

# Erik Gleibermann

## Smoothing the Serpent's Tooth

*What wound did heal but ever by degrees?*  
—Iago in William Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act II, scene iii

One day in the last few weeks of his life, when he was having frequent coughing spasms, my father and I explicated Shakespeare's Sonnet 71. We had originally set out to read *King Lear*, his favorite play in the Shakespeare canon (he had read nearly all of them), but now the aggressive radiation seemed to be working only marginally, its effect outstripped by the destructive power of the spreading lung cancer, and a complete play seemed too demanding. He could, however, take poetic language fourteen lines at a time.

I had come upon Sonnet 71, drawn to its focus on death ("Then you shall hear the surly sullen bell") and was wondering how it might refract my father's current experience. But not knowing what inner turmoil he was in, I only hesitantly suggested the poem. His response was clear: "Death? Bring it on." And so, sitting in my parents' living room we read, silently, preparing as though for a college English class. He then cleared his throat and read out the poem in a voice stronger than he had demonstrated during the first two days of my visit. He took on a scholarly mantle and posed to me professorial questions. What was the central line of the poem and where was the poem's turning point? Did the opening image work against the texture of the remaining lines? In my lap lay a heavily taped Shakespeare anthology he had bought as an undergraduate. During these recent months of illness he reluctantly bequeathed it to me, reluctantly because even facing death it was difficult for him to let go of material treasures. It was inscribed with the elegant but almost unreadable tiny earnest script of his undergraduate notes. In the margin of the text next to the first lines of Sonnet 71 he had written, "same theme with modifications." Was this his own insight or the note of a dutiful student taken during a lecture? His 1410-page anthology was filled with marginal notes.

We concluded that the thrust of the poem was an affirmation, that if you cling to someone's memory in a morbid way you deny the life they had lived. When it seemed our analysis of Sonnet 71 was complete, he asked a surprising question. Did I enjoy it? He never would have asked the question four months before, pre-cancer. He had softened.

My father had always been intellectually arrogant, a harsh self-righteous lecturer about the dark Macbethian intentions of men. He was a moral pontificator, and did not spare my two brothers and me from the age of five. When in first grade I brought the half dozen packages of bubble gum a friend had convinced me to buy, my father laid into me with a diatribe about the dangers of hucksters, a word I remember him using, but probably wouldn't learn for another six years. He described a dark exploitative humanity, of people always out to take advantage of you and your money. As I grew through my grade school years, he continued to lecture on how I must confront a violent world and might need to be violent myself to make it through. He was an emergency room doctor and on occasion proudly described subduing an hysterical patient with physical force or kicking a writhing hallucinating drug addict in the head. "Erik," he once said to me like a mean Polonius guiding his child, "you have to learn to step on people." In his lectures he always made his superiority clear. When my intellect began emerging in high school, he displayed his scholarly acumen, disparaging my fledging literary and historical skills, challenging me to explain Sophocles and Byron, quizzing me on ancient European political history and the Victorian novel. What characterized the relationship between gods and men in *The Iliad*? What was the substance of the orphan theme in Dickens' novels? How did the nobles put a check on monarchical power in pre-modern England?

My father began accumulating what he regarded as a professorial-level understanding of the humanities as an undergraduate English major at the Bronx campus of New York University. He rode the A train every day from his parents' home in Brooklyn, studying literature during the ride. In his sophomore year he took the Shakespeare course that opened a door to what he was told was the height of the English language in plays that portrayed the full range of the universal human struggle. He knew it would require toil to get through the course and he dedicated himself to the task. He bought his hardbound Shakespeare anthology that he filled line by line with meticulous interpretive notes. Some appeared to be direct commentaries his professor gave in class, as they seemed too sophisticated for an untutored twenty-year-old. (On the title page of *Coriolanus* it reads, "Theme of the psychological dilemma created by a domineering mother who in order to find vicarious gratification of her own subconscious ambitions forces her son into a tragic choice.") Some were lines paraphrased into modern English. (In *Measure for Measure* next to where Elbow says, "His neck will come to your waist," my dad wrote, "He will be hanged.") Other notes were

brief definitions placed above words he didn't understand. (Where Prospero in *The Tempest* uses the word *discase*, my father wrote "undress.") Months after my father died I looked up notes he had written in response to certain famous lines. Aside Richard the Third's "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse," he wrote "anguish." Above Hamlet's suicidal soliloquy opening "To be or not to be," he wrote "done like a student's debate." These marginal notes seemed like a skeleton key of an undergraduate mind fervently seeking to develop literary comprehension.

If there was something a little feverish about his undergraduate encounter with Shakespeare, it was because he had more at stake than just mastering literature and earning recognition from his teacher. Shakespeare was a young man's most direct escape out of the modern Jewish ghetto. Both of Eli Gleibermann's parents immigrated to America from Eastern Europe in 1906. His mother, Molly, the more worldly of the two, arrived from Warsaw. His father, Chatzkell, who deserted the czar's army in the Russo-Japanese War, came from the Russian city of Pinsk. Molly worked as a milliner on New York's Lower East Side, earning enough money to go out on the town weekends and attend the opera. She always considered herself a woman of high culture. Chatzkell had learned the mason's trade back in the old country and went into business for himself as a plasterer. He partially blinded himself on a job one day when the lye-streaked plaster on a ceiling landed in his eye. Trying to make a gesture toward assimilation he took on the American name of Charlie, reputedly out in the street when he heard a driver call the lead horse of his carriage Charlie. It struck him as close enough to Chatzkell.

The two met when Chatzkell was renting a room in Molly's sister's house. Years later in 1930, when my father was born, my grandparents still spoke exclusively Yiddish at home. When he was growing up, as in many first generation/second generation households, the parents spoke in the native tongue and the child replied in English. My father understood Yiddish in his boyhood, but less and less as he moved toward adolescence, his lost knowledge an unconscious rejection of the language. By rejecting Yiddish he was not just establishing independence from his parents; he was renouncing all the oppressions imposed by the language. It was the language his father yelled in when beating my father with a leather strap. It was the language his mother used to tell him that if he didn't eat everything on his plate she would send him away. It was the language with which his parents sent him off to yeshiva each morning, a school none of his friends in the neighborhood had to attend. Yiddish scared him. Would it keep him

from being a success? He watched his father lose his business during the Depression, never recover, and just sit in his chair at home with his hands turned up, mumbling in sounds that echoed from the back streets of Pinsk.

At age nineteen and still living at home, my father decided to be an English literature major and seize the ticket out of this confining childhood. He couldn't afford to rent his own apartment, but he could afford a copy of *Great Expectations*. He couldn't make his parents negotiate payment of his tuition in English, but he could read a slim volume of Shelley. And he could translate the world into iambic pentameter. He decided he would keep his Shakespeare anthology forever. He kept it close at hand for the next few years even after abandoning his plans for English graduate study and going to medical school. Why did he forsake English grad school when literature was his love? Fear. Fear of poverty. Maybe there wouldn't be a professorship or teaching job on the other side. Maybe he would end up like his father, unemployed and blind in one eye. Medicine seemed secure even if he had to go back and take the pre-med courses he didn't take as an English literature major.

He became a worldly success, a doctor in a Michigan college town, married with three sons. But he was plagued with self-doubt, the legacy of childhood abuse and pain at the hands of his parents. He was prone to devastating depressions and overwhelming feelings of isolation. He had few friends and didn't seek them out. And from the earliest years of his marriage he felt estranged from my mother. His children did not offer him an alternative love, for he had little idea how to relate to them from the time they were infants.

You can't talk to young children with the language of an adult. You can't deliver speeches. And you can't teach them using the lessons of literature. The currency of childhood is play, and my father did not know how to play. He knew how to talk. He liked to talk and sometimes even Shakespeare would spill from his lips. In kindergarten I made my first friend who lived in an apartment complex at the far end of our neighborhood. I was five and couldn't go there on my own, so my father agreed to take me. There was a street number and an apartment number, which I didn't get quite right. When we arrived nearby and I looked around confused, my father announced, "You've taken me on a wild goose chase." I knew from his chastising voice that he was angry and that I had done something wrong, but couldn't reconcile it with the image in my mind's eye of a giant goose squawking along a riverbank with my father crashing through a thicket to catch it. This moment of shame was my unbeknownst introduction to

Shakespeare. In *Romeo and Juliet* Mercutio calls Romeo's raging imagination and inclination for far-flung quests a wild goose chase and tells him "thou hast more of the wild goose in one of thy wits than, I am sure, I have in my whole five."

Several years later I stole one of his Hershey bars from the back of the refrigerator and when he confronted me with the misdeed I swore I was not the culprit. He declared, quoting Queen Gertrude, "Methinks the lady doth protest too much." I thought maybe he was trying to shame me by calling me a girl. But to my credit I otherwise understood the line. By age eight I was starting to fathom the syntax of an Elizabethan phrase.

From my early grade school years through high school he would occasionally declare a Shakespeare line or probe me to see if I had finally read any Shakespearian drama, but we rarely talked of Shakespeare again in my years before college. When I did read Shakespeare in high school, I kept my study of *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, and *Twelfth Night* secret. When I had graduated and moved out of my parents' house to college and then San Francisco, my father and I almost never talked of literature at all, although he knew I was taking English classes in college. The silence reflected our estranged relationship. Leaving home I became untethered from his grip and gained perspective on his history of what I felt was intolerable arrogance, judgmentalness, and neglectful parenting. In my youth he had somehow come to believe that pronouncements qualified as guidance and that providing financially as a workaholic doctor substituted for spending time with a son. Long after I had left home I could still hear the echo of his voice yelling. Consumed by the supremacy of his own voice he never seemed to hear mine, confirming Queen Margaret's statement in *Henry VI*, Part 3, that "wrath makes him deaf."

The day I left Ann Arbor at age twenty-two for San Francisco, he drove me to the airport and halfway there asked me a question. "Have you ever heard of the San Francisco syndrome?" No I hadn't. "The San Francisco syndrome is when someone moves out to San Francisco searching for a new life. They seek, they strive, they struggle. And then they leave, go back where they came from, and commit suicide." I couldn't believe the sadism and I couldn't reply without entering his dark territory. I was too sick to try.

It was only after another ten years that I could decode his seeming taunt. My ability to see beyond the surface of his viciousness was a product of struggling through my twenties and thirties to deepen my understanding of him, to see a wounded heart, a humanity, even a love, beyond the bluster and scorn of my childhood. In invoking the San Francisco syndrome he

was telling me “I’m scared about your moving away. I’ve heard stories. I don’t want anything to happen to you.” He probably wasn’t even aware of his own buried feelings for me. How, I thought, was it possible for love to masquerade as cruelty? That was the paradox of my childhood. While Shakespeare was a master at portraying the contradictions of the human condition, there is nothing in his thirty-seven plays that can explain the relationship between me and my father.

Perhaps on his own, perhaps partly in response to my emerging empathy for him, in my twenties and thirties (his fifties and sixties) my father began to reflect. It was sometimes painful for him. It came with guilt about his past fathering. I had seen traces of this reflection even in childhood when he would sit next to me and tell me sadly about his own father. “I never knew him,” he said. “He was just this broken guy who sat there speaking to me in his limited English.” This again was code. He was telling me, “The pain my father inflicted on me for not being able to parent me I am passing on to you. I’m sorry but I can’t help it.” In his voice I heard the guilt, but as a child I could only conceive that somehow I had done something wrong. Like his father before, my father tried only through words. He didn’t act.

One day when he was almost sixty I got a phone call from him. He told me my mother had left him. Actually, she had only moved out of the bedroom, but the threat of losing her was enough to trigger a cascade of buried feelings and, a few minutes after he had told me about the apparently shattered marriage, he beseeched me to forgive him. “I have failed you as a father,” he said. “You have to forgive me. You have to.”

“Yes you have failed me,” I said. “But for the moment that’s the past. I want to help you now.” I later learned he had confessed to and asked for the same forgiveness of my two brothers. “Dad, you know I can’t forgive you suddenly as though some words could make right all the years. But maybe we can work for it.” I think his greatest fear, having just been rejected by my mother, was that his sons would forsake him too. I had virtually forsaken him for at least ten years, not in my external relationship with him, but inwardly.

Over the next several years, by the time I was in my late thirties, as the diligent work of building connection took deeper root, we slowly became lighter and we began to do something he had deprived me of in my boyhood. We began to play, still mostly with words. When after he retired he went back to school at the University of Michigan to pursue a dream of becoming a humanities scholar again, I could easily have dismissed his

project as inflated, as I certainly would have in the past. At the university he audited as many as six courses at a time: literature of the Moghul Empire, the mythology of *Finnegan's Wake*, Literature and Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Russia. (He wouldn't touch Shakespeare, though. He already considered himself an authority.) He fancied himself a virtual professor and enjoyed displaying his obscure knowledge to whatever audience he could find. But I could see his genuine love of learning and the young man inside him who was reaching past Brooklyn, carrying the hope that through study he might lift himself beyond his uneducated parents to a higher, freer place. In our phone conversations I began to rib him about his studies, ask him if he'd met any nice college girls, and joust with him as best I could, about Aristotle and the Spanish romance, letting him basically school me and indulging his teacherly self-image.

By the time I was forty I would even say we became buddies. Several years after we first began talking about his university work, we traveled to England for a week-long road trip. In the English countryside we gunned the car down roads like teenagers, admired Tintern Abbey, ate bad fish and chips, argued about his grizzly-like snoring, talked about sex, and revealed private truths. He told me when he first met my mom she was a cherub. I told him I was the one who kept stealing the Hershey bars. He asked me which of my girlfriends was the best in bed. I recalled the pain of his never coming to my Little League games.

Our boyish bond was solid, but a traveling companionship was challenging too and it forced us to dig down a little deeper to stay friends. Spending twenty-four hours a day with me, the dormant aspects of his old arrogant, pontificating, angry self re-emerged. He quizzed me like I was a schoolboy about the architectural features of the country's various cathedrals. When circumstances touched his longstanding money fears he often erupted with anger. It was a deep anger borne of a deep fear from his boyhood back in Brooklyn when his father permanently lost his business and my father couldn't afford to move out of his parents' house in college. It was fear transmuted into anger. When he saw me leave a tip in an Oxford pub he blew up in my face (one doesn't tip bartenders in England), and he vented disdain when I pressed him to stay in a decent bed and breakfast instead of a youth hostel. Because the price was right he didn't care that youth probably did not include someone seventy-five and that the place had a shared bathroom that would be two floors below our bedroom. "I'm not walking down two flights to use the can," he said. "I'll just piss in the sink." Despite priding himself on knowing the Shakespeare canon and the

nineteenth-century British novel, he also relished a crude element to his arrogance. Knowing before we left for the trip that he would at times be irate and even wrathful, I made him sign a magna carta written in Middle English, stipulating that whenever he directed his anger at me we would have to stay overnight in an expensive hotel.

But the moments of conflict were brief punctuations of an otherwise genial companionship. Just before Father's Day, a few days before we were to arrive in Stratford, we were sitting at lunch and I gave him a folded paper napkin. "Open it," I said. "It's for Father's Day." Inside I had penciled in two possible gifts. The first was a British-style cane with a mallard's head handle. He had admired one back in Oxford. It was a practical gift for walking the streets of various English towns. He had begun to have trouble walking without getting out of breath. The other gift was a ticket to an unspecified Shakespeare play in Stratford. He would get to choose. Selecting the play from among the three offered proved difficult. He had standards for a production and not just any play would do. He rejected *Antony and Cleopatra*. It was too hard to stage. *As You Like It* didn't have enough heft. The third play was *Titus Andronicus*, often considered the worst of the thirty-seven, and one whose author may not even have been Shakespeare. "But that is real drama," he said. I knew the play and it was basically an Elizabethan slasher film, a sanguinary tale with over ten murders. And it didn't escape me that Titus kills his son in the opening scene. But it was Father's Day so I deferred.

On the way to the playhouse we crossed the Avon River. Halfway across he had to stop and catch his breath. He stood slightly hunched over and put his arms on the railing, looking out over the river. It seemed a moment when he might speak something Shakespearian, but all he said was, "I am one tired old hound." I could feel the weight of his breath and a bodily gesture of submission. I saw his death for the first time.

Less than two years later he had developed lung cancer, a cancer that would kill him in only two months from his diagnosis. It was with what turned out to be ten days left in his life, when he didn't have the energy to read *King Lear*, that he was still talking about making one last trip to San Francisco and walking the Golden Gate Bridge. His former arrogance, it seemed, had been transformed into a determined resistance to the universe. I didn't think he'd make it that far.

One reason he proposed our reading Shakespeare in those days of decline was that he knew I was about to travel to the Ashland, Oregon Shakespeare festival to write a travel article for *The Boston Globe*. A couple

of days after our sonnet session when I had returned to San Francisco, his decline accelerated and it became clear that he could die within days. They had found two metastasized brain lesions. I told him I was coming home. But he said no. He was resolute. Go to Ashland, he said. Write the article. It will be a great article.

So I went. And I didn't go heavy. I went with the spirit he had invested in the Shakespeare anthology he had pored through as a wide-eyed undergraduate. I had brought the anthology with me to look over the texts of *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*. I would be sure to check my father's marginal notes too. I lay on my bed in the Olivia bedroom at the Midsummer Night's Bed and Breakfast. They had offered me the Desdemona suite but I declined after considering the fate Desdemona had come to in her boudoir. They also offered me the Juliet suite with its own balcony, but in the moment it seemed too luxurious. So in the Olivia room I sat doing the groundwork to write the mini-reviews that would be embedded in the larger Ashland story. Saturday was a matinee of *The Merchant of Venice*. We had rented a DVD of the film version with Al Pacino several years before. He had made two comments about it. One was that it was a travesty the filmmakers cut material from the text. The other was that Pacino was "the best Jew the Italians ever had." After the Ashland play I walked outside the theater and got on the phone to check on Dad.

"Hey Dad."

"Hey Erik. Is that you? Where are you?" He sounded woozy, but lucid.

"Outside the theater. I just saw *The Merchant of Venice*. Tomorrow is *Othello*."

"Oh *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock. How did they play him? He's not detestable, you know. He's a bleeding man. It's how they treated him that made him bad."

"Ya Dad, I've always been sympathetic to him. The 'Hath a Jew not eyes' speech outweighs the pound of flesh. But Dad, forget the plays. How are you?"

"No, no, you get ready for—which play is it? Oh, right, *Othello*."

"But Dad, tell me what it's like today?"

"Well, you know, it's like I'm standing in the rain. Everyone tells you it's a beautiful day and you go outside and it's pouring. The rain is pouring and the door is locked."

"Dad, can't I stand with you in the rain?"

"No. You go write. I'm tired, tired." He was dreamy, as though talking from a faraway place. I knew I likely wouldn't see him again.

Days before, when he decided that he didn't have the energy to read *King Lear*, he revealed that the play contained his favorite line in all of Shakespeare. It's in Act I, scene iv, when Lear says of his betraying daughters, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child."

"That's a terrible thing for a parent to have to say," he told me. Why was this line his favorite? I think it expressed what in his experience was a great intergenerational universal, the deep wound of the father and the son. In claiming that line, he may have been thinking of his rejection of his father whose insular Jewish existence made my father run away for a wide open America well beyond Brooklyn. He may have been thinking too of his sons who he had so mistreated in their youth, who like him had to dispel his emotional ghosts in order to create fulfilling lives. But while that line in *King Lear* remained his favorite through the years, it no longer defined him. We had repaired what he had never repaired with his own father. While at the end of his days he was still susceptible to delivering bombastic lectures and academic quizzes, we had fully overcome something dark. We could sit quietly, not driven by words.