

DAVID ROMPF

*Changes*

MY FATHER ENDURED COUNTLESS setbacks after surgery to replace his aortic valve: life-threatening infection, caustic antibiotics, months quarantined in hospital rooms, lungs flooded with liquid. Each day brought a new hurdle and a new medication. During this period, as independence faded with bodily strength, he began wearing diapers, which on any given day was the least or worst of his worries. On some days it was more worrisome for my mother, my sister, and me because the task of changing him would eventually shift to us.

In the hospital, to allow some privacy where privacy was scarce, we stood behind a pulled curtain or waited outside in the hall while a nurse removed my father's pajama bottoms and then his diaper, turned his frail body, and cleaned what needed to be cleaned. If he was cold, a blanket was spread over his upper body. Turned again on his back, his groin and thighs were checked for any smears. Before a new diaper went on, he was swabbed with medicated wipes. Lying in bed for long periods causes the skin to break down and become tender; if it is not treated properly, sores will develop, escalating the risk of infection. Two or three times a day, and once always just before the lights were dimmed, fresh clothing and linen were exchanged for the soiled. Sometimes I watched

the nurses through an opening in the curtain; most of them worked methodically, with the precision and efficiency acquired from hundreds or thousands of changes. They applied lotion with their gloved fingertips, rubbing the substance in small circles. They asked, "Does it hurt?" or "Is it too cold? Are you uncomfortable?"

The nurses dressed him in a laundered gown or a pair of flannels my mother brought from home. Daytime blankets gave way to nighttime blankets, and when the change was finally done and the curtain pulled open, we re-entered the room to find my father looking snug in his bed and relieved.

"She was rough," my father said of one nurse. "Like a linebacker."

I'd met her. She was bulky and broad-shouldered, commanding. Her hands appeared capable of crushing stone. But she was also quick and light on her feet, and flipped her patient from side to side in a strangely silent motion. I imagined she could safely toss my father into the air and, before he landed, he'd be changed, dressed and ready for bed. She slathered the medicinal lotion with gusto, smoothing it over like plaster on a wall, but when it was all over my father seemed relaxed and renewed, no worse for wear on her field of play.

Staying clean in the hospital—a constant effort—was as important as keeping the antibiotics flowing into my father's body, monitoring his vitals, and removing toxins from his blood. No hygiene, no health; no cleanliness, no comfort. The nurses I observed seemed to approach the duty with cheerful expediency, like angels on their righteous quest. They knew it was noble to finish quickly and gracefully, out of respect for the patient. I never forgot that my father was one of many on the ward who needed changing, often in the middle of the night, and we were mindful that, upon his discharge, we would not have the help of these godly attendants.

Before he comes home, on Christmas Eve, the easy part is accomplished: we buy a box of diapers and set it on the living room floor, ready to be

opened. Although we know the change will need to happen soon, none of us has spoken about it.

It isn't the unpleasantness—the filth, the pungency—that weighs on us. My mother and sister, after all, have changed countless diapers for their children. But it is not a child who has been delivered to us on an ambulance gurney a few minutes before seven in the evening. He is a husband and father, partner and provider, a man who never expected to be dependent on others and who never thought he would end up wearing diapers. He is an eighty-two-year-old army veteran with unflinching modesty. Until my father's heart surgery, I had never seen his body naked, except once when my sister and I were children. We had hidden in his bedroom closet with the intent to scare him, and when we popped out of our hiding place, it was he who, while removing his work clothes, surprised us.

My brother-in-law, who once worked as a student intern in a hospital and learned alongside nurses, is the first to change my father at home. Narrating each step, he emphasizes points that might not have occurred to us—certainly not to me, a childless middle-aged man. Such as: after the adhesive strips have been cut off, turn the used diaper into the repository for the used moist wipes—a Changing 101 precept: keep dirty with dirty and as far away as possible from clean—and when you are finished, roll up the old diaper, keeping its contents at the center. Then slip the neat package of waste into a plastic bag. A small detail, and arguably insignificant compared with sustaining hydration or dialing 911 when blood pressure sinks below a safe level, but it is a detail that helps ease us into our new responsibilities. In sustaining my father's life with his comfort and cleanliness as priorities, the integrity of the change was paramount.

While my brother-in-law conducts our lesson, my sister holds my father, who lies on his side, his face turned toward the wall, looking away from us. There is no privacy curtain to be pulled. He groans as his

backside is cleaned, and at first we think he might be in physical pain, his muscles aching after the move from the hospital. But for weeks he would continue to groan during his changes, not from bodily torment but from the misery of having his family perform the unthinkable.

The next day, after several tutorials, it is our turn.

My mother will not, or cannot, go next. At first, her reluctance seems disconcerting. Decades earlier, she had changed babies when cloth diapers were pinned, not taped, and tossed into the washing machine for recycling. It was much easier now, I thought, but what did I know? Nothing at all, and no other worldly experience could prepare one for this. It isn't the process itself from which my mother initially turns away; it is the person that has deflected her, the one who had shared her bed, the man who was twenty-seven years old when he stood next to her at the altar. Although my father is home—for him, the most comfortable and reassuring place—she cannot yet bring herself to regard him as less independent than he was when we arrived in California in the nineteen-sixties and had nowhere to go, when he marched out into the scorching heat and found a job and an apartment for his family. I will come to understand her reluctance weeks later, not because it's an especially difficult thing to figure out but because, for now, we are figuring out how to change my father. A father waiting to be changed takes precedence over reflection and history. Do now; think later.

As I begin, for the first time, my father groans. The antibacterial wipes are icy against his body. "Just one more wipe," I say. "I know it's uncomfortable but it's almost over." Where his skin has reddened I apply layers of thick white cream.

"Almost done," I keep saying.

The mantras of relief: almost finished, almost over, looking good, all clean, getting ready to put fresh pants on.

I refer to the diapers as pants to preserve his dignity. They look like plastic gray underwear and I can pull them up over his feet and legs,

then up to his waist, like a regular pair of shorts or briefs. “There, your pants are on,” I say. I prefer these to the other kind with two dangling, unwieldy strips that, for me, seem impossible to fasten correctly into place. These less desirable diapers are white, not gray, and look like they belong on an infant. They amplify my father’s current vulnerability. My mother will come to insist on using the white ones because they fit more tightly, better to prevent leakage.

With my father unclothed before me, I remember someone once saying that he ate like a squirrel and needed to put more meat on his bones. He had always been a lean man. But he did not at all eat like a squirrel; he could gulp chocolate shakes and finish plates of cheese and crackers in the evening and never gain a pound. The man who had been skinny his whole life shed thirty pounds in the hospital, weight he could not afford to lose. Now, months after surgery, he seems emaciated, breakable. During changes I’m afraid that I’ll wipe with too much pressure or turn him too abruptly. His legs, which have lost an alarming amount of muscle, look like thin, white rubber tubes. The skin of his buttocks sags and the spiky contours of his spine can be seen with textbook detail. Despite this diminished state, his body perseveres; it has fought and resisted, retreating only in the most vicious bombardments but always coming back to fight again.

During changes, I fear making a messy situation messier. My father has been good and kind to me, to all of us; his own curtains of humor and acceptance have obscured sacrifice and toil. He will live now in this den, in this bed, in these sheets, and I want his realm to be free of impurities. His waste carries stench, bacteria, and everything the world abhors, but whatever its name, eliminating all traces of it becomes a mission of absolute, pristine perfection. But I also fear hurting him and I fear breaching the most personal boundaries of privacy that exist even among family members. Montaigne wrote that man is the sole animal whose nudity offends his own companions, and the only one who, in

his natural actions, withdraws and hides himself from his own kind. His assertion seems generally true, but not now, not for us, and not for anyone who will become dependent on others, not for those who will surrender to undress, yield to a damp washcloth in someone else’s tentative, searching hands. None of us can hide during my father’s changes.

Each time I remove my father’s pajamas, my own hands, gloved against bacteria and infection, link me with my paternal grandmother, who died when I was eleven. I’ve seen pictures of her as a young woman but could barely imagine her as my father’s mother. To me she was the silver-haired woman who took out her false teeth at unexpected moments or gave us quarters for our piggy banks. Now here is her son spread out on a blue cotton sheet, the shades pulled at the hour for a new pair of pants. Here, too, is her grandson, gray at the temples, trying to focus on his mission. A man becomes connected to his grandmother through the changing of his father, and a father becomes child to his son. We are boys traveling together through ten minutes of infinity, and each of us becomes more bound to the other, differences purged like unwanted molecules. Montaigne seems to have forgotten about being an infant, or an elder without options. We may withdraw and hide during the long middle stretch, but at the beginning we are uncovered and unaware, and toward the end we are stripped of our modesties.

When my mother cleans him the first time, she announces, “I changed your father!”

She is triumphant. She is proud to have surmounted what seemed, only days earlier, unachievable. I cannot convince her to call the diapers pants because that is not her style; it’s my choice, not hers. (*Your father’s diapers*: words I never thought I’d hear.) Comparing online prices for bulk supplies, my mother assumes a dignity defined by cool practicality. My father is simply dirty or clean, ready for changing or good for another few hours. He smells clean or he doesn’t. To get the job done, she

distances herself, for a time, from her role as spouse of more than fifty years. "I changed your father," she says, as if he was not also her husband. But soon, during the changes, they talk as husband and wife, planning the meals they want to eat or discussing the evening's TV schedule. She dresses him in a new shirt she has picked out, or wraps him in crisp sheets and spritzes him with his favorite cologne. She looks at him and declares, "You're so cute!" And that is how I imagine she thought of him when she was sixteen and he was twenty-five, my mother gazing at the butcher from the coffee aisle at the A&P. Cute, young, closely shaven, lean and sinewy from his work, healthy, clean.

Watching her take care of my father, I have never felt older. Not only older but on the brink of helplessness, of being unhelpful, even when I can assist with daily chores, the lifting, the feeding, and the changing. I am no longer the young man driven by exuberance and uncomplicated hope. I live in a grittiness of the present, with a perspective shaped by the minute that has just passed and the minute to follow.

You can never believe, or want to believe, that the time will come, this time when your father or mother will be swaddled, but when it does, all belief—moral and political and religious—seems to recede or evaporate altogether. What you are left with is a human who must presently be cleaned because he cannot clean himself. Changing my father provided moments of uncommon purity. We had never been so close, and despite physical decline and passing years, we had never been so ageless, child and parent merged, not separated, by transposed roles. As I pulled a new pair of pants up his legs, eternity belonged to us while duty and burden dissolved. And now that he is gone, the boxes of unused diapers given away, I dream of changing him one more time.