My Father's Earring

I'd long been troubled by my father's earring; it didn't seem like the kind of thing a father should be wearing. Especially not to a football game, which happened when I was 12. (And which was the first time I experienced it directly, though I'd certainly heard about it before that; it was part of family legend.) At the game, some Rams fans sitting a few rows above threw food at us. This was not entirely unexpected; we'd been drawing looks since arriving at the LA Coliseum. (After all, this was back in 1966; and the earring wasn't one of those demure little studs, either, but a solid-gold crescent, in the pirate tradition my father favored.)

The earring had been given to him – and inserted, with an icepick – by his wild-man friend Maurice DeYoung, in a hotel bar in Port Au Prince, Haiti, sometime around 1947, or "after the war" – a favorite phrase of my father's, for whom, as for so many veterans of "The Greatest Generation", World War II was a, maybe *the*, major demarcation point. For my father, "before the war" meant, basically, childhood and adolescence (he was born in 1919); "after the war" was everything else. He was also fond of the line "recently – since the war", which never failed to draw laughs. It all went along with his having been, for some years after the event (when he was writing first for radio, and then

breaking into early TV), what he self-mockingly called a "professional ex-prisoner-of-war."

He had a valid claim to the title, though. In October of 1943, the B-17 bomber he was navigating was shot down (and the landing-gear shot out), and they had to make a belly-landing in the hills north of Rome. The crew hid out in caves for a month, fed by partisans in the village nearby (Civitella Cesi), until they were betrayed to the Fascists. My father spent 18 months in Italian and German prison-camps, before being liberated by the advancing Soviet Army in the spring of '45.

After he'd returned Stateside, and received the goodly chunk of Army Air Corps back pay that had accrued while he was in prison-camp, part of being a "professional ex-POW", it would seem, required making several trips down to Havana and Port-Au-Prince, to spend the proceeds as an aspiring young writer should. In Havana, he hung out at his hero Hemingway's bar, El Floridita, until The Master made an appearance, and my father got him to sign his copy of *The Green Hills of Africa*. (I have it in a prominent place on my bookshelf; my son Zack will inherit it.) In Port-Au-Prince, my father's bar of choice was in the famous Hotel Oloffson – Maurice DeYoung, Owner and Proprietor – which was the inspiration for the hotel in Graham Greene's novel *The Comedians*. Behind the counter of the bar hung a sign that read, "*Les roues de vos injures roulent sur les*

railles de notre indifference" ("The wheels of your injuries run on the rails of our indifference"), and DeYoung did his best to live up to the motto, which became part of his own legend. He was said (by my father at least, whose DeYoung stories were legion) to carry a set of throwing-knives, which he liked to demonstrate on his girlfriends. But the night my father first met him, he was carrying a gun. The story ran that my father was sitting at the bar when there was a loud ruckus in the room directly above. The disturbance continued until the man sitting next to him pulled out a pistol and shot it through the ceiling.

"Jesus, what are you doing!?" my father exclaimed. "Are you crazy!?"

"Nah, I aimed it where they weren't," the man replied. "I know the layout of every room in this hotel. I own the place." He pocketed the pistol and held out his hand. "Maurice DeYoung. Pleased to meet you." And thus began the storied friendship.

It was on another such evening in the bar of the Oloffson that DeYoung produced a pirate's earring, which he said he'd found while skin-diving. "Pure gold."

My father was duly impressed.

"Want it?"

"Sure."

"OK, I'll give it to you – on one condition."

"What's that?"

"You let me put it in."

No sooner had the bartender handed him an icepick and cork than the bloody deed was done. The next day, one side of my father's face was dramatically swollen – but DeYoung's word was good. The non-corrosive properties of the gold kept serious infection at bay, and my father lived to tell the tale.

Was this the same earring he sported 20 years later at the Rams game? I seriously doubt it. But it was of the same piratical design -- and guaranteed to make me cringe, not only then, but 32 years later, in 1998, when he donned it in preparation for Thanksgiving dinner at my in-laws' in Westchester County.

Much water had passed under the keel by then. I was married to my first wife, Diane, whose Aunt Sue and Uncle Steve, and their children, Diane's cousins, we were driving up from the city to spend the evening with. Zack was 11 – almost my age when I'd been initiated into the mysteries of the earpiece. My mother had died three years earlier, in the summer of 1995, and Gog -- as I'd called him ever since babyhood -- had gotten remarried only a couple of months before to Chun Ling, a doctor of Chinese medicine almost exactly my age. They had come from LA to New York for the holiday, and were staying at the Harvard Club, my father's home base whenever he visited the city (which was his birthplace). The first time we met Chun Ling must have been a

day or two before Thanksgiving, when we all had dinner at the Harvard Club, and I welcomed her into the family bearing a single red rose. Gog liked that.

That Thanksgiving was also to have been the first time Gog would meet Diane's extended family – aunt, uncle, cousins, and their young children. (Diane's mom, Mimi, had died earlier that year; her father, Bud, back in '86, after failed open-heart surgery.) Gog had decided the occasion warranted the earring, and he was wearing it when we came to pick him and Chun Ling up that afternoon. His plan, I have no doubt, was to *épater les bourgeois* – "shock the squares". (Another French phrase he liked to deploy -- and one he had ample experience in performing.)

"Gog," I said, as we turned onto the Henry Hudson Parkway, "do you *have* to wear the earring tonight?"

He was sitting in back, with Zack between him and Chun Ling; Diane was up front with me.

"Why, does it embarrass you?"

"No, it's just that…" But embarrass me was exactly what it did do, and always had done – both the earring itself and rumor of the earring; and the idea of him flaunting it tonight was especially cringeworthy.

"What, you're afraid of me ruining your reputation among the squares?"

This was a dig at Diane as much as me (Uncle Steve was a senior executive at Shearson-Lehman; his son Kenny, at the time, was in the money-market; and his daughter Nancy's husband Jon was co-founder and partner of an investment fund), and I could see her eyes widen in incredulity and hurt at the gratuitous sally. I was hurt, too; for it was partly just because of their squareness, and the artless decency that went along with it, that I loved Sue and Steve. I had always secretly longed for my parents, and especially my father, to be more conventional (or even just a little?) – more like other parents. (Mom, back in the day, had loved the Stones and the Beatles – especially the Stones; and they both hated Frank Sinatra.) Gog may even have been aware of my renegade sentiments that afternoon in the car – he was nothing if not intuitive, albeit by fits and starts; and it was perhaps such an intuition that had prompted the insult.

"Jesus Christ, Gog," I muttered.

"Well, you won't have to worry about that," he went on, in a loftier tone. "Because I'm getting out right here. Stop the car." He started to open the back door.

Chun Ling reached across Zack to grab him. "No-say, No-say, stop, No-say!" ("No-say" was her version of "Nelson.")

"Come on, Gog. What is this, *King Lear*?"

"*King Lear*? I'll give you *King Lear*, you sharper than a serpent's tooth! Stop the car!" He opened the door wider. "Let me out, goddammit! Stop the car!"

"Jesus, Gog! I can't stop! We're in the middle of the Parkway!"

"Then turn around! Turn the car around! Take me back to the Harvard Club!"

"Come on, Gog, this is crazy. Close the door."

"Not until you turn around!" His face was red and glistening, and the earring bobbed back and forth, with a life of its own.

"OK, OK, take it easy. I'll turn around. Just close the door, please -- you could fall out."

"And wouldn't you love it if I did!"

"No-say, No-say, close door! You no be so crazy now!" Chun Ling reached across Zack and him and pulled the door shut.

I got off the parkway at the next exit and drove back to midtown on surface streets. But No-say was intent on being so crazy now. He fumed all the way back to the Harvard Club, with a mad look in his eye (and ear) that didn't stop until I dropped them off in front of the crimson awning on West 44th St. He lurched out of the car without a word and disappeared behind the door of the club. Chun Ling followed behind, shaking her head and looking mortified.

One of the things I had learned, in the intervening 32 years since that ill-starred football game, was that the donning of the earring sometimes – not always, but sometimes – heralded either the advent or the acceleration of one of his manic states. And now I began to understand that Gog had probably been in a manic state since marrying Chun Ling. Maybe their sudden marriage had even been the product of such a state. I remembered how he'd sounded when he phoned to announce his wedding as a *fait accompli*. The call came not long after the start of the academic year.

He opened with an "Are you sitting down?" and proceeded to reveal that he'd married the Chinese doctor he'd been seeing at an outpatient clinic in Irvine, where he'd been getting treatment for his unsteady walking and balance. These had become frank symptoms earlier that summer, when we all – Gog, Zack, Diane and I – traveled to Prague to attend a Byron conference, where I was delivering a paper entitled (aptly enough) "Fathers and Sons in *Mitteleuropa*: Byron's *Werner*, Kafka and Freud." During that trip, Gog had often stumbled on the cobblestones of the Old City, and I remarked that when he got home he should maybe see about getting some physical therapy. He ended up getting that, and more.

At first I wondered why he couldn't have found a therapist closer to home; and then, why he'd had to marry the therapist he did find. But he'd always been a romantic, and had done the chivalrous thing. They'd gotten married in Vegas, and shortly thereafter, Chun Ling relocated from Irvine to the house in Pacific Palisades. It was indeed a *fait accompli*, and the first I'd heard about any of it was on that phone call. He'd not been wrong to ask if I was sitting down.

After dropping them off at the Harvard Club, we called Sue and Steve to tell them my father and his new wife wouldn't be coming after all, and that we'd be at least an hour late. When we finally arrived in Bedford Hills it was well after dark, and I had a story to tell.

The next day, Black Friday, I had planned on laying low (as I always did on that day); but upon further reflection, this didn't seem like the right thing to do, so in the afternoon I took a crowded train into the city and knocked on the door of their room at the Harvard Club. When Gog answered, I kissed him on the cheek, expressing my dismay at the scene in the car, and my regret at the *King Lear* remark. "It wasn't my best moment," I offered. I said nothing about the earring, which was no longer in evidence.

"No it wasn't", he concurred, then added, "I liked the Josh who brought the rose."

I've thought a lot about that remark in the years since then. It was classic Gog for him see it that way: to prefer, to the Josh who made even the least bit of trouble for him – that is, who resisted (however seldom, and ineffectually) giving in to his contrarian whims – the Josh who knew how to be gracious and accommodating. He liked the Josh who made him shine. For such narcissism was also in the Gog tradition, and well in keeping with his piratical vein. The earring, after all, attracted attention, produced general shock and awe, and warned off the faint of heart. And I use that last phrase advisedly. For another family legend had it that he'd once appeared in pirate mode at "21", and asked for a table by the window. "I'm sorry, sir – those tables are all reserved," replied the maître d'. Gog then rephrased his request. "Give me a table by the window or I'll cut your heart out."

But such intimidation was used sparingly, and only as a last resort to getting his way. His more habitual approach was to charm with his wit and style – a strategy that succeeded equally with both sexes. Though there was, regarding the ladies, never any question of philandering. As a husband, he was steadfastly loyal. Difficult, to be sure. On occasion, outright

mean ("you simpering black witch" was a phrase he'd famously coined, in reference to my mother and her Black Irish heritage, for the amusement of a group of my friends, which elicited much hilarity from them; though somewhat less from Mom herself). Sulky by turns, and for days at a time (the other face of his manic side; I'm sure he would have been diagnosed as bipolar if he'd ever consented to go into psychotherapy, which he was dead set against, believing it would rob his unconscious of the hoard of imagination he relied upon as a screenwriter). But always faithful to my mother.

Among his own friends he was also a renowned entertainer, on account not only of his wit, but of his strenuous clownishness as well. In his cups at the parties he hosted (he drank only beer, but a lot of it; he liked to say he had "a very high capacity and a very low tolerance"), he would put on a Charles Trenet record and do a kind of dance known as The Drop. I was hardly ever present to witness this, thank God – but the one time I was, I never forgot it. On the uncarpeted part of the living-room floor, just in front of the stereo, which was playing "*Que-reste-t-il de nous amours?"*, he commenced to do a kind of shuffle -- a Vaudeville-Charleston routine where his hands crisscrossed back and forth over his knees, which knocked together and splayed apart as his loosened trousers progressively lowered, until they were rucked around his ankles.

And still he danced on…. This was The Drop. His face wore a frantic, almost beseeching expression I had never seen before, and wished never to see again. It was the sort of expression I thought – as with the earring – a father should never wear. No doubt he would have called me a square as well if he'd known my feelings then. Of course, the Drop elicited much hilarity from those assembled. But I was not one of them; I was his son. And if, on the one occasion I witnessed it, I was found to be laughing along with the rest of the jocund company, in my heart, as the saying goes, I was crying. Crying for the father I clearly did not have, and never would. Why could he not be more like the other fathers? (Only once do I remember him playing catch with me; and that special event was ruined when I made a wild throw that smashed the plate-glass window of his study, and he flung down his mitt and stomped off in a fury.)

And why could he never call me "son", except in jest? For there was yet another tradition – this between us alone, and not unrelated, I think, to the piratical one – which held that on Father's Day we should exchange cards: the cornier the better. His would be redacted to read "son" rather than "dad" or "father", and both would be understood as entirely tongue-in-cheek. It was an article of faith with us – the faith of heretics, you could say – that any heartfelt sentiments passing between us must be couched in irony and archness. Even at an age

when a full appreciation of irony and archness was still unavailable to me, I knew enough to be able to discern their contours, and recognize that a sincere, unmediated expression of father-son love was not permissible for such evolved beings as ourselves. Leave it to the squares to give each other these corny cards "straight", and unredacted; we knew better than that. But what really was it that we knew, other than that we would rather be caught dead than giving in to an unguarded moment of true feeling? Well, so much the poorer we; and I think I even had an intimation of this at the time, though I dared not betray our implicit understanding by acknowledging it.

And I wonder: am I betraying him even now, nearly 20 years after his death, by writing this? No doubt in some measure I am; nor can I convince myself, try as I might, that this violation is sufficiently compensated for by the inherent value of honest confession. Nevertheless, if I am indeed betraying him, I am also following in his footsteps, both as a writer – in choosing to be a writer, that is; though I am quite different from him in the kind of writer I am choosing to be – and as a performer. Let me take the writer first.

Our closest bond was always through writing. He taught me much in that regard, and his teachings could be boiled down to one essential principle: simplicity and directness of expression. (Though as a stylist, I admit, I am generally

neither simple nor direct – one of the literary differences between us – I nevertheless recognize the value of that aspiration, and teach it to my community-college students.) He would sometimes literally stand over my shoulder as I wrote an assignment for school – especially in fifth, sixth and seventh grades – and on occasion would even dictate certain sentences he thought I should have written, rather than what I had written. He was not, I think, a great teacher – at least not of me; though for some years he taught a popular class in adaptation for the screenwriting division of USC's Film School. But as my preceptor he was simply too impatient, irritable and unreflective to take the time to explain the principles behind his strictures. (Though these flaws arose, I think, more from his uncontainable eagerness and excitement to impart what he knew, what he had learned by doing over the years.) But the strictures -- "Keep it simple"; "Don't overwrite"; "Don't use a big word when a little word will do" -- have stuck with me all these years, and in some ways he is standing over my shoulder still, expostulating with me to "cut the purple prose" and simplify, simplify, simplify.

Yet have I followed his precepts? No, I can't honestly say that I have. His model for good writing was Hemingway; mine, alas, is Proust – an example utterly vainglorious of me to take to heart, and disastrous to even try to emulate. And I wonder….

Have I gone this way just to spite him, after the fact? To answer his over-the-shoulder expostulations by going perversely in the opposite direction, in the tradition of my French master? By answering his "less is more" with Marcel's "more is more"? Or is it rather just a form of long-deferred adolescent rebellion, still working itself out on the threshold of old age? Or even merely some inverted version of his own tradition? Am I now wearing my own pirate's earring, only on the inside?

But whatever my resistance in practice to my father's teachings, in theory – and in class – I enthusiastically espouse them. A line of his that I like to quote to students is "A writer is someone who writes" -- oft proclaimed by him in order to dispel any illusions cherished by the would-be writer of writing as a romantic calling. The trappings and mystique of writing were not only irrelevant but damaging to the job that needed to be done. I suppose I exhibit my own version of this ethos when I tell my students that writing is a lot like plumbing or carpentry: mostly mundane labor, sweat and toil, rather than a basking in fields of asphodel. (Though my students have no idea what asphodel is, and frankly I'm not so clear on it myself. I mean, I know it's a classical flower that supposedly adorned the Elysian Fields; but I don't know what it looks like, and wouldn't recognize it if I saw it.)

I mentioned that another way I follow in my father's footsteps is as a performer. No, I don't do The Drop – though I certainly have my own forms of clowning and pratfalls. I mean that I am a humorist who finds it very difficult not to make jokes – jokes that often enough aren't funny (at least not to Julie, my second wife, and main audience now; Diane died of cancer in 2004 – as it happened, only five weeks after my father, who died of congestive heart failure.). Indeed, I seem to require an audience, as was recently pointed out to me, rather uncharitably, by my off-and-on friend Joe. This merits some explanation.

Joe and I have a difficult friendship, as we invariably end up concluding after one of our periodic blowups. One such blowup occurred last March. He'd sent me an article, on American literature and the Bible, that he'd been moved by; but I couldn't get through it, and told him so. He took my rather dismissive response personally, and wrote me a blistering email, excoriating me (if one can be both blistered and excoriated at the same time; but it sure felt that way) for being a bullshitter, a games-player ("the bullshit games you play", was one of his lines), a "performer", and an audience-seeker. These were the same accusations he'd leveled at me in an earlier blowup over the phone a few years back, and he wanted none of it anymore. His charges were not without a measure of truth (as I

had duly acknowledged the first time), but it was a nasty email, and I called him on it in my reply, demanding an apology -- or, absent that, an explanation of the nastiness. He answered with a full-throated explanation (but no apology), I forgave him, and we agreed to resume our fraught but worthwhile friendship.

After the hurt and righteous indignation on both sides had passed, I allowed once again that his basic observations were not wrong. I am indeed a performer, a role-player, a comedian manqué – very manqué, sometimes. And, as my mother's mother used to say, I don't get it from the wind. Gog was there before me. He set the standard of performance, and in my own way I carry on the tradition. I wear the earring inside. I am attracted to the transgressive, and I too like to *épater les bourgeois*. But unlike my father, I also yearn for them. I yearn for a return to the bourgeois normalcy I never quite knew at home. And Sue and Steve – who, unlike Gog, are still with us – represent that normalcy. Steve especially: the conventional, thoroughly-decent (and perhaps, in the thoroughness of his decency, even rather unconventional) paterfamilias I never knew, but always wanted (and always knew I wanted). But though I may be Steve's nephew-in-law, I am my father's son, *faute de mieux*. Or perhaps I should say, for better *and* for worse.

And it's mostly for the better, all told, that I want to remember him. The piratical elements are still vivid, certainly,

and not to be denied. But they are only part of the larger tradition, and not the most important part, as far as I'm concerned. There are other elements that are just as abiding in memory – if not more so, and much dearer, too. Let us call these the "puppetical tradition". Gog as the puppet-master – but only in the most blameless and childlike of senses: the lover of puppets and puppet shows. Blamelessness, you see, counts very highly with me. It is maybe even next to Godliness. (And Gogliness. When I used to refer to him by his nickname to those who didn't know it, they would sometimes mis-hear the word and ask, "You call your father *God*?" But perhaps they were not entirely mistaken in this; for Gog was indeed a kind of deity of puppets, and puppet-shows his sacred space.)

For Zack's fifth birthday we gave a party at my parents' house in the Palisades. We arranged a visit from a life-sized robot (my idea; it was inhabited by the roboteer), and then staged a puppet-show (my father's idea). Gog had given Zack a parti-colored painted chest full of hand puppets – a number of them reversible (Old Mother Hubbard turns into a shoe; the frog turns into a prince; Little Red Riding Hood turns into the wolf) – and a small puppet-theater to go with it. I worked the puppets with the help of my friend Miles, an actor, who did most of the voices. Gog was sitting on the living-room floor (the carpeted part this time) with the audience of kindergarteners, who I

don’t think got any more pleasure from the show than he did – and maybe not even as much. After all, we were now in the era of the Nintendo Gameboy, and it was hard for mere hand-puppets – or even life-size robots – to compete with that. The age of analog innocence had passed; but it was possible, at least for the duration of that puppet show in October of 1992, to believe otherwise. The puppets gamboled in front of the kids, among whom sat Gog – rapt, laughing, innocent. Beatific, even. And without the earring. I don’t recall there even being a pirate puppet in the chest from which we drew the cast that afternoon. But if there was, it would have been in the tradition of *Peter Pan* and Captain Hook, not Maurice DeYoung.