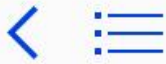


JAMES WOOD
Becoming Them

FROM *The New Yorker*

NIETZSCHE SAYS SOMEWHERE that the industrious, virtuous English ruined Sundays. I knew this at the age of twelve—that is, the Sunday part and the ruination part. When I was growing up, Sunday morning was all industry and virtue, a religious bustle: the dejected selection of formal clothes (tie, jacket, gray trousers); a quick pre-ecclesiastical breakfast; lace-up shoes handed to my father, master of the polishing arts (that oily Kiwi cake, glistening in its tin like food). Then the eternal boredom of church, with its ponderously enthusiastic adults. And, after that, Sunday lunch, as regimented as the Hapsburg Sunday lunches of brisket of beef and cherry dumplings that the Trotta family eats week after week in *The Radetzky March*. A joint of beef, or of lamb, or of pork, with gravy, roast potatoes, and a selection of fatally weakened vegetables (softened cauliflower, tattered Brussels sprouts, pale parsnips, all boiled punitively, as if to get the contagion out of them). It was the 1970s, in a small town in the north of England, but it could almost have been the 1870s. The only unusual element in this establishment was that my father cooked lunch. He cooked everything for our family, and always had; my mother was never interested in the kitchen, and gladly conceded that territory.

After lunch, tired and entitled—but sweetly, not triumphantly—my father sat in the sitting room and listened to classical music on the record player. He fell asleep gradually, not really intending to succumb. He wanted to be awake for one of his favorite composers, a narrow but rich cycle of Beethoven (piano sonatas and string quartets), Haydn (string quartets), and Schubert (lieder, especially “Die Winterreise”). These three masters were almost as unvarying as the rotation of Sunday beef, lamb, and pork. My brother and sister and I were all musical children, so we would be appealed to, as we crept toward the door. “Don’t go quite yet—you’ll miss the next one, ‘Der Lindenbaum,’ which Fischer-Dieskau does very well. He has the advantage over Peter Schreier.” My father’s musical discussion involved grading performances; though an intelligent auditor, he



didn't play a musical instrument. So my memory of those Sunday afternoons is as much a memory of names as of music: "No one has really approached the young Barenboim, in those late sonatas, except Kempff. But of course Kempff is a completely different pianist. Solomon, whom I heard playing the last two sonatas in London, when I was still at school, was tremendously fast and powerful." Richter, Kempff, Schnabel, Barenboim, Brendel, Ogdon, Pollini, Gilels, Arrau, Michelangeli, Fischer-Dieskau, Schreier, Schwarzkopf, Sutherland, Lott, Vickers, Pears—all the precious names of childhood.

I thought of those Sundays when Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau died, some months ago. Some of the obituaries rightly suggested that he became a brand name for a kind of smooth, dependable quality. That is how he functioned in our household (which isn't to deny his beauty as a singer, or the validity of my father's admiration of him). I grew a bit suspicious of that rich emollience of tone, that tempered, bourgeois liquidity. Just as intolerantly, I grew restless with the way my father would look up from his armchair and calmly utter the double-barreled guarantee: "Fischer-Dieskau, of course . . . Marvelous." The name had the shape and solidity of some dependable manufacturer or department store, a firm that would never go bust. Aston Martin, Rolls-Royce, Harvey Nichols, Austin Reed, Royal Enfield. My father had great faith in reliable British companies, often against the evidence, it should be said. It was a joke in our family. Once, at dinner, a wall plug and socket exploded, with a mild, odorous flash. Imperturbable, my dad went to the wall and examined the plug, like the scientist he was. "M.K. and Crabtree," he said, intoning the names of the manufacturers. "Totally dependable." We all laughed at this stolid evenness of response, while perhaps gratefully aware that this was the kind of man you would want around in an actual crisis. Fischer-Dieskau, like M.K. and Crabtree, was totally dependable, though inconveniently German.

Boredom, headache Sunday boredom: I blamed Christianity. On those English Sundays, the knowledge that all the shops were religiously shut (even the little back-alley record shop where my best friend and I fingered the new LPs) simmered like a sullen summer heat and made me lethargic. There was nowhere to go, nothing to do. My brother was somehow more adept than I at slipping away to sin; he made it to his bedroom, and I would hear Robert Plant whin-



ing to my children just as he spoke to me, in exactly the same tone and with the same fatherly melody, and I am dismayed by the plagiarism of inheritance. How unoriginal can one be? I sneeze the way he does, with a slightly theatrical whooshing sound. I say “Yes, yes” just as he does, calmly. The other day I saw that I have the same calves, with the shiny, unlit pallor I found ugly when I was a boy, and with those oddly hairless patches at the back (blame for which my father unscientifically placed on trouser cloth rubbing against the skin). Sometimes, when I am sitting doing nothing, I have the eerie sense that my mouth and eyes are set just like his. Like him, I am irritatingly phlegmatic at times of crisis. There must be a few differences: I won’t decide to become a priest in my fifties, as he did. I’m not religious, and don’t go to church, as he does, so my Sundays are much less dull than those of my childhood (and the shops are all open now, a liberty that brings its own universal boredom). I’m no scientist (he was a zoologist). I am less decent, less ascetic, far more materialistic (*pagan* would be my self-reassuring euphemism). And I’m sure he’s never Googled himself.

This summer I happened to reread a beautiful piece of writing by Lydia Davis, called “How Shall I Mourn Them?” It is barely two and a half pages long, and is just a list of questions:

- Shall I keep a tidy house, like L.?
- Shall I develop an unsanitary habit, like K.?
- Shall I sway from side to side a little as I walk, like C.?
- Shall I write letters to the editor, like R.?
- Shall I retire to my room often during the day, like R.?
- Shall I live alone in a large house, like B.?
- Shall I treat my husband coldly, like K.?
- Shall I give piano lessons, like M.?
- Shall I leave the butter out all day to soften, like C.?

When I first read this story (or whatever you want to call it), a few years ago, I understood it to be about mourning departed parents, partly because a certain amount of Davis’s recent work has appeared to touch obliquely on the death of her parents. I think that the initials could belong to the author’s friends—seen, over the years, falling into the habits of grief. It is a gentle comedy of Davis’s that those habits of grief are so ordinary (piano lessons, leaving out the butter)

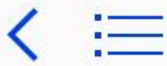


that they amount to the habits of life, and that therefore the answer to the title's question must be "I can't *choose* how to mourn them, as your verb, *shall*, suggests. I can mourn them only haplessly, accidentally, by surviving them. So I shall mourn them just by living." But I spoke recently to a friend about this story, and she thought that I had missed something. "Isn't it also about *becoming* one's parents, about taking on their very habits and tics after they disappear? So it's also about preserving those habits once they've disappeared, whether you want to or not." My friend told me that before her mother died she had had very little interest in gardening (one of her mother's passions); after her mother's death, she began to garden, and it now brings her real happiness.

If you are mourning your parents by becoming them, then presumably you can mourn them before they are dead: certainly I have spent my thirties and forties journeying through a long realization that I am decisively my parents' child, that I am destined to share many of their gestures and habits, and that this slow process of becoming them, or becoming more like them, is, like the Roman *ave atque vale*, both an address and a farewell.

My parents are still alive, in their mid-eighties now. But in the past two years my wife has watched both her parents die—her father quickly, of esophageal cancer, and her mother more slowly, from the effects of dementia. She bore one kind of grief for her father, and she bore a slightly different grief for her mother, for an absence that was the anticipation of loss, followed finally by the completion of that loss—grief in stages, terraced grief. I say to her, "I haven't yet had to go through any of what you've gone through." And she replies, "But you will, you know that, and it won't be so long."

My parents know much better than I do that *it won't be so long*; that their life together is precarious, and balances on the little plinth of their fading health. There is nothing unique in this prospect: it's just their age, and mine. Twice this year my father has been hospitalized. When he disappears like that, my mother struggles to survive, because she has macular degeneration and can't see. The second time I raced over to damp Scotland, to find her almost confined to the dining room, where there is a strong (and pungently ugly) electric fire, and living essentially on cereal; the carpet under the dining table was littered with oats, like the floor of a hamster's cage. When my father returned home, he had a cane for the first time in his



robust life, and seemed much weaker. My brother took him around the supermarket in a wheelchair.

I spent a week at my parents' home, helping out, and it took a couple of days for me to register that something was missing. It nagged at me, faintly, and then more strongly, and finally I realized that there was no music in the house. In fact, it occurred to me, there had been no music during several previous visits I'd made. I asked my father why he was no longer listening to music, and was shocked to discover that his CD player had been broken for more than a year, and that he had put off replacing it because a new one seemed expensive. He was much less perturbed than I was by this state of affairs. I could hardly imagine my parents' life without thinking of him sitting in an armchair, while Haydn or Beethoven or Schubert played. But of course this idea of him is an old memory of mine, and thus a picture of a younger man's habits—he is the middle-aged father of my childhood, not the rather different old man whom I don't see often enough because I live three thousand miles away, a man who doesn't care too much whether he listens to music or not. So even as I become him, he becomes someone else.

Most likely he is simply too busy looking after my mother to have time to relax. He is the cook, the driver, the shopper, the banker, the person who uses the computer, who gets wood or coal for the fire, who mends things when they break, who puts the cat out, and who locks up at night. Perhaps he is too busy being anxious about my mother, being slightly afraid for both of them, to sit as he used to, triumphant and calm and secure.

Or perhaps this is just my fear projected onto him. When I was a teenager, I used to think that Philip Larkin's line about how life is first boredom, then fear, was right about boredom (those Sundays) and wrong about fear. What's so fearful about life? Now, at forty-seven, I think it should be the other way around: life is first fear, then boredom (as perhaps the fearful Larkin of "Aubade" knew). Fear for oneself, fear for those one loves. I sleep very poorly these days; I lie awake, full of apprehensions. All kinds of them, starting with the small stuff and rising. How absurd that I should be paid to write book reviews! How long is *that* likely to last? And what's the point of the bloody things? Why on earth would the money *not* run out? Will I be alive in five years? Isn't some kind of mortal disease likely? How will I cope with death and loss—with the death of my parents, or,



worse, and unimaginably, of my wife or children? How appalling to lose one's mind, as my mother-in-law did! Or to lose all mobility but not one's mind and become a prisoner, like the late Tony Judt. If I faced such a diagnosis, would I have the courage to kill myself? Does my father have pancreatic cancer? And on and on.

There is nothing very particular about these anxieties. They're banal, even a little comic, as the mother in Per Petterson's novel *I Curse the River of Time* understands when some bad medical news is delivered. She had lain awake, night after night, worried about dying of lung cancer: "And then I get cancer of the stomach. What a waste of time!" It's just the river of time, and a waste of time. But there it is. And sometimes I murmur to myself, repetitively, partly to calm myself down, "How shall I mourn them?" How indeed? For it sounds like the title of a beautiful song, a German lament, something my father might have listened to on a Sunday afternoon, when he still did.