



“The Great Big Rickety World My Father Saved Me From”

by Debra Magpie Earling

from *Hearth: A Global Conversation on Community, Identity, and Place*

edited by Annick Smith and Susan O’Connor

Most folks are probably familiar with Atlas, his shoulders bowed beneath the monstrous weight of the living earth, carrying all of our beauty and all of our wiggling troubles. Poor Atlas, robed in a sphere of stars, destined to hold up the sky for eternity while the universe spins around his misery, a dark and dismal job without thanks.

My father’s middle name was Atlas, and he was mighty, so strong he hoisted washers and dryers and refrigerators up the concrete porch steps and into our house without help, and as easily as if he were lifting a featherweight. Some cussing, but no sweat. But I couldn’t or wouldn’t see the true strength of my father for most of his life, and for most of my own life, really. I was too busy being uncomfortable around him.

My father could talk a leg off a stranger, and did, at the gas station, in the campground, at the grocery store, on the street, at the swimming pool, in restaurants, in coffee shops, and in any line, in any town where we would be waiting for anything, and yet at home my father possessed a quiet, grumbly countenance that left me sad and bewildered. He wasn’t a daddy or father-daughter man. He never asked me how my day went or what I wanted to do with my life and rarely what I thought of anything. I cannot think of a single time he wrote me a letter, although sometimes his scrawl would appear at the bottom of a Christmas card my mother had sent. Dad, plain and simple. He was not a sullen man; my mother called it “undemonstrative.” My father wasn’t a hugger and would rarely say “I love you,” but he was anything but undemonstrative. He demonstrated his feelings through hard work, anger, and undeniable generosity. Throughout my childhood and into my teenage years, he was short fused to an explosive temper. An undeniable rage. Laugh too hard at the dinner table or push your knees into his seat back while he was driving—and lickety split—you’d get his blister-weltering belt or a monstrous cuff to the head. He wasn’t someone you could sit down and visit with, not usually, anyway. You did things with him: shoot cans, ice skate, work on cars—Get out here and help!—weed the garden. But when my best friend’s family needed heating fuel my father paid for a tankful without hesitation. Anyone who entered our home was offered something to eat. If anyone needed help my father opened his wallet and his home without question or reprisal.

The only time I got my father to talk was when I brought up his old days in the ring. He was known as the Gold Boy of Rose Lake, Idaho. He’d boxed in the Spokane Coliseum and had a boxer robe and old photos of his boxer days to prove it. My mother pulled his boxing robe from the back of the closet. I remember the rough, moth-bitten black wool, his title in yellowing whipstitch felt letters across the back. Most of all, I remember how my father fell silent, his face lit by wonderment.

If you happened to get my father going, he’d fire off rounds of stories that always ended with the same punchline in which some lippy unsuspecting charmer would get smacked in the kisser. You couldn’t squirm away from Dad once his stories began. Make no mistake. Virgil could round a haymaker on any fool not smart enough to recognize he was primed to get



pounded, and he could also talk up a bluster with such intensity you couldn't escape. You were in for a rollick but not a good time.

By count, my father must have cracked the heads of a thousand knuckleheads and busted another thousand in the chops. I'd always hoped that one of his stories might contain, not a different outcome necessarily, but a snigger of epiphany or empathy, a jab of miscalculation that would have exposed my father's sly world as human, too, an indication that everyone, including my father, got a comeuppance.

Not a chance.

In hundreds of renditions of Dad doling out just desserts to swaggering suckers, the outcome was always the same. Men hit the ground or banged against cars or flew up in the air with astonished cock-eyed wonder. They smacked unwittingly into hog troughs, careened into fences, and landed on other unfortunate cocky bastards. Usually a single moon-glow punch would render them down for the count. There was also the random dumb cluck who would make the mistake of getting back up and, like a roly-rocky Bozo punch bag, be rendered *cuckoo cuckoo cuckoo* by my father's endlessly clobbering fists. If my father would have pulled out a comb and ribbed his hair, it would have suited his narrative. His ham-blush face, his eyes sharp, almost glittering.

I was mortified when my father would pounce on unsuspecting visitors, any friend or stranger who stopped by. If you were a Jehovah's Witness, you were in for a sorry afternoon of big talk and glory days. I tried to shuffle people quickly from the room when they came to visit. If I made the mistake of going to the bathroom, my father would seize the opportunity to chat about his boxer days, cocking back his arm to illustrate how he'd punched some jerk's lights out. Then there was no easy exit. My guest and I would be in for a long night of fight stories until I pulled my friends from my father's colossal grip. I apologized profusely once we got out the door. I feared they'd think my dad was lying, or worse, that they'd feel sorry for me. My father's ferocious stories revealed a crazy pridefulness that even as a teenager I recognized spelled a deeper layer of violence. And at the surface, I knew his stories sounded like fabrications. I mean, *criminally*, as my dad liked to say, how could you knock out every single opponent, even if he was a numbskull? But I'd never known my father to lie. He may puff-chestedly brag but he was a man of his word. He possessed a bald-faced honesty that was humbling.

When I was nineteen years old and working in the tribal court system, I'd come home with stories about abused children who'd been removed from their parents' custody. My father listened ashen-faced and shaken. He admitted he'd been wrong about many, many things, sorrowful things, and that he never should have hit us. He realized we could have been removed from the home because of his violence, and that we rightly should have been. He listened solemnly while I recounted the past, the belt welts that had turned to bruises, the many times he had struck my brother and me for simply laughing, or the time when he held my sister down and shaved her eyebrows because she'd plucked them. When my mother stepped between them, she got a black eye for her efforts. My sister hid in the woods just beyond our house for weeks afterward, washed her clothes in the horse trough, crouched in the bushes, and slept in the neighbor's barn. My mother didn't kowtow to my father. She expressed her anger through shouting matches and slapping. Both of their angers disintegrated into long nights of dreadful and stomach-quaking arguments.



“Dad,” I said, “we were afraid of you.”

He accepted my story without additions or yeah buts. He shouldered the responsibility for his actions and never shifted blame. He understood he wasn't the father or husband he should have been. His mea culpa was genuine; his apology was in practice, not words. He desired to become a better man, and he did.

It's difficult to juxtapose the almost childlike man my father was when I was growing up, his insane anger, his lashing out against the soft-spoken and gentle man he strived to be, and eventually became. He lost height, but grew in moral stature as he aged, shedding the detritus of his past by always endeavoring to do better.

Last year, my brother reminded me of a story I'd put out of my mind. When Dad was no more than seven years old, barefoot and stacking wood for his step-grandfather, he stepped on a nail that pierced his foot clean through. Old man Huelsiep called Dad to the chopping block and lifted the flat of his axe, and without flinching smacked the nail back out of my father's foot. “Get back to work,” was all he said to my crying father. Though Dad would never have used that incident as a reason to forgive his own brutality, my brother and I recognized he'd experienced a cruelty that was difficult for him to overcome. Other monstrous stories resurfaced, how the old man had repeatedly raped my father's sister Vernice, banging her bleeding head again coat hooks, knocking her to the shit floor of the chicken coop, ravaging her again and again on the kitchen floor while her biscuits burned, while her soup bubbled, while her canning jars boiled dry and hissed on the cookstove, until one bright fall morning at the age of sixteen, she'd walked up the road and run away with a Canadian. For my father and his siblings, there were unforgiveable degrees of violence, and then there was the violence of survival.

I've often wondered if my father accommodated my mother's family because he longed to provide the home he'd so desperately desired as a child, or maybe because his own family had disowned him after he married my mother. I've tried to draw conclusions, to understand the contrast of love and violence.

Vernice once told me that we weren't considered part of the family because we were Indian, as if the statement wasn't hurtful, as if such a thing could never be cruel. Romantic notions of unconditional love that I associated with my Indian mother couched in my father's white heart. He welcomed all her family into our home, and faced the toll. Murders, alcoholism, and death, car accidents and death, stabbings and death, children and death, beatings and death, and death, death, death. My father took in my mother's sister's daughter, who became my sister Cheryl, and lamented that he had not taken in Cheryl's brother as well, after he was struck in the head by a baseball bat wielded by a nutcase relative in a fit of rage and drunkenness. Harold, always a sweet dark-eyed boy, would remain seven years old forever, even when he was stabbed and pummeled to death by two hoodlums when he was fifty.

At one time or another, my father took care of every single one of my mother's family, including Harold. Her grandmother, her sisters, her nieces and nephews, even one or two of my mother's old boyfriends disguised as my aunt's companions.

Our house sagged under the weight of sullen-faced alcoholics, baby-dolled prostitutes, ghosts of dead Indian relatives, and a parade of my mother's mean and entertaining siblings who brought with them their own weird and disagreeable companions. Quibbling broke out in our house, if not out-and-out fights. Drunk shirttail relatives stole per capita checks and threatened to



get my mother fired. One kooky cousin bragged he was going to put rattlers in our mailbox. When I was sixteen, my jealous aunt slammed a glass into my mother's face and left a puckery scar forever. Wild stuff. And yet my dad took them all in and gave them a second chance (even my aunt, years later); he fed and clothed them, calmed them, and stood beside my mother at all the funerals and wakes. During this time, my parents continued to have fights, scary all-night rages, while my brother and I trembled behind our bedroom doors. My father was my both doorman and bouncer to the misfortunes that careened toward us.

It wasn't until my own life took a terrible turn at the age of seventeen and the man I'd married threatened to take me down the same path my father had taken us that our world transformed.

I was taking classes at the community college and I had a few short minutes to change and get to work. I was pulling back my hair when my husband stumbled into the apartment, drunk and stropic. He was supposed to be at work hours before but had hit the bars instead. I was as acquiescent as a beaten pup as he zigzagged into the kitchen. I believed in my own childish and dopey way that I could save my marriage, and my husband. I pretended I was happy to see him but kept my distance, a girl bedazzled and bedraggled by love.

Barry was wobbly-walking with a jug of milk when he lost his grip. Milk sloshed across the floor, glug-glugged out of the mouth. I tiptoed toward the door, walking backward with my head down. If I could make it out of the house, I'd be OK. I was ready to push open the door when he grabbed me and tossed me toward the mess he'd made. I lay still in the milk puddle hoping that there wouldn't be a siege this time, that this humiliation was the end of it. When I finally got back up, he rag-dolled me, double-fisted my coat, and pressed me to the wall. He was incoherent and spitting, his face iron-hot as he knocked his head against mine, cussing me, blaming me for the spilt milk, for everything.

My father had taught me how to throw a haymaker, one ferocious punch that could catch someone by surprise and get a person out of a bind. I took a deep breath and maneuvered my way to the side of Barry, leveraging the whole of my weight. I rounded my arm slowly back and threw myself forward, but my best shot wasn't good enough. He returned a fist pop to my face. I got a purple, swelling eye. A split lip. A dancing swarm of stars. When Barry went to the bathroom, I made my escape. I drove home to my parents.

The moment stands out in all my recollections of youth—the startled moment of plain and simple recognition—not a memory, a forever living moment. My father's burning blue eyes. His back bowed against my mother's screams. "Leave him," my mother shouted so loudly I covered my ears.

"She can't leave him, Ma," my father said, "because she loves him."

My mother was incredulous. She pointed at me.

My father's watershed moment was my puffy face, my bleeding lip. He cast a desperate sadness, as if he finally grasped that love couldn't redeem the husband who beat me nor forgive the violence he had wreaked. The conundrum. To save himself from violence, his own life was predicated on violence. Violence had to end.

After that night, my father stopped fighting with my mother. Oh, the bickering glittered on like fizz but the shouting stopped, the bullying and trouble stopped. It occurred to me, much



later, that the moment marked the end of our era of family violence. I do not recall another wrenching moment that passed between my parents after that night.

Eventually, I came to my senses as well. I couldn't afford my husband's rising debts, his escalating abuse, so I divorced him when I turned twenty-one, and he never forgave me. Barry took his life the year before I graduated from college. I took it hard, moped around, wrote into the early morning hours electrified by guilt. I visited home more often. My father regretted he'd let me get married in the first place.

When I landed a full scholarship at Cornell University, life seemed dreamy and big. But during my second year of school, I made a dumb mistake. My dorm roommate had experienced a breakdown and was convinced her professor was trying to sabotage her. Her stories grew more and more outlandish and conspiratorially alarming. I wanted out.

I imagined myself at a writerly desk in one of the grand old houses around Ithaca, looking out onto sweeping meadows or peering into the lush green woods for new inspiration. I was tied of graduate student housing, the tiny room where I heaped my books and clothes on my side of the room.

June, the housekeeper in my dorm, recommended her brother's house. "He's got a beautiful three-story home. Just what you want. You can have the whole upstairs for dirt cheap. Store your stuff there over the summer," she told me, "so you won't have to haul it all the way back to Spokane. My brother's a great guy, and not home all that often. You'd practically have the whole place to yourself." I liked June, trusted her, but I felt hard-pressed. She told me that I wasn't like the other dorm residents. "You're not a snob," she told me. "You can certainly tell you was raised right." I felt implicated. Few students spoke to her and when they did they were rude and dismissive. I didn't want to be like them. I was ashamed of their behavior. My mother was a housekeeper. I didn't like the idea of living with a stranger, let alone a man, but June reassured me. "A super-nice guy!" she said, as she helped me haul my books and belongings to the car.

He met me at the door and before he invited me inside he offered to carry my boxes in. I don't think I said a word when he opened up the hatchback and began hoisting up a stack of my boxes.

"That won't be necessary," I said.

"No sweat," he said. "My name's Vince. June said you needed to store a few things." He headed for the house and I followed, skunked, unable to extract myself without insult.

Vince wasn't what I expected. I thought he'd be a jolly sort, maybe older, too old to chase me. This guy was a middle-aged man with grease-combed hair. He was wiry and moved fast. He urged me upstairs to show me the place he was renting. I followed like an idiot, clutching my keys in my knuckles. Was this the man my father had warned me about—*if a strange man scares you, you kick him in the balls and run like mad*—when no one spoke of rape or murder or the terrible things that happened to women and girls? I'd been warned by my father, by Vernice's hushed stories of old man Huelsiep.

Pink billowy curtains hissed in the wide-open room and floated up and around me. Dead moths musted the floor. I looked out the windows in every direction and saw that I was clearly in trouble. Except for the big red barn, stubbled corn fields surrounded us. The nearest house was a



mile or more away. What had looked so charming and inviting as I'd driven up suddenly looked sinister and inescapable. No one would hear me.

"Whaddya think?" he said. "Suit you?"

"Yes," I lied. I'd already surrendered my boxes. Bargaining with myself. If I could get out of here I'd never come back. I was relieved when he turned and clattered back down the stairs. I was ready to make a run for it but he stood in front of the door.

"Sit down. Have a cup of coffee," he said.

"No," I said, "really, got to go."

"What's your hurry?" Vince said. I felt snared. I struggled to come up with a good excuse to grab my things and leave. He poured me a cup and gestured for me to sit.

I sat down reluctantly, ready to sprint, my posture straight-backed alert. Vince slowly lowered a heaping spoonful of sugar into his coffee and made a tinkling noise as he stirred and stirred. He lit a cigarette and took a long drag.

"My wife left me about six months ago," he said. He squinted at me through a haze of smoke. "She lives up the road a ways."

"That's too bad," I said. I looked at my watch.

He snorted and cupped his cigarette in his palm before he tapped it in the ashtray. He had an odd, unhealthy cast to his face, a pukey greenish gray that matched his hair.

"Left me for my field hand," he said as he thumbed his brow. His eyes were as oily as his pores.

"You see that corn chopper, back there?" He swiped his hand toward the window. "That big thing by the barn doors. See that there?" He sniffed as if he were proud. "That's a stationary corn chopper."

I followed his glance, ready to make my exit.

"You feed the corn in the bottom there," he said, and took a long draw on his cigarette, the pulled the cherry off.

"When that sucker jams..." He squished the cigarette into the ashtray and held the pull of smoke. "Let me tell you, you don't want to kick it, cause if that sucker catches..." He drew out every line. Pausing too long after each statement. He was revealing a secret and I was transfixed with the horror of what he was telling me, not quite believing what I was hearing. "I found him near upside down. He must have kicked it hard because it pulled him right up into the blades."

"You mean," I began saying, "your wife's boyfriend..." not finishing *was killed right there?* He nodded. Creepy-smug and smiling. He raked his nicotine fingers through his hair and I felt a shier lick my spine.

I don't know what I said then. I focused on extracting myself from the room, extricating myself from his presence. I nodded my head in deference to him. Acquiescent. Seeking mercy. I got to my car as quickly as I could. I planned to leave my boxes and never return.

My father wasn't thrilled to drive clear across the country but it wasn't my mother who convinced him to go. Over the summer he came arounds to the idea that he had to rescue me from this jerk. I sensed the wheels turning in his head. How big was the town of Ithaca? Were there other towns nearby? What other knuckleheaded trouble could I get myself into? I was too old to be in this predicament, and yet he was aware he'd dropped the ball earlier in my life. He wasn't about to shirk his parental duty this time.



Two years after my ex-husband's death, this college living situation was solvable, a mistake he could fix. I wished I'd kept my big mouth shut; I didn't want my stuff back. It could rot in that upstairs farmhouse. Vince was that creepy. But my dad had made up his mind. He'd drive back with me and take the train home. It was settled. He was going to Ithaca to find a safe apartment and retrieve my things.

We left on a hot, sticky evening as the sun boiled down into the distant hills behind us, and things were all jazzy and fight-stories galore until we crossed the eastern border of South Dakota. My father became noticeably quiet and folded his hands on his lap. The sun glared in our side mirrors and the west disappeared like a cowboy riding off into the dusty sunset.

My father seemed dazed and dumbfounded by the vast Midwest and the increasingly busy highways, the miles and miles of interstate that took us farther and farther from home, the rising empty factories that loved the horizon, the endless stop-and-go islands with their unsmiling grimsters and long-haul truckers doped on coffee. He insisted on paying for everything and would give me a half-kidding glum look when I opened my purse. "Put your money away, he said. "You're going to need it."

I felt like a child again, only this time I felt I was safe, without worries. My father was taking care of me. He would handle it. And I got the feeling he wanted to.

This wasn't the fragrant mountains of northern Idaho. This wasn't the dreamscapes of Montana. The flatland made my father lonesome. I thought I could feel his sadness, or maybe I was feeling my own lonesomeness. Having my father with me made me realize how far away from home I'd traveled. I tried to imagine the world through my father's eyes and felt both annoyed and dejected. He wasn't impressed or mildly interested in the journey. He'd never been farther east than Billings, Montana, and once we left the boundaries of his territory he would neither spell me nor guide me by map.

I took a wrong turn in deep fog and detoured through Erie, Pennsylvania, where we found lodging at two in the morning in a dodgy motel. My father snapped off the light as soon as we crossed the threshold and told me to sleep in my clothes without pulling back the sheets. The room had an odd smell of mildew and factory waste and when I complained, Dad told me it was just a stopover and to shut up and go to sleep. In the dim, gluey morning, I discovered the fresco behind my father's bed was actually mold—a black octopus mass of it. He chuckled at my pickiness. It was just a place to sleep. For crying out loud, we didn't have to live there. I was glad I didn't have to stay there alone.

*

I was anxious for my father to see Cornell. After years of crappy decisions, from dropping out of high school to my sad/bad marriage, after years of ugly depression and making my family miserable because my ex-husband had leapt from a bridge to his death, I thought I had made it. I was going to an Ivy League school on a full fellowship. Silly thoughts, after my father footed the whole tab for our cross-country journey, from the greasy biscuits and gravy to the motel rooms.

The first thing we did when we hit New York state was make a beeline to retrieve my belongings. I was nervous and jumpy but my father dismissed my fears. "It'll be OK," he said. "Let's get your stuff and then go get some lunch."



When we arrived at the farmhouse my father took note of our surroundings. “It’s way the heck out here,” he said.

Vince pushed open the screen door and sauntered toward us with a slick smile on his face.

My father was just exiting the car when Vince leaned on his door and tried to keep it wedged open. “Hello,” he said to my father; then he bent down and squinted at me. “Have a good summer?” he asked. “You’re looking good.”

“Lock the doors,” my father told me, and backed the man off as he got out of the car. I felt a lilt of glee. I kept the window cracked so I could hear.

“Where’s my daughter’s things?” my father asked.

“In her room, upstairs,” Vince said, as if I had lived there awhile and we were familiar with each other. “I’ve cleaned some stuff out so now she can have room on the second floor too.”

My father snuffled a laugh. “That won’t be happening,” he said. “You say her stuff is upstairs?”

Vince nodded, sheepishly.

My six-foot-two father towered over him. Even in his sixties, my father was no one to mess with. Dad turned to me. “Stay in the car,” he ordered, like I was a four-year-old. I was thrilled. Two minutes later my father was back with a stack of boxes on his arms. He opened the hatchback with his keys and placed the boxes efficiently and quickly inside. “Is this it?” Dad asked me, and I nodded.

Vince had followed my dad outside and was still attempting to bargain with him. “If it’s the rent, I’ll lower it,” I overheard him say. My dad dismissed him. Vince looked wounded, oddly surprised. Before my dad got back in the car he turned to Vince and gave him a hundred dollars “for the storage.”

“Dumb jerk,” my father said, under his breath.

And then, so easily, we drove away. This time my father had rescued me.

We sat on the grand balcony of Willard Straight Hall looking out over the mad fall foliage, and my father shook his head and looked at me in genuine puzzlement. “Why you wanna come here?” he asked. At the time, I didn’t understand that my father wasn’t questioning my accomplishments, he was questioning my desire to remove myself from the sphere of family. Why would I want to be so far away from everything familiar? No one in my family lived more than an hour’s drive from Spokane.

Loyalty and love were difficult concepts for me to grasp then because my deepest feelings were still confounded and obscured by old trouble. Any move toward clarity or simplicity angered me. I could not see Dad’s question as part of a bigger whole that wasn’t meant to put me down. I saw the world through layers of bullshit and complications. I was too dumb to get my father’s gist.

Why you wanna leave your family and go to a school so far away from us, so far away from me?

I wished I could have answered simply. I’ll be home soon. I’ll never leave you. I love you.

*



When the people I was close to were dead and gone, when my phone stopped ringing, and my life stopped for long enough that I could look beyond myself, it was my father, who had annoyed me fiercely at times, who came into view. And maybe it wasn't the first time, but it was the profound time, when all the pieces fit and I saw the whole of my father.

In the most brutal times, when suicide or murder or car accidents occurred, my father was unwavering. Things didn't fall apart. There were funeral arrangements to be made and funeral clothes to be selected, food to be bought, people to be tended to, as well as gathered up. At all the sad get-togethers and wakes, my father was calm and unfailing. He was a pallbearer, a babysitter, a dependable nondrinker and nonsmoker. In the midst of chaos and drama he was a reminder of the living. You still had to buy groceries, make dinner, read the newspaper, and go to work. He hadn't always done his best by us, but my father's tranquility in times of trouble had been a gift.

Perhaps my father became attentive to the needs of others because he had not been tended to. Perhaps his anger and compassion began with his own beginnings. At the age of seven he'd lost his mother to childbirth, and that same summer, while wading in the shallows, he'd looked up to see his father cannonball from the dock's end. A thunderous splash. Rose Lake lipped over his father, then swallowed him up. Bubbles fizzed the surface—a boil pot aftermath—and waves rippled toward him, then lapped the shore.

My father squinted into the haze of shattered water and waited. Light peaked the sky, stacking heat. A flock of geese exploded on the other side of Rose Lake, and for a moment he was distracted as they passed overhead. Downy feathers seesawed downward before catching a ragged updraft and fluttering up again. Water shivered in circles and wrinkled around the pilings.

Walter pepped up from the deep spluttering like a pranking teenager, calling for help.

No one took his call seriously. Was it a joke?

Seven-year-old Virgil thought his father was kidding, too—that his silly rolling eyes were a hoax, an antic of some sort. The trees overhead rushed with wind and the moment cindered. My dad noticed an awkward hilarity in his father's actions, the first flickering of alarm of the day's sudden and terrible reversal. He fixated on his father's frantic hands slapping finally downward as life frayed outward and up as if the last puff of his father's breath unleashed the first scatter of rattling leaves.

The hazy water stilled, reflecting the wiggling dock, my father standing in the shallows, and then only the clarity of the ghostly sky overhead, driven with clouds. Others paid glancing attention until waves and sound reverberated to shore, lancing the blister of their ordinary evening. The silvery blade of the spinning day became a buzz saw unbolted, and life zippered away.

As my father neared the end of his life grief shimmered up from his earliest experiences as if they had been hard-etched on heavy steel plates and then promptly buried. He dug the memories up shovelful by shovelful, searched yearbooks and old photos, traced his mother's face, then his father's, shuffled through local history books looking at the same photos over and over again, poring over his past. My brother Benny, from his first wife, too soon dead, and just before him. He looked longingly at the faces of my mother's dead relatives. All of his immediate family dead too. His grandmother long gone. His twin sisters dead now twenty years. His brother gone, too, in the nursing home where his own mean in-laws had left him. And the long-ago dead, the



hateful step-grandfather he had scooped up from the field where the son of a bitch had died, his mean spirit gone now, gone and over, and nothing but his dead weight to carry a mile home and finally bury after seventy years of carrying him.

*

When I think of hearth I think of my father even with all his strife. My father who fought to tame his own anger – though he wasn't always successful – so that he could at last protect us. My father who'd shrugged under the weight of my mother's burdens, and all her family, and voluntarily hoisted them up. And for a length of time – and beyond what was humanly possible – my father struggled to balance a world not of his making. He held up my mother's heartache and had the courage to admit the heartache he had caused.

When I think of hearth, I think of my father holding up the great big rickety world, rocketing back his muscly arm against the darkness that threatens to engulf me.