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Gilead

Marilynne Robinson

I told you last night that I might be gone sometime, and you said, Where, and I said, To be with the Good Lord, and you said, Why, and I said, Because I'm old, and you said, I don't think you're old. And you put your hand in my hand and you said, You aren't very old, as if that settled it. I told you you might have a very different life from mine, and from the life you've had with me, and that would be a wonderful thing, there are many ways to live a good life. And you said, Mama already told me that. And then you said, Don't laugh! because you thought I was laughing at you. You reached up and put your fingers on my lips and gave me that look I never in my life saw on any other face besides your mother's. It's a kind of furious pride, very passionate and stern. I'm always a little surprised to find my eyebrows unsinged after I've suffered one of those looks. I will miss them.

It seems ridiculous to suppose the dead miss anything. If you're a grown man when you read this – it is my intention for this letter that you will read it then – I'll have been gone a long time. I'll know most of what there is to know about being dead, but I'll probably keep it to myself. That seems to be the way of things.

I don't know how many times people have asked me what death is like, sometimes when they were only an hour or two from finding out for themselves. Even when I was a very young man, people as old as I am now would ask me, hold on to my hands and look into my eyes with their old milky eyes, as if they knew I knew and they were going to make me tell them. I used to say it was like going home. We have no home in this world, I used to say, and then I'd walk back up the road to this old place and make myself a pot of coffee and a fried-egg sandwich and listen to the radio, when I got one, in the dark as often as not. Do you remember this house? I think you must, a little. I grew up in parsonages. I've lived in this one most of my life, and I've visited in a good many others, because my father's friends and most of our relatives also lived in parsonages. And when I thought about it in those days, which wasn't too often, I thought this was the worst of them all, the draftiest and the dreariest. Well, that was my state of mind at the time. It's a perfectly good old house, but I was all alone in it then. And that made it seem strange to me. I didn't feel very much at home in the world, that was a fact. Now I do.

And now they say my heart is failing. The doctor used the term 'angina pectoris,' which has a theological sound, like misericordia. Well, you expect these things at my age. My father died an old man, but his sisters didn't live very long, really. So I can only be grateful. I do regret that I have almost nothing to leave you and your mother. A few old books no one else would want. I never made any money to speak of, and I never paid any attention to the money I had. It was the furthest thing from my mind that I'd be leaving a wife and child, believe me. I'd have been a better father if I'd known. I'd have set something by for you.

That is the main thing I want to tell you, that I regret very deeply the hard times I know you and your mother must have gone through, with no real help from me at all, except my prayers, and I pray all the time. I did while I lived, and I do now, too, if that is how things are in the next life.

I can hear you talking with your mother, you asking, she answering. It's not the words I hear, just the sounds of your voices. You don't like to go to sleep, and every night she has to sort of talk you into it all over again. I never hear her sing except at night, from the next room, when she's coaxing you to sleep. And then I can't make out what song it is she's singing. Her voice is very low. It sounds beautiful to me, but she laughs when I say that.

I really can't tell what's beautiful anymore. I passed two young fellows on the street the other day. I know who they are, they work at the garage. They're not churchgoing, either one of them, just decent rascally young fellows who have to be joking all the time, and there they were, propped against the garage wall in the sunshine, lighting up their cigarettes. They're always so black with grease and so strong with gasoline I don't know why they don't catch fire themselves. They were passing remarks back and forth the way they do and laughing that wicked way they have. And it seemed beautiful to me. It is an amazing thing to watch people laugh, the way it sort of takes them over. Sometimes they really do struggle with it. I see that in church often enough. So I wonder what it is and where it comes from, and I wonder what it expends out of your system, so that you have to do it till you're done, like crying in a way, I suppose, except that laughter is much more easily spent.

When they saw me coming, of course the joking stopped, but I could see they were still laughing to themselves, thinking what the old preacher almost heard them say.

I felt like telling them, I appreciate a joke as much as anybody. There have been many occasions in my life when I have wanted to say that. But it's not a thing people are willing to accept. They want you to be a little bit apart. I felt like saying, I'm a dying man, and I won't have so many more occasions to laugh, in this world at least. But that would just make them serious and polite, I suppose. I'm keeping my condition a secret as long as I can. For a dying man I feel pretty good, and that is a blessing. Of course your mother knows about it. She said if I feel good, maybe the doctor is wrong. But at my age there's a limit to how wrong he can be.

That's the strangest thing about this life, about being in the ministry. People change the subject when they see you coming. And then sometimes those very same people come into your study and tell you the most remarkable things. There's a lot under

the surface of life, everyone knows that. A lot of malice and dread and guilt, and so much loneliness, where you wouldn't really expect to find it, either.

My mother's father was a preacher, and my father's father was, too, and his father before him, and before that, nobody knows, but I wouldn't hesitate to guess. That life was second nature to them, just as it is to me. They were fine people, but if there was one thing I should have learned from them and did not learn, it was to control my temper. This is wisdom I should have attained a long time ago. Even now, when a flutter of my pulse makes me think of final things, I find myself losing my temper, because a drawer sticks or because I've misplaced my glasses. I tell you so that you can watch for this in yourself.

A little too much anger, too often or at the wrong time, can destroy more than you would ever imagine. Above all, mind what you say. 'Behold how much wood is kindled by how small a fire, and the tongue is a fire' – that's the truth. When my father was old he told me that very thing in a letter he sent me. Which, as it happens, I burned. I dropped it right in the stove. This surprised me a good deal more at the time than it does in retrospect.

I believe I'll make an experiment with candor here. Now, I say this with all respect. My father was a man who acted from principle, as he said himself. He acted from faithfulness to the truth as he saw it. But something in the way he went about it made him disappointing from time to time, and not just to me. I say this despite all the attention he gave to me bringing me up, for which I am profoundly in his debt, though he himself might dispute that. God rest his soul, I know for a fact I disappointed him. It is a remarkable thing to consider. We meant well by each other, too.

Well, see and see but do not perceive, hear and hear but do not understand, as the Lord says. I can't claim to understand that saying, as many times as I've heard it, and even preached on it. It simply states a deeply mysterious fact. You can know a thing to death and be for all purposes completely ignorant of it. A man can know his father, or his son, and there might still be nothing between them but loyalty and love and mutual incomprehension.

My point in mentioning this is only to say that people who feel any sort of regret where you are concerned will suppose you are angry, and they will see anger in what you do, even if you're just quietly going about a life of your own choosing. They make you doubt yourself, which, depending on cases, can be a severe distraction and a waste of time. This is a thing I wish I had understood much earlier than I did. Just to reflect on it makes me a little irritated. Irritation is a form of anger, I recognize that.

One great benefit of a religious vocation is that it helps you concentrate. It gives you a good basic sense of what is being asked of you and also what you might as well ignore. If I have any wisdom to offer, this is a fair part of it.

You have blessed our house not quite seven years, and fairly lean years, too, so late in my life. There was no way for me to make any changes to provide for the two of you. Still, I think about it and I pray. It is very much in my mind. I want you to know that.

We're having a fine spring, and this is another fine day. You were almost late for school. We stood you on a chair and you ate toast and jam while your mother polished your shoes and I combed your hair. You had a page of sums to do that you should have done last night, and you took forever over them this morning, trying to get all the numbers facing the right way. You're like your mother, so serious about everything. The old men call you Deacon, but that seriousness isn't all from my side of the family. I'd never seen anything like it until I met her. Well, putting aside my grandfather. It seemed to me to be half sadness and half fury, and I wondered what in her life could have put that expression in her eyes. And then when you were about three, just a little fellow, I came into the nursery one morning and there you were down on the floor in the sunlight in your trapdoor pajamas, trying to figure a way to fix a broken crayon. And you looked up at me and it was just that look of hers. I've thought of that moment many times. I'll tell you, sometimes it has seemed to me that you were looking back through life, back through troubles I pray you'll never have, asking me to kindly explain myself.

'You're just like all them old men in the Bible,' your mother tells me, and that would be true, if I could manage to live a hundred and twenty years, and maybe have a few cattle and oxen and menservants and maidservants. My father left me a trade, which happened also to be my vocation. But the fact is, it was all second nature to me, I grew up with it. Most likely you will not.

I saw a bubble float past my window, fat and wobbly and ripening toward that dragonfly blue they turn just before they burst. So I looked down at the yard and there you were, you and your mother, blowing bubbles at the cat, such a barrage of them that the poor beast was beside herself at the glut of opportunity. She was actually leaping in the air, our insouciant Soapy! Some of the bubbles drifted up through the branches, even above the trees. You two were too intent on the cat to see the celestial consequences of your worldly endeavors. They were very lovely. Your mother is wearing her blue dress and you are wearing your red shirt and you were kneeling on the ground together with Soapy between and that effulgence of bubbles rising, and so much laughter. Ah, this life, this world.

Your mother told you I'm writing your begats, and you seemed very pleased with the idea. Well, then. What should I record for you? I, John Ames, was born in the Year of Our Lord 1880 in the state of Kansas, the son of John Ames and Martha Turner Ames, grandson of John Ames and Margaret Todd Ames. At this writing I

have lived seventy-six years, seventy-four of them here in Gilead, Iowa, excepting study at the college and at seminary.

And what else should I tell you?

When I was twelve years old, my father took me to the grave of my grandfather. At that time my family had been living in Gilead for about ten years, my father serving the church here. His father, who was born in Maine and had come out to Kansas in the 1830s, lived with us for a number of years after his retirement. Then the old man ran off to become a sort of itinerant preacher, or so we believed. He died in Kansas and was buried there, near a town that had pretty well lost its people. A drought had driven most of them away, those who had not already left for towns closer to the railroad. Surely there was only a town in that place to begin with because it was Kansas, and the people who settled it were Free Soilers who weren't really thinking about the long term. I don't often use the expression 'godforsaken,' but when I think back to that place, that word does come to mind. It took my father months to find where the old man had ended up, lots of letters of inquiry to churches and newspapers and so on. He put a great deal of effort into it. Finally someone wrote back and sent a little package with his watch and a beat-up old Bible and some letters, which I learned later were just a few of my father's letters of inquiry, no doubt given to the old man by people who thought they had induced him to come home.

It grieved my father bitterly that the last words he said to his father were very angry words and there could never be any reconciliation between them in this life. He did truly honor his father, generally speaking, and it was hard for him to accept that things should have ended the way they did.

That was in 1892, so travel was still pretty hard. We went as far as we could by train, and then my father hired a wagon and team. That was more than we needed, but it was all we could find. We took some bad directions and got lost, and we had so much trouble keeping the horses watered that we boarded them at a farmstead and went the rest of the way on foot. The roads were terrible, anyway, swamped in dust where they were traveled and baked into ruts where they were not. My father was carrying some tools in a gunnysack so he could try to put the grave to rights a little, and I was carrying what we had for food, hardtack and jerky and the few little yellow apples we picked up along the road here and there, and our changes of shirts and socks, all by then filthy.

He didn't really have enough money to make the trip at that time, but it was so much in his thoughts that he couldn't wait until he had saved up for it. I told him I had to go, too, and he respected that, though it did make many things harder. My mother had been reading about how bad the drought was west of us, and she was not at all happy when he said he planned to take me along. He told her it would be educational, and it surely was. My father was set on finding that grave despite any hardship. Never before in my life had I wondered where I would come by my next drink of water, and I number it among my blessings that I have not had occasion to

wonder since. There were times when I truly believed we might just wander off and die. Once, when my father was gathering sticks for firewood into my arms, he said we were like Abraham and Isaac on the way to Mount Moriah. I'd thought as much myself.

It was so bad out there we couldn't buy food. We stopped at a farmstead and asked the lady, and she took a little bundle down from a cupboard and showed us some coins and bills and said, 'It might as well be Confederate for all the good it does me.' The general store had closed, and she couldn't get salt or sugar or flour. We traded her some of our miserable jerky - I've never been able to stand the sight of it since then - for two boiled eggs and two boiled potatoes, which tasted wonderful even without salt.

Then my father asked after his father and she said, Why, yes, he'd been in the neighborhood. She didn't know he had died, but she knew where he was likely to have been buried, and she showed us to what remained of a road that would take us right to the place, not three miles from where we stood. The road was overgrown, but as you walked along you could see the ruts. The brush grew lower in them, because the earth was still packed so hard. We walked past that graveyard twice. The two or three headstones in it had fallen over and it was all grown up with weeds and grass. The third time, my father noticed a fence post, so we walked over to it, and we could see a handful of graves, a row of maybe seven or eight, and below it a half row, swamped with that dead brown grass. I remember that the incompleteness of it seemed sad to me. In the second row we found a marker someone had made by stripping a patch of bark off a log and then driving nails partway in and bending them down flat so they made the letters REV AMES. The R looked like the A and the S was a backward Z, but there was no mistaking it.

It was evening by then, so we walked back to the lady's farm and washed at her cistern and drank from her well and slept in her hayloft. She brought us a supper of cornmeal mush. I loved that woman like a second mother. I loved her to the point of tears. We were up before daylight to milk and cut kindling and draw her a bucket of water, and she met us at the door with a breakfast of fried mush with blackberry preserves melted over it and a spoonful of top milk on it, and we ate standing there at the stoop in the chill and the dark, and it was perfectly wonderful.

Then we went back to the graveyard, which was just a patch of ground with a half-fallen fence around it and a gate on a chain weighted with a cowbell. My father and I fixed up the fence as best we could. He broke up the ground on the grave a little with his jackknife. But then he decided we should go back to the farmhouse again to borrow a couple of hoes and make a better job of it. He said, 'We might as well look after these other folks while we're here.' This time the lady had a dinner of navy beans waiting for us. I don't remember her name, which seems a pity. She had an index finger that was off at the first knuckle, and she spoke with a lisp. She seemed old to me at the time, but I think she was just a country woman, trying to keep her manners and her sanity, trying to keep alive, weary as could be and all by herself out there. My father said she spoke as if her people might be from Maine, but he didn't ask her. She cried when we said goodbye to her, and wiped her face with her apron. My father asked if there was a letter or a message she would like us to carry back

with us and she said no. He asked if she would like to come along, and she thanked us and shook her head and said, 'There's the cow.' She said, 'We'll be just fine when the rain comes.'

That graveyard was about the loneliest place you could imagine. If I were to say it was going back to nature, you might get the idea that there was some sort of vitality about the place. But it was parched and sun-stricken. It was hard to imagine the grass had ever been green. Everywhere you stepped, little grasshoppers would fly up by the score, making that snap they do, like striking a match. My father put his hands in his pockets and looked around and shook his head. Then he started cutting the brush back with a hand scythe he had brought, and we set up the markers that had fallen over – most of the graves were just outlined with stones, with no names or dates or anything on them at all. My father said to be careful where I stepped. There were small graves here and there that I hadn't noticed at first, or I hadn't quite realized what they were. I certainly didn't want to walk on them, but until he cut the weeds down I couldn't tell where they were, and then I knew I had stepped on some of them, and I felt sick. Only in childhood have I felt guilt like that, and pity. I still dream about it. My father always said when someone dies the body is just a suit of old clothes the spirit doesn't want anymore. But there we were, half killing ourselves to find a grave, and as cautious as we could be about where we put our feet.

We worked a good while at putting things to rights. It was hot, and there was such a sound of grasshoppers, and of wind rattling that dry grass. Then we scattered seeds around, bee balm and coneflower and sunflower and bachelor's button and sweet pea. They were seeds we always saved out of our own garden. When we finished, my father sat down on the ground beside his father's grave. He stayed there for a good while, plucking at little whiskers of straw that still remained on it, fanning himself with his hat. I think he regretted that there was nothing more for him to do. Finally he got up and brushed himself off, and we stood there together with our miserable clothes all damp and our hands all dirty from the work, and the first crickets rasping and the flies really beginning to bother and the birds crying out the way they do when they're about ready to settle for the night, and my father bowed his head and began to pray, remembering his father to the Lord, and also asking the Lord's pardon, and his father's as well. I missed my grandfather mightily, and I felt the need of pardon, too. But that was a very long prayer.

Every prayer seemed long to me at that age, and I was truly bone tired. I tried to keep my eyes closed, but after a while I had to look around a little. And this is something I remember very well. At first I thought I saw the sun setting in the east; I knew where east was, because the sun was just over the horizon when we got there that morning. Then I realized that what I saw was a full moon rising just as the sun was going down. Each of them was standing on its edge, with the most wonderful light between them. It seemed as if you could touch it, as if there were palpable currents of light passing back and forth, or as if there were great taut skeins of light suspended between them. I wanted my father to see it, but I knew I'd have to startle him out of his prayer, and I wanted to do it the best way, so I took his hand and kissed it. And then I said, 'Look at the moon.' And he did. We just stood there until the sun was down and the moon was up. They seemed to float on the horizon for quite a long time, I suppose because they were both so bright you couldn't get a clear

look at them. And that grave, and my father and I, were exactly between them, which seemed amazing to me at the time, since I hadn't given much thought to the nature of the horizon.

My father said, 'I would never have thought this place could be beautiful. I'm glad to know that.'