

# Michael Milburn

## Digging

When I was twelve I would entertain my older sisters by doing headstands while we waited for Sunday lunch. As my legs straightened overhead, I shifted my weight between my neck and hands to keep my balance. One day as I held this position, my father entered the room to summon us to the table. He walked over and gave my feet a push, saying “Steady there,” and laughed as I toppled to the floor. During the meal I must have been quieter than usual because my mother asked me if something was wrong. Unable to bear the pain shooting through my neck and shoulders any longer, I began to cry as my sisters scolded my father, who shook his head in disgust.

Recently I saw the actor Tom Cruise interviewed on TV. He recalled his father, Thomas Cruise Mapother III, as “a bully and a coward. . .the kind of person where, if something goes wrong, they kick you.” After a ten year estrangement, Cruise visited his father in the hospital where the latter was dying of cancer. “He would only meet me on the basis that I didn't ask him anything about the past,” Cruise said. When the interviewer pressed Cruise about the effects of this relationship on him, the actor dismissed the question, stating his impatience with people who blame their troubles on their parents. Expressing his disdain for psychotherapy and the introspection it encourages, he sounded proud to have distanced himself from his troubled childhood.

As someone who blames his father for many of his current problems, and spent years in therapy cultivating this blame, I felt reproached by Cruise. It was hard to look at him, with his famous cocky smile and energy, and think of the name he had made for himself—literally, by dropping his father’s surname—without concluding that his was a healthier approach than mine. His “live in the present” philosophy sounded so reasonable: why would anyone allow himself to be dragged down by the shadow of a flawed, dead parent? No wonder Cruise boasted of rejecting self-examination; he had excised from his life the single most negative factor in mine: a bad father.

As a boy, I dreaded being around my father, dreaded his coming home from work, dreaded playing golf with him, dreaded being alone with him. The few times that he and I ate by ourselves in our house’s formal dining room, I searched for things to say that might interest him or at least not provoke an impatient response, and felt liberated when the meal ended. Later, I dreaded visiting him, and calling him on Father’s Day or his birthday; since his death eleven years ago, I celebrate those anniversaries for the freedom from dread that they represent. He had a way of making me feel stupid in conversation, and exhibited an impatient dismissiveness toward me whether we were alone or in a group. If there was love between us, it was the reflexive love one signs off with at the end of a letter, dictated more by custom and the blood tie than by feeling.

A successful Wall Street lawyer, my father worked long hours and came home preoccupied with his cases. He wasn’t the sort to walk in the door and set to catching up on his children’s lives. Rather, both my parents encouraged the impression that his work was more important, and the people involved of greater consequence, than we were. My mother would alert us to good and bad times to engage him, and when a case was, in her ominous words, “headed to trial,” he would be unapproachable for months. Even on our yearly vacations to Bermuda I couldn’t think of him as a contented father, but as someone fulfilling his paternal obligation. I felt self-conscious spending time with him, assuming that he had better things to do than putter around on a motorbike with his youngest son clutching his belt on the seat behind him.

The contrast between his respect for adults, particularly those with money and social standing, and his disdain for his children permeated his conversation. I blame my abhorrence of the telephone on the fact that when I was growing up he deputized my sister and me to screen his calls. The pressure I felt not to misspeak or garble a message was the result of his reminders that the world calling in mattered and I did not. At boarding school once I neglected to sign and return a document related to a wealthy aunt's estate; eventually, mine was the only signature outstanding as a dozen older relatives waited to collect their inheritances. On my next visit home, my father proclaimed to a crowded room his incredulity that so many important people concerned with so much money had been delayed by someone as trivial as me.

When I tell stories about my father, people often react with pity, which I understand, but it's not my goal in the telling. I'm not sure why I continue to talk about him. Anger? Catharsis? These may account for part of my motivation, but at this point in my life—I'm fifty-four—I have already vented and examined my resentments so exhaustively in therapy and writing that there's not much new for me to feel. Yet over a decade after his death my father gives no sign of relaxing his grip on me. I imagine that this is true of a lot of men whose fathers continue to haunt them. Perhaps talking about them is our attempt to understand their power or keep it safely in sight, for this paternal influence isn't simply a vestige of childhood; in my case, at least, it still has teeth and clearly persists for a reason.

Few people are capable of Tom Cruise's detachment, which could end up driving one's parental conflicts deeper into one's psyche, from which they might resurface in more potent form. Alternatively, one could resolve to forgive past hurts, either in one's own mind or through an absolving encounter with the parent while he or she is still alive. This is a popular device in movies, where years of antagonism dissolve with a few apologies and long-withheld admissions—"I only wanted to please you"; "You always made me proud"—and the child emerges unburdened of the parent's disappointment and disapproval.

Neither my father nor I had it in us to initiate such a scene. The furthest we could go toward rapprochement in his old age was that he became an affectionate grandfather to my son, his namesake, and I mailed him all of my published poems and essays, many about him and his influence for good and bad on my life. While we never made peace face to face, I felt that I had spoken to him honestly through my writing, and he was able to taste some of the joy of fatherhood by doting on a grandchild who knew him only as a goofy old tease, not a contemptuous tyrant.

These new channels in our relationship did only so much to bring us closer, and ended up exposing the limits of forgiveness. I suspect that some of my writing hurt or angered him. According to a nurse who cared for him at the end of his life, he once launched into a barely coherent rant against me. Though the nurse assured me that he was not in his right mind, I concluded the opposite, that his antipathy had finally found full release. A year earlier, he had compromised his image as a benevolent grandfather when I overheard him calling my seven-year-old son a jerk. He said it in the gruff, half-teasing voice that he often employed; the rest of us, my siblings and even my mother, were called jerks all the time. But that was the point—I accepted his abuse on the grounds that he didn't mean it or had always done it, but I didn't want my son practicing the same appeasement, more humiliating than the insult itself.

"Please don't call him a jerk," I called from the other room, and heard my father's indignant grunt in response. It was rare for any of his children to challenge him, and I knew that he would view my protest as a violation of family rules, his rules. "But he likes it," he called back, which was true in a sense, since my son always responded to my father's treatment by giggling and taunting him right back—this battle was mine. I repeated my request and he went silent, not speaking to me for the rest of the visit. Clearly, whatever softening our relationship would undergo had to accommodate the tension below the surface. As for posthumous forgiveness, he still preoccupies me too much for me to approach him with the necessary equanimity.

Having failed to absolve or disengage from my father, I try to see him as affecting me in constructive ways. His unattainable expectations continue to fuel my ambition, while keeping me from taking any more satisfaction than he did in my accomplishments. His constant disapproval while he was alive left me so depressed and lacking in self-esteem that I credit him with both my intense introversion and my discovery of writing as an outlet. Finally, he makes me a better parent by serving as a model for how not to treat one's son. I am aware of the perverseness of these "blessings," but casting his legacy in a positive light keeps me from seeing him solely as a scapegoat for my neuroses and dissatisfactions.

Still, whenever I feel constrained by some personality flaw—shyness, anxiety, short temper, self-doubt—I reflexively trace it to his mistreatment. I agree with Cruise that we accomplish nothing in blaming our problems on our parents; at the same time, understanding the source of these problems gives us an advantage in overcoming them. Recognizing the connection between my failures and my upbringing also makes me easier on myself than I would otherwise be. The danger is that I will always define myself as a victim, no longer of a domineering father as close as the next phone call or family dinner, but of an eleven years dead ghost.

If I'm still grappling with this ghost at age fifty-four, am I doomed to continue doing so until I am dead? Watching a television show recently, I grimaced when a middle-aged man beginning therapy said that he hoped to settle his chronic issues with his father and "finally put them to bed." As a veteran of father-focused therapy, I knew that those issues weren't going to bed or anywhere else, and that the task of resolving them, especially by an adult child, was more likely to enrich the therapist than liberate the patient. The best the latter could hope to gain was enlightenment through discussing past hurts and present pain with a sensitive listener.

I wonder if there's any good to be found in this, if we better ourselves by dwelling on the obstacles—illness, looks, misfortune, asshole fathers—that life sets before us. Do we nurture certain conflicts, knowing that they will spur us to our potential? In her memoir *The Three of Us*, Julia Blackburn quotes her father's enigmatic claim that children choose their parents in order to seek out the level of trauma they need to help them fulfill their destinies. "Because we chose our parents," he adds, "we must forgive them, if we are to forgive ourselves." This is the best justification I can find for the energy and anguish I expend on my father, one that casts my relationship with him as more than a drawn out grievance. Maybe I needed him to be a monster—given my years of emotional and literary preoccupation with him, it's hard to deny that he has given my life purpose.

My father never seemed to care about his effect on his children. Maybe he retired at night scolding himself for insulting or embarrassing one of us, but the consistency of his behavior and lack of visible remorse makes me doubt this. For example, he was unabashedly vocal in his bigotry. From my earliest youth I remember him telling off-color jokes about African Americans, Jews, gays, and women, and chortling at my mother's or older siblings' protests. I came to know him well enough to realize that he spoke more from a desire to be outrageous than from genuine prejudice—he was too smart and worldly to condemn people so broadly. A liberal Democrat, he supported progressive causes—in the 1970s he contributed to the legal defense fund for Joan Little, a black prisoner on trial for murdering a white guard who had raped her. If he was alive today I would assume his respect for Barack Obama's intellect and character even as he gleefully denigrated him.

But this doesn't excuse his expressing bigoted views around his small children, when I assume that his desire to amuse the adults present overrode any concern for the example he was setting. When it came to showmanship, he couldn't help himself. A few weeks after my best friend in college, a gay man, died of AIDS, my father launched into a joke about "faggots" at the dinner table. I glimpsed him checking my expression out of the corner of his eye. Unable to resist delivering his punch line, he pressed on. I said nothing, but thought, "How could you?" I remember myself at five, ten, fifteen years old, thinking the same thing as I listened to him mock

blacks and Jews. Imagining myself speaking this way in front of my son, I wonder, “How could anyone?”

His friends saw him differently—as clever, funny, self-deprecating, a great storyteller. He teased, but never humiliated them, or perhaps he did humiliate them but the fact that they were adults and not related to him allowed them to laugh it off. They must have noticed how contemptuously he treated his wife and children, but since contempt was part of his public persona and performance—eliciting laughter through mockery—they probably mistook the hostility for humor. Maybe people thought that my mother, siblings, and I were willing foils, since we always laughed, at him, at each other, at ourselves, as if the smooth functioning of our family depended upon my father looking good.

The first time I heard him characterized accurately by someone from outside my immediate family, I was in college. The writer Geoffrey Wolff, who was married to my first cousin, visited our house often during the summers and loved my father’s company. Geoffrey had introduced me to my college writing teacher, the poet Ellen Voigt. Dropping off a new batch of my poems at Ellen’s campus office one day, I apologized to her for all the harsh portraits of my father, explaining that most people had much more positive views of him. Ellen said she had mentioned my father to Geoffrey, who had described him as charming and charismatic. “But a hard father to have,” Ellen quoted Geoffrey as adding, “a man consumed by scorn.”

Geoffrey’s observation impressed me—I was used to bringing home friends and girlfriends and watching them succumb to my father’s charm, hearing them point out the discrepancy between the bully I had promised and the witty bon vivant who kept them giggling and their wine glasses filled. As anyone knows who has spent time with a friend’s or spouse’s contentious family, it’s not the same when the offending parents aren’t one’s own—the barbed jokes fall harmlessly, the slights miss their mark, the nuances of behavior and judgment are not magnified by history. The outsider hears the same dialogue, sees the same performance as the insider, but the two are attending different movies entirely.

By the time my father retired, selling our New York house and moving with my mother to Rhode Island, he was in his late seventies and ill. Watching a formidable father grow enfeebled helps to reduce both the man and his influence to a mortal scale. And for a brief time, reading out loud to my father after his eyes failed, helping him to the toilet, hearing him whimper as nurses cleaned his bedsores, did humanize him. If I could have preserved him that way, he’d no longer plague me; I’d be free. But after his death, my mind restored the father of my youth, the one seething with scorn. It propped him back up at the head of the family dinner table to snort with derision when I spoke. The old, sick, vulnerable, needy father who died, died.

His ashes are buried in a Rhode Island cemetery. Since his funeral, I’ve thought of visiting the site, but see no purpose in doing so until I have laid to rest that other father and his hold over me. Looked at in this way, I suppose that my writing about him is an act of digging, though whether I am preparing his grave or probing toward some forgivable, loveable version of him, I’m not sure. At this point in my life the two goals are probably the same. That I feel no closer to reaching them than when he was alive hasn’t stopped me from trying. Grievances, Robert Frost said, are a form of patience.