

2000: My Father's Garden

My dad never said we *couldn't* eat the fruit from that old persimmon tree in our garden, but my sister, Rina, and I knew that it was off limits to us. When he first took us out to the orchard, he walked right up to the one and only persimmon tree that stood at the far end of the grove, chatting to us about everything and nothing as he went. He didn't look at the tree as he approached it; didn't give it a moment of his time or attention. He walked up to its roots below ground, spun around facing us and the whole of the orchard, with his back to the gnarled branches of the persimmon tree which were laden with golden orange fruit. The fruit was still hard and unripened and dangled from arthritic, finger-like limbs which seemed to engulf my father – fruit that looked as mysterious and beckoning as the eyes on a peacock's tail feathers.

My father's arms spread out to his sides; his palms opened to the sky as he invited us to play and eat in our orchard. And as his smile unlatched from his drooping cheeks, his thin, pink lips revealed his pearly-white false teeth. [Hitler had taken his real teeth from him.] His upper lip parted like a huge garage door rising on the stony façade of his face. Inside, his white Chiclet teeth gleamed like the chrome on some strange Dusenbergl relic that promised mobility but didn't deliver. He proclaimed in quiet, honest tones that Rina and I could climb *any* tree in our orchard and eat from any of their fruits. But, although he never said so, she and I knew that his hands, eyes and words didn't include that persimmon tree. But what his heart felt, I couldn't tell.

So, of course, we tested his words. We climbed the brittle branches of the gnarled, old persimmon tree and tasted its bitter fruit. And I blamed my father when one of the upper branches broke and I fell through the sieve-like limbs to the ground. And Rina complained to Mom that the fruit was unbearably bitter. But Dad got angry at us for mangling his tree, and Mom retorted with her own tart words, "The complaint department is closed." She turned away from us in measured steps and returned to her incessant cleaning. But what her heart felt, I couldn't tell.

Mom was a German, Jewish refugee who escaped Hitler's bone-crushing war machine. She ran from village to village throughout the war, lying about her Jewish identity, hiding her fugitive taxonomy in her Bavarian accent and soft blue eyes. She had torn off her yellow star from her coat sleeve for the dubious freedom of three years of starvation and flight, like a baby robin fleeing a burning forest, but lost in smoke and flames.

Her complaint department was closed and it never reopened. To open it to us would have meant opening it to her own feelings, and she just couldn't allow that to happen. Her mother: dead; her father: dead; her uncles and aunts: dead; cousins: dead. Dear God, she might have asked, "When will *You* hear how I feel?" But He never said.

Dad was a graduate of Dachau. He walked the Ivy League halls of Death Camp University. He graduated cum laud, class of '45. He majored in survival, but his family went up in smoke. When I told him that a branch on the damn persimmon tree broke causing me to fall and hurt myself, his face contorted like the side of a mountain in an earthquake and the back of his enormous hand cracked across my innocent face like thunder.

The sting of the fall was less stunning than the sting of his hand; the bitter persimmon less biting on my tongue than the reaction I felt inside me. So, I used my own examples to draw my parents' conclusion: talking about your feelings is about as helpful as putting a

leach on a wound. Like mama's loving boy, I decided that I would best be served if my "complaint department" were closed. My parents proved to me that I could never get my emotional needs met. I bow my head in acceptance of their beliefs.

Rina did the same. She grew up and married, had two point five children and a sports utility vehicle in her garage. But say one word she doesn't like and "bang" she'll let you have it. The thunder of the daughter was inherited from her father.

I chose to be a silent victim instead, my reward, insanity. Years of denying my feelings destroyed my mind. Twenty-five years of my life were held hostage to the feelings I locked up inside myself, feelings that were left dangling from a flimsy branch of a persimmon tree.

The world became a sour reflection of my embattled mind. I become the good Jew and the evil Nazi all in one. But I didn't complain, and I certainly didn't betray my parents by differentiating from them or acknowledging how I felt.

Until one cold winter day when the sky was as pale as a blue-white sheet of ice. The garden appeared dead. The trees had lost their leaves; the ground was covered with a brown-black sludge of leaves and puss-like patches of ice. But the persimmon tree, naked and tall, stood with orange ornaments hanging from its branches. The decorations were objets d'art glistening in the thin, cold air. The fruits hung temptingly and sensuously from every finger-like limb, beckoning me to taste it once again.

I dared to satisfy my own needs and reached up again. I ate of its sticky, sweet fruit and knew that I could put my parents' experiences no longer before my own. And in so doing, my own feelings were revealed more crystalline to myself. I suddenly realized I needed to express my feelings to myself more than others. With gentle kindness I offered my cherished emotions as a gift unto me. But in so doing I realized that for greater self-intimacy, I'd need others to witness and share in this sweet spiritual delight.