

# *My Father's Last Disappointment*

ELLIE ANDERSON

He had a name like cashmere, Kazimierz,  
but changed it to Charles (and went by Charlie)  
so people could pronounce his name,  
so he could leave Poland behind.

Which he did, almost  
completely.

Only his accent stayed,  
his ideas of things that mattered.  
He had to have a hat with a feather  
in the band;  
a sharply creased, dark gray suit;  
a starched white shirt; an expensive  
gold watch  
to wear on Saturday night.

He'd scrub himself rosy  
taking care to remove  
the dark circles of coal dust around his eyes.  
Then he'd get dressed and go to the bar  
to sit with his friends, Jack Moore and Ignatz Matchiofski.  
Sometime during the evening, Dad  
would pull his sleeve up,  
the cuff crisp,

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to look at the time,  
like someone important,  
with a schedule and places to go.

Right before he died,  
someone stole his watch.  
He wanted a new one,  
wanted to know the time,  
so important now that it passed in tidal  
waves of morphine sweeping him over reefs  
he never knew existed.

But my brother didn't think  
we should spend the money.  
"He's dying," he said. "Why should we spend \$400.00  
if he's only going to use it for a few weeks?"

"It's his money," I said. "It's not like it's your's  
and you have to sacrifice.  
He's dying, and he wants to know what  
time it is. For Christ's sake. Go buy him a watch."

So my brother bought him a travel alarm clock  
whose digits glowed green in the dark.  
Daddy's face. Oh god. His face  
when he saw that clock. His eyes  
so large and dark in his thin,  
thin face.

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His disappointment, his dying.  
“We were afraid to buy one for your wrist,”  
I said. “You’re so thin. And you throw your arms  
against the wall.”

It wasn’t true. We’d never discussed it.  
I wasn’t afraid to buy a watch for his wrist.

He fell back to the pillow,  
closed  
his eyes. He knew.

I sat in a chair by his bed.  
He would wake in the night, sit up suddenly,  
ask, “What time is it? Oh, four o’clock.  
Is it night?”

The day he died, I took that clock,  
put it in my pocket.  
I made my brother look for it,  
made him say, “Where’s that new alarm  
clock? Someone stole it. Someone who  
came for the funeral? One of our friends.”

I still have that clock. Fifty  
years and the screws that held it up,  
have fallen out.  
It doesn’t matter.

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I have never wound it.  
But I often need to know  
the time  
in the middle of the night.

Sometimes I sit up so suddenly from  
a dead sleep that I  
strain the vertebrae in my neck.

And so, I write this to tell you  
that I said I would have done  
anything for my father as he lay  
dying.

But I didn't move from the chair  
by his bed.

I was chasing away the angels  
who came for his soul and now,  
cannot be forgiven for this clock.