

# **The Only True Genius in the Family**

**By Jennie Nash**

## CHAPTER 1

My dad died at an incredibly inconvenient time, and I have no doubt that he planned it that way on purpose. It was February, 2006. His home on the Idaho side of the Tetons was buried under six feet of snow from a blizzard that had roared down from Canada and locked the whole region in its icy grip. There were no flights in or out of Driggs for a week, and once I finally arrived, I was prevented from carrying out his final wishes because the particular bend in the Teton River where I was to stand and scatter his ashes in reverence and mourning was frozen so solid that the idea of a trout jumping in spring seemed to be the stuff of myth.

His timing also seemed designed as a turbo boost for the only other person whom he believed had been touched by God in the same way he had been – though, good pagan that he was, he would never have referenced anything divine. That person was my daughter, Bailey, 23 years old, who in the spring of 2006 was finishing the paintings she would need to complete her MFA degree from the esteemed Art Center in Pasadena – a milestone that everyone who knew her had been expecting since the day she first picked up a crayon. Just at the moment when Bailey was planning her first solo art exhibition, there were laudatory obituaries about my dad’s career, exultant TV segments about his lasting contribution to American art and the whole news-worthy question of how we would preserve and protect his legacy – all of which acted like an amplifier for what Bailey was doing with her own art.

And as if all *that* weren't enough, his death came smack in the middle of an important photo shoot for which I had thousands of dollars of artisan chocolate in my studio and millions of dollars of jewels on loan from Harry Winston in Beverly Hills. Chocolate waits for no one, not even death. It sweats, discolors, loses its sheen. While I trekked to Driggs to sign the death certificate and shelve my dad's remains until the ice had melted, Peter, my camera tech and right hand man, called the client to say we were rescheduling the shoot for the following week, sent home the burly security guards with their sparkling loot, and emailed chocolatiers from Ecuador to Madagascar to request a second round of lavender truffles, port-marinated figs dipped in dark chocolate, and triple milled cocoa blended with Aztec chili.

I would have killed my dad if he hadn't already done it himself.

The newspapers called his death a freak accident. He had gone up to the Grand Targhee ski resort late in the day when the snow was wet and heavy, and taken the Dreamcatcher lift to the top of Fred's Mountain. He saluted the lift operator when he got off the chair, checked his bindings and took off toward the Headwall Traverse. Before he got down to the Blackfoot trail, he abruptly cut into the trees in the middle of the steepest pitch on the run, and he did not turn, he did not swerve. He headed directly into a huge lodgepole pine. He shattered both knee caps, broke one arm, cracked open his skull, and then lay there in the snow and the gathering dark, waiting for the cold. But while the newspapers had the facts right, they had the story wrong. The truth of the matter was that my dad was sick and lonely and he couldn't take it anymore. His hands trembled from

Parkinson's, his eyesight was so bad that anything he looked at had black holes scattered throughout it like buckshot, and his latest lover – a bush pilot who fancied herself a later-day Beryl Markham – had dropped dead of a heart attack the day after roasting him a Thanksgiving turkey. He was a man who could not tolerate imperfection, who had no patience for suffering, and who believed in the existence of the soul of mountains more than he believed in the existence of the soul of men. Death, for him, would have been a welcome escape.

My dad's luxurious log cabin sat on a curve in the river on the Idaho side of Jackson Hole. It was about five miles outside the tiny town of Driggs, which was famous for huckleberry milkshakes, a playhouse theater and a yarn shop that stocked an improbably fantastic array of spun wool and silk. While over the pass in Jackson, people skied, rodeo-ed and generally whooped it up, in Driggs mosquitoes came in spring, huckleberries in August, the snow in November. My dad watched this slow unfolding of days – and captured it on film -- from a house built out of old railroad trestles and local birch. It had huge, open-beamed ceilings and windows that framed dramatic views of each of the three main peaks of the Teton Range. Just steps out the back door, the Teton River ambled by, narrow and reedy, a haven for deer, moose and trout.

His neighbor in Driggs was Sam Penner, a former neurologist from Seattle, an aging fly fisherman and a competitive drinker. I'm certain that after my dad's diagnosis the two of them sat in front of one their enormous fireplaces drinking Macallan whisky and discussing possibilities. Sam would have talked about medications, symptoms, the time line of decline. My dad would have talked about the way the Native Americans, when their time had come, would just walk into the woods on a cold night, never to return. Sam may

have nodded, remembering Jack London's famous tale about the man in Alaska trying to stave off death by building a fire. Maybe my dad then asked Sam what, exactly, happens when the body is left too long in the cold, and Sam probably answered that the extremities freeze first, the fingers and toes, then the hands and feet. He might have mentioned that when the heart begins to shut down there's a false sense of heat, and of hope. My dad would have gone back to his house after that discussion, counting the days until snowfall.

He called Bailey now and then while he waited for the weather to shift, asking how she was doing with her work. She said they talked mostly about storms – about the quality of wind, the shape of clouds, the color of water when the currents have churned up the sand. She had no idea she was feeding the flames of my dad's newfound interest in violent weather and no idea that he was methodically feeding his photographic negatives to the fire so that there would be no record of his mistakes, his wanderings, his less-than-perfect shots. All she was doing was trying to finish her paintings.

Her specialty was paintings of the beach – its sand and its birds, its rocks and its water, its sky and its sun. That was the view she had grown up looking at from her bedroom window, from our dining room, from our sandy back deck in Manhattan Beach, California. She saw it, however, in an unusual way. Hers weren't pretty landscapes, with children crouched next to plastic buckets or peaceful sunsets fading to pink. She put each element squarely at the center of her work, yanking it in forward into a white hot spotlight and seeing straight into its soul. In her hands, water looked like a reflection of infinity. Clouds looked like something you could seize and taste. She painted with oil on paper in a range of weights, colors and textures – part David Hockney, part Van Gogh, part something all her own that no one could quite put their finger on.

For her MFA thesis, she was making six paintings. She worked on all six canvases at one time, moving from one to another as she sketched out the designs and brought each layer to life. Nothing could stop her from painting, whether it was a beautiful day, a sore throat, or something with far deeper repercussions. On the day I told her my dad had died, she was working on a painting of a sunset – an image that placed the viewer inside a striated tube of orange and hot pink, peering out the far end toward the green flash people said you could see when the sun dipped below the horizon. I walked into her studio and told her I'd just gotten some bad news about Grandpa Paul.

“He went to the doctor?” she asked, without looking away from the easel.

I shook my head. “He had an accident.”

“Is he OK?”

“No, sweetie. He's not OK,” I said, “He hit a tree up at Targhee yesterday.”

“He hit a *tree*?” She turned and looked at me. “That's ridiculous. Grandpa would never hit a tree.”

“I know,” I said.

“But he's OK, isn't he?” she asked.

I shook my head. “He's not OK. They found his body on the mountain this morning.”

She lowered her brush, leaned toward me. “His *body*?” she asked, “You're saying he's *dead*?”

I nodded.

“He can’t be dead. We were just talking about these clouds.” She waved her paintbrush toward her easel for emphasis. “Just the other day he was talking about the way the clouds roll, how they really seem to roll across the sky, you know?”

“I know,” I said, although I hadn’t spoken to my dad in several months, and never about anything as subtle as the motion of clouds. I stepped closer to Bailey and hugged her. I explained that I would be going to Driggs the next day and asked if she wanted to go with me.

“To do *what?*” she demanded, her voice rising to a frantic pitch.

“Well,” I said slowly, thinking that I would have to identify the body, arrange to have it cremated, assure the ski resort I wasn’t going to sue, call the newspapers, meet with the attorney, arrange to have the snowplow guys paid through the winter, “To make arrangements.”

Bailey nodded. Her eyes were dry but her skin was splotchy, as if the blood in her veins had been the first part of her body to register the trauma. “I want to say goodbye,” she said, “but I think I better keep working.”

“This isn’t really goodbye,” I said, “We’ll go back again to scatter his ashes when the snow melts.”

“Then I don’t want to go,” she said, “I have to finish these paintings. He would want that.”

She rose from the couch, then, and went back to her easel. I watched as she picked up her paintbrush and palette. Tears fell from her eyes, but she just mixed them into the paint, raised her brush and kept on painting the last flash of sunlight as if it were the best possible response to the fact that her grandfather, her mentor and her hero had just died.

Our Manhattan Beach house was modeled after a 1920s Spanish rancho, with red clay pavers and Navajo rugs, thick plaster walls that yielded deep windowsills and arched doorways, and heavy teak doors with wrought iron handles. We had wide leather couches, three enormous fireplaces, and 16-panel glass doors that opened from the living room onto a patio that was just steps from the beach. During the day, a colorful tribe paraded by our house on a bike path set into the sand. There were runners, bikers and roller bladers, lovers walking hand-in-hand, moms pushing babies, men walking dogs, girls in bikinis, kids loaded up with buckets and shovels and balls. At any given moment, you could look outside and see people arguing, kissing, chatting, dreaming, planning, plotting, playing, sunning. It was impossible to be in that house and not feel the pulse of life.

Even more palpable than the presence of beach-goers, however, was the sound of waves booming onto the beach. The sound was constant and on most nights, it was soothing. I could lie in my bed and listen to my heart beat in rhythm to the waves, or I could try to time my breath to their cadence. It was primal and calming. But when I was agitated, the waves seemed to mock me. As soon as I got settled in bed that night, the sound of the waves reverberated through my head like the echo of an evil god bent on causing insanity. They were so loud they seemed to rattle the windows and shake my bones. I pulled a pillow over my head.

Harrison, who had plucked The Economist from a teetering stack of reading on his bedside table, reached out, reached under the pillow, and began to rub my back.

“You want to go to Driggs?” I asked through a layer of down feathers.

He kept rubbing. He had inherited his family's maple sugar business when he was twenty years old, rescued it from his father's alcoholic confusion, and as patriarch of the family, presided over the re-birth of the business as well as the death of both his grandparents and parents. He was an expert in succession planning, which is to say that he was very skilled at mopping up people's messy lives and frayed nerves in times of crisis.

"Driggs is nice this time of year," I said, "Not a lot of crowds."

Harrison laughed. There were never any crowds in Driggs.

I whipped the pillow off and turned to face him. "It's the perfect place to delude yourself that global warming isn't real," I went on, "All that snow, those sub-zero temperatures."

He lowered the magazine. Harrison was in the midst of preparing to sell the family business before every sugar tree in the state stopped producing sap in protest of rising temperatures and maple sugar became a thing of the past – a thing like phones with a manual dial, drive-in movies, made-from-scratch cookies. He was planning his own succession now, and the project had etched his face with worry and his hair with grey. His normally taut arms had become slack, and I noticed that his jeans hung off him as if he body was made of wire. There was a hollowness at his core, a sadness around his edges. I had lately been tiptoeing around him, afraid of asking too much about what was going on or how he was feeling, because it seemed as if it wasn't going well and I thought it would be nice not to make him say so. "I'll come if you need me to," he said, "You know that."

"No," I said, "It's stupid for us both to be miserable."

"You'll be too busy to be miserable," he said, and he spoke with the authority of someone who knew.

I flopped back flat on the bed. “I wonder if my dad will run into my mom in heaven,” I said, “I can see her running up to him after all this time, still eager to forgive him.”

Harrison looked at me with one eyebrow raised.

“You don’t think heaven works like that, do you?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I’ve always liked to picture my grandpa napping under a tree and it would be nice to think your dad is working a fishing hole. But no. I don’t really think heaven works like that.”

I bit the skin on the inside of my cheek and nodded. “I wonder if my dad would have liked me better if I’d liked to fish.”

“You think too much to be a fisherman,” he said, “Fishing isn’t about people liking each other any more than heaven is about people running up to each other in forgiveness.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

He moved his hand from my neck to the top of my head, as if shielding it from rain. “Stop thinking,” Harrison said, “Stop wondering. Stop worrying. Just go to sleep.”

I turned off the light and rolled towards the dark. “I actually think I’d like you to come with me,” I said, “If you think you have enough time.”

He leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. “I’ll make the time,” he said.

Two days after receiving news of my dad’s untimely death we sat down at a massive polished granite table across from a lawyer in a Diane von Furstenberg wrap dress.

“Your father did a lot of work on his will these last few months,” the attorney said. She was tall, with blunt cut brown hair and a large cup of coffee.

I wanted to say, *What a surprise*. There had been a time when my dad was going to leave his entire estate to a jewelry artist who wasn't much older than I was because he felt guilty for leaving her for a ski instructor. If, during the height of her reign, the pilot had happened to outlive him, she would have inherited his house and the millions of dollars of art in it. The previous mistress, the daughter of the owner of a chain of steak houses, wasn't so lucky. During her years with my dad, all his money was slated to be split between EarthFirst and The Field Museum in Chicago. “My dad changed his will like some people change their clothes,” I said.

The attorney smiled a tolerant smile, placed a thick document in front of us, and left us in silence. Harrison and I read through the will page by page, marveling at what my dad had done. His final will and testament was itself a work of art designed to secure his stature in the world after he had left it. He had everything meted out – every print, every negative that he had allowed to remain on this good earth. Despite the fact that he and I had such a rocky relationship, I got the house in Driggs, a big chunk of money, and the job of settling his estate. Harrison got his fishing rods, his collection of hand-tied flies, and an autographed copy of Norman MacLean's *A River Runs Through It*. Friends, institutions and organizations got various works of art – his, and those from his expansive personal collection. Although his photographs were scattered throughout private homes, galleries, and museums all over the world, The Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona would be given the honor of mounting a retrospective and the promise of 42 of his best prints for their permanent collection. An artist making such a bequest has a lot of

power. Some know how to wield it better than others. My dad was a master of the genre, and Bailey was the big winner of his game. In addition to a fat trust she could tap when she turned 25, she got the best prize of all: he had given her the sole right to reprint images from the negatives he'd chosen not to destroy, and curatorial power of the retrospective.

I got to that part of the document before Harrison. Even when I'm reading at a slow pace, he reads more slowly than I do. So after I read the pages detailing Bailey's control of the negatives and the retrospective, I sat back in my plush swivel chair. The news was, in some ways, comforting, because it made such perfect sense. My dad's well-honed philosophy was that the best photographs were the ones that took the least amount of work. He was a big fan of telling people to drop out of school, forget about F-stops, and just get out into the world and see what they could see through the lens. One of his favorite stories, which I'd heard him tell at least a dozen times, was a re-telling of the way Ansel Adams explained the history of his famous photo, "Moonrise Over Hernandez." Ansel, my dad explained, was driving down the highway at sunset. He kept slowing down and looking at the sun, which was behind him, and then he would turn around and look at the moon, which was rising full and bright in front of him. Soon, Ansel became aware of a town up ahead, and then he became aware of the graveyard in the foreground and the white crosses gleaming in the last rays of light. He stopped, got out his equipment, set it up, and without taking one measurement, without gauging the light or considering the depth of field, got off one shot before the sun went down. One.

*That*, my dad would always say at the end of the story, is how to take a photograph. He would have loved the idea of putting his retrospective into the hands of his 23-year-old granddaughter and shunning scholars with far more impressive credentials and

far more nuanced opinions. Bailey may not have studied the impact of Paul Switzer's photographs on America's post-Vietnam culture, but as far as he was concerned, she understood the nature of genius.

As the news sank in, however, it began to gnaw at me. I felt the cool undercurrent of disappointment dragging me down. It grabbed hold of me across my belly and tugged me under, as if it had the power to hold me beneath the surface of the water, to hold me against the rough and dangerous sand where I couldn't see and I couldn't breathe. He could have used this moment to say he was sorry, to ask forgiveness, to make amends for a lifetime of disappointment. But he didn't.

As I sat at the granite table, I wondered, as I had so many times before, if the reality was that I simply wasn't good enough. I could take a picture of asparagus for the pages of a glossy magazine, and I could take a picture of a cupcake for a billboard, but capture the whole world in one image? Understand the way that one picture – conceived in confidence, lit with precision, taken with a steady hand – could get at the fundamental stuff of life? My dad believed that I lacked the essential DNA, and he believed that my daughter had it.

I felt rage at him and shame that I was glad he was gone. I felt jealous of Bailey – of her talent, her confidence, her luck, her easy relationship with my dad and the world. For years and years I'd been pushing that emotion down, telling myself that what I was feeling was not jealousy, but something different – a mix of maternal anxiety and pride. But I was jealous of my own sweet daughter, who was at that moment holed up in a room at the back of a studio a thousand miles away, painting the sunset, because she knew without a doubt that painting the sunset was the right thing to do. I began to cry. I just sat there and let silent tears pour down my face and fall onto my lap. When Harrison caught up

to the place where I had stopped reading, he turned and looked at me, and saw my broken face. Without saying a word, he stood, came over to where I sat, leaned down with his hands on either side of my face, and brushed the tears from my lips with his thumbs. He got down on his knees in front of me, then, and leaned his long body across mine in an awkward hug.

When he pulled back, he said, “He did a pretty good job, considering,” Harrison said.

“Considering what?”

“The fact that he spent 20 years ignoring my offer to help him do it.”

“He hated me so much,” I said softly.

“He didn’t hate you. He left you a fortune.”

“Money meant nothing to him. You know that.”

“I’ll share the fishing poles,” Harrison said.

“Gee,” I said, “Thanks.”

“Come on, Claire. He left you a spectacular house, a pile of money. Give the guy a break; he’s dead.”

I pushed back my chair and walked to the window. It looked out over Town Square, with its twin arches of bleached elk antlers. Tourists were tramping through the snow in their furry boots and their chic hats, grinning in the hot winter sun. “You know how you always used to tell Bailey how pretty she looked?” I ask, “I mean, when she’d come down the stairs on her way somewhere? No matter what, you would look up and you would say, ‘You look pretty, Sunshine.’ And every single time she brought you a drawing, you would take it to your office or frame it for your study. And every single time she ran in

a race, you were at the finish line to cheer her on. My dad didn't do those things for me. He never looked at anything I made, or looked at anything I wore. And do you know why I hate to fish?"

Harrison just stared at me, waiting for my reply.

"He never taught me how to do it. He would drag me with him, somehow expecting that I'd figure it out just by osmosis, but I never understood how it worked, and then you came along with your perfect casting technique, and then Bailey came along with her talent for drawing, and he had no reason to teach me to fish."

"I said I'd share the rods," he said, "and I meant it."

I nodded, wondering how someone I had been married to for so long could so completely miss the point.

**Excerpted from *The Only True Genius in the Family* (Berkley Trade, February 2009) by permission of the author.**