

Andrew Roe

{ IN HIS WORDS }

Spiritual Envy

We started taking shifts—my mother, my wife, and I. Caring for my dying father as the days and nights somehow passed. Spoon-feeding him applesauce and chocolate pudding. Dropping morphine drops on his tongue, which he stuck out like a baby bird. This had been going on for weeks, ever since we'd had a hospital bed delivered to the house and converted the extra room downstairs into his bedroom. We were all so tired. My father had been sick for years (cancer, strokes, a series of countless lesser ailments), and now that it was getting close to the end, we were numb, ghostly. As it turned out, my wife, three months pregnant with our first child, was the one in the room with him when he finally died.

At that moment, I was sitting in the nearby living room, writing in a journal that I had been keeping. Here's what I had written earlier in the day:

Today, Saturday (10-30-04), it's a shock the first time I see him. He's so dark. Ashen. His face is transformed now, extracted of color and life. His stubble clings to his jaw, chin, neck. It's like the last living thing.

Death—haunted now, fully.

M. comes in room w/ a sandwich, asks if I want to split it. Food?
“Look at his face.”

She does and she's shocked too. She starts to cry. I should have warned her. It's that much of a change from yesterday. Sitting there, sense th—

When my wife cried out, I ran to the room. There he was, mouth open. There my wife was, her belly now slightly rounded. And there I was, the living in-between link. And I had the uncanny sense of something having passed from my father to my unborn son. It was the most powerful

moment of my life and I knew right then that nothing would ever eclipse it. Three generations in this room—one gestating, one alive, one dead, but all connected—part of the same story, the same shared history, together for the very last time.

I’VE NEVER BEEN a religious person, unless you count my brief preteen infatuation with the miniseries *Jesus of Nazareth*. But when you experience one of those big life moments—like losing a parent or becoming a parent, which, in my case, both happened within a matter of months—you inevitably question your beliefs and your place in the universe and whether or not there’s more to this life than, well, this life. And if you don’t have religion to turn to at such moments, you come to admire how it can be a comfort and consolation for so many people. You find yourself with an acute case of spiritual envy (to quote the title of a book by Michael Krasny, a former professor of mine).

I’d already been thinking about the power of religion and belief for a few years, having started writing what would eventually become *The Miracle Girl*. The initial spark was seeing an episode of ABC’s news program *20/20* in the mid- to late nineties. It featured the story of a Massachusetts girl named Audrey Santo. Young Audrey had been in a swimming pool accident that put her in a comalike state called akinetic mutism. She could not speak and she could not move. According to her doctors, it was unknown whether Audrey was conscious and aware of her surroundings. Her day-to-day care required great effort and sacrifice, a deep, vast love. And she was also the object of a growing fame because of the miraculous events that supposedly occurred around her.

There were the usual stories of statues weeping and bleeding, of illnesses and ailments cured. People came to the Santo house in droves, a stream of the hopeful and devout and curious, lining up as if it were a theme park. The Catholic Church was investigating. Believers and skeptics alike were interviewed. Audrey’s mother was very religious, certain of what was behind her daughter’s reputed powers, while her husband was estranged from the family. The garage was turned into a chapel/bedroom for Audrey, and the family even replaced the garage door with a glass partition so more people could “view” her. Most haunting of all: the young girl’s eyes were open, making

her seem both alive and dead at the same time, trapped in that transitional moment.

I immediately knew this was something I wanted to write about, leading me to a series of “what if” questions: What if the mother wasn’t religious and was trying to make sense of what was happening around her, while also struggling with the burden of caring for a child in such a consuming way? What if the estranged father came back and had to deal with the guilt of his abandonment? What if the backdrop was the approaching millennium, with all its buzz about reckoning and doom? What if, instead of Massachusetts, the story took place in suburban eastern Los Angeles (where I’m from)? And what if, besides the family, I also told the story of the people who came to visit the girl, seeking her help, her guidance, her healing—and not just for physical ailments or spiritual direction, but also for things like heartbreak and other commonplace disappointments we all face?

I’ve always been drawn to stories of miracles and the pilgrims they attract, both in real life and in fiction—from Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* to, more recently, Don DeLillo’s short story “The Angel Esmeralda,” in which the apparition of a murdered young girl purportedly appears on a billboard, drawing scores of onlookers to a street in the Bronx. Why do they come? What do they hope to find? I wanted to explore this collective (and ancient) yearning for the miraculous to be true, to impart meaning and purpose, particularly in a day and age when such certainty seems to increasingly elude us. And I wanted to write a novel not only about the power and mysteries of faith and how the possibility of miracles can sustain so many but also about how a different kind of miracle can be found all around us in our everyday lives—like when you hold your child for the first time, or when you say good-bye to your father for the last time and you tell him, *This child is going to know all about you. He’s going to know how excited you were when you heard he was on the way. He’s going to know how funny you were, how you liked to play tennis, how you liked to tell stories about when you were in the Merchant Marines during the war. He’s going to know all these things. I promise.*

WE CHARTERED A BOAT to scatter my father’s ashes off the coast of Dana Point, California. The day was emphatically sunny, bright, clear. My mother and I had some trouble with the ashes. They were in a box, a very

nice box, but there was also a plastic bag in there holding the ashes. When we tipped the box upside-down to scatter my father's remains in the sea, the plastic bag came out, too, even though we'd been warned about this. I guess we should have rehearsed it a little bit more.

Then this happened: After the ashes had been put in the ocean and we witnessed their slow descent, a school of dolphins appeared, as if on cue. About twenty feet in front of us, beautiful and otherworldly, rising up and out of the water and then back down in an effortless glide. We stood and watched and marveled. It was another moment when you just wanted to believe.