



# Knot School

By REBECCA ROTERT

*"Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity."*  
— Simone Weil

**O**ver the weekend, deep in a craft project with my niece, I tried to tie a reef knot. I held the lengths of twine and began it, but the memory in my hands gave out. I started over but couldn't remember the delicate little ballet of fingers and rope.

My dad had been a fisherman, among other things, and he knew every knot there was. Over the years he would teach me basic knots, and I was often resentful. Knot school always stopped the action — taking the boat out, tying up a gate, catching a horse without a bridle — and I'd learn begrudgingly, forgetting it almost immediately. But my attitude never stopped him. He would simply keep teaching me, sure that one day I would care enough to apply my full attention.

Two years after his death, the things my father taught me continue to unfurl. All the various knots of our relationship, of love altogether, make their turns and twists known to me even still.

I thought that by now, I would miss him less. In fact I miss him more. This is, in part, due to the nature of loss when the agent is Alzheimer's. I lost him first to the disease and then to the death from that disease. In fact, I feel like I lost him a million times over the course of the disease, every time a part of him — a part I thought was fixed — became unhinged. One day he could replace a battery, and the next day he turned the battery around in front of his eyes and wondered what on earth it was. Toward the end, I began to forget who he had been before the disease. Now, years later, my old dad returns to me at the strangest times. Just yesterday, trimming Brussels sprouts, I heard him say, "I like them little cabbages."

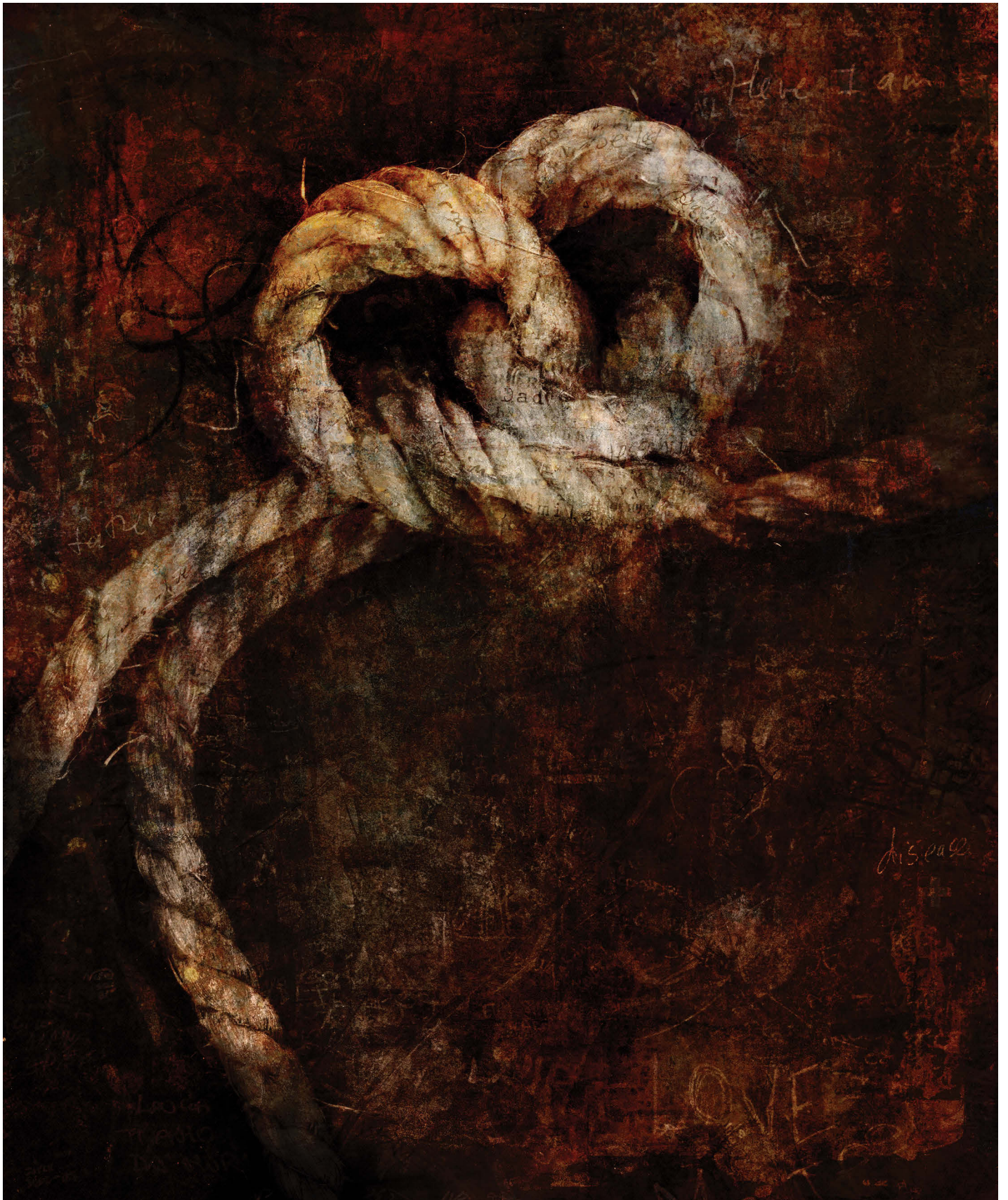
When I first got my dog, a long-legged, big-eared pound mutt, everyone who looked at her said, "She's going to be big." But I refused to

believe it. Even as she grew, I told myself, "This is it. She'll probably stop here." Because I didn't think I could handle a big dog. What if I wasn't strong enough to carry her? What if a swipe of her tail wiped the coffee table clean? It was something I hadn't done before, so I told myself this story. I wouldn't have to expand my own capacities in order to love this creature. She would stay small. And I would stay comfortable.

I did the same thing with Dad. I told myself, "He may forget these small, unimportant things, but he won't forget home or us or me." It was a protective move replete with its own logic. We cannot expand to make room for the unimaginable until we have no choice. I forgive myself my own denials. But other sins are harder to forgive — all the small ways my humanity was too threadbare to lift us up, my dad and me. I should not have been

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surprised that he would be the one to teach me how to shoulder this slow, unbearable loss.

At first, I was convinced he was play-acting. That he was tired, that events in his life and work had left him broken and unable to move forward, so he stopped trying to understand. And I would get frustrated. I would say things like, “Dad, you know what I do for work. Same thing I’ve been doing for years,” or “I just told you this, we’re going to the lake.” I’d not spoken to him with this tone,

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this attitude, since I was a teenager, convinced my father was being ridiculous and not paying attention to me, not “getting” me. I all but stomped my feet and slammed the doors. But then, the confusion became so pronounced, the errors so significant, my adolescent behavior stopped.

So though I approached him with what I might characterize as adult attention, I was no less selfish in my approach. I gently corrected him when he got things wrong, as though the right name for a person or place or object would get him back on track, as though he’d simply veered out of his lane of vocabulary and I had only to place him back in its stream. There was a time I attacked the situation with strategies — diet, exercise, reading. I hauled him out into hot days to water the garden. Afterwards, when he asked for ice cream, we drove to Starbucks to get a frozen coffee. I didn’t want him eating all the sugar in ice cream, certain it would accelerate the deterioration. Halfway through his frozen coffee, he looked at me and said, “Do I have to keep eating this?” I said no and threw it away, aware in my bones that I’d missed the chance to give him some joy, some ice cream.

Soon I would start avoiding him. I would pull into the driveway and find myself unable to go inside. There, sitting in my car, my soul was so thoroughly bound by so many fundamental lies that it couldn’t budge. Each lie was a string of twine pulled tight — that love is what you give me, love is how I feel when I’m with you, how you see me, that you understand me and love me for who I am. My love for him was bound in his vision of me and without this vision, I didn’t know who I was,

what I was worth. I was lousy with conditions: In order for me to love you, you have to be who you were, you have to be someone I understand and someone who understands me.

It was a terrible thing to see, when I saw it clearly. How I had limited us. We were running out of time. I had to find a better way to be.

I want to say it got easier after this awakening. But “easier” isn’t quite the word. I would say that both of us suddenly had more room. For example,

when he asked me about who I was: “What do you do? Where do you live again?” I released the compulsion to say, “You know this,” and instead told him the story of me. The job I loved but which taxed me, the book I was trying to write, how I’d married, how I’d moved to the woods where there were owls and deer and turkey. This re-telling delighted him, and it occurred to me, isn’t this what we want in relation-

ship? To be new to the ones we love, and for them to be new to us? When the unfaithful spouse says to his wife of the new love, “She understands me,” isn’t he really saying, “I’m new to her. And it feels wonderful.” To be fully literate in the lives of our loved ones is a grace and a pleasure and adds to the richness of love, but to be new to one another is equally rich. That to walk into my father’s room unburdened with expectations of who he is, free of grief for all that we lost, might be the greatest expression of our love. To say to him, in how I behave, “Our lives are knotted together in so many ways, but you don’t have to remember how the knots are tied.”

A few weeks before Dad died, I came to see him at the facility where he spent his last six months. He wasn’t in his room. I searched other rooms, the kitchen and dining room, and I couldn’t find him. I began to panic a little. Then I found him at the far end of one of the hallways. He saw me and walked toward me with his arms open wide. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” he said, wrapping me in his big bear self. Perhaps, by some mysterious firing in his brain, he actually knew me that day, perhaps he thought me someone else entirely, but because I’d learned this final lesson from him, whether or not I was known in that moment didn’t matter. What mattered was that I was able to be there, with him, exactly as he was. I was able to hug him and smile and say, “Here I am.”

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