



## Father, Son

*Jennifer Lang*

### **Carom**

When you call, I'm startled. Usually we conduct three-way conversations via Mom.

Your voice, sotto voce, unnerves me. I leave my husband and kids in the kitchen, pad upstairs to our bedroom.

*I have to tell you something because your mother and brother found out, and I don't want to keep it from you.*

I plop onto the edge of our bed steeling myself for some devastating seven-letter word: illness or divorce.

*I've been in a relationship with Sue for the past twenty-five years.*

Your words sound nonsensical like your lawyerly gobbledygook or school children's mumbo jumbo. Only after you repeat yourself do I process their meaning.

Sue, a high school dropout, your secretary who followed you whenever you switched law firms. I picture her pale skin, streaky blond hair, a two-millimeter gap between her top front teeth. She had a husky laugh like a smoker.

*What about Mom?*

I half-listen, half block out your blabber.

A memory from two decades back bombards me. Our farewell parting at the San Francisco

Airport before my junior year abroad. What had you meant during our emotional goodbye when you'd said, "Don't think too hard. Just go with the flow?"

I do the math: you were forty-five, me seventeen, Sue, somewhere in between. When you encouraged me to let go, you were two years into the affair: seven other letters which had never crossed my mind. Had you, too, just gone with some invisible, overwhelming flow?

How can you live with yourself? Do you even feel remorse? I scream, but the thoughts carom inside me and, like the metal ball in a pinball machine, remain trapped.

After we hang up, I crumble. My husband knocks, sits by my side, hands me a tissue.

*You're really lucky.*

My eyebrows rise, questioning.

*I've never had a secretary!*

My tears turn into titter. In his arms, I think about how the go-with-the-flow approach has never suited me. Because I'm a Virgo. Because I'm a control freak. Because I'm fallible.

Fallible: errant, faulty, human.

A long-ago refrain thrums in my head. Lyrics about infidelity that I listened to incessantly on my Walkman: *I'm only human... Born to make mistakes... Please forgive me.* Then, they didn't mean anything. Then, you and Mom seemed untouchable, the allusion of a happy couple.

Like the round steel balls in the arcade game, I carom: strike and rebound. You dealt a blow, but I'm determined to bounce back from the force of impact, intact.

## **Caged In**

In the car, you sprawl on your side in the backseat, bending your knees to fit door to door. I set Waze for the doctor's office: 33 Ussishkin Street, Ramat HaSharon. We don't leave home without our GPS in this country.

"Go slow," you say.

It distresses me to hear you moan when we hit a bump, or when you move to find a more comfortable position. In all of your twenty-two years, you've never broken a bone or spiked a high fever. Last week's cystectomy was your first surgery, minor on the scale of things.

"You okay?"

"Hmmm."

"So, what are you thinking?" I ask cautiously. "About the company?"

It's delicate. You and your *Abba* founding a start-up together. You as CEO, your father working kind-of-for, kind-of-with you.

*In 200 meters, at the roundabout, take the second exit.*

"I'm ready for something else," you say with a voice inflected with a modicum of pain.

Everything's effort, everything aches, even talking, since the procedure.

"I understand."

*Abba* told me that you already stepped down, you needed a change, you wanted to work for someone else.

"So, what next?"

"A trip maybe."

"Where?"

"Asia probably."

*Keep left.*

Most mothers might bristle at the idea, but I'm relieved. In our adopted Israeli life, most of your friends traveled after their compulsory army service. You didn't. Rather than trek through the Annapurna Mountains, you went straight from being discharged to attending meetings, rounding up funding, and hiring people without passing GO. In a rush like when you were little, always one cage ahead at the zoo, one room ahead at the museum.

"I support you."

So does *Abba*, I think but withhold from telling you. He and I see the toll of such tremendous responsibility, of being in charge of a company. You whatsapp at odd hours. You forgo full sentences, answering with yups and nahs. You check your phone every seven seconds, an uncontrollable tic.

Here, now, trapped in the car, during your unexpected stay with us as you heal, you disconnect more easily from technology and share more than you have since hitting puberty. As much as I want your hurt to disappear, I treasure playing the role of your "Mommy" again: driving you to the doctor, making you meals, doing your laundry.

*You have reached your destination.*

I wish we hadn't. I wish we'd gotten lost. I wish we had more time.



**About the Author:** American born, French by marriage, Israeli by choice, I write mostly about my divided self. My essays have appeared in *Under the Sun*, *The Tishman Review*, *Assay*, *Ascent*, *The Coachella Review*, *Hippocampus Magazine*, and *Full Grown People*. Honors include Pushcart Prize and Best American Essays nominations and finalist in 2017 Crab Orchard Review's Literary Nonfiction Contest. I live in Raanana, Israel, where I teach writing and yoga, but my heart and soul reside in my birthplace, the San Francisco Bay Area. Find me **here** and follow me @JenLangWrites.

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