



## **A Proposed Museum**

There's the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), the Getty in Los Angeles, and the Guggenheim. I propose a museum to my father, the Semore Cunningham Jackson Museum, his name emblazoned across the front. I envision a portico entrance with four columns.

The title implies that I am enamored of my father, or that he is some great, outstanding citizen, famous for his work, his inventions, or his creations. Not so. My father was none of those. The title might also suggest that I am overcome with love or emotion towards him. That, also, is not the case.

Why a museum to an ordinary man? I might call it a museum of guilt—my guilt for not loving my father until he was long gone. Or, more likely, it might be a rear-view museum, a retrospect applying patches to my emotional landscape.

Among others, its exhibits would include a death room, a fear room, and a fireplace room. A portrait room would show a young man, a middle-aged father, a man growing older and tired, and a man on his deathbed. But first, come with me into a room clear and focused— filled with fear.

One night when I was very young, I needed to go to the outhouse, a separate building well behind our house. I asked my mother if she would accompany me. She said to my father, "Semore, go with Wayland to the toilet. He's afraid of the dark."

After a hard day's work, my middle-aged father had eaten supper and settled his tired body in a rocking chair with the daily newspaper open before him. The last thing he wanted was to be annoyed by a skinny, cowardly son. He deliberately folded his newspaper, stood, and walked over to me, took hold of my shoulder, dragged me through the kitchen, and thrust me into outer darkness. The door slammed, and I was

alone. I pressed my body against the house. Tears gushed from my eyes. How cruel and unfeeling. I hated him.

After wallowing in fear for a few minutes, my eyes began to adjust to the moonlight. I saw the silhouettes of the Chinaberry trees I climbed in the summertime. Further away was the hen house where mother gathered eggs every day. Beyond that, standing silent all the way at the back of our property, the toilet. I saw no monsters. This was my backyard.

I walked to the toilet alone. Yet the memory of my father remained as bitter as if he had thrown me in the deep end of the pool, turned his back, and left me to drown.

Another time, I was five or six at the most. I was playing in the dirt at the edge of our front porch where burrowing ant lions brought up the grains of sand and piled them around their hole, forming a perfect circle like a mountain with a crater. I believed that if I put a stick in the dirt, drew circles around the hole, and said, "Doodlebug. doodlebug, come and get your supper," the bug would appear.

I was doodling when I heard Mother's voice from inside the house, "Wayland!"

I yelled, "In a minute."

My father, sitting in a porch swing he himself had made, said in a no-nonsense tone, "When your mother calls, never say 'in a minute.' Say 'I'm coming.'" In raw fear, I raced inside. This father on earth was nothing like my Father we sang about in Sunday school.

This is my Father's world.  
He shines in all. that's fair,  
In the rustling grass  
I hear him pass  
He speaks to me everywhere.

On our way to South Ward Elementary School, my sister and I passed the store where my dad charged groceries. My sister added candy bars to the bill, and we ate them on our journey. I would never have done that. I would not even think it. These two memories near the museum entrance let the reader see the single vision of my father I accepted for most of my life.

Leave the room of fear and come along to the brighter room of youth. See a boy barely able to find a whisker, left fatherless at age 16, the oldest of four children. In the hands of a mother who was calculating, he stayed in school until he graduated from the 8th grade. He was worth more finishing eighth grade than his younger brother, who was yanked out of school and put to work.

Beneath the portrait of the youth is a glass-enclosed box containing a test required for an 8th grade graduation 125 years ago. It is a test many college graduates could not pass today. With his education he pursued different jobs, finally settling as a contractor. He could take an empty lot, draw blueprints, and build a house—from an empty lot to the last electric wire and finished cabinet.

In a house for the owner of the grocery store he patronized, he decided to put one final nail in the steps at the front porch before leaving for home. He hit the nail badly. It flipped back and stuck in his eye. Instead of rushing to see a doctor, he pulled the nail out, came home, and waited a day or two. When he finally went to a doctor, the doctor said, "If you had come to me when this first happened, we might have saved the eye, but it's too far gone now." So, my father had a glass eye for all of my life.

With his career, you might be surprised to learn that, as a boy, he had lived at one time in a sod house, common on the prairie—a one-room dwelling with thick walls of buffalo grass sod cut directly from the earth. The deep, tangled roots held the dirt together like bricks. These walls were often two to three feet thick, providing excellent insulation against the extreme Oklahoma heat and cold. And supported by a few precious wooden poles, a roof of the same materials. They appeared to be small mounds that blended with the landscape.

Now, house dwellers, imagine his widowed mother's disappointment when he was 19. Against her wishes, he proposed to and married a girl two months short of 15, the daughter of a Methodist minister. His mother was a member of the Church of Christ in an age where denominations mattered. She felt favored of God above all who were not members of her church, including her new daughter-in-law and her daughter-in-law's entire family.

They met at a social event popular on the Oklahoma prairies, a picnic. He and my Mother's older brother came together. He met mother and was smitten. He asked her if she would like a hamburger. Nervous and unsure, she said, "No, thank you." He later said he breathed more easily when she refused. If she had said yes, he would have had to find a friend to borrow some money.

Before we leave the room of his youth, we must visit him and my mother in a small house out in the countryside the morning after their marriage. She dutifully rose and made breakfast for him. The biscuits, the first she had ever made, turned out to be sinkers, like rocks. My father looked at his plate but said nothing. He got up from the table and walked out the back door. She could see him standing, his back to the kitchen window, and trembled as she thought, "He'll throw me back. I can't even make biscuits."

He came back in, came up behind her, put his arms around her, and whispered, "Come here, Jewel, I'll show you how to make biscuits." He did, and thereafter she could make the best biscuits ever.

Before he was 30, they had four sons, my older siblings. Black and white photos show him swimming with them, posing in a row, lined up like a totem pole, with wet hair and making funny faces. There is evidence that he enjoyed the sons of his youth.

One might expect a room labeled love, but there is no such room. The room where we would expect to see it is labeled instead the room of veils. Its only furniture a wooden chair against a wall beneath a family photograph. Faces are blurred and there is measurable space between the subjects. They do not touch each other.

There might have been love running around, but it was never, never uttered. I never heard my parents say to each other, "I love you." Neither would they have said that to their children, nor would the children say it to their parents or to each other. Life was not about mushy feelings; life was hard and was about survival. I cannot remember hearing those words from anyone at any time. It just wasn't done.

So, this room has veils of all shapes, sizes, and colors, with strings to fix them across the face. Underneath the veils, there might be a smile, a frown, a grimace, even a kiss, but they were never out in the open. Oddly, now, *love* is a cheap word, thrown around like a discarded toy, used so much and so often it has lost its meaning. It is the equivalent of goodbye: *love ya*, and *later*. It is not a sign of emotion.

Once, and once only, I saw a veil drop. I poked my head into the kitchen and saw my father embracing my mother. I jerked back quickly, in awe of the moment, but I never saw it again.

Leave this loveless room and continue to what might surprise: a reading room. In the words of my mother, who only completed 6th grade: "We had a good, happy home, Semore and me. The children was growing up. He would work, and when he

would come home in the afternoon, he would bring us a book apiece. I'd have supper ready, and we'd eat supper and put the children to bed. And we'd lay in the bed and read. (In the era of the dime novel, guessing what they read is not too hard.) Doyle and Jerry said to us one time that they hoped that when they married that they'd have a happy home as they'd been raised up in. I felt like that was a compliment."

The death room focuses on their 47th wedding anniversary, the day my father died. He was 67. My oldest brother, working with him, had said, "Mama, get Daddy to quit. He has to use two hands to grip the handle of the hammer, but he won't stop."

He epitomized Oklahoma's motto: Labor omnia vincit (Labor conquers all). When he helped build a cabin for our church at Falls Creek Baptist Assembly, the pastor commented, "Semore is the only man I ever met who could outwork me." He built the house next door to us where Mother's parents died. He built the house 53 miles away, in Duncan, Oklahoma, for his mother.

Mother sat at his hospital bedside. He complained of pain. She called the nurse who came and pulled back the sheets. His bed was filled with blood. Alarm bells went off, and medical workers raced to his room. Later, his doctor said, "Mr. Jackson, go home. Do whatever you want to do; eat whatever you want." Hope was gone.

Living 1600 miles away, I knew nothing of these things, but I got the call. I have no memory of hearing his voice during the two weeks I stayed. I returned to California. He died, and I did not return for his funeral. It was at that point I began to see my father in a different light.

The next exhibit, devoted to fishing, his lifelong hobby, might display a cruiser, a motorboat, at least some vessel, fancy rods, and reels. But there is only a barrel holding upright a few cane poles, fishhooks, and bait cans. He was literally a poor fisherman, content to find "a good spot," and wait on the shore for the fish to come to him.

I still do not get it: a man sitting on a rock at the edge of a lake, pole extended, a line leading down to a floater, a cork, waiting. Waiting. Waiting. The cork disappears, and the pole is raised. A fish! And when he got home, Mother left it to him to clean (prepare for cooking) the fish. I never tasted them for fear of getting a bone in my throat.

The door to the last exhibit has the figure of an open Bible above it. This room is a surprise to me because, in all the time I was around him, my dad never attended a church except once, for the funeral of a friend. And that doesn't count.

So, why a Bible? Years after I left my hometown, when I was a college student, my mother joined the church I had attended in Ardmore, the K Street Baptist Church, a conservative, comfortable church in a conservative culture. She taught in Sunday school and played the piano for her Sunday school department's opening exercise each Sunday. The hold outs were my dad and two of my brothers. My second oldest brother had no time for religion, and my fourth brother died in Germany in WWII.

My mother had gone to Texas to be with her daughter-in-law at the birth of her son. In Mother's absence, my father joined the church. And he went the "whole nine yards." He soon became a deacon and a Sunday school teacher. He recruited men for his class and was so successful that the pastor decided the class should be split—over my dad's objections. That was HIS class; he had enlisted all these men. How dare the pastor split it!

In this last room stands an image of me, face turned to a dark corner—for a reason. I had come home from college, a ministerial student, as self-righteous as a first century Pharisee, and he asked me a question about the Bible. I gave an answer with confidence as if I knew something. May God have mercy on my soul. It was the blind leading the blind. Here was a good man trying to do what he thought was right, being taught by a Snit. Deplorable. I earned my spot in the corner.

After visiting the exhibits, sitting with you on the patio in back of the museum with a cool drink in hand, what did I learn? That, I, like my father, am a flawed being. That death comes when it comes. That a life might appear to be two-dimensional, but from the distance of time and geography, no one's life is simple. That you don't have to understand a person to love them. Also, reflecting on one's life and choices, everyone has regrets. Finally, the light from the tunnel might be an oncoming train; it might also just be light.