

LET HER IN

by

Karl Meade

Like most of us, my dad is an onion. Layered, pungent, complex, and often with a bite to him. But beneath that tough skin, beneath that Halifax-shipyard upbringing, his thirty-two-year Air-Force-Major demeanor, and his my-dad-kicked-me-out-at-seventeen-so-don't-give-me-that-crap motto, you'll find a Tibetan monk. You just have to peel a few layers to get there.

The first time I saw him play hockey he got in a fight. This was 1973, on the Rockcliffe base in Ottawa. I was ten. It was the gentlemen's non-contact league: officers versus the sergeants. My dad had just been promoted to officer, so to the sergeants he was a deserter. Every time he touched the puck a sergeant hit him. He took on three of them in the corner, got kicked out, then broke his knuckle on a sergeant's forehead outside the dressing rooms. Even from the stands, I heard the sergeant's plea: "Jesus, Ray, calm down!"

Later, at home, my mom was unimpressed by the fight, my dad unimpressed by the sergeant. "He *ducked*," my dad said, proffering his swollen hand. 'Can you believe it? A sergeant, *ducking*?' This didn't help. My mom had been a sergeant when they'd met, my dad a mere corporal. She out-ranked him, quietly, for the rest of her life. The next day he bought her a Doctor Hook album.

The first time I heard him say the f-word was when I shot him in the ass with a shotgun. This was 1975, CFB Greenwood, Nova Scotia. I was twelve. His two younger brothers brought their hunting dogs up from Portuguese Cove, outside Halifax. We'd wait for the dogs to circle the rabbits back to us, my uncles bawling their down-home dog-calls—"get 'em oot! get 'em oot!" I was standing on a stump fondling a blackhead when a rabbit scampered into the clearing. I waited for it to move past my dad, then squeezed the 410's trigger. My dad's back arched, briefly, beautifully, like a Scorsese gangster with a Tommy gun, then he dropped to the snowy meadow like a duffel bag. He bounced back to his feet, pants around his ankles, bent over. His giant forefinger jabbed the red welt on his bare white ass. "You stupid fucker! You shot me in the arse!"

Later, at home, my mom was unimpressed by his theatrics: "It was just a ricochet, Ray." My uncles kept winking at me—they'd wanted to shoot him in the ass for thirty years—while my dad tried to recover, raving over mom's stew: "Jesus that's good, Lorna! Just beautiful!"

The second time I heard him say the f-word was when his prized Delta 88 sprung a trunk leak, soaking my mom's hospital gowns. This was back in Ottawa, 1978. I was fifteen. He figured if I closed him in the trunk with a Polyfilla gun, he could seal out the water by sealing out the light. I'd just smoked a joint, and couldn't shake the thought of my mom's leftover chicken and fresh-baked rolls in the kitchen. An hour later the phone rang—my mom asking why dad hadn't picked her up yet. When I opened the trunk, two raging eyes rose up at me, his massive hand shaking the Polyfilla gun like a weapon. His voice spluttered: "Here I am in the fucking trunk... sealing all the fucking *air holes*...!"

"Mom needs a ride," I mumbled, backing away, my mouth full of chicken.

"I'll give you a ride!"

The first time I saw him cry was when I washed the kitchen floor: May 26, 1980. I was seventeen. I was on my hands and knees, bucket beside me, rag in hand, the counters piled with plates and cups and glasses, and duct-taped pots and pans—I'd washed out the cupboards too. The place reeked of vinegar. My dad appeared in the kitchen doorway, shirtless, in baggy-white boxers from 1949. His eyes wide, watery and red. He stared at me like he'd been stabbed.

“What are you doing?” he said.

It was the morning after my mom died. In the past eighteen months we'd gone from idyllic life in down-home Nova Scotia to estranged life in big-city Ottawa, learning the new words: lymphoma, cobalt, chemo. I'd gone from straight-A hockey-star to truant pot-smoking house-leaguer. My dad had gone from soulmate-married Air Force Major, to widower. To one word, in one night.

I splayed my hands out. “I'm washing the kitchen floor. They're all coming, aren't they?”

He looked around the kitchen, looked at me, and nodded. Then he walked down the hall, closed his door, and resumed his calls across the country: my mom's family on the west coast, his family on the east coast, the air force bases in between, scattered with lifelong friends.

Three days later the house was full of aunts, uncles, and cousins from both coasts. I tried to play the good son, the strong one, but at the funeral parlour I touched my mom's stiff face, then wiped my eyes, angrily. My dad put his hand on my shoulder. “It's okay to cry,” he said.

Our neighbours approached, hands clasped in front of them like ushers: “We're sorry for your loss.” After they walked away I muttered something bitter about “Hallmark Card remarks.” My dad looked at me. “No one knows what to say, Karl. They came out of respect.”

Within a week it was just the two of us living as bachelors: at forty-eight and seventeen. I'd like to say we fell into a rhythm of two orbiting spheres of mutual sympathy and quiet weeping, but after the funeral I swallowed it whole. I threw myself into parties and beer and pot, stumbling home and scribbling nonsense to my mom at 2 a.m..

I came home early one Friday afternoon, playing hooky, to find my dad sitting in full uniform at our dining room table drinking a Black Label, eating fried eggs and baloney—"Cape Breton steak, Karl! Just beautiful!" He handed me a stubbie and we sat at the table telling stories. When he said he dreamed about her every night, his throat welled up with a great, primal sob. I walked around the table and put my arm around his hunched shoulders. He shook me away with a proud, angry wave of his arm.

I walked down the hall, shut the door, and sat on the closed toilet seat. I could feel her slipping away, but I would not cry. When I came out he was lying on the couch, smoking, blinking at the ceiling, listening to Doctor Hook.

The next day I gave up pot, not just because it washed me out in a haze of paranoia, but because it reminded me of coming home one afternoon a year earlier to its sweet aroma in our living room: my two older brothers, home for a visit, smoking a joint on that same couch with my mom. She'd just come home from chemo, wearing her stylish handkerchief-hat, as she called it. She smiled at me with her calm eyes, and then a forlorn look came over her and she scurried down the hall to throw up in the bathroom. Pot didn't work. Gravol didn't work. Chemo didn't work.

Now, in the fall after she'd gone, my dad had a new assignment that kept him on the road for weeks at a time. Before he left, he said: "Work hard, play hard. But not too hard." Suddenly I was the solo teenage bachelor: skipping school, playing hockey, drinking every night. Riding some wild animal inside, trying to hold on.

The first time he came home, unannounced, at midnight, he found the house overflowing with teenagers, his Sportspal canoe being "paddled" down the middle of the street by six beer-swilling *Voyageurs* singing *Frere Jacques*. He put his suitcase down and showed us the proper J-stroke paddling technique—"don't squeeze so hard, you gotta go with the flow, roll the wrists"—then challenged us to a nine-iron driving contest in our backyard, launching Starflights over the neighbours' houses into the stunning night sky: "Look-a-that! Beautiful!"

After that, my friends always asked: "How's Ray? You should bring Ray."

When the Vice Principal called to say I'd missed forty-three of the first sixty days of school, my dad said: "But he's on the honour roll, isn't he? Let him be." He hung up, then challenged me: "The truth." I told him I could do the whole day's work in an hour at home; on game days I'd sign in "late" at 2 p.m. so I could board the hockey team bus as being "present." He shook his head, then chuckled: "*Late?* At 1400 hours?"

The first time he tried to date was a year after she'd gone. "It's time," he said. "I know," I said. One Friday evening four friends and I gathered at our house to drink beer before going out to woo girls at the school dance. My dad and four of his widowed and divorced friends waltzed in from the Officers' Mess—they'd come to drink beer before wooing girls at a singles dance. There was a pause, as we eyed each other, until one of my friends strode forward: "Ray! How the hell are ya!"

The ten of us stood in the kitchen for six hours, drinking and “telling lies.” My dad’s boss, the big Colonel, put his hand on my shoulder and nodded toward my dad: “The man’s got guts.” Then he clinked my bottle and looked me in the eye: “Like father, like son?” I tried not to look away.

The next time I saw him cry was when he found my letters to my mom. A shoe-box full since she’d gone.

“I talk to her every day,” he said. He blinked and nodded at me. “Just go with it. Let it come.”

I nodded back, swallowed, but couldn’t let it come. I couldn’t cry on the anniversary of her death. I couldn’t cry when I left for university in the fall. I couldn’t cry when our seventeen-year-old dog died. I didn’t cry until fourteen years later, when my wife and I lost our son in a late miscarriage. I held his little body in my hands in that white hospital room, trying to hold on. Then I saw my mom and dad holding me for the first time in that military hospital in Baden-Baden, and I saw how he carried her with him, to this day, gently, the way he always has. That’s when I started to let her in again, to let the layers unfold, so I could carry her with me.

THE END