

TO EMBRACE OR KILL: *Fathers and Sons*

Richard McCann

Fathers ought to avoid utter nakedness before their sons. I did not want to know—not, anyway, from his mouth—that his flesh was as unregenerate as my own . . . I did not want to think that my life would be like his, or that my mind would ever grow so pale, so without hard places and sharp, sheer drops . . . I wanted the merciful distances of father and son, which would have permitted me to love him.—James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*

THE SPEAKER of Joseph Lobbell's "A Letter" begins, "I wanted to write a friend / who also has a father who is dead." The implied possession—of having a dead father as opposed to having no father at all—might also fit Hemingway's "Fathers and Sons." As Nick Adams travels back into his father's country he is claimed by the past, a past which, like the father, will neither wholly die nor nourish him. In "Fathers and Sons" the past is as dark as the "black murk of the swamp" Nick crosses, an image which repeats in "Big Two-Hearted River," yet it is also close and sensual, its very darkness presenting itself as an appeal. The story moves back through memory as darkness (the evening Nick drives through, the heavy trees of the small town, the swamp) but also suggests how memory might inevitably open into clarity and light. By traveling through darkness, Nick finally arrives into the deepest past, the past he would recover, a lit tableau in the woods. Though Nick does not live in the past, we discover how deeply it lives within him as he moves through the submerged layers of his own consciousness.

The landscape of "Fathers and Sons," the northern Michigan of Nick's youth, is heavy with the past. Everywhere it reflects Nick's ambivalence. Though Nick feels that after fifteen "he shared nothing" with his father, his encounters with the "natural" world yield forth the father out of the past Nick yearns for:

His father came back to him . . . when he saw shocks of corn, or when he saw a lake, or if he ever saw a horse and buggy, or when he saw, or heard, wild geese . . . His father was with him, suddenly, in deserted or in new-plowed fields, in thickets, on small hills, or when going through dead grass, whenever splitting wood or hauling water, by grist mills, cider mills and dams and always with open fires.

"Fathers and Sons" rises from such ambivalence, as do Nick's memories. Nick reveals his deep love for "the last good country," yet is an exile. He strives to create a distance between his old and new selves, his past and present, his father and himself, yet also strives to break that distance

down. Twice he decides to think no more of his father, yet he cannot stop himself.

Though in one sense Nick "admits" the past in "Fathers and Sons," it is perhaps more accurate to say he falls into it, falling into himself. "Fathers and Sons" begins with a detour *not* taken, an image which suggests that this story will lead into a center usually driven by. In this landscape Nick finds the road he assumed had been repaired is still incomplete; likewise, so are Nick's relationships with his father and his past, relationships which even death—if not death especially—has left undone. Nick's entrance into town at the beginning of the story signals his entry into the interior of memory and self, just as Hemingway's recurring use of the second-person singular and long heavy sentences creates for Nick an interior voice, contemplative.

Because this movement into the past is not always characteristic of either Nick or Hemingway, because "Fathers and Sons" may be read as a semi-autobiographical story, it assumes added importance and dimension, suggesting that the story also operates as a metaphor for the creative process. Here Nick does not only "fish" the cool shallows, avoiding all but an absolute present, as he does in "Big Two-Hearted River," he also searches within memory where "the waters pile up on you."

Traveling through the father's country, himself a father now, Nick begins to make connections between the past and present, the father and self. He also fears connection, however, not knowing if his image of his father, and the part of the father which lives within him, should be embraced or killed. On one hand he is moved by a great love for the father; on the other, the memory of the father is utterly spoiled, "no good now." "On the other hand," a phrase Nick uses in thinking of his father, best describes the structure of Nick's thought. Almost every paragraph describing the father and the past is equally torn between love and guilt. On one hand Nick loves his father's ability to hunt and see; on the other he is disgusted by his smell. He views his father heroically, the way his child-self might; from a distance, however, he knows his father's beard hides a weak chin.

This ambivalence is mirrored in Nick's uncertainty over how he should best approach his memories of his father. In the first third of the story Nick holds himself at some distance from the scenes he remembers and, in a sense, creates. Looking out from the car window, he imagines his father and himself back in the past. He becomes both "Nicholas" and "Nick." His vision is doubled, sometimes intimate, sometimes distant. Entering town he sees it as both a citizen and as a stranger might:

[He drove] under the heavy trees of the small town that are a part of your heart if it is your town and you have walked under them, but that are only too heavy, that shut out the sun and dampen the houses for a stranger . . .

For Nick the trees function in both ways. They are "part of his heart," yet they also burden him, a fantastic weight.

Nick's conflict is, in part, in deciding which perspective to assume. The distance he holds from his father—a distance enforced by departure, geography, time and finally death—may make him an exile, yet does provide the seemingly necessary emotional distance between his father and himself, the distance necessary for freedom from the weaknesses of the father which have disappointed the son. It also provides the aesthetic distance which Nick as writer (and Hemingway *persona*) requires in order to approach the past. Nick fears a past which might overwhelm him in an onslaught of immediate sensations he cannot control. The dangers of standing inside such a past are revealed through the metaphor of hunting quail. As Nick hunts "the country in his mind" (a pun which reinforces the sense of the landscape as mental) he simultaneously remembers his father and recites to himself how one must assume a distance from one's prey:

In shooting quail you must not get between them and their habitual cover, once the dogs have found them, or when they flush they will come pouring out at you, some rising steep, some skimming by your ears, whirring into a size you have never seen them in the air as they pass, the only way being to turn and take them over your shoulder as they go, before they set their wings and angle down into the thicket.

The hunting metaphor also functions as it does in other Hemingway stories: as a test. How much can be captured? Can the hunter exercise the needed control? In "Fathers and Sons" the memory of the dead father becomes the object of the hunt. Repeatedly Nick likens the father to a bird. Hunting, Nick remembers the father's "hawk nose," the eyes which can see "as an eagle sees, literally." Later, he remembers his father as an eagle whose talons have caught in a canvas decoy, an image which recalls his father "trapped." Nick remembers his father when he sees "a thicket." No matter what the needed method, Nick will flush the memory out.

Yet if the father is the object of the hunt, Nick also becomes both hunter and hunted within his own search. Because the story takes place in memory the hunt for the father also becomes a hunt for the father within the self—the father internalized in Nick. Though Nick cannot find the distance he feels he needs to write about his father—"It was still too early for that"—"Fathers and Sons" gives us Nick's *rehearsal* of the story he will one day write, the story Hemingway writes through him. Thus "Fathers and Sons" becomes the search for the means of writing the story. The search for the father becomes a search within the self.

As the story progresses Nick splits into two characters, two selves which overlap. One is the writer, Nicholas Adams, who seeks to order an experience which resists resolution; he plays it over and over in his mind. The other is his child-self, the self "Nicholas" looks back upon. Likewise, if Nick's son represents the third generation of parenting in "Fathers and Sons," so he also represents Nick's own child-self, a self which sleeps beside him as he travels through memory, a self which finally wakes. The

title, "Fathers and Sons," refers not only to the actual generations but also to the way Nick becomes a father to his younger self. The relationship of the older Nick to the younger is the same relationship the autobiographer has to the protagonist he creates.

This autobiographical structure of "Fathers and Sons," a man looking back at himself, reflects Nick's ambivalence. It simultaneously allows him the distance achieved by the creation of an intermediary and the closeness achieved by making contact with his younger self, the self which has never died. Likewise, if there are two Nicks, there are also two pasts. One is the spoiled past, the past which Nick feels he must "get rid of"—his father's weakness and sentimentality. The other is the past Nick hopes will yet nourish him—hunting with his father, his relationship with Trudy, the American past of the "virgin forest," a past in which masculinity has not been, in Nick's eyes, corrupted.

In embracing Trudy, and in embracing the whole scene in memory, Nick strives to overcome his distance from the past he yearns for—the past of wholeness and union, the past which might redeem the father's weakness. "Now if he could still feel of [the trail to the Indian camp] with bare feet," Nick imagines to himself, and in doing so descends into a past alive with rich sensual detail:

First there was the pine-needle loam through the hemlock woods behind the cottage where the fallen logs crumbled into wood dust and long splintered pieces of wood hung javelins in the tree that had been struck by lightning. You crossed the creek on a log and if you stepped off there was the black muck of the swamp. You climbed a fence out of the woods and the trail was hard in the sun across the field with cropped grass and sheep sorrel and mullein growing and to the left the quaky bog of the creek bottom where the killdeer plover fed.

The sense of the two pasts is reinforced by the contrasting imagery used to describe the place. Half the view consists of that which is sharp, dark, burned, cut away, dead; the other half is clear in light, and green. Yet Nick appears to overcome the dangers of his passage.

As he turns off the "main road" (which recalls the image of his driving through the detour), Nick travels back into the deepest self. He arrives in the "virgin forest where the trees grew higher before there were any branches and you walked on the brown, clean, springy-needled ground with no undergrowth. . . ." The deeper into the past he travels, the less spoiled the place: he returns to the past as a source. The scene in the woods becomes the emotional center for both Nick and the autobiographical story he cannot yet write. This is the scene which rests inside all the other layers of time. The longest and most complete memory Nick searches out, it exists in the past like a tableau.

As Nick achieves union with Trudy (union with memory for the older Nick, union as experience for the child-self), so he makes contact with a self not yet separate from the "virgin forest." Nick Adams enters the gar-

den, the instinctual life uncorrupted by the father's sentimentality. In doing so, Nick goes beyond his father's life: the split. Whereas his father is as "unsound" on the subject of sex as he is sound about hunting, Nick unites hunting and sex within a single context and experience. He has discovered in Trudy a sexuality without inhibition or shame. "You think we make a baby?" she asks Nick, and then answers herself, "Make plenty baby what the hell." Nick embraces the world his father warned against:

His father had summed up the whole matter by stating that masturbation produced blindness, insanity and death, while a man who went with prostitutes would contract hideous venereal diseases and that the thing to do was keep your hands off of people.

By recreating Trudy in his memory Nick not only breaks the distance of time but also breaks the emotional distance his father accepts. Nick does not keep his hands "off of people" but has instead entered a world untainted by the father's Puritanism.

Yet if the scene gives us Nick Adams in the garden, it also gives us his fall. Unlike the Indians, Nick does not have a natural ease with sex. Though he yearns to belong to the place, his father's blood betrays his "true heritage."

When Nick hears that Eddie, Trudy and Billy's half-brother, wants to have sex with his sister, he is outraged. He imagines himself killing Eddie, scalping him and throwing him to the dogs. Nick is pleased with the picture of himself he has created—a picture drawn from dime novels:

... Having scalped that half-breed renegade and standing, watching the dogs tear him, his face unchanging, [Nick] fell backward against the tree, held tight around the neck, Trudy holding, choking him, and crying. 'No kill him! No kill him! No kill him! No. No. No. Nickie. Nickie!'

'What's the matter with you?'

'No kill him.'

'He just a big bluff.'

'All right,' Nickie said. 'I won't kill him unless he comes around the house. Let go of me.'

'That's good,' Trudy said. 'You want to do anything now? I feel good now.'

'If Billy goes away.' Nick had killed Eddie Gilby, then pardoned him his life, and he was a man now.

Trudy quickly recovers from the intrusion of Nick's violence. Nick does not: he silently continues the fantasy; he sends Billy away. Into the "Eden" he carries his rage, shame and romanticism; into the scene which was to assure him of the masculinity his father could not provide, Nick carries the childish romance of conquering the foe and being transformed suddenly into "a man now." Nick shatters his own relationship to the forest's ease and innocence; in casting for himself the role of white man defending the pure maid from the "half-breed renegade," Nick suffers the same split as his father. He sentimentalizes. After Nick has sex with Trudy again, he is not vitalized, as is she, but feels instead that "something inside

... had gone a long way away." He is no longer "hollow and happy," but emptied instead. He turns back towards his father's home.

And he turns again toward the present. The memory of Trudy remains for him something no one can take—a memory of his life in a more whole and innocent world—yet the memory fails to function in the present. "Long time ago good," Nick remembers, "Now no good." Even the mythical past has begun to disappear. The Indians now contribute to the wreckage of the forest; Nick recalls how each year "there was less forest and more open, hot, shadeless, weed-grown slashing." Nick finds what he shares with his father—that they are both citizens of the incomplete and fallen world—just when he'd begun to leave him.

When he turns back into the present Nick finds his own son awake beside him on the car seat. Nick's relationship to his father, and to his younger self, is underscored by the fact that he wakes into the present to find himself the father now. His son stresses both the distance and connection between Nick and his father when he tells Nick, "I hope we won't live somewhere so that I can never go to pray at your tomb when you're dead." He raises for Nick the question and fear of whether his son will have to assume the same distance, making for himself a life in a foreign place, far from the father.

The unquestioned love of Nick's son for his grandfather also reminds Nick of one's need for the past, a past which defines the present self, as Nick's does. The son is even more an exile than Nick; he has no sense of place. He does not understand the difference between being buried in America or France; he can't remember the grandfather except for having given him "an air rifle" and "an American flag," the dead symbols of Nick's past.

Yet the son, if an exile, also asks that his past be given him. In agreeing that they will visit the grandfather's tomb, Nick seems to agree to some acceptance of his father and of that past. Yet he also seems to agree to pass on to his son a past stripped of ambivalence. Of the Indians Nick says only, "they were very nice;" he cannot, he feels, speak to his son about Trudy. Likewise, he supports the heroic view of his own father, telling his son, "He was a great hunter and fisherman and he had wonderful eyes."

But if Nick wants to spare his son his own ambivalence, he also spares his son a full knowledge of the world—his father's limits, his own. In doing so he continues the cycle in which the son will grow, as did Nick, into disappointment with the father, grow to be betrayed and to betray. In this sense "Fathers and Sons" refers to a cycle without release. The father is doomed to fall from the son's heroic vision of him; the son is doomed to embrace and kill. In giving to his son the masculine world he himself yearned for—the world of hunting, fishing, of Fathers—Nick passes on both the *need* to prove oneself within that world and the resultant split. Nick himself does not resolve the split within the story; it seems in fact irresolvable.

One can just "get rid of it" or move in close. But Nick does seem to begin to see more intimately, to create the past in detail, more the citizen of the small town than the stranger. He has begun, by rehearsal, to write the story we have read. But the ambivalence lasts even here. Nick agrees to "visit" the tomb of the father, not to "pray."

I mentioned earlier that "Fathers and Sons" may be read as a semi-autobiographical story; in doing so it is interesting to consider for a moment these images of distance in relationship to Hemingway's own creative process. For Hemingway, as for Nick, distance seems to have been a necessary stance in approaching his materials. Just as Nicholas has his younger self stand between himself and the experience he seeks to describe. Likewise, Hemingway's terse and tense prose style serves to create the pace and intimacy of memory, gives us some idea of at least one thing that chaos came to mean—the past. "Fathers and Sons" is, in many ways, the obverse of "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." It suggests how ambivalence and fear lie within the darkness which a "well-lighted place" staves off. To stay within the light becomes a way out of those traps—perhaps also "the trap" his father "helped create" and fell victim to, certainly the trap of darkness which will not allow the clarity Hemingway seeks.

Even that clarity, however, is not without ambiguity. Through a focus on the present moment it may provide grace, as do the fish in "Big Two-Hearted River," "keeping themselves steady in the current with wavering fins," yet it is also created by the same force which holds the fish: a great tension. "Fathers and Sons" reveals the way in which Hemingway's personal and stylistic ambiguity may rise from a deep ambivalence towards the past and self. As Jackson Benson has noted in *Hemingway: The Writer's Art of Self-Defense*, "Hemingway was the American in the middle, whose conflict was never resolved, and whose pain was relieved only temporarily by the use of a portable Corona." Hemingway's journey into the past, like Nick's, is not only an attempt to recover, it is also a testing of the self, to survive.

"Fathers and Sons" also points to an ambivalence over the masculine role. Though Hemingway never questions the role—it appears as a given—it is a source of the fantastic burden Nick feels. His shame over his father's weakness appears stultifying; Nick must constantly battle to redeem what the father lost. In thinking of Hemingway as a writer of boy's stories, it is interesting to recall how in "Fathers and Sons" the male is condemned repeatedly to suffer the loss of the boy's world, yet remain unable to create a wholly new one, a world that might be equally valued. Nick becomes the father, passing the conflict on to his son—inevitable.

If "Fathers and Sons" makes a peace with this, and with the father, it is perhaps made in the way in which Nick becomes a father also to himself. He seeks to become the father he lost. This motion necessarily recalls the way in which Hemingway himself came to create the role of "Papa," the

American Father. One can only wonder if Hemingway's suicide was a desperate attempt to embrace the father, or if it was an admission of what he shared with the father and the possible distance he failed to create. Such a question is necessarily speculative, perhaps even unfair, yet it is interesting that becoming the father appears as the only way out in "Fathers and Sons." In this way Nick both possesses a dead father and at the same time tries to give birth to a new one: himself. It is perhaps useful here to create another full circle, as "Fathers and Sons" does, and quote the Lobdell poem with which we began:

I wanted to write a friend
who also has a father who is dead.
Perhaps there were things we could do for each other.
But perhaps he had already forgotten his father.
I go back to the time
my father used to check my body
for ticks, a job I still recoil from
though it is necessary to do.