



HOWARD AKLER

**MEN OF  
ACTION**





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*This book is for Saul's family*



The first time I shaved my father, he was in a coma. This most quotidian of tasks turned surreal: shook a can of Gillette Foamy, lathered his unresponsive face. I admit to nerves. He was, until the last difficult months at home, always well-groomed, and there was a clear obligation to keep him so. I thumbed his chin to the left. Began on the right. My initial stroke disturbed not a whisper – his skin was too slack – and it took repeated attempts before I was able to hold his cheek taut enough with one hand and angle the blade properly with the other.

With burgeoning barberish confidence I continued to chin and jaw and was a cool hand around the tracheostomy hole in his throat. This was a new intimacy with the old man. I felt for the first time his familiar dewlap. Paid close attention to the mole by his left ear; half-splattered with thick white foam, it reminded me then and since of a fire hydrant in a snow drift.

Such assiduity creates its own blindness. I rinsed the cheap plastic razor, tapped loose stray bristles. Only when I turned to appreciate my job did I notice I had left his sideburns long, like mine.



Assets and liabilities. He knew his way around a balance sheet. Saul was a chartered accountant for over five decades. The bulk of his clients were in the building trades – masonry, excavation – and he was well acquainted with all the necessary writeoffs. He liked to calculate depreciation in his head. He'd light a cigar, slowly, work it between thumb and forefinger for several silent seconds. It gave him time to think.

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The second time I shaved my father I was conscious of several spots I'd missed before, those hard-to-reach areas common to many men: under a nostril, side of the lips. There was an entire thatch hidden in his labiomenal crease.

*Okay*, I said into my father's unhearing ear. *Here we go.*

That morning, I had studied my own face in the mirror. Made note of the grooves and nooks that gave me depilatory trouble and tried, later, to transpose them.

As I wiped clean the residual blots of shaving cream, I was mortified to see I'd nicked him. Momentarily mortified. *The man's in a coma*, I said out loud. *Who gives a shit about a dot of blood on his chin?*

It has been fourteen months since he died, thirty since the surgery, and what lingers most is not the shock of the tumour, nor its sombre consequence, but all the sitting, the sedentary hours at his bedside while I tried to get my head around what had happened in *his* head. Because when he emerged from the coma he was not the same. His awareness was erratic. Brief coherent stretches were bookended by much lengthier ones in which he was muddled, mute. I would shift in my hard hospital chair and attempt to stay vigilant. Note any small sign of consciousness – a nod, a smile. The most important thing, during those long answerless days, was to simply pay attention.

It was my father, of course, who taught me to shave. I was a nominally hirsute teen and he was in his early fifties. How many father-son rituals would we share? He taught me to ride a bike. To skate. Driving would come later; a frank talk about sex never did.

I suspect I was happy to be initiated in this adult routine. We stood shirtless, side by side, lathered faces in the bathroom mirror.

Every few months I grow a beard. Or, to be more precise, I stop shaving. It is this lack of action that fosters growth.

‘To pay attention,’ writes the essayist Sven Birkerts, ‘to *attend*. To be present, not merely in body – it is an action of the spirit. “Attend my words” means incline your spirit to my words. Heed them. A sentence is a track along which heeding is drawn.’ He goes on to say the etymological background of the word *attend* is to stretch toward: ‘Paying attention is striving toward, thus presupposing a prior wanting, an expectation ... Reading, at those times when reading matters, we let the words condition an expectation and move toward it.’

His eyes were open the third time. Who knows what he saw? I looked at him and a vacant gaze looked back.

I lathered him up. From cheekbone to jowl, he seemed oblivious to each scrape of the blade. I shaved his neck and chin and tilted his head to tidy up the space under his nose. Then, while I searched out the inevitable strays, my father did a remarkable thing: he drew down his upper lip. He flattened his philtral dimple so I could properly shave that hard-to-reach spot. This tiny movement could have been conscious or merely a reflexive response to the touch of the razor on his face. I sat down. I bounced the possibilities around. Chin in hand, I waited for more.

For fifty-seven years, he sat at his desk and worked with numbers.

For twenty-three years, I've sat at my desk and worked with words.

The beauty of his profession: it all adds up.



I suffer from a lack of *sitzfleisch*, the ability to put my ass in a chair and keep it there until the day's writing is done. My first novel, a slender 160 pages, took eight years to write. The second will be almost as long, whenever it is finished. I put it aside two and a half years ago and applied all my sedentary determination to another chair.

The grief and uncertainty of a long bedside vigil is a sad match for my desperate need to shape and reshape sentences.

I can't help myself. I'm a born writer. By this I refer not to any rare insight nor special talent for sentences, but to a deep pathological need, noticeable from a young age, to rewrite my own history. It's an ontological state.

Nine to five, five days a week, fifty-two weeks a year (minus two for vacation) for fifty-seven years.

Adelaide, Temperance, Toronto streets. And then, finally, mimicking the migration of his generation's Jews, the firm pushed out of the cramped downtown core to north of the city's old border, at Steeles Avenue, into the suburban neighbourhood of Concord.

From where he would return home, every day, at 5:19 p.m.

It's a cliché, of course: the humdrum accountant, boring old bean-counter whose devotion to routine, to order, is evident both in and out of the office. Indeed, my father found tremendous comfort in sameness, an emotional stasis that required fidelity to the clock. Unburdened of briefcase and tie, he sat on the living room sofa at 5:30 and read the newspaper. Dinner at 6 - he neither cooked nor cleaned - and less than thirty minutes later was back in his car. He would not go anywhere. Only sat in the driveway and smoked a cigar. These were the times he was most actively alone; free from my mother's household business, from five-kid clatter, Saul could stay pungent and idle until he went back inside the house to watch television from 7 till 10:30, his bedtime.

For a man so wedded to certainty, it always seemed odd that he liked to gamble. Over the years, he played cards, lotteries and, most of all, the horses - though it should be noted, perhaps truer to his cautious nature, he only ever bet the two-dollar minimum.

The track and the office, the office and the track. These were the far-off places, places of an adulthood so unlike the domestic sort familiar to me. I used to imagine him there, his humour. The way he liked to kibbitz. Just because the stakes were small does not mean they were insignificant.

I went with him once as an adult. He'd initially chafed at the idea - his habit for decades, once various cronies stopped, was to go solo - but with distinct pleasure he described in detail long-ago exactors, near misses.

I put ten bucks on a horse named Honest Accountant, who predictably finished with a view of the field.

'Never bet on an honest accountant,' my father said.

Also, perhaps, a little predictably.

He was, at the age of seventy-nine, still going to the office every day. He was driven, I suspect, by his need for routine, since he was not a man known especially for his dynamism. He was, however, known for his reliability, and this ultimately began to slip. Papers piled up on his office desk and the one at home. Simple returns took days not hours. Some he even filed late – a first for him – and his firm was forced to pay a penalty. His partners began to grouse, and it was decided he would retire on August 31, 2009.

His first client was a barber. His last client was a barber.

The question, to me, always baffles: *So, what do you do?* Casually intended, just a bit of small talk, I nonetheless hem and haw. To answer *writer* is to invoke not only the long stretches when I cannot write, when I cannot get the words to make sense on the page, but also the much, much longer stretches in which I earn little or nothing from my work. It speaks directly to my struggle to reconcile vocation and avocation.

Saul had no such dilemma. A proud professional, proud to support a family of seven, his question was not what do you do, but what do you do *now*? His retirement would redefine him. No longer a partner in a small but lucrative firm, not anymore a man who could enjoy the chit-chat with clients and colleagues, my father – who did not like change – would now face nothing but.

Truth is: 90 percent of my writing life is spent not writing. I open the notebook, blank page ablaze with possibility. This is the moment to pick my ear. Or stare out the window. I ruminate heroically. So driven to produce that I commit nothing to paper, clinging through the lost hours to all options. Only in the dying moments of the work day do I jot down three or four words, my clumsy scrawl like the blip of a heart monitor.

Part of the problem is my concentration is poor. I can't sit still. The click of a pen is a starter's pistol and I'm off, an adrenal lunatic, apace up and down the hallway. A nomad in my own home.

The more I wander, the less present I become: my emotional life is too connected to what I put or do not put on the page. When I cannot write, I lose my sense of self. I begin to disappear.