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Sugar Face ~ forgiveness

It is a sunny day over the river, perfect for a drive to the local museum. So the children and I pack into our wintergreen hatchback and go to Katonah. I pay a small fee to enter the dim silence, where we see a man we gaze at face to face. He looks to be made of some kind of fine stone, perhaps marble fashioned at the hands of a modern Michelangelo, destined to sit here forever with his broad nose, strong chin, steady eyes. We look at his lashes, read the wall card to the right. Media: burnt sugar. Turning to survey his cheeks, we see what we'd not seen before. The crystalline disintegration has already begun. This man, like it or not, is bowing to a humidity that will slowly eat away each feature, turn him into sweet nothing. His name none of us remember anymore. In our house we just call him Sugar Face. . . .

When my father's father died, I went to see the body. I had never been to such a small gathering of its kind. It was clear to me that the six people who made an appearance sat in a wake of unforgiveness. It lapped at our toes, pushed us like so much flotsam to the edge of the viewing room. There was not much to say.

My father was the only one among his brothers who showed up. He did it to honor his father, who'd left him a one-dollar inheritance. In fact, my grandfather left one dollar to each of his sons except the youngest, son of a second wife. The youngest received a full inheritance. My father did not hold this against my grandfather, at least not enough to abandon him at his death. . . .

He shared with me a poem he had written a few years after my grandfather died. Not only did its verses recognize my grandfather's frailties, they also admitted something surprising. My own father had been reluctant to embrace the roles of husband and father that my grandfather so inadequately embodied. In fact, some of the ways my father treated women and children were geared toward proving himself to the man who never gave him a living inheritance of love.

I'm glad my father shared that poem with me. Seeing his pain and struggle with his own father was the beginning of my deeper forgiveness of him.

There was a time, after all, when I could not talk to my father on the phone without thinking, "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you." When he'd end the conversation with "I love you," I would just say, "Thanks." I was angry with him about my whole life—a life terrorized by a cruel stepfather, a life that felt fatherless, a life that lost several mothers to his constant infidelities. I was grateful when he opened his heart to me and I could release my anger, grain by grain, to the wind.

It's convenient when forgiveness happens this way. Someone opens a door, invites us inside,

lets us look at the cobwebbed corners the way my father let me. In fact, I always wish this had happened with my grandmother—the one who gardened her land with such great resolve.

Yet Grandma didn't change or reveal; her constant criticisms squeezed me with a force she probably never knew. Once I told her to stop talking to me the way she did, but she simply repeated her criticism in different words, as if I'd asked her to explain herself more clearly. I boiled with anger; I did not want to hear in more detail how ugly I looked with my hair styled the way my mother styled it. These words represented all the others I'd listened to over the years. Words about how she loved my father's first wife best. Words that painted my mother and my beloved stepmother Bezie as unpolished imposters. Words about her first and loveliest granddaughter—a girl I never knew until adulthood.

One day, standing in my study, I was totally immersed in unforgiveness. . . . Suddenly, and quite uninvited, these questions rolled into my mind. "What if the people whose love you cherish held you to the standard to which you hold her? What if your loved ones only saw your faults, of which you have many? What is your unforgiveness but an idol set on a pedestal—the idol of you set in perfection against others?"

Unforgiveness as idolatry. I was stunned. But it made sense. . . .

God has a lot to say about idols all through the Bible. And none of it is good news. "When you cry out for help, let your collection of idols save you!" he says. "The wind will carry all of them off, a mere breath will blow them away" (Isaiah 57:13). These words are forbidding. They poke me to attention and remind me that I must not bend to the temptation to be unforgiving. For if I bend, I am worshiping the idol of myself—one that does not have the power to face the wind.

I find this compelling, yet forgiveness is still a mountain to climb. Hand over hand I face disappointment. I need to mourn, like my father who slowly faced the truth of his father but did not turn away. Mostly I must come to terms with the discovery that someone I hoped in isn't marble after all, but another cast of burnt sugar—a sweet nothing like me. She needs God's grace, surely, but she also needs mine.

Living in the fragility of this discovery, I reframe the old adage about glass houses and stones. I tell myself, people with sugar faces shouldn't rain judgment. For God knows, as do my friends, my spouse and my children: I need their forgiveness. I need grace too.