadn't known were in me burst forth, followed by an almost tidal surge of love. "He was so tiny," I howled, and my grandmother chuckled with puzzlement.

"He was a very happy baby," she assured me, and looking at the photograph, I believed her. That was the day I caught an inkling of something that needed mourning. The bright giggling baby reaching for a kitten was the embodiment of joy, and the taciturn father who had chased me around the kitchen wielding a dust-broom, stick, or belt was an engine of misery.

What had happened in between? I yearned to know. But somehow, I knew to tread lightly.

That same year, my grandmother sent along copies of photographs in the Christmas boxes she packed with hand-knit socks and slippers. When I handed my father a print of the knicker-clad boy, a dreamy quality came over his face.

"I remember the day they took this," he said, softly laughing. "I was scratching like crazy. My long johns were wool. Everything Nan made for me was wool, and I can't stand the feel of it next to my skin."

I felt a surge of warmth. A shared allergy to wool wasn't the stuff of legacy-building, but it was a beginning.

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I went to college halfway across the country, followed by graduate school and a ten-year stint in Washington, DC. One decade turned into two, and the jet fuel of anger that pro-

pelled me away spent itself, leaving the ashy gray of longing. In my mid-thirties, I returned to my birthplace where in short order I married, had a baby, got divorced, and got a second graduate degree. On lonely nights, I wended my way to the High Street house with the excuse that my young son missed his “Papa.” My little boy did indeed love his grandfather, whom he called a “digger-man.” Together they read books and assembled puzzles about diggers, and rolled miniature trucks and backhoes around the kitchen floor. Their other favorite activity was lining up my son’s rubberized animals—dozens of miniatures that fit a child’s hand—and naming them, one by one. Some he had seen at the zoo: chimpanzees, zebras, and elephants. But many were prehistoric: tyrannosaurus rex, parasaurolophus, and triceratops. My son was a typical kid in his love for dinosaurs, perhaps less so in his ability at the tender age of two and half to pronounce the alphabet soup of their names perfectly.

Each time he did, my father looked at me wide-eyed and gave a low whistle.

“This kid’s a genius,” he would say. “He’ll probably be a doctor someday.”

Watching my boy’s eyes light up as they turned the pages of a favorite book, my father smiled with something akin to reverence.

“Look at his eyes,” I remember him saying. “They sparkle just like diamonds.”

That was why—the dark memories of thrown dishes and burning rage notwithstanding—I returned to the High Street house again and again. I went toward what I needed, even if it wasn’t being given for me.

It was his tenderness toward my son that emboldened me to ask what it was like to lose a father. The answer he gave was both blunt and anguished, and entirely unexpected.

“What was it like?” he asked, his eyes looking far away. “It was the worst day of my life—I lost my best friend. It was a shock to my system. I cried for three days.”

Had my father been to therapy, as I had, he might have announced, *I am a survivor of childhood trauma*. He might have disclosed the entire story: that his adored father Doug, who had long suffered from the lung damage wrought by tuberculosis, died suddenly in his early forties from a horrific winter bout of pneumonia.

He might have described how my grandmother loaded her husband into the car that would disappear into the 1954 rural dirt-road night, and how he—just past sixteen—begged to be allowed to go along. He might have teared up when he recounted his mother making him stay behind, and he might have broken down telling how his frail and feverish father hadn’t survived to the next morning. He would likely have sobbed with regret that he never had the chance to say goodbye.

But he said none of these things, only that he had endured a shock to the system, one that left him crying for three straight days.

I had never seen my father even tear up.

Had he felt more trusting, he might have opened up further and let me hold him as he shared having found out at the age of twelve that he had been given at birth to his mother's sister, and that Doug was not his biological father. He might have described what he learned as yet another trauma, his having secretly overheard that he was, inexplicably, unwanted by his birth mother. He might have relayed fear about leaving behind a rural fishing village with its one-room schoolhouse, button-sized store, and two churches—blink, and you miss it, I often joked—and his two best friends from childhood, and ending up in a gritty northeastern factory, staring out at asphalt instead of shoreline and trucks instead of lobster boats. He might have shared a longing for comfort and the elation he felt meeting my dark-haired Sicilian mother, exotic by Nova Scotia standards. He might have even disclosed how they had to get married when she became pregnant, and how he had to take a second job greasing garbage trucks at night just to make ends meet.

He might have, he might have, he might have. But he didn't, and I burned to know. I would learn the story in bits and pieces over many years, in equal parts by asking questions and looking up records. He had tried to get his high school diploma by taking night classes, but he had dropped out, too tired in the evening to stay awake and study. By then he had three young children. When the fourth arrived, our family moved to the four-bedroom High Street house. For years my father hammered and sawed and painted, transforming the spacious but run-down house into a place of classic beauty.

That's when he strung the bird feeders, filling them nights after work. He was feeding the birds the evening of the chest pain that he'd ignored for weeks because construction work is seasonal and he'd worried that if he were out sick there would be no income. I had been called home from college for his first open-heart surgery and, standing in the intensive care unit over a once-frightening form now stilled by anesthesia, I had floated a silent request.

"Please don't die before I have the chance to know you."

His brush with death prompted me to dig more deeply into the details of his life, hoping to find in them a tidy explanation for his rage. His aggression. Why he seemed to be sleepwalking when he came after me, neither hearing nor seeing the kid—a freckle-faced little girl who was almost his double; why he never allowed himself to cry.

"Don't you dare cry, mister, or you'll catch it again."

In the course of twenty-five years, beginning with that last visit to my grandmother, I would not only uncover the story of his childhood, I would also learn the identity of his birth family, discover my own dual Canadian citizenship, and manage to unseal his adop-

tion file—no small feat for a baby born in rural Nova Scotia in 1937. He didn't even have a birth certificate. The project would involve researching family history, tracking down death certificates, paying for replacement birth certificates, and even traveling to Nova Scotia to talk to extended family members, a multipronged effort that seemed—right up until nearly the end—to lead only to dead ends.

But the frustrating search served another purpose as well. It was like a rope that pulled me out of a dark hole and closer to the light. And the closer I became, the less willing I was to hold on to old resentments that had kept me at a self-protective distance for that same twenty-five years. The cost had come in Christmases and other holidays spent alone, birthdays unobserved, achievements uncelebrated, and a grievous sense of “unbelongingness” that began to outweigh the old emotional armor.

In the spring of 2019, I was out for a walk when my cell phone rang. I was coming out of a string of my own losses—most notably, the cancer death of my beloved husband only five months after I married him, three years before. My father had instantly loved the man too; the death shook him. He'd taken to wearing one of my husband's caps nearly all the time, a gesture that touched me in my own grief.

“There's a big envelope here from Nova Scotia,” my father said. “It looks official.”

“Did you open it?”

“No—I was waiting for you.”

The next morning, I was behind his door by nine o'clock. Together we opened the oversized envelope and spread the contents across the kitchen table. Inside were copies of affidavits and his adoption certificate, along with documentation of his family history. The name of his biological father, whose identity I had long ago confirmed, had been redacted per the family's wishes. But the most compelling line was in the social worker's notes, a sentence not about his biological parents, but about Doug—the man who raised my father. “One helluva nice guy,” my father had always said of the fisherman who played the bones in an old-time band and bought his son chickens and ducks and rabbits to raise, and a white half-chow named Snooks.

The child seemed very much devoted to the father and followed him around a great deal.

“Listen to this, Dad.” I read the line out loud.

“I did follow him around,” my father replied, leaning in close, his blue eyes liquid with light. “My mother would look out the window—remember that telescope over the sink? She would look for my father's boat coming in and I would run to meet him. And—”

I instantly sobbed, and so did my father. I reached for his arm and held on tight.

I understood. Once, years before, I had run to my own father, and jumped up and down on the other side of a chain-link fence. He had longed for his father, just as I had longed for mine.

"It still bothers me," he said afterward, "that I never got to say goodbye."

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By the time my father learned his adoption story, I was fifty-seven years old, and he was eighty-one. He was in failing health, having undergone three open-heart surgeries and developed congestive heart failure. The surgeries left him with vascular dementia which made him hazy and sometimes anxious. But as he approached his own inevitable mortality, I observed an emergent clarity, honesty, and welcome tenderness.

One weekend, a precipitous drop in his blood pressure landed him in the hospital. He was alone when I visited. Seeing me, he teared up; thinking he was hungry, I called the kitchen to order food.

"That's not it," he said. "There's something I need to say to you."

He worked his mouth, trying not to cry.

"I know I was hard on you when you were growing up," he said slowly, "and I am sorry."

I had waited fifty-seven years to hear those words.

"It's enough, Dad." I laid a hand on his leg. "It's the past. I love you."

I didn't say, I would do anything to take away your grief, but I thought it.

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A child without a parent experiences a singular suffering. She dons emotional armor to protect her from a rough world. But armor is heavy, and it hurts, a constant reminder of the vulnerability she would rather forget.

I wish it hadn't taken fifty-seven years to understand my father. His days are numbered. One weekend during the spring of his eighty-second year, I met him and my mother at a historic garden where we strolled among rows of irises, peonies, and roses. I watched his old-man hands, thin skinned and purpled, gently cup a blousy hot-pink blossom as he exclaimed, "Have you ever seen a color like that?" Then we stood on a veranda and watched birds flitting in the fruit trees, and he chuckled at the rabbit that had somehow managed to find its way into a gated patch with rows of delectable beans.

"Can you smell that?" he asked about the lilac bushes, and "Did you hear that?" of a redwing blackbird's familiar song, as if he had never heard anything so lovely.

Pure beauty—scents and sounds and sensations: this was now the stuff of my father's life. What had seemed an occasional oddity was in fact his essential feature. Gone were the days of pounding the earth, and gone were the times he pounded on me.

Gone, too, the armor.

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I finally typed a key code to the now nearly illegible list pinned over my desk. The list is fading, much like the life of the man who drew it up. I can't look at the list for too long; it hurts. Instead, I stand to gaze out my window at the rising skyline of Boston, dotted with the magnificent cranes that defy mediocrity. That's when I finally understand that list of birds—not only why he wrote it, but why I kept it. Before my son, before the birth story, before the simple but clear-eyed expression of remorse, that list offered a glimpse of one boy's hidden and protected heart.

Small, delicate, and chirping as he fed them, songbirds were the children he could love without words.