

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

LISA UNGER

*New
York Times*
bestselling
author

THE
SAFE

ROOM

A SHORT STORY

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A SHORT STORY

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How do you come up for air? How do you breathe again?

These are thoughts of which I'm barely aware as I organize papers on the floor of my father's office. The room is overly warm; I've kicked up a mighty amount of dust, causing regular and violent sneezing on my part. Outside the window, the gunmetal sky threatens snow.

Since his death a day ago, I have sifted through the strata of his life—his faded photographs and once-critical documents, his titles and deeds to properties bought and sold, his financial records with numbers so high as to seem unreal, his barely legible handwritten notes, stacks of notebooks with mostly blank pages, a list of quotations that moved him on a single wrinkled sheet of paper.

In these layers, I search for him, any piece of him. But I find him as elusive in death as he was in life. I lift another stray scrap of paper I found in a desk drawer, toward the back. There's a single word printed there in his weird, shaky scrawl: *safe*.

I have no idea what it means. I smooth out the paper and place it in the pile of such cryptic notes, which will likely find their way into the trash. But not yet. I'm still hoping some meaning will emerge. In my line of work, I've come to understand that sometimes the smallest thing might mean more than you initially can imagine. And sometimes not.

Finally, as the sun dips low behind the trees, I stop. Draw in a breath, coming up for air. My leg has fallen asleep, and the thundering in my head and grinding in my stomach remind me that I haven't eaten since I had a slice of toast this morning, after I woke up on the couch, unable to bring myself to sleep in my father's bed, though no one will sleep in it ever again. I rise, stretch, watch the sunset turn the sky an audacious pink, and then leave his loft office to pad down the carpeted stairs and through the living room to the kitchen.

A couple of months ago, he called me.

Hey, he said in his message. It's your old man. Give me a call. Okay. Take care.

Click.

I, as I most often did, ignored it. Even though I'll admit now I heard something different, a kind of unfamiliar softness in his voice. But then, when I was busy with other things—getting Amelia ready to move into the dorm, running around for clients, taking the cat to the vet—his odd tone wasn't compelling enough for me to return his call.

My estrangement from my father was banal, uneventful. He was a stick figure in my childhood, someone characterized by his absences and by my mother's bitter resentment of his absences. He was hard. Like physically hard, all bones and muscles. There was no soft place to land there, no hugs or cuddles. The last time I saw my dad—for a brief, awkward dinner at an old pub he liked near here—when we parted on the street, he shook my hand. A quick, businesslike farewell. And that was okay with me. Because at that point, any attempt at affection would have been difficult to accept or return.

Occasionally he sent rather large checks. *For your new place*, he might scrawl on a piece of paper ripped from a notepad with a hotel logo on it. Or: *For the kid's school*. My daughter, Amelia, is a freshman at NYU and didn't recognize my father, her grandfather, in a picture she recently found in an old album.

I had no issue whatsoever accepting the money he sent. I understood that it was what he could give. That it was his way of expressing whatever feeling he might have for us. I received it with gratitude, acknowledged it with a phone call that might or might not have been returned, a handwritten note that he might or might not have read.

I am not angry at my father. I might have been, once. But that was long ago, and I've had lots of therapy. I've built a life, a family of my own, forged my own way. But I'd be lying if I said that there wasn't an absence, a space where his love should have been that stayed empty—and now will never be filled.

When I eventually returned that final call, someone else answered his phone. A woman whom I have yet to meet, who did not identify herself. She had a faint accent. I'm going to say eastern European, but that's just a guess.

I'm still not sure who she was—a nurse, a helper, a lover? She told me that he was in the hospital and that if I wanted to say goodbye, I should come soon.

“What happened?” I asked, more curious at first than alarmed. My father, as long as I've been alive, had never been sick, as far as I was aware. Like, not even a cold. “What's wrong with him?”

There was a strange silence.

Then she said, “It's not clear. Someone found him unconscious, called an ambulance. The doctors say his organ failure is profound. He won't survive.”

There was something odd about the way that information was delivered. Vague, not the words of a professional. Also, there was a coldness there. Something else.

“Who is this?” I asked, my words ringing back to my own ears, harsh, afraid.

She hung up. I called back. No answer—just my father's recorded voice: “Leave a message.”

I packed a bag and got into my car that afternoon.

I have a weird freedom now. My daughter left for college this fall to study film at NYU. She's living her best life, according to her Instagram feed and constant texts, photos, and FaceTime calls. My husband, Rick, is a celebrated nature photographer, and he's currently in Asia, tracking some rare bird. Truthfully, our marriage—well, it's not what it used to be. But it still *is*, more or less. Long phone calls when he's away, and periods of time when we occupy the same space; eat dinner out with friends; host gatherings of our intellectual, creative, artist-writer-photographer friends; go to the theater and gallery showings. We fuck. We share a dream loft in SoHo, bought when one could still afford such a thing, and which neither of us could stand to lose. It's the place our daughter thinks of as home. Rick and I still love each other. It's just that there's been a drift, as if our marriage is a boat that neither of us thought to moor.

My work as a private investigator—mainly for insurance companies and corporations these days, with a smattering of private clients—has been slow.

So there was nothing to do except make sure my neighbor could feed our ancient cat, Alibi. I wouldn't dream of asking Amelia, though her dorm is mere blocks away. She might as well be on another planet, so involved is she in her new life as a college student. Which is as it should be.

By the time I reached my father, he was already gone. Not dead, but in a strange twilight, wasted by illness, mumbling words no one could understand. He was waxy and frail, nothing like my memories of him, where he was always vital and in motion. A predeath stillness seemed to veil him from me, from his surroundings.

The hospice nurse handed me a book about the stages of dying. I read it while I sat by my father's bedside. Hospice. They let you stay. They take care of you, and I did not feel judged for being the absent daughter of an absent father. Something about those souls standing at the exit door, caring for the dying. They'd seen it all.

I stayed. I called Rick and Amelia, told them the news.

Should we come?

No. It's okay.

They both sounded unsure that my answer was sincere.

Mom. I can come.

Rae, let me come home.

Again: No. It's okay.

On some level I intuited that my father wouldn't want that. Strangers in the room in this intimate moment of his passing. He'd barely known them in life. Why should this be the only version of him they remember? I think it was okay that I was there. I imagine he might have wanted that. Though I know he'd never have asked it of me.

The nurse pulled out the couch, and I stayed the night. Of course, I didn't sleep. The moon was full, a klieg light into the room, casting my father in an eerie silver glow. When he moaned, which he did intermittently, I said, "Hey, Dad. I'm here."

I wondered if he'd have any words for me, something I could take away. In the moonlight, I talked to him, even though he seemed somewhere far

away, offline. Not dead yet, but gone to some in-between place. I told him that I wished we'd been closer. That I should have returned that call. That regardless, it was okay. That we were okay. Our relationship was exactly what it was and truly didn't need to be anything else. By morning, there were no more words for either of us.

The cause of death was listed as congestive heart failure. I noticed a faint blue tinge to his lips. He was seventy-five and did not have a heart condition of which I was aware, or any other health condition. I'll admit to a niggling of suspicion. Something didn't seem right, or natural. As an investigator, you develop an instinct for these things.

I asked the doctor who came in and recorded the time of death for more information. She looked through the chart.

"Huh," she said. "These symptoms are consistent with poisoning. I have to report this. The ME might want an autopsy."

"Poisoning?" I said pointlessly.

"Could be accidental," she said. "Something he ate, something he was inadvertently exposed to."

I had a kind of swirling brain fog. My father had died. He was . . . poisoned? Maybe accidentally. Maybe . . . not? Normally, my investigator's brain would have kicked into full gear. Instead, I felt like a little girl who just lost her dad. A deep, helpless sadness was all I could manage.

As I sat, grappling with loss and with this strange information, the nurse put a hand on my shoulder and offered me a piece of paper, a checklist of all the things that should happen next.

I picked a funeral director at random. A few hours later two men came to take his body away. It wasn't him, just the husk of him. Still, I wept. Ugly, stupid, uncontrollable, with a passion I didn't have for him in life. The end of something—of life, of hope, of other possibilities.

Very efficient, this business of death. They know what to do with a body, I'll tell you that. The paperwork, however, is staggering. But they guide you through with a kind of practiced patience, these people accustomed to managing family members in shock, ushering them through the many steps.