

Gravity

by Bruce Holland Rogers

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I have a good head for remembering things. Objects attract one another in proportion to the product of their masses and in inverse proportion to the square of their distance, that's how the equation goes. My mother had just walked out on my father. He should have seen it coming. In fact, he probably did, but he didn't say the things that could have stopped her. My father was never any good at saying the things that needed to be said.

My wife said I should go see him. I should take him something. I should get him to talk. So after work I drove over to my parents' house-- my father's house, now-- with the casserole Susan had baked. On the way, I stopped at a liquor store for a fifth of scotch.

Dad came to the door when I rang, and I followed him into his den, where he had been watching a baseball game. There were smudged empty glasses all around his over-stuffed chair. When he sat down again, he sank down deep into the upholstery.

"Who's pitching?" I said, and Dad said, "Stieb."

"Brought you something," I told him, and I held out the bottle. He thanked me and opened it. He poured a little scotch into one of the glasses.

"None for me," I said when he tipped the bottle toward a second glass. "Susan made you a casserole. I'll go put it in the kitchen."

Dad nodded, looking at the game. In the kitchen, I cleared away some crusty dishes and put the casserole on the counter next to a half-full glass of flat beer. Gasses are soluble in liquids in inverse proportion to temperature. Warm beer goes flat fast.

Back in the den, I watched the game with my father for a while, and then I said, "You want to talk about this?"

He looked at me, and then he looked back at the game.

I said, "I didn't think so."

Susan made me go back a few days later, with another casserole. When Dad came to the door, I noticed that his flesh sagged from his eyes and cheeks, so he looked a little like a basset hound. He was skinny as ever, but as he led the way back to his den, the floorboards groaned and popped under his footsteps. I outweighed him by a good twenty pounds, but the floor was silent under my feet. When he sat in his easy chair, Dad sank down so far into the cushion that it looked like the chair was folding in on him.

"Brought you another," I said, offering a bottle.

"Thanks."

"I'll just go put this in the kitchen," I told him, meaning the casserole. He nodded as he picked up the remote and flipped through the channels.

I found the first casserole dish where I had left it, untouched. I discovered a thin layer of mold when I lifted the lid. It was green. Molds are saprophytes. No chlorophyll. The green comes from the spores growing on the filament ends. I don't make any special effort to remember these things. Like I say, I just have a head for it. I scraped the moldy food into the garbage and joined Dad in the den.

"You should eat something," I told him.

"Yeah," he said. "I suppose." There was a motorcycle race on ESPN.

"You can't keep going on just scotch," I said. "Empty calories."

"Yeah."

A rider lost control of his bike and flipped into a hay bale. My father took a sip of his scotch.

"Did you try to talk to Mom before she left?"

When he didn't say anything, I said, "Do you know where she went?"

He shook his head and poured some scotch from his new bottle.

"Maybe she'll call," I said. "You could talk to her then."

"I'm fine," he told me. "I've trying to watch the TV here, okay?"

I got up to go, and he struggled to rise from his chair. The floorboards creaked loudly again. One of the chair's arms made a popping sound as he tried to lever himself up against it.

"It's okay," I told him. "I know the way out."

When Dad stopped trying to get up, he fell back into the center of the chair even deeper than before. The chair legs bent outward, near collapse. I said good-bye.

"How'd it go?" Susan asked me later, and I said, "Okay."

The last time I went to the house, he didn't come to the door. I let myself in, and when I checked his den, the TV was on, and I could tell that the chair had finally caved in. The splintered legs were still there, at the edge of a big square hole in the floor.

I looked down the hole, but I couldn't see anything except some upholstery threads that had caught on the shattered floor joists. I walked into the basement, and the square hole continued from there as a deep shaft through the concrete. It was so deep, in fact, that I couldn't see the bottom even when I got a flashlight from his workroom.

"Dad?" I called.

My voice echoed down the hole, unanswered.

"So what happened?" Susan asked me later that night, when I brought back the casserole dishes.

"He doesn't want to talk about it," I said.

"But he's got to talk about it," Susan said. "He can't keep it all locked up inside, or there's no telling what will happen. What did you say? Did you try to draw him out?"

"I don't want to talk about it," I said.

I sat in my recliner and turned on the tube.

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