
Family Album



By Michael G. Ryan

1

“Let the dead bury their dead.”

2

My grandfather was not the first person I knew who had died—there were friends and acquaintances, and even my grandmother, plus all those painful moments in life that *feel* like death—but he was the first one I really *knew* was dead.

My mother came out of her bedroom in the middle of that night; I was standing on the second-floor landing in the old farmhouse where I had grown up most of my life. I’d come out into the hall from my own drafty bedroom as soon as I heard the phone ringing, but I couldn’t hear my mom’s end of the conversation through her closed bedroom door. Now the lamp on her bedside table backlit her, so she was little more than a shadow to me, her hair in disarray as she pulled on her long leather coat and rubbed her tired face. She was only thirty-eight; I was twenty-two.

“Dad died,” she said. “I have to go.”

“I need to find my coat,” I said.

I went with her to the nursing home not because I thought she needed me but because I needed to see. It was Saturday morning, Valentine’s Day, 1987; it had just been Friday night an hour before, Friday the 13th. Does anyone die in the blazing sunlight of the afternoon? It was bitterly cold in Illinois, though there wasn’t much snow on the ground that night. I rode on the passenger side with the window cracked while my mother smoked, a terrible habit that she didn’t give up for another eighteen years; the night sky yawned over us, and the city of Decatur seemed

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utterly lifeless. Streets that were normally loud with passing cars or pedestrians were empty and alien, alarming in their differences. Every house that we passed as we came from the western outskirts to the heart of the city looked to me as if it had been photographed in black and white. I had no concept of what to feel. I wondered if it had hurt my grandfather, Dad, to die. I wondered too if it was actually a relief for him to escape all the family fighting that was swirling around his bed like a blizzard as faces and voices once familiar also turned to black and white.

We didn't really hurry because the people at the nursing home would wait for us before they took Dad away, and it obviously wasn't an emergency. Not anymore. They made those middle-of-the-night calls often, I supposed, and they had their routines down—morbid or forgettable or both—when it came to the dead. We cruised silently and seemingly aimlessly through Decatur's empty streets, stopping pointlessly at red lights, drifting through the occasional stop sign, a shark in dark waters.

At first, my mom didn't cry; she's always been tough that way. So in the car, I felt like I was riding with a stranger. Her face, which has always been young but never far from angry in my mind, was a stone mask, rigid and unforgiving, and I could barely recognize her. Her hands, when not clutching a cigarette, were white-knuckled on the steering wheel. I grew dizzy just looking at her, the same sort of vertigo I sometimes felt about heights.

"I meant to go see him today," she kept saying. The dashboard lights and the streetlights that blinked by over and over made her face look washed out as well. Her eyes were still puffy from being jolted out of sleep, and they didn't stray from the road.

When I watched, I never saw her blink. I wondered, as she drove to bear witness to the final state of her father, if she was remembering the death of her mother, my grandmother, “Mom.” I was.

I can’t say if she was feeling afraid or sad or just terribly alone. We’ve talked about it since then; she never really quite answers, though we are close enough to admit human frailties that we all allegedly don’t have at all. I think most people feel safe, secure in their lives, as long as their parents are alive, standing between them and the hereafter. In the natural order of things, parents precede their children into the earth. What terror it must be to see those parents wither away, disappear, and leave you on the threshold next.

For a long time, I didn’t know this feeling; I had to guess what raucous fears filled the quietude of her heart that night. I would not know what those might be until my own father died.

That night, I breathed through my nose because I knew that if I opened my mouth to breathe, I’d say something stupid or inappropriate. Or I’d just begin to fall apart in my own confusion. What comfort could it have been to my mom to have me there, her son, who knew nothing of her misery and who had no means to comfort her because of his ignorance? I was only a few years out of high school; I worked as a stocker in a Kroger’s grocery store while my friends went off to college. I was dating a girl who was still a senior in high school. I lived at home and ate cereal for dinner and wasted more time than I could account for. I read novels and fancied myself one day to be a literary man of the world. I dreamed

of traveling to faraway places where I'd be welcomed for who I'd become. I didn't know anything.

My grandfather had worked for the railroad—would you believe I have never known which one or for how long or even what he did on the rails?—and he kept model railroad cars until the day he died. He talked about trains sometimes the way other men talk about baseball; they were one of those absurd passions we all have and can't real explain well to anyone but another passionate absurdist. I found myself thinking about Dad and trains as we arrived at the nursing home that cold February night. I was imagining the train that carries us from experience to experience in a long, complicated route—this was again the literary wannabe, trying to make something universally mysterious understandable through allusions. I told myself that getting out of the car at the nursing home was like climbing down from that particular train in an utterly foreign station. Really, I had only looked out from its window before, as the train rolled on. Getting off ended up eviscerating my own innocence of what death can do to a man, to a family, and to a heart.

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I was a ten-year-old boy when my grandmother, Mom, died. She had breast cancer, though I didn't know it at the time. I only knew that she was sick and in the hospital, and "sick" is such a dubious word. Your pets get *sick*. TV is *sick*. Jokes are *sick*. What's *sick* to a little boy, anyway? It's a day off from school.

Because a grandmother is also somebody else's mother, there's a lot of confusion over exactly who the hell the woman in front of you *really* is. My mom and my aunt and my two uncles all have memories of their mother that are in direct and polar opposition to my memories of the same person. I remember the lady who hovered with ferocious authority over her checklane at Cousin Fred's, a catch-all store where my parents sometimes took my sister and me to shop; she wore dark-rimmed glasses that she wore on the very end of her nose, a chain running from the earpieces around the back of her neck, and she hustled groceries and sporting goods down her lane with one hand while the other furiously tacked out the prices on her cash register. I loved to run up behind her while she worked, in that little employee-only space between the register and the bags where she stood for a shift, and somehow she always managed to take her hand off her register keys long enough to rub my head for a heartbeat.

She had a tolerance for her grandchildren that, to hear my mom talk, *never* existed for her own children. When we were growing up, my cousin Bill, who was my age and the son of my uncle Butch, would often stay the night out at Mom and Dad's with me. Mom and Dad lived in Harristown, a western suburb of Decatur (a city that doesn't merit suburbs), so it always felt like we were in the middle of nowhere. The house seemed enormous to us, and Bill—who was far more adventurous than I—led me off to the privacy of the bathroom one time to show me something amazing. I assumed it was in the brown paper bag he held.

“You can't tell anyone,” he made me pledge.

“I won't,” I promised.

“Not even Tammy,” he said, referring to my sister.

“I wouldn’t tell Tammy if she had gangrene,” I said. We didn’t know what this meant, as we didn’t know for certain what gangrene was or looked like, but the promise sounded great.

“Okay.” Bill grinned mischievously, which I should’ve known was a bad sign. He had dark bangs that partially hid his eyes, but when you could see those eyes, you knew for certain that insanity ran in our family (we’re related to Mary Todd Lincoln in a half-assed sort of way; she went bananas, you know). “See this quarter?”

I nodded.

Bill suddenly dropped his pants and his underpants (a sight in and of itself amusing) and got down on his hands and knees on the floor. I retreated nervously, my back to the closed bathroom door as Bill put his face to the bathroom rug and thrust his behind up into the air. His butt cheeks spread, and there, in all its glory, was his anus.

Then, like magic, his anus *opened*. It made an odd little sucking sound, and then it stood open as wide as a quarter... one of which promptly disappeared up Bill’s butt.

“Wow!” I cried, my momentary caution dismissed. I came forward from the bathroom door to get a better view. It was like the circus if the circus had buttholes in the center ring. “That is *so* cool!”

“That’s not the cool part,” Bill said from facedown on the throw rug by the tub. Without breaking position—I gathered it required intense, focused relaxation to keep one’s anus spread open like a fish gasping for air—he dug around inside his paper bag

and produced a banana... which he proceeded to peel. You can see where this is going; I could not until the deed was well underway.

The banana insertion was going along swimmingly, much to my continued astonishment and admiration, when my grandmother opened the bathroom door.

Bill's anus snapped shut with the force of a bear trap, and half the banana disappeared up his butt like a turtle withdrawing into its shell. He sat up quickly, fumbling for his underwear, the surviving half-banana caught up in his clothing, as I stood there staring at my grandmother.

"It wasn't my idea," I said immediately.

"Uh huh," Mom said.

As it turned out, Bill's mother, my aunt Linda, had arrived to pick him up, and when she learned what we'd been up to, her head spun off. I was promptly shooed from the bathroom so that Aunt Linda could engage in some reluctant yet furious anal exploration. I could hear her utter dismay in finding the banana (which she knew about), followed quickly by, "Oh my God—is that a quarter??" (which she clearly *didn't* know about).

Mom never said boo to us about it. And it had been one of her bananas, even.

She also never chided us when Bill and I discovered that we could hyperventilate and make each other pass out from lack of oxygen; she never raised her voice when we engaged in hedgeapple wars out behind the chicken coops; she never criticized when we categorically refused to eat the oatmeal she made (she put so much butter in it that it turned yellow, which pushed my gag reflex faster than dog poop).

Now that I think about, Bill *did* eat the yellow oatmeal, so I no longer feel bad about telling the banana story.

So Mom was, in the eyes of her grandchildren, perfection. As a grandmother should be. She was every stereotypical grandma that TV has produced in its fifty-year history. And I wanted very badly to please her when my parents told me that she was in the hospital and that she was “sick.”

I was an amateur magician, emphasis on the *amateur*. It seemed like a good job to me, something I might be when I grew up—that, or a cop. We had a lot of those in my family.

With scrawny ten-year-old hands I fumbled with card tricks like “The Three Sisters” (you put one queen on the top, one queen in the middle, one queen on the bottom, cut multiple times, rifle, and voila! The three “sisters” are back together! The trick: put the missing fourth queen on top before you start the patter and hope that no one in your audience is memorizing suits) and Chinese Linking Rings (yes, of course one of them has a gap in it). I studied Harry Houdini in the seemingly probable event that I should ever chance to be chained, boxed, and thrown into an icy river. So, with the resilient confidence of a boy, I asked my parents to take me to the hospital to see Mom.

“I can do a trick for her,” I suggested, clutching a worn pack of playing cards.

My mom smuggled me in. What drama! Children weren’t supposed to be in the intensive care unit, so my parents stowed me between them and strode confidently past the nurses’ station while I suppressed a giggle. We turned a corner into a nondescript room, and there stood my uncle Keith, who was just getting out of

high school, and my aunt Bonnie, who was in college, and my uncle Butch, Bill's dad, a local deputy sheriff. As we came around the curtain that surrounded the bed, there was Dad, my grandfather, and he was holding Mom's hand.

A long time had passed since I'd last seen her, and at first I didn't recognize her, God forgive the child who doesn't know any better. Her skin was discolored and tubes ran back and forth across her face and body like so many puppet strings. Thick bags hung beneath her eyes, and she seemed terribly sad, heavy with self-awareness and knowledge. Her hair, what little there seemed to be left of it, was flat and lifeless against her head, making her look smaller, somehow; her hair was nothing like the thick tangled bird's nest I was used to. I was scared of her. She was unknown to me now. But my mom led me to her bedside, where she arranged the rolling table so that I could do my trick.

Everyone was quiet.

"Go ahead, Mikey," Dad said.

I hadn't said a word. I knew everyone was watching me, or at least I thought everyone was watching me. I felt warm.

I fanned out the cards in front of Mom and said, "Go ahead. Pick a card."

She did so, with a trembling, liver-spotted hand.

I felt better once she had the card. Smoother. I told her to remember it and put it on top of my deck. She did, with my mother's help.

I cut the cards professionally—I was still trying to learn to cut with just one hand, but I wasn't so arrogant or stupid as to try

it here and now—and thumbed through the deck. I removed the two of diamonds.

“This is your card,” I said.

“No, Mike,” she whispered hoarsely. Her eyes were sad and looking past me and the walls.

I swallowed and looked again. I took out the king of clubs.

No.

I could feel my lower lip begin to tremble with shame, and my heart began to pound. Again, I could feel everyone looking at me. I could smell the room then, a sickeningly sterile smell meant to cover the stench of withering body odors underneath it. I started to shuffle the cards.

“Let’s try again,” I suggested.

“I think Mom needs to rest,” my mother whispered, and she led me away. Mom half-waved with the hand that had held the card as I retreated. “Maybe later.”

There wasn’t any later, of course. I never saw her again.

I didn’t know what to think when the grown-ups told me she had died. My mother cried, and that by itself was terrifying. Her tears were holy in my world, as mysterious and unseen as the spirit itself, and I didn’t want to see them. My uncle Keith came to visit my sister Tammy and me the day before the funeral, and I saw a stranger on his face when he came into my bedroom to talk to us. I didn’t want to go. I knew my cousin Bill was going, but I wanted to get away from all the body snatcher looks burning in the family’s eyes. Going to the funeral was just volunteering to be in the heart of that darkness, that dangerous place. I also suspected there might be religious services of one sort or another, and I didn’t want

anything to do with that either. God took; I didn't see what he gave, as Mom had disappeared but nothing had appeared in her place that would ease our sorrows. So, I stayed home with a babysitter from down the street while everyone else dressed up for reasons unexplained and climbed into cars where no one would dare turn on a radio and rode to an event repeated a thousand times over every day in every city yet every one unique. Nobody forced me to go. Nobody even suggested twice that I should attend. I wish someone had.

In my mind, for many long, long years now, I've done that card trick for Mom a thousand times, and I find her card quick as lightning the first try every time. But I never have any sense of having done it *right*. As an adult looking back at the boy I was, I wish I could tell him to skip the trick. Or I wish I could tell Mom to lie to him. Yes, the two of diamonds. You are so good, Mikey.

4

As a child, I was a little obsessed with death.

This, as you might suspect, kept my mom on the verge of a debilitating brain aneurism daily for about four years.

"Why is he so interested in Charles Manson?" I overheard her say to my dad one night in the kitchen. "Why does he like swords and guillotines and the Kennedy assassination?"

"He's a kid," my dad answered. "You should be glad it's not pot."

"I'd *rather* it be pot," my mom said, which I guarantee you wasn't true. My dad was a love-flower-long-haired-freaky-hippie-child type; my mom was, to say the least, *not*. Establishment and

anti-establishment trying to co-exist as my parents. Someone should have written a bumper sticker about it.

But I didn't smoke pot and I didn't sniff nail-polish remover like some of the idiot neighborhood kids and I didn't get a Nazi swastika tattooed on my upper arm. I did most of the normal kid stuff from about age nine until early high school, though some of it I look back on with just enough embarrassment to hope my own son won't follow in *all* of my footsteps. But there *was* lots of normal stuff. I read Hardy Boys books. I built models—World War I fighter planes in particular. Twenty-five years later, I still know that the Red Baron flew a Fokker DR1 triplane. I watched *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* and read *The Phantom Tollbooth*. I played chess with my dad (until I beat him the first time, at which point our games came to a ceremonious halt).

Then there's the other stuff, the not quite as normal stuff. I played "school" with a girl from down the street, Sonja, for the sole and exclusive purpose of "giving her an F" on some fictitious piece of homework so I could justify spanking her (which she was equally enthusiastic to receive, I might add). I shoplifted from the White Hen Pantry, a 7-11 wannabe up the street, as if I were an international jewel thief. In the fourth grade, my best friend Mark and I repeated a filthy rhyme—

*Big Dick, Big Dick, went to the show
Sat his ass in the very front row.
When the girls came out to dance
Down went the zipper on Big Dick's pants...*

—and the two verses that follow (which involve Big Dick’s relationship with his dog, his death, his sexual relationship with Satan, and Satan’s horrifying realization that Big Dick’s entire essence of being is to have sex... which is a helluva lot more metaphysical than Mark and I *ever* considered that rhyme to be) until we were blue in the face and in serious trouble with every adult who knew us. I have since heard my own ten-year-old son giggle to discover the double-meaning in the name of the planet Uranus. I tried to tell him a joke from my youth—“Why is the starship *Enterprise* like toilet paper? Because they both go around Uranus looking for Klingons”—and he laughed maniacally, finally catching his breath long enough to ask, “What’s a Klingon?” The humor of my youth was partially generational, I suppose.

And then there was the death thing.

I read Vincent Bugliosi’s book *Helter Skelter* with hesitant parental consent, and I was disappointed to find that the all the bodies in police scene photographs had been whited out. I read William Peter Blatty’s *The Exorcist* without parental consent, and was disappointed—and truly surprised—when I got caught. I went to the library and looked at pictures from Nazi concentration camps. I checked out old *Life* magazines with pictures of the Zapruder film of JFK’s assassination. I made a gallows out of plywood and hung my sister’s Barbie dolls from it after tugging miniature black felt hoods over their heads. But this interest in death and all things related to death stopped on the threshold of going to Mom’s funeral. I didn’t want to see her in a coffin. I didn’t want to grieve. They were just pictures before; this was different. I *knew* this dead person. Or I used to know her.

I knew I wasn't going when my uncle Keith came into my room the day before the funeral. He was only eighteen, but he looked like a man to me. He had a cop's brown mustache coming in already. It'd serve him well later, when he actually *was* a cop.

My bedroom was a disaster area—my parents were not strict about keeping it clean, so I didn't unless specifically told to do so. I had inherited old military bunk beds from my uncle Butch, and after Keith had climbed his way over the rubble of comic books and Hot Wheels and Aurora model kits, he sat down on the bottom bunk.

"How ya doing?" he said to me. His voice was chillingly low and soft. His face was droopy and his eyes were far away. He sat with his hands folded on his knees.

"I'm okay," I answered, and I looked at my sister Tammy, who stood staring on. She was six at the time, but it looked to me like she knew something was wrong with Keith, too. He was never quiet. Of the four children Mom raised, Keith was the baby, but he was always the loud boisterous baby.

And then his eyes, which were dull and flat like old coins and completely unfocused on either Tammy or me, began to water.

The man apparently hates me now, many years later, and I'm not very fond of him anymore either, but it's easy enough to forgive memories for not continuing to have life after they'd begun to become memories. When I was ten-years-old, my uncle Keith was more a hero to me than my own father. In fact, I wished my name were "Keith"; I used to make other kids call me by that name (though I told them it was because I wished I was Keith Partridge from *The Partridge Family*). And the image of Keith's tears from back

then are the only memory I have that makes me wish I could see him now.

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Keith was a cop in a thug's body.

Like my uncle Butch, and much later my cousin Bill, Keith grew up to be a police officer in Decatur, but he didn't stay there long. I think he's an officer somewhere in Texas now. I heard once that in Texas, they give you the lethal injection and then read you your rights. I bet Keith loves it there.

Whenever I stayed the night at Mom and Dad's house out in Harristown, Keith usually made it a point to go out. He always had a Friday night date—he was damned good looking. He was athletic and muscular, with a '70s shaggy haircut and a healthy brown mustache. His eyes were sharp and focused, and his wit was cutting. He walked like he had a roll of quarters in his pocket and a burning desire to use them on someone. I'm sure the girls fell over themselves hoping to get a date with him, though I was a kid—a boy, at that—and couldn't imagine why anyone would want to suck face with a girl.

Bill and I naturally thought Keith's time spent with girlfriends was a strong indicator that he was retarded.

We slept in Mom and Dad's living room, on the floor in front of the ancient television set that Dad only turned on to watch *The Lawrence Welk Show* on Sunday nights. (To discourage him, Bill and I would sing along with the closing theme song—“*Good night, sleep tight, and pleasant dreams to you... Here's a wish and a prayer that ever dream comes true... And now till we meet again... adios, au revoir, auf Wiedersehen.*”

Good night!”—mercilessly off-key. Dad would just hunch down in front of the TV and turn it up. Nary a word to encourage our silence.)

The living room was borderline dysfunctional. The couch was pushed up against one wall such that it faced a closet with a mirror on it. The TV was at one end of the room, and everywhere you could sit to watch it was a thousand yards away at the other. Mom bought Avon bottles—racing cars, the U.S. Capitol building, dogs, a rooster—that she lined up like trophies on black metal bookshelves. A cuckoo clock hung above a painting of a rooster my mom had done such that the clock’s pendulum swung in front of the painting. The place was like an indoor garage sale.

Bill and I camped out on the floor with a stack of comic books swiped from Keith’s bedroom. *Sad Sack*, *Sgt. Rock*, *Batman*, *Richie Rich*, *Weird War Tales*, and, most important, *Tales from the Crypt*.

“Look, look, look,” I said to Bill, slapping him with a comic. “Read this. This woman has to go the guillotine, but her husband’s the executioner, so he has to kill her. And then when he gets home, their kid’s playing with a toy guillotine.”

Bill agreed it was pretty scary, but he had a better one, one that had an immediate and long-term impact on me.

“This kid hears something in the basement,” Bill said, reading the panels carefully as I listened. “It keeps calling him. ‘Joey, come down here, Joey.’ He can hear it all over the house because it’s coming out of the heating vents. So he starts to go down to the basement to see what it is... but his dad stops him just as he’s at the top of the stairs with a flashlight.”

I breathed a sigh of relief, but I *knew* that wasn’t the end.

“So he gets back in bed,” Bill went on, turning pages, “but he can still hear that voice. ‘Joey, come down here and help me.’ So he waits until his parents are asleep, then he gets the flashlight again and heads downstairs.”

I waited.

“There’s nothing down there at first.” Bill turned the page. “And then he turns around... and he screams!”

He paused for effect.

“The next day the police come to look for this missing kid, but they can’t find him anywhere. They think maybe he ran away. They even search the basement. But they don’t search in the furnace, where the kid’s bones are still burning from where the thing in the basement pulled him in.”

He showed me the final panel: a blond-haired skeleton, sitting cross-legged, hair on fire, one hand on the furnace door as if he’d tried to get out.

I had blond hair.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” I announced suddenly.

I got out from under the blankets and started for the bathroom... but stopped in the hallway outside the living room.

To get from the living room to the bathroom in Mom and Dad’s house, you had to step across a gigantic heating vent that practically filled the hall. If you skirted it to the left, you’d end up in the kitchen; if you skirted it to the right, you’d be in front of Keith’s bedroom door (which was always closed). But to get to the bathroom, you had no choice but to cross that vent. And it clunked and thunked like a thing alive...or like there was something living in it.

I went back to Bill and got back under the blankets. “Did you go?” he asked.

“I can wait until Keith gets home,” I said.

By the time he finally came home, I was considering going outside and peeing in the bushes to avoid the vent.

Keith rarely tried to be quiet coming in; he banged his keys against the front screen door to startle us, or he’d growl outside the door. But if he did try to be quiet, it was so he could bang the door open unexpectedly. He would roar into the room like a living tornado, arms waving, sudden and terrifying. The goal, I think, was for either Bill or me to have a biological accident.

Which is pretty much how the heating vent story ends. Keith literally scared the piss out of me.

Periodically, Bill and I undertook the mammoth task of cleaning Keith’s bedroom. It often hadn’t been touched since the last time Bill and I cleaned it.

“Stack the magazines and the comics, put the dirty clothes in a basket in the hall so Mom’ll wash them,” Keith instructed us before taking off for the day—he never stuck around to witness the transformation of his garbage dump to something livable. “Put the records next to the turntable, and throw away all the trash. You can keep whatever change you find, but not the quarters, you little maggots. And stay out of the cabinets.”

“*Seig heil, mein Fuhrer!*” we screamed, clicking our tennis shoes together and raising our hands in a Nazi salute. We learned that from a comic book. We were always eager to please, since cleaning Keith’s room could net us as much as two bucks apiece from all the

loose change he liberally tossed all over the place. I bought quite a few balsa wood airplanes with Keith's money.

As soon as he was gone, we bee-lined for the cabinets.

One wall of Keith's bedroom was nothing but cabinets, reaching all the way to the ceiling. The upper levels were frustratingly out of reach (without a chair from the kitchen, that is), and the lower ones were filled with fairly innocuous stuff—gruesome war magazines, Keith's BB guns and *thousands* of loose BBs, more comics.

The mother lode, of course, was in those upper cabinets.

There Bill and I found an astonishing amount of porn, and not *Playboy* porn either. My dad the hippy had *Playboy* porn; Keith had the raw stuff, the feet-behind-the-ears *glistening* photos stuff. Shaved privates, come-hither looks, lip-licking tongues, fingers in places where fingers didn't go. A cornucopia of porn.

"Ugh, gross," Bill said.

"This stuff makes me wanna barf," I agreed.

No, the real mother lode was the monster models that Keith had deliberately put away out of our reach. Dracula, Frankenstein, the Wolfman, the Creature from the Black Lagoon (with day-glow claws!), the Mummy. One of the coolest was a skeleton chained to a wall in a dungeon setting that the plaque on its base called only "The Prisoner." But the big one that we found was an Aurora model guillotine with a little French man whose head came off when you dropped the blade on him. Keith had done an incredible paint job on it, right down to the blood on the guillotine's blade.

Of course, we took it down.

And of course, we played with it, too.

A lot.

This particular toy gave my mother conniption fits when she found out I was decapitating Jean-Louis over and over again. (His head went back on about as easily as it came off so he could be executed as many times as his executioners wished.) And Keith threatened to chop *my* head off if I didn't stay out of his stuff.

This was the young man who came into my bedroom and wept because his mother had died. This was someone I didn't recognize. I thought I knew him up until then.

But I'd find out more about him as I got older, and some of it was hard to accept from my hero.

6

Those models that Keith put together and that heating vent in front of Mom and Dad's bathroom have stayed with me my whole life, like some of the stupid, gross jokes he used to teach me. (*Why did the baby cross the road? Because it was stapled to the chicken.*) Just a few years ago, I discovered that a company called Polar Lights had acquired the license to reissue all those old model monsters, including Madam Tussad's Chamber of Horrors—La Guillotine (minus the copyright-infringing "Madam Tussad's" reference, one of the two reasons the model vanished from the market over 25 years ago. The other reason? A battalion of mothers who'd had the same ear-splitting reaction as my mom and who wielded the power of their collective voice.)

So, I bought "La Guillotine" and meticulously put it together. It wasn't my first time—when I was a boy, I built incredibly detailed model airplanes, World War I Sopwith Camels and Spads, or

Japanese Zeros, Messerschmidts, and Spitfires from the Second World War. I built 'em so fine they could've been used for special effects in the movies. Then I took 'em in the backyard, balanced them atop returnable glass Pepsi bottles (the 16-ounce kind that came in eight-packs that I needed both hands to lug into the house), and shot the hell out of them with my BB rifle. To me, it seemed the next logical evolutionary step for a model airplane.

My current "La Guillotine" will not be subject to mindless destruction, however reasonable that may someday seem. I spent twenty bucks to win the damned thing off of eBay—and when I went to buy paints and glue for it, I found it at the local hobby store for fifteen. I shelled out another twenty-five for "flat black," "flat brown," "flat white," and seven other "flat" colors of paint, some glue, an Exacto knife, a sanding file to trim the stems from the model pieces, and a couple of paint brushes.

"You might want to prime your model before you start," the young guy at the counter suggested. "It'll take the paint better."

"*I'm* the one getting taken," I told him. "I've nearly spent a house payment on this project so far. I'll skip the primer."

He glanced at the black-and-white assembly instruction sheet from La Guillotine that I'd brought into the store with me so I knew which paints to buy. He grinned as he rung me up and took my debit card.

"The Guillotine," he said. "Man, that's a popular one. The original Aurora version sells for over a hundred bucks on the Net. People have been coming in here asking about it seems like every month for years."

“I had it when I was a kid,” I said, twisting the truth a bit. Looking at him, I knew for certain he wasn’t even close to being old enough to remember it. “I loved it.”

“You and a thousand other guys.” He gave me a pen and my receipt to sign. “It must be one of those toys you just never forget.”

Maybe.

I put it together over the weekend, and I painted it as I remembered Keith’s guillotine looking. To his credit, Keith must’ve had the patience of Job, because I found working with microscopic pulleys and rapidly unraveling “rope” (yellow string) to be a *pain royale dans le derriere*, to poorly quote the French. I painted my fingertips and part of the kitchen table; I lost a piece under the refrigerator that I had to chase after with a broom. One of my cats jumped in my lap, and though I shooed him away instantly, he stayed long enough to ensure I’d keep finding tiny cat hairs stuck in my paint or my glue.

But in the end, it was just as I remembered it. I stood it up on my kitchen table, sentenced little Jean-Louis to death, and let go of the little rope. I even remembered the sound the blade made as it slid down between the upright posts. Never mind that Jean-Louis’s head was attached better than the blade (he survived). It was my childhood exemplified, I thought.

I’ve never let go of that period of time when I was growing up every weekend out at Mom and Dad’s, digging around Keith’s bedroom, playing out back around the chicken coops, and coveting all those monster model kits that Keith owned. I find myself writing

about it right now, and I found myself writing about it once before, many years ago.

“Model Monsters”

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The motor ticked as the engine cooled, but Paul Matheson didn't get out of the pickup truck. It would've been better for everyone if he'd just driven away, forgotten about his dream of monsters. Then no one would have been hurt. Instead, he checked his look in the rearview mirror and wondered if neighbors would think him some kind of stalker, watching the old house for signs of life. Sweat dampened the gray hairs at his temples and spidered across the receding area where his part thinned. The cab was hot.

A kid rode by on his bicycle, moving fast, close to the truck. Paul jumped, automatically reaching for the door handle, then jumped again when two more children shot past, laughing in the summer breeze they were creating. They didn't even look at the pickup. Paul watched them weave their way to the corner, turning and passing between houses with generous yards and occasional sprinklers, houses with mailboxes at the ends of driveways and ditches along the narrow roads that ran before them. He could remember riding his three-speed down these roads, his cousin a gear behind him, the sun dazzling and the heat jumping from the pavement like a knife as he cut through yards splashed with unchecked yellow dandelions. He had been nine. A summer later,

both of his grandparents were dead, and he had never come back to this neighborhood or this house. Until now. And he was so afraid to see what had changed that he could barely remember how to breathe.

He got out of the truck and walked across the empty street to the foot of the gravel driveway that led up to the house's garage. There was a mailbox here that hadn't been here three decades before—it was painted dark blue and had the name "Spencers" stenciled on its side. The flag was up.

He went up the drive to the front door—once, there had been a breezeway door next to the garage, but along the way someone had built an extension onto the house and that extension now replaced that entrance—and mounted the three short, chipped concrete steps to the unshielded porch. The screen door was closed, but the inner door was open; inside, all lay in shadows, bulky black spots that might have been furniture or people. Someone moved even before he knocked, so he didn't.

"Can I help you?" a young woman's voice asked. Paul still couldn't see her. She had stopped after rising from her seat, and now she was an outline beyond the screen. Somewhere to her right, beyond Paul's sight, a fan on high whirred.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he stammered. He had rehearsed this on the drive down from Chicago, but the script had just vanished from his head. "I hope I'm not. My name is Paul Matheson."

"You're not bothering us, Paul Matheson," the woman said, laughing.

“Oh.” Paul squinted. “Well, my grandparents used to live here, a long time ago. I was just wondering if I could look in the backyard. I didn’t want to just *do it*, you know. I thought I should ask.”

It wasn’t really what he wanted; he really wanted to see Uncle Burt’s room with its record albums and Aurora model kits and miles of loose change. He just couldn’t bring himself to ask for admittance.

A young male voice said from behind the woman, “That’s fine. Go right ahead and look.”

“Go ahead,” the young woman repeated, and she sat down again.

“Thanks,” Paul said and turned away. The ghosts beyond the screen door murmured among themselves.

He went around the garage, considering a look in the window as he passed it. But he was wary, concerned that someone might see him, so he didn’t. The permission extended only to the yard; there was a fence ahead, the border to the back, and there was a gate. Grandpa had never had a fence—the whole neighborhood had been a yard, grass was God’s and not to be contained. He unlatched the cheap metal gate and, smiling at the changes he had known *had* to be, looked at the yard.

It was different, of course. There was no sidewalk extending from the back door to the shed where Grandpa had kept his garden tools. In fact, there was no shed. A sandbox with rotted wood and a swing set and the hull of what Paul guessed was a Chevrolet scattered across the grass like shrapnel. None of this had been here years ago. The dead car sat under a tree that *had* been here,

but the tree looked so much smaller now than it had when he was nine. The lowest limb, which had forever been out of his reach, was not at the height of his forehead. The grass was mowed but not along the link fence, so weeds snaked their way up the metal, a wall of growth to outline the border. It could have been anybody's yard. Anybody's but his grandparents'.

"Is it what you expected?" a voice said behind him. He turned as the back door banged shut and a young man emerged, scratching his naked back. His chest was smooth, like a child's, and he was unshaven, almost slovenly so. But he smiled easily, as if he appreciated the nostalgic look in Paul's eyes. Paul liked him already.

"It's all different," Paul answered.

"The people before us took up the sidewalk that used to be here," the young man said.

"I rode my bicycle up and down that sidewalk." Paul pointed to the very back of the property, where the fence was slightly bent. "There used to be a shed there with my grandpa's pushmower in it. And there used to be flowers along the house there."

The woman emerged now, holding a baby. She was pretty but young—Paul guessed that, combined, the three of them were *almost* his age. The baby clutched distractedly at the woman's brown hair, and she didn't notice. She looked like someone from a testimonial phone company ad. Her skin was clear and her eyes, curious. To Paul, the two young people certainly looked like a couple.

"I'm Craig Spencer," the young man said, extending his hand awkwardly. He seemed so much like a child playing house, the

daddy, the would-be adult, that Paul laughed as he gruffly shook Craig's hand.

"Paul Matheson," he said.

"I know," Craig said. "You said so a minute ago."

"I'm Lynda," the woman said, gently extracting her hair from the baby's grip. "That's with a 'y.' And this is Nathan."

"Honey, he doesn't care if it's with a 'y' or not," Craig said out of the corner of his mouth, as if she had committed a social faux pas.

"Nice to meet you," Paul said and reached out, touching the baby's small palm. "Hi, Nathan."

The baby looked at him, mystified.

Craig scratched his back over his shoulder again, his elbow jutting out like a compass pointer, and said, "Sorry about how I'm dressed. It's just hot as hell inside, you know."

"Grandpa and Grandma used to have central air," Paul said, looking at the back of the house. He pointed out the windows one at a time. "Aunt Julie's room. Uncle Burt's room. He was still only a teenager back then. The bathroom—there was a huge heating grate in front of the bathroom that I was always afraid to walk on because I thought there was a monster in the furnace, waiting to get me. The kitchen. The breezeway."

"The central air quit on us late last summer," Craig said. "It's damned expensive to have it fixed, so we just bought a bunch of fans. We've had to let a lot of things just go right to hell around here, just 'cause of the money. We stand in front of the fridge a lot to keep cool."

“And we take cold showers,” Lynda laughed, jiggling Nathan, who gurgled a stream of nonsense and stuck his hand in his smiling mouth.

Paul smile, too, but it faded fast, and he said, “No, Craig. It’s certainly not what I expected. I think I expected my family to be here.”

They were all silent for a moment, except baby Nathan, who talked to everyone and to no one. Lynda whispered in his ear, and he laughed at the feel of the air on his skin.

“I guess you haven’t been out here in a while,” Craig ventured then.

“No, not for a long time.” Paul wiped at the sweat on his forehead. “I live in Chicago Heights now. None of the family lives down here anymore.”

A neighbor emerged from the house next door, an elderly man whom Paul vaguely recognized from years before: the old man looked at the three of them standing near the back door. He called out, “Hey ya, Craig.”

“Hey, Mr. Douglas,” Craig called back, and Paul remembered the man then. Old Man Douglas, who threw rocks at the kids who rode their bikes across his lawn. The bully of the block.

“Jesus, that guy was a Civil War vet when my grandparents lived here,” Paul muttered with a grin. “What is he, a vampire or something?”

“Do you want to come inside and look around?” Lynda said out of the blue. Craig’s face lit up.

“Hey, yeah. Hell, I’m sorry—I bet you’d love to see the inside again, wouldn’t you?” He turned toward the back door. “I’ll get some clothes on.”

Paul kept grinning and said, “Thanks. That’s just what I wanted.” And when Craig cocked an eyebrow at him, Paul quickly added, “To see inside, I mean. You should walk around naked if it feels right.”

As Craig laughed and opened the back door, Paul’s last chance to leave and do no harm vanished.

They showed him all around, Craig chattering over Lynda, Lynda darting into the gaps in Craig’s monologue with the skill of a seasoned politician in a debate, and Nathan burbled for the entire tour. The cacophony was underscored by the steady drone of fans and a television tuned to the QVC Shopping Network.

The heating vent, three feet long and two feet wide, was still there directly before the bathroom, just as he remembered it. Paul felt that wild childhood impulse to jump the metal grill rise in him like a wave; he took a long step over it instead on his way down the hall to Uncle Burt’s old room. Both Craig and Lynda laughed.

“There’s no monster in the furnace now,” Craig said, fussing with his buttons. He wore a shirt now, an Arrow shirt that he readily admitted he had picked up at a rummage sale for a buck. “The damned thing hardly works. No monsters, though.”

“You never know,” Paul said, reluctant to let the unsubstantiated fears of youth go. He wanted their brilliance to live a little longer.

Uncle Burt's room was a nursery now, cluttered with baby things that Paul would have been hard-pressed to identify. There had never been children in his life; there had never even been the thought, because there had never been anyone to entertain them with. The nursery confused him for a moment: there were no piles of a young man's clothing or posters of now-defunct rock-and-roll bands or BB guns or record albums or sports magazines. There were no Aurora model kits. There was no Uncle Burt at all.

They wandered the rest of the house leisurely, Paul setting the pace. The trappings of old people like his grandparents had long ago been replaced with the knick-knacks of a young married couple. They had a large photo of their wedding over the TV, the matte covered with signatures ("Our guest book," Lynda explained), and there were newspapers everywhere. Paul imagined he could smell a dog, but there was no sign of the animal, and he wondered briefly if it was the baby he was smelling. He didn't care; he was glad to be inside the house.

"It's all different, isn't it?" Craig asked when Paul had seen everything. The three adults had ended in the kitchen, and they now sat around a Formica table, drinking sodas. Nathan had fallen asleep on the floor before a fan in the living room.

"the heating grate's still there," Lynda said.

"Yes, the grate," Paul said. "And that's about it, I'm afraid. I'm not really surprised; I just wanted to look one more time before I put it out of my mind for good."

"Hell, the house I grew up in burned down a few years back," Craig said. "I couldn't go visit it if I wanted to."

Paul nodded and touched his cold soda can to his hot head. The kitchen was baking, despite the open window over the tiny sink, and he didn't feel right in suggesting they move to the other room. Besides, he had discovered that the kitchen—which had been huge when he was a child—was, in fact, quite small, and its size put him in close quarters with both of the Spencers. He could smell Craig's sweat, a locker room toughness smell that made him feel like the young man's best friend, and he sat close to Lynda, the heat emanating from her bare arms, the smell of her hair near him. He felt his tongue in the side of his mouth when he looked at either of them, and he didn't want to leave their company, not even to spread out in the bigger, cooler living room.

“So why did you want to come down and look?” Lynda asked, and Paul met her eyes when he spoke.

“I had a dream about this place,” he said. He looked at Craig then, almost embarrassed by his desire to be attracted to these strangers.

“So let's hear it,” Craig said, gently nudging Paul's arm as if they had known one another for years.

Paul grinned. “I have a lot of dreams that don't mean shit—sorry, don't mean *anything*. But sometimes they just stay on for days, stronger than a memory, really. I dreamed last summer that my mother's eyes were sewed shut, and when I called her, I found out that she'd had that laser eye surgery and was wearing dark glasses to bed to keep her from rubbing. Weird things like that.

“I know this all sounds stupid, but Uncle Burt used to have his room back there in Nathan's nursery. Uncle Burt was a slob. You must know how teenage boys are. He was amazingly careless; he

just threw shi—things everywhere. The place was always a wreck, a pit. My cousin and I used to sneak into his room whenever we stayed the night out here, and we'd find all kinds of change on the floor. I found about six dollars one time. There was always so much *stuff* in his room to draw a little boy in.

“Well, Uncle Burt was really into monsters and horror. He had E.C. Comics galore and *Tales from the Crypt* and *Vampirella*, and he put together these model kits—Aurora models of Dracula and Frankenstein and the Wolfman and this skeleton called the Prisoner who was chained to this dungeon wall and the Creature from the Black Lagoon and this amazing guillotine that chopped this little man's head right off. They were just about the coolest things I'd ever seen in my life. Granted, I *was* nine.

“So I had this dream a few weeks ago that they were still there, those models. I was a grown man and somebody else lived here, but those monsters were still here, just waiting for me to come and find them. Have you ever lost something and you keep looking in the same spot over and over again, like it's going to come back?”

Both Lynda and Craig nodded. “And someday,” Craig said, “I swear my old Camaro will be out there in the garage, if I just keep checking.”

Paul chuckled. “That's how I felt in the dream, like those monster models were still right where I'd last seen them. Time didn't make any difference; I was the only one who could find them. And I desperately wanted them but knew I probably wouldn't get them back. It was like those models were all I had left of my past, so if I didn't get them, I'd lose everything I ever was. In the

dream, it felt like maybe that was how it was supposed to be, but it upset the hell out of me just the same.”

“Man,” Craig said.

Lynda said, “You should call your Uncle Burt and see if maybe he’s still got those monsters.”

Paul smiled tiredly now. “He died last winter. I didn’t even know; I just found out two weeks ago when his estate was finally settled and some releases arrived for me to sign. You know, he was only six years older than me. Heart attack.”

They were all quiet in consideration of the deceased, Paul guessed, before he went on. “So I had this dream, and I thought, ‘What the hell? Go look. What have you got to lose? More sleep, if you keep thinking about it.’ And now, now I’ve looked.”

He wanted to touch Lynda’s hand on the table before him, but he knew that it would be an inappropriate gesture. He wanted to tell Craig just how kind he thought the young man was for letting him inside to look for his past, but he wasn’t sure that Craig would take a compliment well. Instead, he just stood up.

“I really appreciate this. Thanks for letting me look. I should get going now and let you get on with your day.”

Lynda offered hi another cold soda for the road, and he accepted (“My grandparents drank R.C.; you wouldn’t have any of that, would you?” he asked. When Lynda shook her head, Paul said, “Thank God.”). Then they went back through the living room and out the front door, out into the white heat again. The kids on the bicycles came around the corner again, and all three adults watched them.

“Hey, it was great meeting you, Paul,” Craig said, extending his hand again. Paul shook it, Craig’s hand firm in his.

“You can come back, if you want,” Lynda said. “I don’t know if there’s anything still to see—but you can come back, if you want.”

Paul shook her hand as well, his fingers on her slim wrist, and said, “Thanks. I doubt I will, but you never know. Say ’bye to Nathan for me.”

He walked down the driveway, the rock crunching beneath his feet, and across the road to his truck. When he was inside again, he glanced back at his grandparents’ house, and the Spencers both waved to him. He waved back.

They stayed on their small concrete porch and waved after him until he turned the corner from whence the kids on the bikes had come, and then they went back inside the hot house. They never saw Paul Matheson again.

His own apartment in Chicago Heights was dark and cool, the only apartment at the top of a long flight of narrow stairs. It was far too big for him; there weren’t enough lamps in all of Chicagoland to chase the shadows from the corners, and he didn’t try anymore. It was always dark here.

Mail had been dropped through the slot in the door, and Paul stopped to pick it up. There were advertisements and bills in windowed envelopes. The check from Uncle Burt’s estate had not arrived yet. He tossed the entire stack on an end table and closed the door; it slammed with only the barest of touches.

It was late and he was tired, but pulling out the hide-a-bed seemed like too much work; instead, he flopped on the couch, weary from the long drive, and he left the hall lamp in the entranceway burning. It cast thin shadows around the old apartment.

He dreamed of them, among other things, that night.

Three days later, on Tuesday, the check from his uncle's estate arrived, and he signed it immediately, shoving it with restrained excitement into a plain envelope. The sun hardly reached the desk beneath the clock where he sat to do his bills, so a lamp burned in the middle of the afternoon. The air conditioner in the window ran full blast, rattling his papers, giving him a sense of life in the room around him, as he scribbled a hasty note. His handwriting looped and swirled. This felt *right* to him, especially when he remembered the “y” in Lynda's name.

Dear Craig and Lynda:

I know this is rather forward of me, but I saw on my way home from work today that it was ninety-eight degrees here, so I can well imagine what it's like down there, out among the breezeless cornfields of Illinois. I cannot stand the idea of you kids huddling in front of fans to stay cool, not when I have money to burn right now.

Enclosed you'll find my inheritance from Uncle Burt, properly endorsed to the two of you. It isn't much—but it should be enough to repair your central air. Please consider it a kindness to repay the kindness you showed me by letting me look around my old stomping grounds. I dreamed of Aurora models again

when I got home, but it wasn't such a sad dream this time. Thank you again. You're very kind people.

It would be very easy for two young persons to say "no" to this sort of gesture from a complete stranger, but I hope you will consider little Nathan before casually returning my gift. I'm sure any doctor would tell you that this heat can be very dangerous—the monster may not live in the furnace; rather, it might be the furnace that your house becomes during this hot summer heat wave. Please accept this. I don't need it at all.

I've included my address if you have any inclination to write. Again, thank you for letting me come inside and re-live part of my life. It was very therapeutic for me and my dreams.

Sincerely,

Paul Matheson

He mailed it on his way to the airport the next day. At the last moment he almost changed his mind; he worried about what they might think. Then he did what felt right and sent it. By the time he returned from the software convention in Seattle a week later, there was a letter from Lynda.

Dear Paul,

We didn't know what to think at first. But we decided that you were right about Nathan, so we fixed the air. It feels so good! It was ninety-nine degrees here last Wednesday (ha! We beat Chicago!), so I took Nathan to the mall just so we could be in the air conditioning for a little while. It was really awful. But now we have air at home again, thanks to you. We really don't know how to thank you enough. Not even our folks have ever been so nice to us. Craig says we're going to make his mom and dad feel guilty by telling them what you did for us. Craig says we

might even make them feel guilty enough to buy us a washer and dryer so we can skip the laundromat! Ha ha.

We have a little surprise for you now. We wanted to do something nice for you, so Craig called his friend Tony Wells in Latham to see if we could get one of those monster models for you. Tony owns a hobby store where Craig used to get stuff for his remote control cars before we were married. Tony thinks he can get Dracula pretty cheap. If we get it, I'll send it to you and you'll be able to remember your childhood even better!

Well, I have to go now. Craig says hi and would have written to you, but he's working right now. Nathan would have written to you, too, but he can't write yet! Ha ha. Thank you again for the check. You're such a nice man.

Love,

Lynda

He held it for a minute, rereading it, feeling delighted and elated. He lingered over the word "love," recognizing it for what it was and not what he liked to imagine it might be; he imagined her sitting at the Formica kitchen table, her brown hair falling over her face as she studiously put her pen to her paper, her forearm slim as it crossed the surface. He imagined Craig in the background, adjusting the air conditioner, wild hair blown back by the breeze coming from the vent, calling to her his asides to go in the letter. He could even imagine Nathan sleeping peacefully in the crib in Uncle Burt's old room, the mobile above the crib turning ever-so slightly as the air conditioning touched it. It was as if he were there.

He looked around his apartment, straining to remember where his old box of photographs was. He wanted to write back to

them *now*, immediately, but he didn't want to alarm them or antagonize them in some way; he didn't want to come across as obsessed or pushy, though he felt he could be on his way to both with minimal effort.

He looked for his photo box and let some time pass, a few days. By the following week, he had had a dream of them again and knew he should write.

In the dream, he was dancing with Lynda. The kitchen was cool, and it was laid out as it had been when his grandparents had lived there—the table was in a different place, the curtains were a different color, the refrigerator was older. He held Lynda's hand in his, his other palm at her delicate waist, and they waltzed around the kitchen. He was amazed—he didn't know how to dance, but here he was, dancing.

Then the dream changed, and he danced with Craig. They grinned at each other, Lynda watching them from nearby while holding Nathan. She encouraged them with her smile. Craig had no shirt on; his skin was warm and damp, and Paul could feel the skin of his own hand adhere to the young man slightly as their respective sweat combined. They danced like best friends, unashamed, comfortable.

He awoke, sorry that it was over, missing them terribly but wondering who they were that he should dream of them so.

Dear Craig and Lynda:

Thank you for the letter; it was much appreciated. My job occasionally takes me away for a time—I am in the computer software field—and your letter was

waiting here for me when I came home from Seattle. It was a welcome diversion after days of discussing RAM and bytes. (That's with a "y," Lynda!)

I discovered some old photos the other day and thought you might like to see how Uncle Burt's room looked all those years ago. The little boy with the plastic cowboy hat is me; the other boy is my cousin Will. My uncle is just barely visible on the military cot in the background, and the devastation in which we are standing is his bedroom. My grandma took this picture. I was about eight at the time.

Notice the model on my uncle's dresser, on the right-hand side of the picture. That's the Creature from the Black Lagoon. It had glow-in-the-dark head and claws and was the only one of his models that I never really played with. I didn't think it looked real enough with the glow-in-the-dark parts! As if it would have looked "real" without them!

That's the guillotine model behind it, though you can't see the little man's head... because it's in the yellow basket below the blade. It wasn't exactly a politically correct model!

Anyway, I thought you might find this photo amusing. You may keep it; I had a duplicate made for you.

I'm glad the air conditioning is working out for you. Is Nathan sleeping better as a result? I imagined that he was.

I appreciate your efforts to obtain a Dracula model for me, but please don't go to any trouble on my behalf. I am touched that you have thought of me at all, and that alone makes me feel good.

I hope to hear from you again, but if I don't, you're quite welcome for the air conditioning, and I hope you like the picture.

Sincerely,

Paul

Another letter arrived two weeks later, as summer gave way to fall. On the afternoon it arrived, Paul noted with mild disappointment that the heat wave of the summer seemed to be over. The digital clock outside the bank he passed on the way home at night said it was only sixty-three degrees; damned cold, in Paul's opinion. He picked up his mail, reading as he walked the apartment, turning on lights. Two slips of paper were in the envelope, and Paul read them as he might have once read scripture.

Dear Paul,

Guess what? Craig's friend Tony found that model! I'm looking at it right now! We're going to ship it to you as soon as we have enough money and time to get to UPS. Will UPS leave a package at your apartment door if you're not home? I hope so, but I hope no one steals it if you're out of town. Maybe we should send it to your work. I won't send it until I hear from you one way or the other.

The job you do sounds hard. Isn't "RAM" a kind of pickup truck? We don't have a computer. We have an old typewriter that needs a ribbon, so we just write everything by hand. I like it that way anyway. It makes it seem more personal, like you had to think about it instead of how fast some people just type whatever comes into their heads. Do you know what I mean?

Thank you for the picture. Your uncle sure was messy! I used to be like that, when I was a little girl. I had Barbie doll stuff like you wouldn't believe. I had so much stuff that I couldn't find enough room for it all! When my older sister died a few years ago, I gave all my old Barbie stuff to her little girls. It wasn't much, but they needed something to help them start filling the void so they could get through losing their mommy.

I'm glad you still think of us. It's weird, isn't it, how you get to be friends with somebody? We hardly know each other, but I feel like I've known you forever. It must be the house. I think it must remember you.

We had to turn off the air at last, by the way. It got us through a rough summer, though. Craig said we could always get hit with an Indian summer and have to turn it on again in October, but we've had the heat on the last couple of nights. I don't think we'll use the air again this summer, but we still appreciate it more than you can know. And we'll use it again next summer for sure—you know how it is "down south" here. (Is it true that people in Chicago think that everything south of I-80 is "Southern" Illinois?)

I have to go now. Write to me if you have time. Nathan says hi.

Love,

Lynda

And the second letter:

Dear Paul,

Lynda said she was going to write to you. So I thought I would write to you, too. I thought you'd like that. I got that model for you. Lynda is reading what I write and she says she already told you that. Well, I'll send it by UPS when I can. Now she says she told you that too. I'm writing in pen so can't erase it, Lynda. I just asked her what she didn't tell you already. Hey! I can't tell you what she just said! I bet you didn't know she can use some seriously dirty words sometimes!

You are a great guy, Paul. You have been very nice to us. We appreciate that. I hope someday I can do a favor for you as nice as the air conditioning. Did Lynda tell you that it's been awful cool down here, so we shut it off? We've even had the heat on once or twice. But that air conditioning is still about the nicest

thing anyone's ever done for us. Just letting you look around our dirty old house does not seem like a fair trade. Maybe the Dracula will make us closer to even.

Hope you are doing okay. See you.

Love,

Craig

He waited until he was back from Atlanta—a full eleven days—before he wrote again, but by the time he returned, he could hardly wait any longer to see them again. He didn't know why the dreams kept coming, but they did, and they stayed when he was awake and alone. Autumn had fallen; he imagined them raking leaves beneath the tree in the backyard. He could smell the season coming from the barren farm fields just a country mile away. He could hear them laugh. In his dreams, the monster models had vanished as if they'd never been.

Dear Craig and Lynda:

I'll be downstate in a week or so, and I'll stop by to see if you're around. If you like, I can take the three of you out to dinner. There was a restaurant my grandparents used to go to, the Dinner Belle—and it's still there! How about that? I checked the last time I was down. It's not the greatest, but it's another piece of this puzzle I'm working out in my head (but mostly in my sleep!).

Anyway, I'd like to take you out. How does Friday the 18th sound? If that's a problem, let me know and we'll try to set up something else. I've included my telephone number in case you need to call; call collect, if you have to. I'll change my answering machine message to accept the charges. Otherwise, I'll see you soon.

He hesitated, then added,

I'm so glad we became friends. This is really nice for me, being friends with both of you. My job is a little isolated, and I have to admit that I'd been lonely without realizing it. You occupy a lot of my thoughts.

Love,

Paul

He drove down a week later, the October air almost cold, the sun sinking earlier in the day than it had over the long, hot summer. The drive was good; he imagined how it would be when he saw them again, and he wondered about the strangeness of their friendship. Did other people have friendships develop this way?

He arrived at the old house just before five on Friday. There were no kids about this time, and the house was still. The door was closed and the curtains were drawn over all the windows along the front of the house. Next door, Old Man Douglas worked his side of the fence, pruning, pulling, vigilant, waiting for winter. Paul wondered if the old man was gathering rocks to throw at kids. He parked in the driveway, shutting down the pickup's engine and "accidentally" tooting the horn once. There was no visible response from the house.

He sat for another minute.

They don't want me here, he realized then, and like a thunderstorm out of season, full of surprise and savagery, it dawned on him. *They don't want me in their lives. They don't even know me.*

No, no, no. You're being stupid. They wrote to you, didn't they?

He considered going to the door, but he could easily envision them hiding behind the curtains, peering out at him, afraid to move lest he sense them, waiting for him to be gone. Nothing stirred. He knew that, of course, he'd been presumptuous in planning a dinner for them without giving them an easy out. "Let me know if this isn't good for you." Well, he had only offered them a negative—if you're silent, you accept. Like those ads he received in the mail for book clubs: if you don't send back the form, you've accepted the Selection-of-the-Month.

"Well, the Selection-of-the-Month has arrived," he said aloud, feeling foolish.

Old Man Douglas peeked briefly around the corner as Paul got out of his truck, steeling himself to knock on the door. The elderly man put down his garden tool before coming around the corner so Paul could see him more clearly.

"They're gone," Old Man Douglas said. Paul stared at him, and *then* he knew.

He looked at the yard, unmowed, and he knew then that they had moved away from his grandparents' house. Maybe the letter he'd written hadn't even made it to them yet, what with the slowness of the post office's forwarding system. They'd moved on, probably up, leaving his one gift—the air conditioning—behind. Why didn't they mention the move? he wondered, feeling both hurt and insulted.

"How long ago did they move?" he asked Old Man Douglas. "And do you have any idea where they live now?"

The elder's lip quivered and he shook his tired head as he said, "They didn't move away, son. They died. Carbon monoxide

poisoning or some such, from their furnace. Damned things—might just as well sit in your garage with your goddamned car running as kick on one of those deathtraps. About a week and a half ago, they just breathed it right in and died in their sleep. Shook the whole neighborhood, that's for sure."

Paul said nothing but stood looking at the house. It didn't look the same anymore. "What about the baby?" he asked at length.

"They were good kids," Old Man Douglas answered. Paul thought he was taking secret glee in spreading the story, as if there had been no one to tell up to now, no one who hadn't already heard. "You'd think they'd have felt sick or something. Dizzy or headaches or something. Wouldn't you think?"

Paul turned away, his eyes closed but his mind wide open, raging, filled with visions. He could not find Uncle Burt's room and the model monsters anymore; they had simply gone away from him, like a balloon carried on a strong wind. Instead, he saw a room with a crib, and there was a funny smell in the air, a hot smell, and a horrible silence from the room he'd just entered, along with everyone else who had come to find the Spencers when they'd not been seen for days. From the hallway, from the heating grate that had terrified him as a child, there came a dry chunking sound as the furnace kicked on, but this sound stopped after a moment. The mobile over the crib turned on a dry breeze. When he looked down, he saw a puffed, discolored hand, so tiny, balled into a weak fist.

He said something to Old Man Douglas and got back into his truck. He wondered if the heat was still on inside the house as he backed out. Surely someone had had the sense to turn it off as

Craig and Lynda were zipped into plastic bags and rolled on stretchers through their living room and out to the waiting ambulance. He wondered instead if the air conditioning was on. His chest hitched. He tried to remember how they danced in his dreams, he and Lynda with a “y,” he and Craig without a shirt, but the dream refused to be resurrected and he could breath no life into it. It had become ash.

One of Craig’s parents apparently found his letter to Lynda and Craig, for Paul received a UPS package six weeks later, just around Thanksgiving, with a brief note attached:

Dear Mr. Matheson:

Here is the model kit our son and daughter-in-law promised you. There has been a tragedy, and Craig, Lynda, and Nathan are no longer with us. They would have wanted us to deliver this to you.

Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Spencer

Inside was an old Aurora Dracula model kit, the pieces still on the stems. The box’s colors hadn’t faded a day in nearly thirty years.

He put it together the same day it arrived.

7

Keith took a turn as a security guard at a local department store, Turn-Style (think Target without Target’s classiness—but not as classless as Walmart). Turn-Style was the anchor store in a miserable little indoor strip mall that hosted a dirty General

Cinemas, an Eisner's grocery store that eventually became Jewel and then became vacant, and a handful of other businesses that barely hung on week after week.

As I was growing up, my family gravitated to this particular strip mall; why, I have no idea. I saw *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* in the theater there, confused by the ending ("Did they die?" I asked my dad as we walked out to the parking lot. "What do you think happened to them?" he answered philosophically—and pointlessly, I eventually realized, since yeah, they *died*. "I have no idea what happened to them," I pressed. "That's why I'm asking you."). When I was in high school, the same theater hosted midnight movies on Friday and Saturday nights. A gaggle of my high school chums and I saw *Heavy Metal* and *Pink Floyd's The Wall* and *Dawn of the Dead* and *Rocky Horror Picture Show* there until midnight shows moved to the new theater out by the mall, where our kind of weirdness was not tolerated. Teenage boys in corsets to do the "Time Warp" was hardly middle America.

My dad adored Team Electronics at one end of the strip mall ("What Radio Shack aspires to," he sometimes said of Team). One of the few bookstores in town that sold new books, Book Emporium, was there, if you could find the books amidst the Hallmark ornaments, the Christmas villages, and the decimated forest's worth of greeting cards. The strip mall held a children's art contest for Halloween one year, and I won the right to paint my entry on the large glass windows outside the Book Emporium. I had copied my submission off the cover of an old record, *Disney's Chilling Thrilling Sounds of the Haunted House*, which showed an old mansion on a hill during a violent thunderstorm. A single light filled

a window below the widow's walk at the top of the house. Lightning crashed behind the gnarled trees in the background, and in the foreground stood the slanted and weathered gravestones of a forgotten cemetery. In my window-painted version, I put the names of friends on the tombstones. (Amy Fair, whom I was sweet on in the fifth grade, particularly resented her prominent grave; my methods of courting—assigning her a burial plot—left a lot to be desired. Nowadays, it would probably have gotten me jailed.)

So when Keith got the security job at Turn-Style, we saw him practically all the time. My mom and I would wander in on a Saturday evening to find him standing in the watch department, lazily leaning on the glass cases. He was always in street clothes, comfortable stuff—loose sweatshirts, windbreakers, jeans, tennis shoes. Hands in pocket. Alert. But he blended in. He feigned intense interest in whatever was on the shelf in front of him while watching teenagers out of the corner of his eye. Even now, when I shop in a store like Walmart (where I try not to shop, for what it's worth) and see a young man under thirty who's dressed a little too casually, who seems a little too enthralled by girdles or picture frames, I see Keith, a hungry shark cruising amongst the school of shoppers. Once he had a suspicious character, he was a pro at "shadowing" them (a *Hardy Boys* term I'd picked up), even though he sometimes seemed to swagger.

Given a chance, he'd dog a black kid over a white kid every time, without fail.

The first time I heard the word "nigger," it came out of Keith's mouth like vitriol. I don't know where his rage against blacks came from—Decatur was about 50/50 black and white even

then, with hardly any other ethnic groups mixed in—but it fed me a grammar for a fear that took years to get over.

It wasn't a word I ever used—it was a word that would have gotten my ass blistered if I had uttered it in front of my parents. But a word is just a word; it's attitude behind it that engenders the real danger.

On a school bus trip back from the St. Louis Zoo, I traded another boy, Fred, a rubber alligator I had bought at the zoo for a serious stockpile of candy. It wasn't much of an alligator: it was a foot-and-a-half long with a hollow belly, so you could easily shove a pencil down its throat and the length of its body. Its rubber teeth were crooked and refused to be straightened; it looked more as if it might gum you to death than do you any real harm. The trade was more than fair. I ate all the candy in a rush, sharing it with some of the other kids on the bus, but by the time the bus finally got back to the school, I was missing my alligator. I had a teary fit when my mom arrived to pick me up, wailing that Fred had “stolen” my alligator. She did just what I had expected: she stuck up for me. She found Fred and demanded the return of the filched property. Fred was a good kid, honest, and actually a really nice guy, but he sure as hell wasn't going to let himself get screwed out of an alligator he'd traded for fair and square. Fred (and Fred's mom) gave my mom an earful, and inevitably I was outed. The alligator stayed with Fred. My mom was mortified by my audacity.

Fred was black. I was sure my mom wouldn't believe *him*.

One evening, after visiting Keith “on duty” at Turn-Style, my mom and dad gave me permission to walk from Turn-Style's back exit up to the Book Emporium. I was eleven or so. I was trekking up

the strip mall's cavernous internal walkway from Turn-Style's back entrance toward the bookstore when a pair of young men came roaring past me. They were muscular but wiry, with fierce cheekbones and dark skin and bulging eyes that were so, so white as they ran. Each of them carried a dirty shopping bag, the kind old ladies refuse to throw away, and the bags bulged with electronic components. The two young men disappeared around the corner, racing past the bookstore. They pushed out the glass doors and onto the dark parking lot, arms and legs pumping, breathing so loudly you could hear them from a distance..

Keith bolted out of Turn-Style, another young security guard right at his back.

"Mike!" he shouted. He came upon me in a cloud of adrenaline that made the air around him crackle with energy. He leaned into me, his chin down, his face inches from mine. "Did you see a couple of niggers with grocery sacks come this way?"

His jaw muscles were taut and he spoke through locked teeth. His fists were clenched. He was a warlord in battle. He was a lion, hunting. He was a marshal out for justice.

I pointed toward the exit. "That way. They went outside."

He grabbed both my shoulders roughly and squeezed them. Then he and the other guard sprinted the length of the mall, Keith graceful and controlled even as he slammed into the glass doors with his entire body like an offensive lineman and burst out onto the parking lot beyond. I chased after the two of them, breathless, on the verge of tears with excitement and wild tension. I went out the same door. I could hear unintelligible shouting on the parking lot even before I got there.

I stood beneath bare florescent bulbs near the exit and watched Keith and the other guard stalk among the cars, peering through windshields into dark cars, each of them taking his own row. The other guard had a flashlight that bounced off glass and fell dead on dark metal as they worked further and further away from the mall, out toward the bank far across the lot. Keith shouted something to the other guard, and they turned back toward the strip mall. That was when I saw the pair of black men skulking between cars two rows over.

“There they are, Keith!” I yelled, bouncing and pointing. “Right there! There!”

The two men popped up, dashing in different directions. One of them streaked back toward the bank, away from the mall’s lights, his grocery bag of electronics tearing and spilling as he ran. The other guard ran after him. The second man ran parallel to the mall, weaving between the cars, refusing to drop his bag. He held it to his chest like a football, arms folded over it. When he hit an open space, he picked up some speed, but the cars slowed him over and over until Keith finally ran him down. He hit the young man hard behind the knees, sending them both sprawling across the blacktop. From the sidewalk, I couldn’t see much—a mangle of arms and legs, snarling curses, fists. Then it ended like a thunderclap: Keith was leading his prisoner back to the mall, the black man’s hands cuffed behind his back. In one hand Keith carried the tattered remnants of the grocery bag of electronics; with the other, he wiped the blood from his lip, his nose. As they drew near the sidewalk, the black man stared at me with undisguised loathing. My heart pounded with fear of retaliation.

“What the fuck are you looking at, bro?” Keith demanded of his prisoner. He jerked the man past me, tripping him over the sidewalk’s curb.

“Take it easy, motherfucker,” the black man said.

“You know what a body bag is, asshole?” Keith yanked the glass door open and shoved his prisoner inside. “Wanna see one from the inside? Then keep right on fucking with me.”

Keith gestured for me to follow him, so I did, trembling, though I wanted to do nothing of the sort. I deliberately kept out of the black man’s line of sight, but I stayed close enough to hear and see everything Keith did. He maintained a steady patter of obscenities back down the walkway to Turn-Style’s back entrance, though it dropped to a murmur when we finally reached the store. Customers gawked as we worked our way through Turn-Style to the front, where Keith buzzed a security door that let into a narrow metal staircase that climbed above the store. Out of sight of the floor, both Keith and his prisoner bucked up—the black man jerked around in Keith’s grip, and Keith shoved him hard into the stairs. When they finally made it upstairs to the security room, Keith threw the black man into a folding chair.

“Over here, Mike,” he grunted. He led me across the hall to a small room with no light. “Wait in here for a bit.”

I sat in the room that smelled of cigarettes and coffee, in the dark, on a metal chair at a card table, and peeked out from the edge of the shadows into the brightly lit security room across the hall. I could see about half of the black man’s back, dirty from his roll on the parking lot; Keith paced back and forth between the

man and the large one-way glass that overlooked Turn-Style below. I listened to his patter with growing anxiety.

“Where’d your buddy go, asshole?”

Silence.

“He pretty much left your sorry ass behind, didn’t he? Not much of a brother, is he?”

Silence.

“I think if some motherfucker was always telling me that he was my brother, I’d expect a bit more goddamned loyalty than that. What about you? You got a thought about that?”

“Fuck you. Why you fuckin’ with me? I didn’t do nothing to you.”

“That’s what Malcolm X said, bro, and they shot his ass.”

It went on and on for half-an-hour or more. I didn’t know why I was there—a witness, I guessed—but I knew I didn’t want to be there anymore. Not another breath. But I was bound by immaturity and fear to the chair. Keith and the black man went at it with equal gusto, and the language was horrid and foul. When the cops finally arrived, icons of calm compared to Keith and the other security guard (who finally returned with the second shoplifter in tow), Keith reluctantly gave up his bust.

He came across the hall while the cops took the shoplifters away. No one said anything to me until Keith sat down in one of the other chairs around the card table.

“I want to ask you something,” he said. “Okay?”

I nodded, eyes wide in the poor light. Keith looked tired but satisfied.

“Can you use the word ‘weebee’ in a sentence?” he asked.

I didn't think about it at all. "No."
"Weebee going to jail now," he said, grinning.
"I don't get it," I said, grinning. But I got it.

8

If, by his own admission, Keith was the black sheep of the family (something he often noted with sneering pride), then my aunt Bonnie was "daddy's girl." Dad's "doll," as he called her, much to my mother's displeasure. She was three or four years older than Keith, and the scholar of the family: she was the only one of her immediate family to finish both high school (GEDs were practically biological requirements in my family) and college. Like all of the siblings, she was good-looking—long black hair, fashionably thin, a comely face with a perfectly upturned nose. She was "perky and pert," for want of a better expression. She had a more sophisticated sense of humor than her brothers Keith and Butch, though she happily fell back on the more base humor if the situation merited it. She once goaded me into taunting a llama at the Scovill Petting Zoo; she knew that it would spit on me long before I did. She took me to see Huey Lewis and the News in concert up north of Decatur in Peoria, where she lived most of her adult life. (Actually, she lived in a suburb called Pekin—where quite literally not a single black person lived. Not surprisingly, Keith approved.) To my amazement, she knew the words to Huey Lewis's songs despite her decrepit age of twenty-eight. We shared the same astrological sign (if you buy into that stuff), so she bought me birthday cards with cryptic descriptors of what the savage, vengeful Scorpio was really like. She read what I wrote,

even when I sucked a lot more than I do now, and she was amazingly supportive of my desire to be a writer one day. I loved her like no one else in my family.

Maybe that's why I can't remember hardly anything about her now.

I remember so much about Keith—strong emotional moments that still make me laugh or cringe—and enough about my uncle Butch to be true to who he was back then. I remember Mom and Dad, of course; I see them every couple of days in the face of an old woman in the grocery store or an old man waiting patiently in line at Starbuck's. But my memories of Bonnie are just a bunch of unrelated stars scattered across the firmament, connected by invisible lines and a strong imagination to form a vaguely recognizable sign. I remember the thing she turned into after Dad's death much better than I remember the woman she was before that. I can really only remember two moments, and they seem to have nothing to do with one another.

Like an old home movie, I can see Bonnie sitting across a McDonald's restaurant booth from my mom and me. She's telling us a story about the last time she was in a Burger King... and why she won't go there anymore.

"The manager was young but completely bald," she says. Her face screws up in distaste. "And he's *sweating*. Omigod, he's sweating so much that little balls of sweat keep flicking off of the top of his head."

Her throat constricts, and she makes an extremely realistic-looking gagging gesture.

“The sweat just flies everywhere,” she says. “It’s on... it’s on the *food*.”

It turns out that the gagging looks so real because she really *is* gagging on the memory. My mom joins in, her own gullet rising; it’s quite the little gagfest. My mom chimes in with her story about getting a McDonald’s burger so disgustingly greasy that she wrung it out on the order counter, and the manager frantically wiping it up as she did. Both my mom and Bonnie gag again—it’s really obvious that they’re both drawn to this revolting-story swap. I can still see Bonnie, her eyes bugging with sick amusement while one hand delicately covers her mouth in the most feminine of gestures to keep herself from puking all over the Formica table. I laughed and laughed (not so much so at my mom’s story—my sister and I had both been present at the burger-wringing, and it was more an embarrassing recollection than an amusing one). I didn’t have anything to add to the gagfest—my best gross-out stories were still a few years away—but I loved listening to Bonnie tell hers.

My other recollection of Bonnie is a slightly more shameful one. She was dating the man she would marry and quickly divorce, a seemingly normal everyman named Bob. Unbeknownst to me at the age of 12 or so, Bob had quite a Norman Bates relationship with his elderly mother—he tended her every need in a quite servile manner, and while he seemed fairly intelligent, he often took on a strange glassy-eyed look that made everyone around him uncomfortable. He was good-looking—he had curly brown hair, the cute sort of baby face that would still have him getting carded in bars until he was thirty, and was just outdoorsy enough to camp during the summer and ski during the winter—so he and Bonnie

looked particularly good together. He was very fond of both my sister and me. Like Bonnie, he had a way of talking to us without talking *at* us.

He and Bonnie had taken a vacation together, and they took Tammy and me with them to the Walgreen's drug store one summer afternoon to pick up their processed photos. Back in Bonnie's car, Tammy and I hung over the backseat to look at the pictures while Bonnie and Bob rifled through them.

"Bob thinks he's Grizzly Adams," I said, laughing and pointing at a photo of Bob in the woods with the rough scraggle of a beard coming through. He was standing with a walking stick atop a sizable boulder with an impressive forest view behind him. "Man, do you look silly."

Bonnie looked back at me with a withering stare. "That's not very nice, Mike. I want you to apologize to Bob."

I felt the heat rise up from around my collar until my entire face was flush. I muttered an apology under my breath and sank back into the seat. In only a few moments, everyone else in the car had forgotten about the incident, but I never forgot it—I had never been on Bonnie's bad side before. It staggered me to have her angry with me, even if only for a moment. It was nothing, really—but it was *something* at the same time. Bonnie, my favorite relative, was angry with me. That *never* happened.

As of this writing, she's been angry with me for decades, for even pettier reasons. I saw a photograph of her not too long ago; my mom found it through Facebook, and though she denies any interest at all in what became of her baby sister, she still sent it to me via email and wrote, *Can you guess who this is?* Sure, I could guess,

and I did. She looked like Mom. So, though Bonnie is not one of those dead people who I used to know, she certainly seems that way.

9

Pekin was about an hour-and-a-half north of Decatur, so Bonnie was able to make the trip down to see us most any weekend she chose. When she came to town, it gave me the feeling of a holiday coming. At Thanksgiving, she blew in with pumpkin pies in paper grocery bags, and she came early enough to hang out with my mom in our country kitchen to talk and talk and *talk* while preparing the meal. At Christmas, she arrived with her laundry basket filled with presents; she wrapped in the best glittery papers (my mom preferred the funny papers from the Sunday newspaper, arguing that the paper was meaningless, as it was torn up and thrown away in the end). Keith might not wrap his gifts at all—the year he gave me the most amazing gift ever, a complete weight-lifting set, I helped him unload it from the trunk of his car—but Bonnie always did the holidays *right*. Even when it wasn't a holiday, her arrival seemed like one: it changed the rules about how the weekend was going to go. With Bonnie in town, we were more likely to go out to eat, to go to the movies, to stay up late talking, to play games, to sit like a family around our dining room table (something we rarely did). Keith would come to visit, too, no doubt. Sometimes Dad would come over too, his old hat in one hand as he stood on the front porch of our old farmhouse, his oxygen tank in his other hand.

As Dad got older, however, Bonnie preferred to keep her non-holiday visits a secret from him.

“I just don’t want to spend the whole weekend carting him around town,” she sometimes said, or, “He makes me really, really tired.”

For a time, my mom indulged her without saying much. Of course, Dad made everyone tired in his later years, including me.

He drove a red Ford Pinto station wagon that he kept in immaculate condition. For the longest time, it retained its new-car smell; after that, it smelled like Dad, a musky old-man smell that mixed laundry soap with aftershave and mothballs. It was always station wagons with him, for as long as I can remember. (I have a strong recollection of Dad taking Bill and me to Cousin Fred’s to shop. He refused to turn on the radio, insisting instead that we could sing. Bill and I broke out into a furious, off-key rendition of the Steve Miller Band’s “The Joker,” bellowing “I’m a joker, I’m a smoker, I’m a midnight toker!” Dad scowled this song away and by the green lights of the dashboard broke into a brassy singing voice. “Tangerine,” he sang, and then, apparently not knowing the rest of the lyrics, ad-libbed: “Do-de-do-de-do.” Bill and I laughed hysterically—the tune, one from Dad’s youth, was in use at the time as a song to promote a weight-loss drink on television. We assumed he was singing jingles to us.)

When I was in my late teens, Dad came around one January afternoon in his red Pinto with the speedometer that had never registered over thirty miles per hour, and he asked me to go with him to check the pressure in his tires. I reluctantly agreed, knowing I was in for an ordeal.

We lived in the sticks west of Decatur, and the drive down I-72 to town was nightmarish.

“Go faster, Dad,” I urged. Cars tore by us in the left lane with such speed that I was sure we were standing still.

“It’s winter in Illinois,” he answered. “It’s not safe.”

You’re not safe, I thought but didn’t say. He drove with his oxygen tank wedged between the seats in the front (the Pinto had an automatic transmission on the floor), the mask dangling around his throat. Though he didn’t display it most of the time, he kept a handicapped parking sign in his glove compartment; to get the better parking spaces, he’d take it and hang it from his rearview mirror when he went to eat at the Dinner Belle, his favorite restaurant. I always protested he wasn’t really handicapped and didn’t need the sign. That ride into town to check his tires changed my mind.

Eventually we reached the Amoco station where Dad did most if not all of his business. He handed me a dollar bill.

“Here, Mikey,” he wheezed. “Go on in there and buy me a pressure gauge. Then come on out here and check the air in the tires, will ya? That front one on your side especially.”

I did as he asked, and all four tires registered 32 pounds per square inch, exactly correct, according to his service manual that I fumbled through in the cold outside the car. I told Dad the results.

“Well, now,” he wheezed, rubbing his old beardless chin, “that can’t be right. Now I’m just sure that right front tire’s low.”

I shrugged it off. “Nope. It’s fine.”

He shook his head. “That gauge must be wrong. Here, take this dollar and go buy another one.”

I was about to protest, but he dismissed me with a gentle wave. Annoyed, I trekked back into the Amoco station and, to the bafflement of the hairy attendant, bought a second pressure gauge. I tested all four tires again: 32 p.s.i.

“I think,” Dad said upon receiving this not-unexpected news, “that there’s a Shell station up the road a piece. Let’s go there, Mikey. I think those gauges here are fixed.”

I shoved the second gauge into the pocket of my gray winter coat with the first. “Dad, they’re right. There’s nothing wrong with your tires. They’re all 32 p.s.i., so let’s call it a day and go home, okay?”

Dad wasn’t deaf, unless he chose to be.

The third gauge—the one from Shell, which was up the road a piece—read 32 p.s.i. as well.

So did the fourth.

And the fifth.

A few years after Dad died, I was cleaning out my closet in preparation to moving to a new apartment. There I found the gray winter coat I’d been wearing on the Tire Gauge Expedition, and in the left-hand pocket I discovered three shiny new tire gauges, each only used once. I had originally planned to throw the coat away—aside from being ugly, it didn’t fit anymore—but that suddenly seemed the wrong decision. So I put the gauges back in the pocket and the coat back in the closet.

I’ve moved a half-dozen times since then. The coat’s still in my closet. So are those stupid tire gauges that were all “fixed to read 32 p.s.i.”

When she protested, I understood Bonnie's desire not to be burdened with Dad and his circus antics on any given weekend. After all, I'd been through it. In hindsight, of course, I don't understand it at all. After all, I got to go through it.

10

I want to share this, but I don't, so I shall leave it to just a few lines.

When I was about ten, I was raped.

I was walking home from the White Hen Pantry convenience store. It was cold, snow on the ground, the late afternoon sky gun-metal gray. I had bought some Charleston Chew candy bars, the long vanilla flavored ones, and I had them clutched in a brown paper bag like a wino carrying his bottle when a teenage boy—maybe a man, I don't know which; on the cusp, I suppose—attacked me.

"What's in the bag?" he asked as he approached me on that cold, gray suburban street, but I never got to answer as he fell upon me.

He dragged me behind a neighborhood garage, our boots crunching in the snow, his hand over my mouth, and when he pushed me down on a patch of exposed hard ground, he suddenly had a knife in one hand.

"I know who you are," he said as he put his knees on my small chest. I couldn't breathe. "I know your little sister and your parents. I know where you live. If you scream, I'll kill them. If you tell, I'll kill them."

He turned me over on my stomach with his free hand. Then I felt both of his hands reach under to find the snap and zipper on my jeans. I did not fight; his knees were in the small of my back now. And I was suddenly much colder, then much sicker as my insides were shoved up into my throat from below. Below the waist, I was set aflame with pain and shame.

As he left, he told me again that he would hurt my whole family if I ever told anyone, and then he abandoned me there, face-down on the ground, my pants and underpants at my knees, bright red blood on the snow around me. He even took my paper bag of candy bars. The only thing that had mattered up until ten minutes ago.

I dressed and made my way home empty-handed. I went through the back door so my mom wouldn't see me, and she didn't. I put all my clothes in the washing machine except for my underpants, which were so heavily stained with blood from the walk home that I didn't think it would come out. I threw those in the garbage can behind the house later that night when everyone else was asleep. Then I took a shower to wash away the smell.

I never said a word, not for more than thirty years. Not to anyone. I raged with guilt sometimes that, because of my silence, he might have raped more boys. I acquired a powerful distrust of men that I struggled with for all of my adult life—including a distrust of my own father that was based on absolutely nothing he ever did. I didn't like to be touched for the longest time. And I lived with the nightmares that he was coming for me, even when I was a grown man and more than capable of doing willful bodily harm to him if he ever came near me again. The nightmares sometimes

blurred into other bad dreams, and his face lost resolution and clarity as the years passed. But I never forgot the terror and the certainty not that I was going to die, but that he would take my family away from me. Life could go on without *me*; my life could not go on without *them*.

11

Dad kept chickens to show (and I guess for the eggs). In the backyard of the house in Harristown, he had a half-dozen or so coops and one larger outbuilding where he could keep particular birds indoors. A sidewalk ran from the back door of the garage, between a couple of aluminum sheds, and to the door of that outbuilding. In the sheds, Mom and Dad kept two tricycles and a little powder-blue car for me, my sister, and our cousins to play with. One of the trikes was junk, with metal wheels and a rusted seat. The other trike was bigger, with rubber tires and a shiny red frame. When we all stayed the night at Mom and Dad's, that trike was the vehicle of choice—we devised myriad contests and challenges to determine who would ride it. The car was second-best only because it was unique—but frankly, it sucked. It moved with pedals, and pedaling it was a Herculean chore that none of us liked to undertake. There was a slight uphill grade on the return trip from the chicken outbuilding to the garage, and by the third trip, we were often too tired to make the car go. If you were too tired to keep pressure on the pedals, they might suddenly begin to turn backward as the car rolled back down the hill. It was humiliating.

My cousin Bill and I were pretty fair about the red trike. My sister Tammy and Bill's little brother and sister, Robby and Amy, got squat—Bill and I were the dominant kids, and we'd battle for temporary custody of the tricycle. It had a place to stand on the back, behind the rear tires, so whoever lost the bid to steer could still get on board (and periodically help power the trike).

Bill and I liked playing outdoors, wherever we were. My family lived in the country most of my youth, first in Warrensburg (a tiny little suburb of Decatur), then later just west of town. When Bill stayed with us out in Warrensburg, he and I would happily trek out into the cornfields to play hide-and-seek; there was an old outhouse behind the house, and Bill and I were enthralled with the idea of going to the bathroom out-of-doors. When I stayed with Bill in town, we devised various games in his backyard (including, but not limited to, playing with his German shepherd Thumper, a massive hound that I never saw completely, as the dog was kept in the garage and was never, in my presence, let out; we played with him through some broken slates on the garage door). But Mom and Dad's house was the best place to be outdoors. Beyond the chicken coops were apple trees (a fine location for wars that resulted in bruised apples and bruised bodies). And the chicken coops themselves were great play sites... provided the adults didn't see.

"They'll make a lot of noise," Bill assured me one summer day as I sat on the red trike, staring down the sidewalk at the big chicken outbuilding. He was standing on the back of the trike, waiting.

"I don't know," I mumbled.

“A lot of noise.”

I looked back at the house. No one seemed to be watching through the few windows that overlooked the backyard.

“Okay,” I agreed. And just like that, we were off, me pedaling as furiously as my ten-year-old legs could, Bill propelling us even faster with one foot on the trike, the other on the sidewalk.

We plowed into the chicken outbuilding at an impressive speed, both of us falling from the trike and down the slight hill to the outbuilding’s left, dragging the trike with us. Inside, the chickens went insane.

So did Dad, who was inside the outbuilding at the time. We ran, but I think it’s safe to say he knew who did it.

On another occasion, I put the idea in Bill’s head that since chickens couldn’t fly, we could have great fun poking them with sticks through the wire fences that surrounded their little dirt yards outside the coops. The tops of the yards were unfenced, so we could climb up a bit and hang over the fence to poke the hens, which ran clucking and sometimes screeching away from our sticks. Then we would drop off the fence and chase them to the far side, where we’d poke them through the wire to make them run again.

After a few moments of mad cackling and scrambling, the hens were joined by the rooster, a big ugly bird with bug-eyes and a real attitude. We saw him coming out of the coop, lifting his feet unusually high as he came down the little studded ramp the chickens used to get in and out of the coop. He turned his head sideways when he spotted us.

Then, like a bullet, he came at us.

We retreated, confident in the fence's ability to contain the rooster. And, of course, we knew he couldn't fly. It never occurred to us that he could *jump*.

He chased us all the way from the coop to the garage. It was humiliating.

Dad was watching from the garage, and as we bolted past him to safety, he stepped out to intercept the rooster that had planned to murder us, and he laughed the whole time.

Dad loved those chickens. Bill and I sometimes walked with him while he collected their eggs. He had a fake egg made of glass that he would place in one of their nests to trick the hens into laying, and Bill and I made a competition out of being the one to find the glass egg first. Dad collected the eggs in a basket and took them back into the house—some of them for eating, others for chicks. He sang under his breath while he did so, humming old big band numbers.

Inside Mom and Dad's house, in the breezeway off the kitchen, Dad kept a large cardboard box under a couple of hot light bulbs. This is where he kept the baby chicks after they were born. (Their hatching took place in an incubator he kept in the master bedroom, of all places, a large latched box with a peephole and an interior light that turned on and off on a timer. Bill and I were discouraged from peeking in on the chicks as they hatched and dried, as we couldn't resist tapping on the peephole's glass to get the newborns to run.) The chicks in the cardboard box were tiny balls of yellow or brown or white, incessantly peeping.

Bill and I would pull a chair from Mom and Dad's small kitchen and stand up on it together so we could look down into the

cardboard box. The chicks would pile up in one corner, stacked atop one another like cottonballs, their tiny chests heaving as if they were having difficulties breathing. When we put our hands down into the warmth of the box, every chick would suddenly come awake, cheeping wildly, running pell-mell across the box to the far corner, where they piled up again. Dad would sometimes let us hold them, taking one or two out with his big hands that looked like they could crush a tiny chick to dust. One of his fingernails looked as if it were made of cast-iron, all gray, hard, and shiny. (My mom used to tell me stories about Dad thumping her, Butch, Bonnie, and Keith in the head with that finger of death as punishment.) But Dad's hands were gentle and caring when he lifted those helpless chicks for us to pet and wonder over. He always chuckled at our reaction, as if it pleased him that someone still found baby chickens fascinating. I guess he'd been around them too long.

Because he worked almost exclusively with chickens (my memory of him begins long after he had retired from the railroad work that I still know nothing about), I often saw him dressed the same way: a pair of faded gray-blue coveralls, a beat-up farmer's cap, and a flannel shirt. In the winter he added a worn blue denim jacket, and all this, with his eyeglasses and his white mustache, combines to form a powerful image of him that is a still photograph in my mind. He was tall, over six foot, and when we were kids, he towered over everyone and everything around us. I can still see him when we grandkids came in from playing outside in the snow; he's about to go out to the chicken coops. He's dressed for the cold. He has a basket for the eggs. Bill thunders off to stand on the

heating vent in front of Mom and Dad's bathroom to warm his feet. The other kids scatter, to Mom in the chair she sat in that lorded over the living room, to Bonnie in her shockingly tidy bedroom, to Keith in his shockingly untidy bedroom. I hang back with Dad in the breezeway.

"You wanna come get the eggs with me, Mikey?" he says softly. For the first seventeen years of my life, he was the only person who dared call me that. Those Life cereal ads were still popular, and I loathed the "y" the commercials had added to the end of my name. But Dad was always the exception. He called me "Mikey" up to the day he died.

"No, Dad!" I bellow, my shoes full of melting snow. "You're crazy! It's freezing out there!"

He laughs and goes on without me, out into the fading evening sun, out into the endless winter to where the chickens cluck and scratch in dark outbuildings, waiting to surrender their eggs to the old man who sings under his breath.

12

A few years after Mom died, Dad became quite the ladies' man. The first woman I remember seeing him with was a stern-faced nurse named Vera. Vera was Mom's first name, too. I once joked that Dad wasn't taking any chances of moaning the wrong name in the middle of the night, but the thought of my grandfather having sex—or even engaging in heavy petting—proved to be not as funny as I thought it might be, so the joke died quickly on the vine.

Vera was the hawk-faced, matriarchal kind of woman who gives elderly ladies a bad name. She smiled the way nurses smile: forced, with a hint of sadism and contempt. I didn't like her. She struck me as the kind of woman who would smack your hand for putting it in the cookie jar. She scowled a great deal. She was critical and self-righteous. She was impatient. Her name notwithstanding, she was nothing like Mom.

But Dad was no fool about dealing with women, despite his advancing years. He was overly suspicious of even the ones he liked and courted. Bonnie and my mom discussed the Vera situation one night in the kitchen of our farmhouse while I sat at the kitchen table, trying to be unnoticed so that I could listen in.

"If she's after his money," my mom said, "she's barking up the wrong tree."

"Does he even *have* any money?" Bonnie asked.

"Oh, he has it," my mom answered firmly. "He's invested some of it in guns and model trains, but I know he has it. And he's not going to give any of it to Vera, I can tell you that. He's going to hang onto his cash with both fists."

(I knew from personal experience that this was probably true. Dad, ever the spendthrift, had taken in recent years to giving crisp, new two-dollar bills in "gift cards" from the bank as his Christmas presents. An envelope from Dad stuck into the Christmas tree was worth a fine and mighty two bucks... and nothing more. Keith once said to me, "Be glad he can't get silver dollars anymore, or your Christmas gift would get cut in half.")

But Dad developed a yin-yang scenario once he was willing to dip his feet into the dating pool again. He dated not just

scowling Vera but a second older lady, Gladys, as well. Gladys was Vera's antithesis: she was soft-spoken, sweet, curious about the family, eager to be seen as Dad's girlfriend. It was only a matter of time before Gladys began to dominate Dad's free time, and Vera slowly disappeared from the picture. Gladys then became the woman who showed up at holiday family gatherings. She sat patiently by his side one Christmas afternoon, the two of them alone in the living room while the rest of the family—me, my sister Tammy, my mom and dad, Bonnie, Keith, their partners—hurried about the house, getting ready to eat. They didn't say much to one another; Gladys seemed perfectly content to sit near him, patting or rubbing one of his hands, as he sat back and breathed in the pure oxygen from his tank. She smiled politely, almost shyly, if anyone came in to engage them in conversation.

If she knew that Dad had money—which everyone at this point assumed he did, whether it was true or not—Gladys showed no particular interest in getting it. She didn't make noise about getting married. She didn't demand gifts or trips. She was just there for him. I figured out much later that she loved him, but he had to die for me to realize that.

Before the Christmas dinner, we all gathered in the living room to exchange gifts, and every year, it was the same thing: Who could buy a gift for Dad that would make it out of the wrapping paper? My mom stressed over this every year.

"He has everything he wants," she complained. "And if he doesn't have it, he goes out and buys it. He's impossible to buy for. I should give him the same damned thing I gave him last year and stop worrying about it."

That Christmas, we gave him a robe. It was a nice robe, red with black fringes, pockets. My sister Tammy handed him the shirt box it was wrapped in, and Dad said what Dad always said: “Why, that’s wonderful, just wonderful. Thank you, darling.”

With his cast-iron gray fingernail—the one he used to thump his kids in the head with—Dad cut the wrapping paper as neatly as a surgeon preparing to do open-heart surgery. He peeled back the paper gently, barely revealing the see-through plastic boxlid beneath. He squinted, wheezing on his pure oxygen, and smiled.

“Oh, a robe,” he said. “That’s wonderful, just wonderful. Thank you.”

He set the box aside, the wrapping paper intact. A touch of tape on the slice down the box’s center, and it would be ready to re-gift.

When he left that day, better than half of his gifts had gone under the knife for Dad’s unique brand of surgery: slit open to reveal their contents, now destined for his hall closet. We found most of them there after he died. I took the robe. Like I said, it was a *nice* robe.

As Dad got older and sicker, Gladys took to caring for him (when Dad wasn’t calling on my mom to come tend his needs). But as Vera vanished and Gladys became his sole partner, it became more and more apparent that Dad couldn’t take care of himself. And that Gladys might not be up to the task, either.

The phone rang late one winter evening, and my mom answered it.

“Irma?” Dad wheezed. His voice was tinged with desperation. “Irma, is that you?”

“Yes, Dad, it’s me. What’s wrong?” my mom answered. “Are you all right?”

“I need you to come here, Irma. I need you to come now.” Dad lived in town, twenty miles or so from our farmhouse. “Please come.”

My mom hung up and quickly bundled herself up for winter driving. We lived far enough out in the country that sometimes the snowplows didn’t get to the roads until days after they finished within the Decatur city limits, so it was a challenge for her to even get out of the driveway. She fishtailed up the drive; there was a particular patch of driveway where, if she didn’t hit it fast enough, the wheels would begin to spin on the ice, and it’d be necessary for me and Tammy to get our own winter gear on so we could come out and help push the car up the drive. But she made it past the ice patch and out onto West Center Street Road, headed for town.

Not long after Mom died, Dad had abandoned the house out in Harristown to live in an apartment complex for elderly people in Decatur proper. We all moved him in, up and down the elevator, back and forth to cars. I rode with Keith that summer day in his beat-up ’72 blue Chevy Nova. “If *he* had to carry any of this shit up a flight of stairs,” Keith had observed, “he might not have so much junk.” I agreed, and we took another load up to the seventh floor.

My mom arrived at Dad’s elderly living complex forty-five minutes or so after he’d called for help. She let herself into his apartment to find him sitting on his couch, the TV on across from him, the rest of the apartment dark.

“What’s wrong, Dad?” she asked, coming to him.

He looked up at her, not scared or sick but just annoyed as he thrust a remote control toward her. “I can’t make that damned TV change channels. Will you help me?”

13

He just got that way as he got older. He left his TV on the same channel—a cable station that scrolled the AP News all day and all night—for so long that the bars at the top and bottom of the channel burned into the picture tube permanently. He forgot things. He confused my mom with Bonnie, sometimes calling them by each other’s names. He couldn’t remember my girlfriend Jennie’s name to save his life, though he always managed to refer to her as “that cute little girl.” “Did you kiss that cute little girl before she left, Mikey?” he’d ask when Jennie went home. *That cute little girl.* Our code words for my girlfriend.

Jennie *was* cute. She had long dark hair and a high voice that made her seem very young, though she was pretty young anyway. She was fifteen when I was nineteen, and frankly, she didn’t look the way I had anticipated the girl in my first serious relationship would look. I had thought I’d end up with a blonde. Why? Because Keith’s first serious girlfriend Debbie had been a blonde, and she’d been my dream girl from puberty on. For a short time, she was my definition of beauty.

Keith brought her around to meet the family one summer evening when I was in eighth grade. I had a friend over, and we were planning to go bike-riding after dark (it was actually more of me bike-riding and David, my friend, balancing on his skateboard

and hanging onto the banana-seat of my bike so I could pull him down the street). Keith brought Debbie into the kitchen through the backdoor as I was about to go out the front door, so I went back to say hi.

“This is Debbie,” he said, introducing her to my parents, my sister, and me.

She had blonde hair down to her shoulders, and she had the most incredible bust I’d ever seen in my life. The fact that I even noticed she *had* a bust was testimony to how overwhelmed I was by her. (I was not then and am not now a “breast man.”) I thought she beautiful and elegant (she wasn’t; she was more the bar-hopping type, but I lacked adult perspective on such perceptions at that age), and when she spoke to me, I was completely smitten. As she sat down at the kitchen table, I suddenly resented the fact that David couldn’t get home if I didn’t pull him there on my bike.

Debbie was around a great deal but only for a short while. I went with her and Keith to Elam’s, a local drive-in root beer place, a couple of times, and she seemed to giggle constantly. I loved the smell of her perfume. I had the worst crush on her that I would ever have in my life (and I had some whoppers later on—I’m sure Tiffany Rutherford is still out there shaking her head with disbelief over some of my antics), to the point that I named my pillow “Debbie” and pretended it was her holding me close at night. I was only fourteen; I don’t think I even knew *why* I wanted to be in bed with Debbie. I just knew it was what I wanted. Not long after that, I had my only wet dream about her. (My mom’s probably reading this, so that’s enough said about *that*.) It wasn’t long before I began to find myself resenting Keith because he had this spectacular

partner whom he had seemed to lose interest in as quickly as he'd acquired it.

"This stuff looks like rat piss," he said one night when he was visiting. He was holding up a glass of mulberry wine, something my dad was experimenting with in the basement (right next to the pot plants that Tammy and I were steadfastly told were tomato plants). I laughed hysterically—it was the greatest expression of vileness I'd heard short of "shit maggot." In high school, I'd dredge up "rat piss" again to be the nickname of one of the guys in our circle of friends.

"Keith, that's gross," Debbie said. She was sitting next to him on the ugly tan loveseat in our living room. There wasn't much room on the loveseat, but they still somehow managed to get a healthy gap of space between them. In hindsight, that was foreshadowing.

The look he gave her was filled with daggers. "No, it's not gross," he corrected her slowly, patiently, as if he were talking to a child. "*Rat piss* is gross. This just *looks* like rat piss."

They were over. And Debbie, my strongest crush, was gone shortly thereafter. It was as if she had died. The sudden separation was *that* jarring to me.

In time, Keith found someone else: Pam, an elementary schoolteacher who was quick-witted and a great conversationalist but who bore no resemblance whatsoever to Debbie. Pam was short, with brownish-red hair that wasn't as long as Debbie's and that was curly instead of straight. Unlike Debbie, who seemed a bull in a china shop that led with her boobs, Pam was compact and controlled. She was also far more refined (unless she was drinking,

and then she degenerated into a giggling mass that was certainly reminiscent of Debbie. One night while Pam was drunk, we had an intense, serious dialogue about writers and their responsibilities. I had to get out of the conversation fast when Pam belligerently insisted that writers had to “write something that people can *read*. If we can’t *read* it, what *good* is it?” There really wasn’t anywhere to go with the conversation after that). Keith eventually married Pam, I heard, and they had at least one child together (I heard), and they moved to Texas so Keith could become a Texas Ranger... I heard.

In truth, my first serious girlfriend Jennie—with whom I had a five-year relationship, and who was my partner when Dad died—was more like Pam than Debbie. Jennie was funny and smart and *perky*. We had a challenging relationship, in part because she was so young that her parents were a constant factor in our lives, in part because we were each other’s first sexual partners, and in part because we were only just beginning to establish our life goals. I had blown off college when all of my high school friends graduated and moved on to university life, but as Jennie’s time for higher education approached, I realized that I needed to get on the bandwagon or get left behind. When Jennie and I split up, it was because she met someone more focused on his immediate future at her university and I met someone at junior college who *was* more like Debbie, at least in terms of looks.

Melody had long strawberry-blonde hair, straight despite her best efforts. She was tall. She was busty. Just as with Debbie, I fell in love at first sight. We had a poetry class together at Richland Community College, and the professor, a romantic fellow named Damashek, introduced us. Melody wrote poetry; I was the editor for

the college's creative writing magazine. It seemed like a natural fit to both Damashek and me.

But this was no easy wooing: I chased Melody for the better part of six months, and she resisted, hard, for reasons sometimes still lost upon me. Bill Cosby once said that the courtship between a man and a woman goes like this: WOMAN: *Come here, come here, come here, come here!* Oh, *get away, get away, get away, get away!* MAN: *Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh. Whatever you want! Whatever you say! Want me to eat this tree? I love it, I love it, I love it...!* That was Melody and me. She was hot for the manager at the Hill's department store where she worked—a weasely little guy who took pleasure in shooing me out of the store when I came in to hang around at the service desk to court Mel—and had even been out with him once or twice. I was not deterred. I pulled out all the stops. I picked her up and drove her to class every morning, even if I didn't have class that day. I drove her home as well. I rearranged my work schedule (I was throwing boxes at a local Kroger grocery store and hating it more every day) so I could take her to and pick her up from work. Nothing. "Friends." I brought her flowers and little presents, and I wrote her poetry to bring down the stars. Nothing. She even told me "I'm never, ever, ever going to love you, Mike. Never. We'll never be more than friends." I cried all the time, it seemed, but I wasn't willing to give it up. I'd missed her August birthday by a couple of weeks (we didn't meet until September), but I was bent that I could make up for it with Christmas, so I threw myself into the Christmas of 1988 with a wild abandon. I bought her everything I could imagine that she'd like. I called in favors to get obscure bootleg record albums by a musician named Morrissey

(whom I grew to hate fairly quickly; he was a whiner) and a band called the Smiths. Anything to please her. Nothing. Oh, she liked the Christmas presents—she accepted them all with a grace that made my heart pound with certainty that I'd scored a romantic point or two. And she had the decency not to say until well after the holiday that nothing had changed for her emotionally. I went into a long Illinois winter despairing that I would never win Melody's heart.

I got her with a single kiss a month later. It was that simple, and I still have no explanation for it. I'd only kissed her once before, but that February 1st kiss was the one that bowled her over, that opened the floodgates and made us partners for nearly ten years. We were in my bedroom, watching Looney Tunes on videotape, and I simply leaned over and kissed her. She turned to me, her arms going around me instinctively, and we were together.

So, the question was: Did I kiss that cute little girl before she left, Dad? Yes, I sure did. And I kissed the one that came after her, too, but by then, you were already gone.

14

When Melody's grandfather died, I was there. I didn't know the man, really; I'd met him at a few holiday gatherings, but in the end, he was just another white-haired, heavysset, wrinkled old man to me. I went with Melody to meet her sisters, Dawn and Eva, and her mom, Joann, at the nursing home where he lay dying. Dawn and Eva, both of whom were married, had their husbands Pat and Dan along for comfort as well. Melody's little brother and sister were

also there, but they were young, under ten years old, so they weren't in the room with their grandfather.

The room was the typical healthcare facility type: sterile yet seedy. Someone had drawn the blinds but failed to turn on any lights, so the room was shadowy with a criss-cross of weak sunlight that came in through the blinds. We all gathered around his bed, some of us throwing shadows across the bed with our backs to the window. Joann took her father's hand and held it tightly.

"We're right here, Daddy," she whispered. She was a heavy woman with a baby face, and she seemed on the verge of tears so often, over every little thing, that I couldn't take her emotions seriously most of the time. Although tears ran down her face now, her voice was steady and firm.

Melody was next to me; all three of his granddaughters wanted to touch him, so they did. They put their hands on his arms, on his face. They combed his hair. Pat and Dan stood behind their wives Dawn and Eva, waiting, uncomfortable.

I watched Melody's grandfather's face. He breathed deeply in ragged gasps. The nurses had told Joann that he could hear her; I didn't know if I believed that. I couldn't see any indication that he was awake in there, that he knew we were there. His raspy breathing was loud enough to drown out the soft sounds of crying all around me, but he didn't seem alive beyond that. He didn't respond to anyone's touch, to Joann's whispers, to anything.

He took a deep breath and let it out with a great sigh.

And that was it. He didn't take another one. He just *stopped*.

Everyone waited for him to begin again, and a silence hung like a physical blanket over the room. We could hear the murmured conversations at the desk up the hall; we could hear an old man, one Melody and I had encountered on our way into the nursing home, wandering the hallways with his walker, shouting incessantly, “Help me, Goddammit! You sons-of-bitches, help me!” A nurse stopped him, turned him around, and headed him back to his room. A telephone was ringing. But the room we were in was a separate bubble from all of that. It had been a deathwatch, and it was over.

Joann cried silently, her head bent down to her father’s chest, and all three granddaughters broke into tears. I held Melody, but I couldn’t stop staring at her grandfather, dead in the railed bed before me. I’d never seen a man die before. The transition between life and death had been seamless. At some point while I was watching, his heart had clenched up and quit, his lungs had exhaled and refused to inhale again, his brain had stopped. A thought that had been crossing his mind—maybe a memory, maybe a desire, maybe an awareness of his daughter Joann at his side and his granddaughters all around—had not been followed by another. Did he get a moment then to acknowledge he was dying? Did it come upon him like a sudden awareness, “this is my last thought” (which then, technically, became his last thought)? Did he have a sense that there was no thought behind that one, nothing to come after it but a black emptiness?

I cried that day, too, holding onto Melody, looking at her dead grandfather, wondering if I could’ve seen his spirit leave his body had I been more attentive. I’ve heard that we cry for ourselves when someone dies, for our personal loss, for the void

the dead person leaves in our lives. But I didn't even know Melody's grandfather. He left no void in my world. I cried because I was suddenly very, very afraid of dying. The death obsession I'd had as a kid grabbed hold of me again in a particularly violent grip and shook me hard. For years after that, I was plagued by a terrible fear of my last moment, the moment when someone breaks into my house and stabs me in the heart, the moment when my car begins to flip over on the highway, the moment when I will lie in my own deathbed, alone or with people around me, listening to my muted heartbeat as it slows down, slows down, slows down... and finally stops.

15

At 70 miles per hour—a speed Dad probably hadn't reached often since he flew in a bomber to the Pacific Islands during World War II, and one I suspect he *never* reached behind the wheel of his red Ford Pinto—I came very close to dying for the first time. Not as close as I ever will, of course (there are a few givens in life, after all), but as close as I had been up to that moment. I'd be closer of my own volition later on, but that was still a ways away.

My hometown of Decatur isn't the most prosperous city in central Illinois. In fact, it's made the news twice in recent memory for less than auspicious reasons: first, the Reverend Jesse Jackson went there to "mediate" when a handful of local thugs were expelled from high school for fighting at a football game. This wasn't just any fight; this was a rival gang issue, and the fight apparently resulted in a number of bystanders getting hurt. Jesse showed up in Decatur to protest, in a loud voice from the pulpit,

that these “boys” were being judged by the color of their skin (all the violators in question were black), that these “boys” were engaged in nothing more than the usual rough-and-tumble antics that “boys” engage in. Jesse planned to hardball the school board into letting these “boys” return to class, to resume their normal lives. Of course, when he was making all that noise, Reverend Jackson had not yet seen the young men’s scholastic and criminal records (one of them had been skipped school more than half the semester, another had a criminal history of violence), nor had he seen the amateur video footage shot at the football game, the footage that showed these punks knocking down an elderly lady in the bleachers, climbing like animals over confused bystanders to pile up mercilessly on their target, another student from a different school. After that, Jesse fell silent and crawled away from Decatur and the controversy he had ignorantly stirred up.

The second incident involved the Bridgestone-Firestone tires that apparently resulted in a slew of deaths amongst drivers of SUVs. The offending tires were manufactured in the Decatur plant. In a town already suffering from terrible financial depression even during the most prosperous of times, the possibility that the Firestone plant would close became just another shovel of dirt on an already filled grave. Decatur’s population has gone from roughly 100,000 people when I was a boy to well under 80,000 some fifty years later. The town doesn’t have much to offer anyone anymore. I haven’t been back in a long, long time; getting out seemed the only choice once I knew I had to make choices.

As a result, I found my first career-track job *out* of town. Once we finished junior college, Melody and I—who were living

together—packed our things and moved down the road 50 miles to Champaign-Urbana and the University of Illinois. I majored in English; Mel majored in Education. We both took whatever jobs we could get. (Melody worked at Steak ‘n’ Shake and Pizza Hut; I worked at Blockbuster Video and for a professor who needed typing done. We both worked at the Green Street White Hen Pantry on campus, the same sort of convenience store I’d shoplifted from when I was a little boy.) We both hated what we were doing: the White Hen Pantry, though owned and operated by one of the nicest men I’ve ever known (Lyle, the owner, had been my boss at the Kroger grocery store in Decatur until he left to buy a couple of White Hen Pantries in Champaign-Urbana), reminded me too much of working at Kroger’s. I was stocking shelves again, and now I was running the register to ring up drunken morons on Friday night who couldn’t understand why, if I was “one of them” (i.e., a student), I couldn’t just let them buy beer without an I.D. My job at Blockbuster was no better—as my mom was a union organizer, I took advantage of that to try to organize a union, and for my efforts, I was unemployed the night of the election, when it was clear after the voting booths had been open for less than an hour that the union was never going to get into Blockbuster. And the job with the professor? He made me want to kill myself, my fear of death notwithstanding. He was a manic-depressive with acute insomnia and a terrible organizational compulsive disorder.... Oh, and he talked to himself when he wasn’t talking to me, but I was never sure when he was addressing me or when he was answering the voices in his head. (Given that he spoke Hebrew to himself, you’d think that would be a telltale sign, until he spoke in Hebrew

once and then exploded when I didn't answer him.) I worked overnight for him, categorizing, databasing, and sorting his mail for him into folders in metal filing cabinets (down to his Wal-Mart ads; not a scrap of mail was left unaccounted for) while he paced behind me, determining the proper classification of each item. Some time around three in the morning, he'd sleep for an hour, giving me a chance to catch up with the filing... so that he could get up at four and reevaluate everything we'd done in the first three hours. I hated him so much that I cried when I came home just before dawn for my three hours of sleep before going to the French class that I was failing. Melody was no better off than I, and to top it off, she smelled like old Pizza Hut breadsticks most of the time.

The saving grace in all of this was one of my professors, a wonderful woman named Carol Kyle. I took a modern short story class with her the first semester we arrived at the U of I, and she was spectacular. She was eccentric, to say the least—she openly told the class, “The government killed JFK, so don't be surprised if those bastards jerk you around on your student loans.”

She had long curly red hair—she wore it the way younger women do, or the way older women do who wish they were still younger; Professor Kyle was well over fifty—and she dressed in flowing dresses with lots of purple and many flowers. She was excited by everything around her, but she was lonely. She had two poodles, Katie and Rhett, and in time, Katie and Rhett had puppies that she absolutely adored, but the only man she'd ever loved had proven to be gay and had died of AIDS when AIDS was still far from commonplace. She had passionately adored John Kennedy, and his

assassination was one of those odd bonds the two of us developed.

We struck up a friendship, and in time, I took all of her classes, even the ones like AIDS in Literature, which I wasn't much interested in. She knew Melody and I were poor and struggling, and she found odd jobs for me to do around her house. I painted one bedroom at least three times. I went with her to the grocery store and shoveled her driveway when the snows came. I would housesit for her when she went to visit her brother or her elderly mother. We went to hear the author of a JFK assassination book lecture, and we developed our own theories about who killed him. She was writing a novel—a fictional piece about her lover who had died of AIDS—so she shared it with me. And when she heard of a job opening for proofreaders at a local not-for-profit organization called the National Council of Teachers of English, she encouraged me to apply and she then made some calls on my behalf to ensure I got the job.

The proofreading job at NCTE evolved into an editing career, one that I had never thought to pursue but which found its way to me. When Melody and I graduated from the U of I, we wanted to move back to Decatur to be close to our families, but I didn't want to let go of the NCTE editing job. So, while Melody got a job as a teacher at the junior college where we'd met, I commuted every weekday back and forth from Decatur to Champaign-Urbana, an hour on I-72.

One cold January morning just after the sun began to rise, I piled into the little red Ford Escort Pony Melody and I had bought new (which was then over four-and-a-half years old—it was all we

could afford, however, and we wanted to make it last another two years after we were finished paying for it so we could be “car-payment-free” for a while), put the unopened Pepsi I intended to drink in the cupholder, and headed out on for the highway and NCTE. (Melody often took the bus to work.) It was bitterly cold, and everything was covered in a thin sheet of ice. I passed almost no one in town on my way to the highway.

I cranked the heater up as high as it would go—and in a Ford Escort Pony, that’s not too high. The car was very small, though, so if the heater had some time to do its thing, it could get toasty. The windshield and rear glass were defrosted completely by the time I hit I-72.

There was no one out on the highway, either—unlike major metropolitan areas, the highways in the Midwest go for miles with little to see. Four-lanes of traffic are often divided by huge ditches of grass, ten yards across, and the buildings that dot the landscape are all on the horizon, never nearer than that. The highway itself tends to run alongside deep embankments that drop down to farm fields, brown and crystal-white, barren, and frost-covered in January. Those fields are perfectly flat, allowing you to see for miles on a clear day, and that early morning, I could see into the next county, it seemed. The radio in the Pony didn’t work very well—the only station I could get most of the time was an AM station that gave an intolerable amount of airtime to Paul Harvey—so I didn’t bother with it. I considered cracking open my Pepsi, but I was still pretty tired, and Pepsi when I’m not quite awake yet makes me feel a little sick, like I’ve eaten chocolate for breakfast. The car was warm, so I took off my hat and gloves and put them in

the passenger seat. I passed an eighteen-wheeler, which disappeared behind me around one long curve of highway. I settled my hands atop one another on the bottom of the steering wheel. It was nice, this time of day. It was warm and relaxing and quiet, and sometimes it was a good opportunity for me to think about where Melody and I were going in this world. I drifted while my mind wandered.

And then I woke up, suddenly, as the Pony crashed over a mile-marker post.

I sat up straight just in time to see that shiny post by the side of the road disappear beneath the car's hood like it was made of aluminum foil. I glanced at the speedometer. I was still going 70. The mile-marker post banging loudly as it was dragged along the car's undercarriage. Directly ahead of me was a huge drop-off, a steep hill that ran down into a field. My car was already off the road and into the grass, and in a moment, I'd be either plunging down the drop-off or airborne.

I jerked the wheel hard to try to bring the Pony back onto the road. The tires screeched... and the car began to roll sideways, up the highway, at 70 miles per hour.

The passenger window shattered when it struck the pavement, but the glass all hung suspended together, as if by magic, as the concrete rolled past and the roof of the car plowed into the road. I began to scream—it seemed like the thing to do—and I raised my hands from the bottom of the wheel to the top to try to hold on. The seatbelt across my chest and waist snapped back tightly. As I lifted my hands, the car rolled again, fast and hard. My glasses flew off. The driver-side window smashed into the

pavement, shattering the glass, crushing the sideview mirror flat and then ripping it completely off as the car continued the flip. The glass from the passenger window rushed past my face like a meteor shower to crash into the disintegrating driver's window. All the glass from both windows shot out of the car and into space above me as the passenger side came down again. The unopened Pepsi can in the cupholder smacked me in the head with the force of baseball coming off the pitcher's mound. Everything was unbelievably *loud*—the car engine, the breaking glass, the crunching metal, my screams, everything. It was deafening.

Just as I brought my hands together at the top of the steering wheel, a funny thing happened (funny weird, not funny “ha ha”): I was wearing a silver stretch-band watch on my left wrist. The force of the roll jerked that watch from my wrist and out the driver's window. I watched it leave me in slow motion, thinking, *So that's what they mean when they say someone was “thrown clear.” Centrifugal force squeezes your adult body out this tiny little window and hurls you away from the accident, deader than you'd ever be if you were strapped into the car.*

This wasn't my first auto accident: as a boy, I'd been in the car with my mom, my sister Tammy, and my aunt Bonnie when someone hit us from behind (Bonnie had whiplash for quite a while after that). When I was in junior high, a car driven by a sixteen-year-old girl who'd just gotten her license hit me. (As I lay in the ditch by the side of the road where the force of impact had thrown me, holding my bloody leg, crying and wailing, she came running up to me and blindly asked, “Oh no oh no oh no. Are you alive?” For a moment I thought the “oh no's” were in reference to the fact that I had survived.) But this accident at 70 miles per hour was the one

I thought was going to kill me. The departure of my watch for greener pastures behind me convinced me of that.

The Pony smashed down on the passenger side again, bending the door in, and then I was upside down once more. When I came right-side up the next time, the car was sliding across the grass median in the middle of the highway. The hood was crumpled and partially open, and a steady stream of smoke billowed from beneath it. A moment later, the car ground to a halt in the tall, frozen grass, and the engine choked and sputtered into silence, the entire car jerking and twitching as it died ingloriously.

The quiet that followed was thick, a tangible object. The engine ticked softly, but my breathing was the loudest sound for a hundred yards. My back throbbed and my legs felt numb. The steering wheel was crushed into my chest, but not so much so that I couldn't squirm out from behind it. I tried to open the driver's door, but it was crumpled into the frame and wouldn't budge. The seatbelt across my chest was suffocating me.

"Let me out of this motherfucking car!" I screamed to no one.

"It's okay!" someone answered. I turned my head back toward the side of the highway I'd just left where a man—the driver of the eighteen-wheeler I'd passed earlier—was jogging down the hill. He was a fat man, and he was clearly struggling with both his weight and the slick grass, but he was making headway just the same. He was a blurry image to me because, like my hat, my watch, and the Pepsi can, my glasses were long gone.

"The car's on fire!" I shouted at him, looking at the smoke again. "Get away! No, wait, get me out!"

“It’s not on fire!” he shouted back. “It’s just steam from the radiator! Don’t move or you might hurt yourself!”

“I’m not dead, I’m not dead, I’m not dead,” I began telling myself, despite the fact that I couldn’t feel my legs, despite the fact that my back throbbed, despite the fact that I’d just wrecked the only car Melody and I had. That was the kicker that finally made me cry. I’d ruined our car.

The rescue workers who came to help me first tried to get me out through the driver’s door. No luck. It wouldn’t come off. Then they threw a towel over my head to keep me from getting covered in shattered glass while they smashed the windshield out and came at me that way. The steering wheel kept them at bay this time. So it was back to the driver’s side door, this time with bolt cutters, a blowtorch, and the Jaws of Life. Eventually they wormed me out of the Pony and onto a stretcher. They secured me neck (in case I had broken it), and they cut my leather jacket off of me, despite my protests. In the freezing January air, they inspected my chest and stomach, noting the intense bruises the seatbelts had made in both places.

They half-carried, half-rolled me across the grass and up the embankment to the waiting ambulance, all the while firing questions at me. Which town did I want to be taken to, Champaign-Urbana or Decatur? (Decatur, because Melody could get to the hospital easier.) Could I move my toes? (Yes. Turns out I had no serious injuries at all, beyond the bruises.)

A state trooper approached. “Is this your watch?” he asked, displaying my silver stretch-band watch.

“Yes,” I said. He gave it back to me.

“Takes a licking and keeps on ticking,” he said to me, grinning as if he’d just coined a phrase.

“Idiot,” I said, but thankfully, he didn’t hear me.

As they put me in the ambulance, someone asked, “Who should we call?”

“My girlfriend, Melody,” I said. I gave them the number.

After a minute (in that surreal time where I lay on the stretcher in the ambulance, but the doors were open and the engine was running but no one was in the vehicle yet), a man climbed in beside me, a walkie-talkie squawking on his waist, and said, “She’s not answering. We got a machine. Are you sure she’s home?”

“Yes, I’m sure. She might still be in bed. Try again.” And then I had another thought, one unconnected to any other. “Will you do me a favor when you talk to her?”

“What’s that?” the man leaned closer; I could see he was a state trooper. He had a cop’s mustache, just like Keith had always worn.

“Would you not tell her about the car?”

16

Professor Kyle fell sick at the worst of moments: after writing a letter to a game company called Wizards of the Coast, commending them for their card game Magic: The Gathering and suggesting that I could be a great asset to their fledgling magazine (which was routinely blowing its release dates), I’d gotten an amazing job offer. Wizards wanted me to move to Seattle, Washington, to serve as an editor for the card game. They offered

me a salary that made my work at NCTE look like a paper route. My boss at NCTE, an amazingly intelligent woman named Zarina who had become a good friend of mine (and who knew Professor Kyle well enough that it was Zarina Professor Kyle had called to recommend me), and my mother were both urging me to take the job.

“Michael,” Zarina said in her most impatient of British tones (she was East Indian; she said “figure” as if it rhymed with “bigger”), tapping her finger on her desk, “this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Don’t force me fire you in order to convince you to take it.”

“This is our chance to get out of Decatur,” Melody said to me. “If we don’t get out now, we’ll never get out.”

But Professor Kyle was very sick. She had cancer.

She’d been on sabbatical from the University of Illinois for months, and when I flew out for the interview with Wizards in January of 1995, she coached me on what to say. She had become very thin; the live-in nurse who tended her told me in private that she’d given up on writing her book and often just sat with her dogs, whispering secrets to them. She didn’t know what Professor Kyle whispered; she didn’t think it appropriate to ask.

I came back from the interview very optimistic about the probability of being offered the job. I also couldn’t stand the thought of leaving Professor Kyle, so my optimism took short, ragged breaths.

At dinner one night, over a year before she was diagnosed with the cancer, Professor Kyle had got more than a little drunk,

and she'd told me something that I thought I'd never hear but that I had begun to suspect.

"You know," she had said over spaghetti in a dark Italian restaurant, "Melody really isn't good for you. I wish... I wish it was me you loved."

"I do love you," I had said. "You know that."

Her cheeks had quivered, and she'd turned her eyes away. "You know what I mean."

I didn't know what to say. I drove her home that night, and the next day, when I drove her back to get her car from the restaurant, we pretended it had never happened.

When she fell sick, I remembered something I'd read: When someone learns they're dying, those around them begin to withdraw. It isn't mean-spirited or even fear; it's psychological preparation to lose that loved one. Less and less time with that sick person will, soon enough, become no time at all. It's a slow separation. I resolved not to let that happen with Professor Kyle.

I went to visit her as often as I could, what with her living in Champaign-Urbana and me living in Decatur. Because I still worked for NCTE in Champaign-Urbana, I often came by after work and stayed through dinner. I brought her things—new books on the JFK assassination, videotapes of the puppies she'd eventually given away, whatever I was writing for her to read. Her home began to smell a little. Her hair began to look brittle.

"I'm just an old woman," she sighed. "I guess I'll find out who really killed JFK."

I got the call about the job at Wizards while I was at NCTE. NCTE was closed at the time, but I was there doing a editing and

proofing job on one of the various conference programs that we did throughout the year. It was a rush job, and weekend work was the only way to get it done. Wizards reached me there and told me what they were willing to pay for me to work on games for a living. It included moving expenses and, of course, airline tickets for Melody and me. It was perfect.

I went to see Professor Kyle that afternoon.

“I can’t do it, I don’t think,” I told her. She was sitting up in her bed, eating soup with a quivering hand. “Not right now.”

“Why?” she asked. “Because of me?”

“No,” I said, then, “Yes. I can’t go until you’re better.”

“But I’m not going to get better.” She didn’t say it sweetly or gently; she said it with her head shaking, scowling. “Do I have to die for you to do this? This is good for you. You should do this.”

“I don’t know if I can leave my mom,” I said. “My whole life has been here. I’ve lived in Decatur for thirty years. How can I just move halfway across the country?”

“Because you have to,” she said softly. “Because you have to for Melody. She loves you. You love her. Why would you want to keep her here when she wants to go?”

“My mom—”

“Isn’t she telling you to do it? Do you think that’s easy for her? Why aren’t you listening?”

I struggled. “And you.”

She sighed. “Oh, Mike. I’ll die before you leave for Seattle.”

She died that night.

Sometimes things happen that feel like death—the separation, the sudden change, the intense emotions—but are quickly followed by things that feel like rebirth. Seattle was like that.

The job, the people, and the place—all were amazing. Melody and I shipped practically every possession we owned, including our new car (a Ford Escort station wagon; “mocha,” the salesman called it. We thought that appropriate for taking to the home city of Starbucks). Our tiny apartment on North Street in downtown Decatur was completely empty, so we brought a couple of cardboard boxes over for our two cats to hide in. They did, for three days, until it was time to drug them, put them in pet cases, and take them on the plane with us.

I attended Professor Kyle’s memorial service in blue jeans because my good clothes had already been carried away on the Bekins moving truck.

We said goodbye to our families—it was particularly hard to leave my mom, who was tough as nails—and then we got on a TWA flight from St. Louis to Seattle on March 15, 1995.

“This is the beginning of something new,” Melody said to me as the plane left the runway and I cried as quietly as I could, knowing my mom was finally breaking down in the airport terminal behind me.

“Yes,” I said.

“I’m so scared,” she said.

“Yes,” I said again. I clutched her hand in mine.

When we’d left Decatur to attend the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, we’d both known we were only 50 or 60 miles

down the road from family. In Seattle, we were over 2,000 miles from anyone who could help us if things went south. Our new house wasn't what we expected—particularly since our furniture hadn't arrived from Illinois. It was two days late.

We stayed in a hotel the first two nights, eating delivery pizza, taking the rental car generously provided by my new employer Wizards of the Coast out and about to explore our new hometown. By the time the furniture finally arrived, I had my first day of work at Wizards as an editor for the trading card game Magic. That first weekend, we abandoned unpacking to go the movies (we saw *Dolores Claiborne* at a matinee theater), but by the next weekend, we'd made some friends (including my new boss Beverly) who were eager to show us the city. Over the coming weeks, we saw the Space Needle, Mt. Rainier, the Seattle Underground, the Pike Place Market, all the sites that make Seattle unique. Everyone was friendly, and though it rained almost constantly, it began to feel like home.

And the time began to pass.

Melody got a job at Wizards, too, working for their magazine *The Duelist*, which promoted the card game I edited. We suddenly had more money than we'd ever had in our lives, and we were able to travel on behalf of the company, another unexpected perk. I went to New York City; Melody traveled on behalf of the magazine to various cities all over the United States. She visited Dallas and Fort Lauderdale and California cities up and down the coast. She worked right up until our wedding in October of 1996, which we held back in Decatur. Some of our Seattle friends even traveled to be there.

My little sister, Tammy, came to visit Seattle not long before Melody and I were married. She was immediately taken by the city, and by August of 1996, she, too, had moved from Illinois to Washington. I kidded myself into believing she was moving to be closer to me; she simply loved it, and getting away from Decatur was the best thing she could have done for herself.

Tammy and I didn't go to the same schools growing up—the four years between us would have kept us out of the same high school anyway, but because of where we lived, Tammy ended up going to high school in Warrensburg, the small suburb where we'd once lived, while I attended MacArthur High on Decatur's west side. "Tammy took the schoolpath less traveled," I once said, "and it has made all the difference."

The Warrensburg kids were wild. Their community consisted of a handful of churches, a doctor's office (a quack named Holtzman who had mercilessly set my broken arm when I was eight by saying, "I am going to znap your ahm back in place ven I count to tree." He then snapped on *two*, and I screamed to raise the dead), a barber shop, and a series of bars. No movie theaters, no arcades, no roller-rinks, nothing to *do* on a Saturday night except drive into Decatur... or get rowdy in Warrensburg.

And oh, they knew how to get rowdy in Warrensburg.

Tammy could drink me under the table by the time she was sixteen, as could most of her friends. They were not the brightest drunks, of course—once, afraid that they might get caught bringing Tammy home drunk, her friends simply slowed down at the foot of our driveway and gave Tammy a healthy shove to get her out of the car. On another occasion, one of Tammy's friends

leaned over her as Tammy puked up from drinking too much and sympathetically said, "I'll fight you for the chunky pieces."

Kids went "mudding" in Warrensburg: take a four-by-four out roaring across empty the rain-soaked cornfields (this often ended with Jeeps buried up to their axles in mud). They played Mailbox Baseball, which consisted of driving up and down country roads, hanging out a car window with a baseball bat to smash all the rural mailboxes you passed. Each successfully struck mailbox is a base hit; three misses and you're out, and the next "batter" steps up to the plate.

When not drunk or high, they were simply bored, and boredom led to rebellious destruction. One of Tammy's girlfriends stole her mother's car to go joyriding; Tammy rode along. The friend's two-year-old baby sister was in the backseat as the carload of fourteen-year-old girls roared up and down Route 36. When they finally got caught by the friend's frantic mother, Tammy's friend protested (even while getting strapped with a belt in the other room; I was in the friend's kitchen, trying to hurry Tammy out the back door and home) that "it was only for half-an-hour!" Her mom seemed unimpressed as she continued to spank her daughter.

Then the inevitable happened one icy Christmas when Tammy was sixteen. The morning of the 26th, I was in my bedroom when my mom knocked on the door. We were still a few years away from a similar scene in that hallway as we would prepare to go to the nursing home where Dad lay dead.

"Vickie died last night," she said. "A car wreck."

Vickie had been one of Tammy's closest friends. The two of them looked like sisters, though Vickie had a liberal dose of

freckles across her nose and upper cheeks, and her hair was closer to red than Tammy's color of blonde. They were inseparable from the first time they met, and Vickie had spent many, many nights at our house, giggling with Tammy well into the wee hours of the morning.

On that moonless Christmas night, Vickie had been going with her boyfriend, Mickey, and a couple of male friends from Vickie's house to Mickey's. Both Vickie and Mickey lived in Warrensburg, where miles of unlit country roads might separate houses. Mickey, who had had his driver's license less than a year, took his carload of friends for a joyride down Hill Road, off the beaten path to his house. Hill Road looked exactly as you might imagine: a dark and isolated country road with myriad hills and dips. Barren farm fields lined both sides of the road. There were no streetlights. There was a thin patch of snow covering everything, but there was no moonlight to reflect off of it.

Mickey had Southern Comfort in the car, we learned later.

At a dangerously high speed, he hit a patch of ice on Hill Road. He lost control of the car, and they careened off the road to smash into the only tree for miles.

Mickey was killed instantly. The two boys in the back seat, brothers who Tammy knew, survived the wreck (though one of them would die in another car wreck just a few years later).

Vickie died.

Tammy took the news with devastating calm. I was standing behind my mom when she broke the news to my little sister, whose face contorted with a grief that I've not seen on her since then. Then she found herself suddenly, almost hurriedly, and an anger

blazed into her eyes that has never gone away when she remembers Vickie and Mickey. She might have cried later, when she was alone; I didn't see her cry at the closed-casket wake, where pictures of Vickie in her cheerleading outfit and her latest school picture were everywhere. Tammy heard the full tale from one of the surviving brothers, and she came back to me with a chilling story: Vicki had known it was coming. After arguing with Mickey about his speed and the danger he was putting them in, she turned to the two brothers in the back seat and said, "Put your seatbelts on." They did, mere seconds before the accident.

Vickie survived the initial crash. After the car struck the tree, wrapping the passenger side around it, and came to a halt, the two brothers, Mickey, and Vickie lay in the wreckage, in the utter blackness of the winter night, the windows smashed and broken around them, the cold seeping in on them. No one moved; Mickey was already dead, and the others were either trapped or terribly wounded. One of the brothers went into convulsions; the other was helpless to aid his brother because, as the car left the road, he put his hands up to brace himself on the back of the seat in front of him. The impact broke both of his wrists, so he could only sit and watch his brother convulse.

"And Vickie moaned," Tammy said. Her lip trembled as she told me, but she didn't cry. She was beyond that, I think. "They could hear her moaning in the front seat, but they couldn't see her. She moaned for a while, but they couldn't understand what she was saying—they think she called to God—and then she stopped. If they had crashed in town, maybe...."

She didn't finish the thought.

Tammy mourned in private—the way she’s kept much of her life, in fact—and she moved on. She had other friends die, many of them Warrensburg students in auto accidents, but none would ever have the same impact on her as Vickie’s death did. She was already on her way to being hardened and tough when Vickie died, but that solitary incident was a turning point for her. Tammy ended up on that path less traveled, and it could not help but make all the difference. For most of her life, she’s had a friend who never grew up. Vickie will always be a sixteen-year-old girl, even now, when Tammy is old enough to have been that child’s mother. Tammy could have ended up the same way; she will deny it, of course, but I think Vickie’s death was a wake-up call for Tammy that life can end at any moment, for anyone.

Only a few years after Vickie died, I was enrolled in classes at Richland Community College, the school where I would soon meet Melody, and I was enrolled in a psychology class, the Psychology of Death and Dying. The professor was a kind woman who had a tough constitution—aside from our discussions about death, she had a number of hands-on experiences in store for us. She arranged a tour of a local funeral home, where we saw the caskets and the make-up room and the embalming tables. We saw a graphic film depicting an autopsy. And the local coroner, a fat man with greasy hair and incredibly pudgy fingers, came to lecture us. He brought with him a photo album, a narrow book that might’ve been intended for wedding pictures. Instead, he had photos of accident victims, all of whom were “anonymous.” He used these photos to illustrate the astonishing number of different ways you can die.

Vickie's photos were on the fifth page. I wouldn't have recognized her through the harsh lighting and the caked blood if not for the photo of Mickey below her... and the liberal dose of freckles across her nose and upper cheeks.

18

The second time I came close to death was entirely my own fault.

In October of 1996, Melody and I were married. We had a medieval wedding back in Decatur, though we were living in Seattle at the time; the groomsmen raised swords for Melody to walk beneath, I'm slightly embarrassed to remember now. We had the entire wedding party's attire custom-made in purples and greens, and Melody's gown accentuated her beauty like no simple garment had ever done before.

"Look at you," I whispered to her as we waited to walk in. "You're a princess."

Five months later, Melody left me.

Because we both worked for Wizards, it was easy to take lunches together, and we did, from time to time. One day in early March, as we rode home together to grab something to eat, I noticed that Melody was sullen, quiet. She'd been like that quite a bit lately. She'd become unreadable.

"What's wrong with you?" I demanded. "Why are you so unhappy all the time?"

She didn't answer, just stared out the window as we rolled in the Ford station wagon down our driveway.

"Melody, what is wrong?" I asked again. I parked the car behind the house. "Do you want out or something?"

“Yes,” she said suddenly, sitting up straight and looking at me. “I want out. I want a divorce.”

She was gone from my life so fast that she left skid marks.

She dropped me off at the house, where I called in sick to my boss at work (“Hi, Beverly. It’s Mike. Melody just left me. I don’t think I’ll be back in today. Call me when you get this message”), and she went back to work in a cab. By the next morning, she had a car; by the afternoon, she had an apartment. She had a phone hooked up by the following day.

But no, I didn’t notice that she seemed to be moving with an alarmingly deliberate authority. I was a little blind and more than a little blindsided.

I stayed a few days with my boss and friend Beverly and her husband Rick, both of whom did their very best to take care of me; Melody even had the foresight to call them to come get me, and they did, finding me walking along the interstate in the rain, crying and confused. Then Beverly paid to put me on a flight home to Illinois to be with my mom, who took over the reins of comfort. I took a week off from work, but I took a computer with me to log in. On my first day in Illinois, I logged in and was reading various emails when I stumbled across an email in one of the company’s public folders, “The Gripe Room.” Someone was whining about the rain and how the company made them “feel” about themselves and how the world was hard when the coffee machine was broken, or some inane bullshit. I chimed in with a 24K email about being deserted by your partner of 10 years without so much as an explanation, about having your brand-new wife leave you, about having your life completely rewritten for no apparent reason. It did

nothing to make me feel better, it stunned those who read it, and though I retracted it a few hours later, it had been there long enough to make me look like a fool and make at least one co-worker interested in swooping in to fill the void. Fortunately, she was nuts and I knew it. I also still had Melody to deal with, whom I believed I could get back. When I returned from Illinois, I went to see her in her new apartment.

“Why do you want to leave me?” I sobbed. “What’s wrong with me?”

She was ready for this. She’d been preparing.

“You’re moody,” she said. “And you’re self-important. And you want to be social with the entire planet but then you complain all the time about not having any time to do anything else. And you don’t take care of yourself, physically. And you get depressed too often. And your sexual appetites are completely different from mine. And you don’t like to go out anywhere, but I’m so tired of staying in all the time. And you never want to try anything new. Oh, and you have insomnia, so you’re almost never in the bed with me.”

“No, no, no,” I cried. “I mean, what’s *wrong* with me?”

She wasn’t coming back to me. In fact, she’d decided to move back to Decatur. She planned to stay with her older sister, Dawn, while she looked for a teaching job in Decatur, maybe even back at Richland Community College, where she’d taught before we moved to Seattle.

And she didn’t want me to come around anymore. She’d call when she was ready to come and get her stuff from the house. “You can keep the cats,” she said.

“You’re damned straight I’ll keep the cats,” I shouted. “I wouldn’t want you to decide you don’t want them one day and dump them by the side of the road. It’s becoming your method of operation!”

I went home, called my mom, and then washed down three-quarters of a bottle of sleeping pills with a Pepsi. It seemed to have a short-term benefit at the time. As I was taking the last of the pills, I began to wish I’d drunk the Pepsi that had hit me in the head when I rolled the Escort Pony down the highway. I still had that can in one of the kitchen cabinets, dented from where it struck my skull. The poetry of that thought was not lost on me.

I sat on the couch in my living room, the cats outdoors, with a picture of Melody that I’d taken when I was still being held at arm’s length during the courting process. I turned a lot of lights off. As the pills kicked in, I could hear myself moaning from far away, a moan not unlike what my sister’s friend Vickie must’ve moaned after the auto wreck. A moan of fear and bafflement and horrible anticipation. I became very, very tired.

Someone began to bang on the living room door.

I thought about going to answer it and decided not to. Then I decided that I was being rude, but by then, movement wasn’t an option. Instead, I just lay there and listened to the doorbell, getting less annoyed and more disinterested by the moment.

In time, that stopped—and I heard more noises, from the downstairs neighbors. I shared the house with the house’s owners, and the owners lived downstairs while Melody and I lived upstairs. The two parts were completely independent of one another,

though they were joined by a staircase and a door. I heard my landlord knocking at that door from downstairs.

Someone came in the room. I couldn't even open my eyes to see who it was. I heard my name. My sister had arrived. I heard her voice, her boyfriend's voice, my landlord's voice.

A rapid series of blurry changes took place over the next hour or so. An ambulance came, and strangers tracked mud back and forth through my living room as the paramedics rushed in to help me. Friends from work stopped by to see how I was getting along with Melody gone, and they had to stand in the dark driveway behind the ambulance while a gurney was brought in for me. I could hear hand-held radios squawking, and I vaguely recalled my car accident again. This time, no one spoke to me—I couldn't communicate. I drifted in and out, weeping, struggling to breath, just waiting for everything to be over, one way or the other.

I fuzzed out in my living room and woke up in the hospital.

Tammy was there; she'd talked to my mom in Illinois, who was hysterical. Other friends were there, too, visibly shaken, waiting to see me again. I drifted in and out, but I burst into more gut-wrenching tears when someone told me that, though the hospital had called her, Melody refused to come see me.

"It's just a trick to get me back," she told whoever she talked to.

A word of advice if you're considering suicide: if you take pills and they get to you in time, they will make you drink liquefied charcoal as soon as you are able. Literally, liquid charcoal. It's a black sludge that cakes your stomach to prevent you from digesting any more of the pills you've taken, and as a neat little

side effect, it induces vomiting that the hospital staff rather you not do at that point. They give you a cupful of this vile mud to consume, and they stand over you like dog trainers until you do.

The other word of advice I can give you: they'll ask you point-blank if you were trying to kill yourself.

Answer *no*, unless you want an extended stay in the hospital. Or somewhere scarier.

The young black doctor who tended me that night stared at me with a burning disbelief bordering on religious denial, tapping a pen on the chart he held. He asked me again.

"You didn't mean to kill yourself?" he said.

"No," I answered.

"Then what did you intend?"

"To sleep. I have insomnia. It was on my wife's list of reasons for leaving me."

"You're aware that you took enough pills to put an elephant to sleep?"

There was no good answer to this question, so I accepted it as a rhetorical one.

"All right," he said at last. "Your sister's going to take you home."

And that was that.

I stayed with Tammy for a few days. Then, when she was fairly sure I wasn't going to try to kill myself again, I went home to my empty house. My landlords had fed the cats, who had also kindly shit in the bathtub as a means of saying "When you leave, we're not happy"—but it gave me something to do. I cleaned the tub, then vacuumed and scrubbed the mud the paramedics had

tracked in off of my living room carpet. Then I inventoried my videotapes in an effort to figure out which ones belonged to Melody and which ones belonged to me. I took her pictures out of all the frames and put them in a box in one of the bedroom closets. And finally I sat on the kitchen floor, propped up with my back to the back door, and cried and cried and cried with my arms wrapped around my knees and the cats—now, my cats—standing by indifferently.

Melody eventually came for her things. By then, I was back at work, where I kept seeing her in the corridors. After all, she still worked at Wizards, too. I fought ferociously not to beg her to return, not to break down in front of her, not to say anything else that would make me look even more foolish than I already seemed to be. When she came to the house to load up her belongings in her leased car, I was gracious about helping her. I put boxes in the back seat and her vanity in the trunk. I showed her the videos I had sorted out that I thought were hers. We packed her clothes.

“I only want to take what I can carry back in this car,” she explained when I offered her some of the other stuff, like the bed.

But no, once again, I didn’t notice that she seemed to be moving with an alarmingly deliberate authority by not needing a bed or very many other common possessions. I was still blind and still blindsided.

After she left, I noticed with a mystified sadness that she had taken all the spoons. Not the forks and knives—just the spoons.

I guessed soon enough that perhaps Adam needed them.

Adam was the young man she'd met in August of 1996, just seven weeks before Melody and I were to be wed. Adam was the young man she'd slept with in September of 1996, just three weeks before we were to be wed. Adam was the young man she traveled all over the country on Wizards's behalf to meet, to bed, and to imagine being with. Adam, who lived in Florida, was the young man Melody went to in March of 1997 when she had left me and told me she was moving back to Decatur to be a teacher. Adam was the young man who ruined my marriage, no matter how I look at it, even now.

Once again, I missed some pretty obvious signs. I hadn't been able to reach her by phone one four-day weekend a few months after we were married but before the split, a weekend she spent in California on the *Queen Mary* ocean liner for a Magic tournament. She had quite a number of reasonable explanations for why I wasn't able to ever to get a hold of her, though the real reason was because she was shacked up in Adam's room. When she left for Illinois in her leased car full of clothes, books, videos, a vanity, and a secret cache of a dozen tablespoons, I worried about her driving cross-country. I called her sister Dawn to confirm that Melody had made it safely.

"Yes, she's here," Dawn told me. "But she's in the bathroom. I'll have her call you back."

Which she did.

"Yes, but she just ran up to the store," Dawn told me during another call. "I'll have her call you as soon as she gets in."

Which she did.

“She can’t talk to you at this moment,” Dawn told me a dozen times, without adding, “because I’m lying through my teeth about where she is. I’ll have her call you back once I reach her in Florida, where she’s now living with Adam, and tell her that you called.”

This all came to light when a friend of mine, who had come to my house to help me the night I took the sleeping pills, spotted Melody at a Magic event on the east coast.

“Isn’t that Melody?” he’d asked one of the players at the event.

“Yeah,” the player answered. “She used to work for that magazine *The Duelist* at Wizards of the Coast.”

“Right,” my friend agreed. “And who’s that she’s with?”

“Oh,” the player said, not knowing what he was giving away, “that’s Adam. They’ve been a couple since they met last August.”

My friend had been at our wedding and, even if he hadn’t been, still knew how to read a calendar.

When he told me about spotting Melody and Adam at the Magic event—and that he’d learned about their relationship predated my marriage—I found the perfect antidote for the melancholy and depression I’d been carrying around like luggage for weeks: rage.

I called Dawn in Illinois again, and when she started in with, “She’s doing something right now,” I came back with, “She’s doing Adam right now is what’s she’s doing. Call her in Florida and have her call me.”

Melody called back. And to her credit, she let me call her names that should be reserved for prison inmates or drunken Marines.

I started dating almost immediately.

Once again, a seeming rebirth followed a seeming death.

It took until October of 1997 to get the divorce papers finalized, but when they finally came through, I called Melody in Florida to let her know I was signing them. Even with a no-contest divorce, it had taken seven months from the time of her departure to reach the last stage.

“I’ll be in court on Thursday,” I said to her on the phone, looking at my calendar, “ and I’ll bring the signed paperwork with me. I assume you won’t be there?”

“No, but my lawyer will be there to represent me,” she said.

I had the divorce papers in front of me for signing, and as I looked from the calendar down at them, something occurred to me.

“Hey,” I said, “we’ll have been married a full year by the court date. Happy Anniversary, Mel. Isn’t the first anniversary traditionally paper?”

We laughed together for the first time since we’d split.

I gave her the signed divorce papers as our one and only anniversary gift.

Rebirth.

19

Slowly but surely, Dad became ill. It wasn’t clear at first what was wrong with him—he seemed confused or agitated, but frankly, that

was Dad. Yet the emphysema that forced him to carry around a red can of pure oxygen and to hiss like a geriatric Darth Vader began to get the better of him. As his lungs deteriorated, less and less oxygen made it to his brain. He began to have spells of incoherence. There was some speculation amongst my mom and her siblings that he might have Alzheimer's, but the doctors did not find any firm indications of this.

Gladys, the soft-spoken little woman who was Dad's sole girlfriend by the time the emphysema took hold of him, was the one who determined it was time for Dad to go to the hospital. She could see better than anyone what was happening to him; she was with him all the time, sometimes sleeping in a chair in his room to stay with him.

He still had plenty of moments of perfect coherence, and these moments were the ones that caused my mom the most grief. He called her all the time, day and night, to come to him at the hospital. These were the moments when he knew something bad was happening to him.

Bonnie came down from Pekin on the weekends, and the foundation of the family began to crumble from within as Dad's condition worsened. Bonnie had always been Dad's favorite—his "doll." But once he went into the hospital, Bonnie became more and more aggressive when it came to dealing with him.

"This is very bad, Irma," she said to my mom as they stood in the hallway outside Dad's room. Bonnie was unusually agitated, and she was particularly annoyed that Gladys was at Dad's side. That long-ago talk of Vera, Dad's other girlfriend, had put the

permanent suspicion in Bonnie's mind that the women around Dad were goldiggers.

"No shit," Irma said. "I'm here dealing with this every single day. I know how bad it is. I've been on-call for him twenty-four hours a day. All you have to do is drive down from Pekin on the weekends and your commitment is fulfilled. It's a full-time job for me."

"You're such a martyr," Bonnie countered. "You think you're the only one who has to do anything, ever. It's how it's always been with you."

Battle lines were drawn.

In only a matter of minutes, Bonnie was screaming at the top of her lungs, reminding Irma of all sort of perceived injustices or self-righteousness, and as the battle between them escalated, Irma said softly, under her breath, "Jesus Christ, I understand why Bob dumped you."

Bob was the man Bonnie had gone camping with and whom I had teased when their photos came back, the man whom she had married and divorced in less than a year. Bob, it turned out, wasn't entirely *right*. He had some serious misconceptions about the kind of woman Bonnie was, and he had some even more serious misconceptions about the role of a modern wife. Bob envisioned his wife baking cookies, having a hot meal waiting for him on the table when he came home from work, and tending the babies. Bob had grown up witnessing just such a woman—his mother, with whom he had quite the Norman Bates relationship later in life.

Bonnie was none of these things. And in truth, their split was more Bonnie's doing than Bob's; he might have gone on in a

state of blissful wishing, but Bonnie would bow to no man. And no woman—including her older sister.

The barb about Bob pushed Bonnie over the top, and she continued to scream.

“You bitch!” she yelled at Irma. She bolted into Dad’s room, taking the war to land at the foot of his bed. Dad, of course, was completely unprepared to deal with his daughters fighting, and Irma knew that. She had meant to keep the fight low-key, out in the hall, away of Dad’s hearing and sight. Bonnie had other plans.

“Get out of this hospital!” Bonnie shouted at Irma from Dad’s side. “Go home! You’re not welcome here!”

The nurses came running, worried that all the shouting was an indicator that something had happened to Dad.

It was the beginning of the end.

Bonnie went home again that weekend, 90 miles from the heart of the family, who lay in a hospital bed with IVs in both of his hands. He moaned a great deal, a sound from his soul. He couldn’t move much due to the needles and the lines. In a matter of days, he had gone from an independent man of senior stature to a virtual prisoner in a bed being urged to piss in a pan. He tossed and turned and complained to anyone who would listen. Old people are often treated like children, though—nurses respond to them that way, condescending to them, pacifying them while dismissing their words. “Old people don’t know what they’re saying or what they really want or need” seems to be the message. Dad found no allies among the hospital staff. So he called Irma as often as he could.

And sometimes the hospital called.

Late one evening, my mom was summoned to the hospital because Dad was agitated almost beyond control. He had ripped the IVs from both hands to escape his bed; they had tracked him down the sterile white hospital corridors by the trail of blood he'd left behind. He stumbled into another patient's room, and there he sat in the dark, confused, angry, dressed in a hospital gown with an open back, an old man in a hostile alien environment. The nurses who approached him found him to have the disposition of a junkyard dog. So they left him sitting in a chair in the darkness, and they called Irma to come "deal with him."

She went into the room where he sat, and when he saw her, he took a deep breath and seemed to calm down.

"Dad?" she said.

"Yes," he answered. His voice was tired and gravelly.

"Do you know who I am?" she asked as she helped him to his feet.

"Of course I do. You're Bonnie."

"No, Dad. I'm Irma."

He stared at her, and the realization settled in. He sagged against her. "Irma."

"Yes. Irma."

He sighed with what little air his lungs would still hold. "Irma, I'm just so sick and tired of them sticking needles in me."

A few days later, after sitting with Dad for a short while, Irma escorted his doctor from his room and out into the hall, the same hall where she and Bonnie had fought.

“He needs some reassurance,” she told the doctor. “He thinks he’s going to die.”

The doctor answered simply, “He is.”

20

Dad was moved to a nursing home—the nurses at the hospital couldn’t “provide him with the care he truly needs,” which is med-speak for “this isn’t a hospice and we can’t handle him if he’s not going to get any better.” The nursing home was his last stop.

Within days, Bonnie had returned to town for another confrontation.

This time it was with Gladys. When Bonnie discovered Gladys at Dad’s side in the nursing home, she exploded.

“You’re just after his money!” she yelled at the old woman, standing between her and Dad’s bed as if she were somehow protecting Dad. “You don’t belong here. You aren’t family. I’ll talk to the nurses and make sure you’re not allowed in here to see him anymore. I’ll have you banished.”

In terror, Gladys fled—and called Irma. In turn, Irma made sure the nursing home staff was led to understand that Gladys was not to be denied access to Dad under any circumstances. They promised to comply.

In the meantime, however, Bonnie had gone one step further. While Dad lay sleeping, she came into his room, located the keys to his apartment, and took them without waking him. No one even knew she was in town, let alone that she had gone to the nursing home. She then proceeded to his apartment, let herself in,

and with the help of one of the family's second cousins who lived in Decatur and had some knowledge in the field, inventoried his guns. She wrote down the models and years of every gun in his collection and took the list to a local sports shop to have them appraised.

When Dad discovered that his keys were gone, it didn't take him long to figure out where they'd gone to. Unlike his previous hospital room, the nursing home room in which Dad was confined had no phone of its own. So with Gladys's help, Dad managed to get himself into a wheelchair, and Gladys pushed him down the hall to a pay phone so he could call Bonnie in Pekin.

When she answered, he begged for his keys back.

"I need my keys," he said. "I'll need them when I go home. My car keys are on that ring, too. Please give them back. I need them."

"Irma put you up to this, didn't she?" Bonnie demanded, clearly still bristling over the confrontation she and Irma had had a week earlier.

And then she hung up on him.

Dad sat in his wheelchair in front of the bank of payphones and cried. Gladys, for all her sweetness and tenderness, was no comfort to him at all.

He aged decades in days after that. The keys became Dad's solitary focal point. I'm sure he envisioned Bonnie ransacking his home, searching through private boxes and drawers, evaluating and classifying, breaking his life down into sentimental value and *real* value. I know I personally have secrets I assume won't be revealed until well after I'm dead, so I can imagine Dad's distress over having

his privacy so horribly invaded while he was helpless to stop it or the shame that might follow. Once he recovered from his initial dose of this new reality, he began to beg anyone and everyone for help recovering his “stolen” keys. Irma and Bonnie got into it again, this time over the keys, but Bonnie had developed quite the talent for hanging up on anyone with whom she couldn’t win or even deal. Her ability and willingness to fight seemed to have degenerated into simply running, screaming while she did so, a banshee who used to be someone I knew and loved.

That was how my relationship with her ended, with her screaming and slamming the phone down, running.

I had been to see Dad at the nursing home, and though we talked in snatches of conversation about his experiences in World War II and the Pacific battles he’d fought, he kept coming back around to his keys.

“See if Bonnie will give them back, Mikey,” he said. I was leaning over the bars they’d placed on the side of his bed, talking to him about Iwo Jima, when he abruptly changed the subject. “I need my keys. I need them, Mikey.”

“I’ll talk to her, Dad,” I promised.

I knew things had gone sour between Bonnie and my mom, but I was only twenty-two years old. I was close to Bonnie. I knew my mom could come across as self-righteous or indignant when that wasn’t how she meant to be at all. I knew I could be more reasonable than she might be. I was also an innocent bystander: I hadn’t been involved in any way in any of the arguments that had been circling Dad like ill-fated moons. In fact, I was just trying to be helpful. I was trying to mediate a hard situation for all of us. I

wanted Dad to stop worrying about his keys and worry about getting well again. In the end, I was just doing what I thought was right, and I thought everyone would see it that way. So, I called Bonnie.

“You could just make copies of them now,” I suggested. “He wouldn’t even know the difference at this point, and it would probably cool things down a bit.”

“Irma put you up to this, didn’t she?” Bonnie demanded.

“What? No, Dad did,” I said.

“You have no right, no right at all, to call me. I can’t believe that I can’t trust you now either.”

I had the unpleasant sensation of knowing how Gladys had felt when Bonnie stormed into Dad’s room and told her she’d be “banished.”

“Don’t ever call me again!” Bonnie shouted. “I know Irma put you up to calling me.”

“No,” I answered. “Nobody put me up to this. What are you talking about? I just thought that—”

“Don’t ever call me again,” she said again, and without another word, slammed down her receiver.

Dad’s obsession with his keys and his increasing agitation over his living conditions did nothing to diminish the general consensus it was Alzheimer’s, not emphysema, killing him. It didn’t really come as a surprise when Bonnie announced her intention to become his legal guardian and thus gain power-of-attorney over his estate. She told the nursing home to stop calling Irma on Dad’s behalf; henceforth, they were to call Bonnie regardless of the need.

Granted, Bonnie was an hour-and-a-half away in Pekin and Irma was local, but that's what Bonnie told them nonetheless. The nursing home responded indifferently to this, however, and continued to call whoever would show up.

"Why is she doing this to me?" Dad moaned from his bed. Bonnie had a lawyer now, and she was seeking medical support for her claim that he was incompetent. The brothers—my uncle Keith and my uncle Butch, who lived in Florida—hadn't chimed in yet, but my mom came roaring out of the gate.

"I won't let her ruin what's left of his life," she said. "I'll stop her, and I know how. That bitch wants his money? I can stop that, too."

Irma invited Gladys over to the house, where she suggested the solution to Dad's care and finances.

"You'll get married," my mom said. "If you're married, Bonnie has no say in his medical treatment or in the disposition of his estate if he dies. You'll be his wife and the sole inheritor of his estate."

Dad and Gladys had already talked about marriage many times before—I will never believe it was Dad who brought it up first, given the bachelor mindset of his later years, but I'm sure he could talk the talk whenever Gladys brought it up—and when Irma suggested it to each of them, they were both willing. Gladys was worried about how it might "look," her marrying a man who might be dying.

"You'll have support from within the family," my mom told her. "I've already talked to Butch down in Florida. Don't worry about it."

But Keith weighed in as well, siding with Bonnie, encouraging her to take control of Dad's estate before "*she* gets it all," in reference to Gladys. Keith stopped speaking to Irma altogether at this point.

The lines in the sand had been drawn quite clearly, with Irma and Butch on one side, Bonnie and Keith on the other, when the whole battle became a moot issue: Dad died.

21

As I said before, it was Saturday morning, Valentine's Day, 1987; it had just been Friday night an hour before, Friday the 13th. In the middle of a cold night, I rode with my mom to the nursing home to see Dad's body, to arrange for him to be sent to a local funeral home for the visitation and then for the burial.

"I meant to go see him today," Irma said to me, meaning yesterday, "but we stopped to help out that old couple. I should have gone anyway. I was just so tired."

En route to the nursing home the previous evening, the two of us had seen an elderly couple standing beside their broken-down car. It was biting cold, though there wasn't much snow; the wind was bad enough without it. So, we stopped, thinking we would only be a few minutes, but for the next three hours we worked on making that couple mobile again. We drove them to the auto parts shop. We took them to the gas station. We kept them in the car with us to stay warm while we tinkered with their dead car, and though I'm sure Irma felt pressure to get this business concluded so we could get on to see Dad, she was infinitely patient with the old couple, who were scared and without other resources.

“I don’t know who we would’ve called,” the old man said to us, clutching his hat in both hands as they sat in the car and we took turns tending their dead car. His wife had one hand on his knee. “Bless you both for helping us.”

When we finally got them on their way again, we were both exhausted, and the afternoon had turned to evening; the sky had gone bleak and stark as the sun went down.

“We’ll go see him tomorrow,” Irma said to me as we turned around and headed for the warmth of home. “It’s Saturday. We can go early and even spend a few extra hours with him.”

We spent those few extra hours with him in the middle of the night, and he did not care that we were there. A nurse met us as we came out of the elevator, and she looked as if she were struggling to look sympathetic. More than anything else, she looked weary. She spoke to my mom in muted tones while I stepped into Dad’s room and pulled back the curtain that encircled his bed.

The horror of that particular moment has never left me. In death, he truly relaxed, perhaps for the first time in months—and every wrinkle in his face vanished. His skin was smooth and white as if he were carved of soap. His head was thrown back on his pillow as if he had been laughing or screaming at the last, his mouth wide open as I’m sure he struggled for one more breath. His hands were beneath the blankets, so he seemed to be little more than a floating head. Years later, I would see a photograph of Napoleon’s death mask, and the color and texture of the late emperor’s mask would remind me again of how Dad looked as he

left this world. I didn't recognize him. His face was utterly foreign to me, though I knew I should know him. It was like coming to do that card trick for Mom all over again—an alien moment, a lost place, a racing heartbeat of confusion.

My mom came into the room a short time later, and I retreated so she could break down in private. She only stayed a few minutes—she didn't need long for her goodbye. After all, she'd been saying goodbye for months. At the same time, she had struggled against the emphysema, against the hospital, against the nursing home, against Bonnie, Keith, doctors, and ultimately against time itself, all so she could keep saying hello to him day after day.

22

While my mom was making funeral plans for Dad, my father, Steve, called from Michigan. He and Irma had been separated for less than a year, and though they had no immediate plans for divorce, they also had no plans for reconciliation, something Steve really wanted...but instinctively knew he wasn't going to get. He had cheated on Irma one too many times, and she'd finally had enough. When he called that weekend, he reached my sister, Tammy, who told him what had happened.

He was in Decatur less than twenty-four hours later.

His motives behind coming were, on the surface, entirely altruistic: he'd come to give comfort to the family. His family. Beneath the surface, however, beat the heart of a man who hoped to get back together with someone he'd loved and lost since he'd

been a boy becoming a young man. Both motives were all right with me.

Growing up, Steve had been a rough-and-tumble streetwise kid from the unfriendly streets of Chicago who ended up in the do-nothing *village* of Decatur. Irma met him when they were both teenagers; at the time, Steve was working as an usher in a local movie theater and Irma was a carhop at a local restaurant. Their courtship, what little I know of it, was quite the Capulets and Montagues story—Mom and Dad thought Steve was a punk, a menace. He wore his hair long (keep in mind this was the *early* 1960s; based on photos I've seen, his hair was practically a crew cut by today's standards but unacceptable back then), and he was a snarling, defiant young man. The two of them were on-again, off-again, and were apparently off-again when Irma met another young man named Larry. Steve dropped out of high school to join the U.S. Marine Corps, effectively removing him from the picture. This left Larry as my mother's chief suitor.

Steve didn't give up, though. He wrote to Irma often from wherever he was stationed, including Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, where he was extremely miserable. Even then, Steve was a dreamer, a strange blend of beatnik philosopher and rebel without a cause. He loathed the Marines ("Scum is the only word you can spell from the initials U.S.M.C.," he wrote); when my sister and I were growing up, he used to urge us not to shake him awake from sleep.

"We had this rule in the Marines," he explained, years after the fact, "that a Marine wasn't responsible for what he did in the first two seconds of wakefulness. We were trained to respond

instinctively. And we had this sergeant who we all hated so much that we wanted to kill him. So, we slept with knives under our pillows, hoping that when he came in to shake us awake, we could stab him in the two seconds of wakefulness when we wouldn't be held responsible for our actions." Whether this tale was true or not, Tammy and I learned—the hard way—not to shake Steve awake. As a famous man once said, if it ain't true, it oughtta be.

But even while he was serving his country in an organization for which he had no tolerance and even less patience, he hadn't lost his teenage crush on Irma Johnson. "Tell me it's not true that you cut your hair short," he wrote to her, courting as best he could from a thousand miles away.

When he got out of the Marines after serving as a spy in Cuba, he beelined for Decatur, Illinois, once more, and in short order, he and Irma were married. Larry, my mom's previous suitor, was long gone from her life and wouldn't resurface for another twenty-five years.

To be clear: Steve and Irma were not compatible. Whatever spark existed between them as teenagers turned into a destructive flame as they grew older. And they both knew, even back then, that Steve's work ethic did not match my mom's.

"It's unfortunate," Steve once said to me, "that there aren't any jobs for philosophers in this day and age. That's the job I'd like to do."

He didn't care much for many other jobs, either, and the two of them fought like wild dogs over Steve's work habits, both professional ones and personal ones. He wasn't terribly neat and tidy around the house; he was unemployed at least as much as he

was employed; and he was terribly judgmental, in a superior, condescending manner that nearly made my mom's head spin off daily with righteous indignation. As the hippy movement took hold, he grew his hair long, had the Charlie Manson beard, and criticized my mom for "working for the Man" when she came home bone-weary after eight hours of checking groceries. My mom, at the other end of the rational spectrum, would fly into uncontrollable rages that he couldn't help but goad her into with his calm, "we-can-work-it-out-if-you're-sane-too" tone. If Tammy and I were to get our butts swatted, we accompanied Irma into the bathroom for the hairbrush; if we were to be lectured, we accompanied Steve into our bedrooms for the dialogue. We often preferred to go with my mom.

Steve was not just a philosopher; he was an amateur, armchair psychologist. To this day, I don't know how to respond to the question, "Why do you feel you need to do that?" in response to some irrational act of aggression. And it was never a rhetorical question with him—it wasn't as if he'd asked "How many times do I have to tell you?" He was looking for a *real* answer. These were lectures interspersed with those heinous dialogues, and they were suicide inducers. Sometimes he would drone on so long that, as I stared at him (averting your eyes meant you weren't "engaged in the conversation" anymore, so you did look away for any reason unless you had another hour to kill being lectured), his head would seem to swell and then deflate again, over and over. It was cartoonish and distracting, and I fancied away many a lecture by wondering if he could feel it the way I could see it.

But he was a true fountain of information, both useful and pointless. He was an intense reader, and he read anything he could get his hands on. We'd go to rummage sales where people would be selling paperback books for a dime apiece, and Steve would lug the entire box of 50 books up to the people running the sale and say, "I'll give you two dollars and take the whole pile off your hands." Often, they'd be glad to do it, and we'd end up with paperback books that even their respective authors wouldn't buy anymore. To this day, my mom will say with barely suppressed fury, "We would go out to eat, and when we'd sit down, he'd have a goddamn *book* in his hands." Her emphasis on the word "book" is as hostile as if she'd said the word "mistress."

But because he knew so much, Tammy and I learned not to ask frivolous questions, for fear that the answer would be unexpectedly long. We grew up under the philosophy, *Ask Steve what time it is, and he'll tell you how to build a watch*. He was thorough, to say the least.

He was a kind father, though, and he was always there for us when we were children. He played Tickle Monster with us and taught me how to play chess (and stopped playing with me the first time I beat him. I was content with that, though, because I knew my win was legitimate—once, when I was having a crying fit because I'd lost for the umpteenth time in a row, my mom said to him, "Why don't you let Mike win once in a while?" Steve answered, "Because in the end it wouldn't be worth anything to him." The real victory was sweet and memorable... and worth more than he ever knew). He came to school plays and was the "cool" dad who my other friends couldn't get enough of. When he taught a class on

video photography at my grade school, I was unbelievably jealous of the attention he paid to the other students, even though I was in the class. When I sulked about it on the way home, he brought it up.

“Was I a teacher or a father today?” he asked.

“You were both. You don’t get out of being a father just because you’re the teacher,” I said defiantly, sure I was being led into a trap.

“Whose teacher was I?” he asked.

“Our teacher. My class’s teacher.”

“And whose father was I?”

I smiled sheepishly. “Mine.”

I was trapped anyway, but that was all right.

He read what I wrote with a deeper earnestness than even Bonnie, whose opinion was gold to me, and he was always fair. He never said, “Good job,” and let it go at that. He would detail for me what worked and what didn’t and, more important, *why* it did or didn’t work. He would write endless margin notes in his distinctive handwriting, usually in green pen, the curves of the letter swirling and unique. When I was heavily into Tarzan and John Carter of Mars books, I took to imitating the style of that author in fiction. When Steve read one of my Tarzan-esque short stories, he wrote, “Edgar Rice Burroughs would be proud of your homage.”

I had to look up *homage* in the dictionary. That was all right, too.

And his patience was extraordinary. When I was sixteen, he and I got into an argument, and I decided that I’d had enough of his self-important bullshit. I waited until his back was turned and he

was headed down the stairs; I then cold-cocked him from behind as hard as I could. (I'm not proud of this now, mind you, but at the time, it didn't seem at all cowardly to me, only convenient.) He stumbled down one step and turned as I prepared to punch him again.

In less time than it takes to describe it, he had me in an armlock and pinned to the floor in the hallway. I had thought his training as a Marine would be rusty all those years later. I was embarrassingly wrong and helpless to escape and tell him to get the *semper fi* out of my face. But of course, he wasn't *all* Marine.

"Now," he said, holding me fast, "let's talk about why you felt that was the right thing to do."

Irma might have been able to overlook his inability to hold down a job—Steve wasn't a drunk or incapable or stupid; he just didn't want to work—and perhaps even his superior attitude and condescending tones if he had been able to stay faithful to her. Tammy and I knew there had been incidents, though we didn't know any of the specifics. We didn't want to.

As a family, we went to Portland, Oregon, for a two-week vacation during the summer of 1986. We had a family friend who lived there, one of my former grade school teachers named Gene, and Gene planned to show us all the tourist traps. We went as far up Mount St. Helens as they'd let us, collecting ash in a glass milk jar to take back to Illinois with us. We went to the street fairs and the ocean. (We also practically froze to death—Illinois in summer can be an easy 100 degrees in the shade. Portland, however, got down to 50 degrees at night, and to further our discomfort, Gene

lived like a hippy—that is to say, with little furniture but whole-grain eating. Sleeping on hardwood floors took the steam out of vacation, and we had apparently missed summer in the Pacific Northwest; it had apparently occurred the weekend before we arrived.)

I couldn't stay for the full two weeks, however; my job at the Kroger's grocery store in Decatur wouldn't let me have two weeks' vacation, so I could only use one. I flew back ahead of the rest of the family, who stayed on for the second week.

Steve had assumed Irma and Tammy would be coming back to Illinois at the same time. He hadn't anticipated that Irma would be around the second week, and her presence made it extremely difficult for him to have the weeklong fling he had planned with a woman he knew named Dorothy who happened to live in Portland. Irma "spoiled" his tryst, and he took it out on her by sulking the entire second week, picking arguments, leaving her alone at Gene's without transportation while he went out with Gene, and in general burning the last bridge of his marriage. Whether or not he got to see Dorothy, I don't know.

When they came back from Portland, Irma moved out.

Tammy and I were devastated by the sudden changes that swept like a tidal wave through our household. Irma moved into a terrifyingly small little apartment where she cried and cried, from fury and from betrayal and from the realization that it was over. Every time I visited her in that dark hole of a dump, my stomach knotted up with fear and anguish over the pain my mom was going through. I had never seen her like this, and it scared me as much as Mom's deteriorating descent into cancer had terrified me when I

tried to magically find the card she had picked. Steve, for all his other parenting skills, was not capable of raising us alone. He was terrible about ensuring that there was food in the house; further, his hours at work and, apparently, seeing yet another woman kept him away from home a great deal. The house seemed dark and cold and empty a nearly all the time. I came home less and less, choosing to stay out with my girlfriend Jennie or other friends.

In time, Irma came back to the house...so that Steve could move out. He found a small house in a nearby subdivision, but he never seemed to get it organized. He always had unpacked boxes on the kitchen table. And when the moment of opportunity came, Tammy opted to move out with him. To this day, I don't know what went on between them—probably his indifferent parenting concepts of “she can come and go as she pleases,” though it could easily have been something more—but it soured Tammy on him permanently. It wasn't long before she moved back in with Irma, and it wasn't long after *that* that Steve moved to Michigan. I cannot speak for Tammy in this regard, but a vast emptiness settled into my life when Steve moved away.

Time passed. Life in a single-parent household became the norm. And the family feud swirling around Dad began, raged, and ended with Steve hundreds of miles away.

When he arrived in Decatur the weekend that Dad died, he ended up staying at the house, all four of us under one roof again after years of all four of us apart. It was exhilarating. There was something about the familiarity of Steve being on the toilet for an hour with a newspaper that gave me renewed hope that my parents might be getting back together.

Old kitchen table conversations began again over breakfast, and again, it was like old times. They talked about Bonnie and Keith and Butch (who was on his way from Florida for the visitation) and Dad. They talked about Dad a lot.

“I can tell you this much,” Irma said to Steve. “That casket is going to be *open* before the visitation. Bonnie wants it closed, but by God, that’s because she and Keith are just too goddamned guilty to look at his face. But I want to see him. And the kids want to see him.”

“You have that right,” Steve said cautiously. He sounded as if he wanted to add something, but for the moment, restrained himself.

“She’s hasn’t even got the backbone to haul her precious ass down here to help me arrange the funeral,” Irma went on. She had been on the phone or at the funeral home for the better part of the weekend. Steve had gone with her to the funeral home, where the director had tried to sell her a far more expensive casket than any dead body needs by first showing her the top model on the high end (the one they never sell) and then showing her the cardboard box on the low end (the other one they never sell). The guilt is supposed to drive the grieving relative to buy the mid-priced casket, but Irma and Steve were both too smart for that. They bought what was needed and nothing more. It didn’t make the experience any less complicated for Irma.

“She ‘needs to mourn,’” she sneered, making quote marks with her fingers. And then, after a deep pause, she said more softly, “She can mourn when he’s buried. If I have to wait that long, why shouldn’t she?”

Again, Steve looked as if he might lecture—I knew what that narrowing of his eyes meant; it meant he was considering a bit of wisdom that would undoubtedly insult more than it informed—but again he held back.

That was about the time I began to think it just might work out again between my parents. I thought, *If he can only keep from pushing her, and if she can only see that he's trying to help, this ought to be all right.*

Nope.

He went back to Michigan a week later.

23

“She’s faking,” my mom said, looking past Steve, Tammy, and me at Bonnie as Bonnie came into the visitation. “It’s all an act.”

Bonnie sagged to the soft-carpeted floor of the funeral parlor. Keith, who had come in with her, moved to catch her.

We were standing as a family, the four of us, in front of Dad’s casket in the main visitation room at the funeral home. We had only arrived a few minutes earlier that evening, and the funeral director—a tall, prim man with a high forehead, a deep voice, and huge, alarmingly flawless hands that he rubbed together constantly—had appeared out of nowhere to escort us to the casket while taking our winter coats at the same time. The hallway he’d us down was wide with thick carpeting that hushed every step, and the double doors that opened to the visitation chamber were the kind that hissed gently shut after you.

“There are rooms at the back for family,” he said. He opened the casket’s lid with his free hand. “And I’ll be available during the entire visitation. Please let me know if I can be of any service.”

He vanished as quickly as he had appeared, like a ghost himself. The visitation wouldn’t begin for another half-hour, so the doors to the chamber whispered shut behind the director as he left. And then we were alone with Dad.

He was wearing his finest suit, a dark three-piece that I’d seen him in before. But he looked wrong, as wrong as he had looked when Irma and I had come to see him at the nursing home the night he died. His glasses were set too far down his nose, as if he intended to read over them. The make-up they’d applied to him was shockingly thick—you could scrape your fingernail across it and leave a ditch in it. It was also a sickening shade of orange; he looked almost cartoonish.

“No, no, no,” I heard my sister, Tammy, mutter. “He looks like he was exposed to radiation or something.”

My mom adjusted his suit, unbuttoning and rebuttoning his coat. She looked down at him as she did so, the way a mother looks down at her infant as she dresses it, and a faint, sad smile crossed her lips. Just as she was turning from him, Bonnie, Keith, and some local cousins came through the thick wooden doors behind us.

Bonnie and Keith had been adamant that the casket lid should be closed during the visitation. At first, Irma had been insistent that they should have to look upon him. “They wanted his money so bad,” she said, “there ought to be a price.” In the end, however, she conceded that it wasn’t necessary for Dad to be on

display to any ghoulish gawking that might take place (“I don’t want there to be an open casket visitation when I die,” she has told me repeatedly in the years since. “I just want to be cremated and have it over with. I’ve been cold my whole life, so by God, I want to be warm in the afterlife.”). But she had arranged for the four of us to view Dad’s body one last time before the visitation actually began. Bonnie and Keith’s untimely arrival was really just a bonus, icing on the cake, unintended spite and revenge.

“Oh God,” Bonnie moaned as she dramatically put one hand to her forehead—it was like a moment from an old black-and-white melodrama, Shakespearean in its tragedy—and proceeded to keel over in a dead faint. Keith chivalrously caught her. Second cousins and my great aunt gathered around her, whispering their concern, comforting her like courtesans to an empress as they beat a hasty retreat from the visitation room. None of us standing before the casket moved to help, and the two groups said not a single word to one another.

“I think your dad would have approved,” Steve said to Irma, smiling slightly as he turned back to Dad’s body. He corrected Dad’s glasses on his nose. It helped.

We each took a moment alone with Dad, and in my time, I put my hand over his forehead, much as Bonnie had done as she “fainted.” His head was cold and hard, like a stone on a winter beach. I had a gut-wrenching moment when I wondered if his brains were still in his skull or if what I was feeling was just hollow bone, hardened for the grave. In two days, Dad had gone from my warm grandfather and his tales of World War II in the Pacific, a man who loved chickens and had worked the railroad and who sang

“Tangerine” and who wanted to get married to his girlfriend, to a rigid shell of a centerpiece.

Vera, she of the hawk nose and the fierce demeanor, and Gladys, she whom Dad would have wed, stood by one another at the visitation. The room was full of elderly people. They came by me and shook my hand and told me their names or their relationships to Dad, but I knew none of them except his two girlfriends.

“It should have been open,” Vera said. “That’s what all these folks expect.”

Gladys, who had been given her own private time with Dad in his casket, just smiled and nodded a conciliatory agreement.

I actually knew this already: an old man whom I didn’t know had asked me, “Why’s the lid down?”

“The family wants it that way,” I’d answered.

The old man snorted. “We came to see *him*,” he said, “not a box.”

Other old women hovered around the casket as if they intended to open it; I had no idea Dad had dated so many women, but there they were, en masse, a platoon of them. One by one they had sought me out to offer their condolences... and to hint that the casket lid should be up. *It was expected*, one of them said to me. I begged off, pointing out that I wasn’t in charge of this event, that maybe they should take it up with someone else. Of course, there was no one else—most of the family was in the rooms at the back. I don’t recall ever seeing Bonnie or Keith. My mom was lost in the crowd somewhere. The first relative I saw that night was my cousin Bill, he of banana fame.

He was a grown man now, with a wife. He looked good—he was slender and tall, and he wore a cop’s mustache, like our uncle Keith. I hadn’t seen him in many years, not since his parents had divorced, so for a few moments, I didn’t even know who he was.

“How are you, Mike?” he asked as he shook my hand.

“I’m good, Bill,” I said, then wishing I hadn’t said such an inane thing at a funeral. “How are you?”

He didn’t answer the question. Instead, he said, “Listen, I was wondering if you’d seen my dad here yet. He’s coming, right?”

Bill’s dad, my uncle Butch, was en route from Florida for the visitation. We had been expecting him for hours, but he’d called to say that bad weather had made the drive longer than he had anticipated. He wasn’t there yet—which was a good thing. The anger in Bill’s eyes was testimony enough to his motives. I knew that Bill hadn’t spoken to Butch since shortly after the divorce, when Butch had moved to Florida and married another woman.

“No,” I answered. “He’s not here. I’m not sure he’s going to make it at all for this. He might not make it until the funeral tomorrow.”

“Damn it,” Bill said, turning to his wife, whom he hadn’t introduced to me. He said something in a low voice to her that I couldn’t hear, and then he turned back to me, faking a smile. “Okay, then. Well, thanks. Good to see you. You look great, man. We should get together some time.”

He pumped my hand again. Then, without ever so much as removing his coat, he left the visitation.

I found Irma as quickly as I could, and I told her that Bill had come to find Butch.

“I think he’s looking for a fight,” I said.

Irma sighed. “Why should he be any different than the rest of the family?”

24

Butch was the oldest of Dad’s four kids. Butch, Irma, Bonnie, and then Keith. I was around Butch a lot as a child—my cousin Bill and I were inseparable—but I never quite understood him. We never connected like I did with Bonnie or Keith. I carved Halloween pumpkins with Bonnie; I went jogging with Keith, who pushed me from a mile to five miles in less than a month. Butch and I just drifted into the same rooms together.

When I was a boy, Butch was a Macon County Sheriff’s Deputy (my hometown of Decatur is in Macon County, Illinois). He was a heavy man then, but his weight was pure muscle, not fat. His hair was black as night, cut sharply like a soldier’s (he’d been a paratrooper, though somehow that stint in the military gave him a fear of flying that persists to his last day), and his eyes were constantly squinting as if he couldn’t see.

He was always a silent man, sitting in his easy chair in his living room while we played, sometimes still in his brown deputy’s uniform. He would drink a few beers, watch a little TV, never saying much to us kids as we roared through his house like maniacal killers. He was calm, even in the weirdest of circumstances, and his sense of humor was incredibly dry.

When a three-foot-long king snake that I had caught behind my grade school bit me on the wrist (after looking into the paper bag in which I had brought the captured snake home, my mom

said, “That snake is coiled up and *very* angry. Keep the bag closed.” “Okay,” I said...and opened the bag. The rest is history), we went to Butch’s house after going to the hospital. We still had the snake—we had transferred it from the paper bag to a glass cage. After I’d finished showing Bill the teeth marks in my wrist, Butch hunkered down in front of me, one eye almost fully closed and the other twinkling with amusement, and said, “Do you think you tasted good?”

On another occasion, when Butch and his first wife, Linda, were moving into a new house, Tammy and I stayed with our cousins under the watchful eye of a babysitter at the new house while our parents all went out together. The babysitter’s eye wasn’t so watchful, however, as we trekked up to the remodeled attic, found a loose grate covering the heating duct, removed said grate, and my cousin Robby (who was about Tammy’s age, only smaller in size) went headfirst down the shaft. He fell two-and-half stories before getting wedged into a bend in the duct as it wound its way toward the furnace. He wasn’t in any real danger from the fall—it was like dumping a gerbil down one of those cardboard rolls your Christmas wrapping paper comes on. He banged and clattered his way down the shaft, making noises like Jiffy Pop Popcorn.

Let me tell you, though, that kid could scream. He wailed louder than the babysitter, who frantically summoned the fire department. He screamed while Bill and I stood in the attic with a flashlight, shining its beam down into the shaft where we could see Robby’s sneakered feet pointed up at us.

“Can you see the furnace?” Bill shouted. Robby just bellowed louder without actually answering.

“You know, if he can,” I said to Bill, “that would be *bad*.”

By the time Butch, Linda, Steve, and Irma returned, the firemen were attacking the heating duct with metal cutters, peeling it back like foil. We essentially watched Robby being rescued from a TV dinner. When Robby finally emerged, scratched and bruised but otherwise unharmed, Butch drew Bill and me aside.

“Did either of you push him down that shaft?” he asked us.

“No!” we answered, horrified at the suggestion. “No way!”

Butch thought about it, then said, “Okay, but did you *want* to?”

Butch’s first marriage, to Linda, exploded, for reasons still unclear to me to this day. Bill and I weren’t even teenagers yet. I know only that once upon a time I had a cousin Bill who was one of my best friends, and in a very short period of time, Linda had isolated him from our family. Bill vanished from my life in a fury. He still lived in Decatur, just across town, but the distance between us wasn’t physical. In time, Linda remarried—the man she married, Jim, worked at one of the Kroger’s grocery stores in town, so I saw him fairly often. He dropped dead just a few years later of a heart attack while hauling gallons of milk from the cooler to the dairy case.

Butch essentially lost all three of his kids—Bill, Robby, and Amy—after that divorce. Linda filled them with stories of one sort or another, and Butch moved away to Florida. Whatever Linda told Bill about the family, about Butch, turned him against us as surely as if we had committed a sin against him. He undoubtedly felt abandoned by his father—a fair enough feeling, given that Butch had taken up a new life far, far away—and the rest of us were his

dad's side of the family. Linda had an extensive family of her own; Bill didn't need us anymore, and he certainly didn't need Butch once Linda remarried. Jim, her new husband, loved Linda's kids and eagerly adopted them. And when Bill had the choice to change his last name to match his new adoptive father's, he did so without hesitation.

For Butch, his life continued to unravel. He got himself into some financial trouble; he borrowed money in Illinois, asking Irma and Bonnie to co-sign the loan for him. They did, but then Butch skipped out on the loan, dumping it in his sisters' laps. Both of them were forced to declare bankruptcy, and for years, they couldn't forgive him. He stood in for Keith as the black sheep of the family.

In Florida, Butch remarried (another woman named Linda; I'm assuming this is the "like father, like son" proverb, given that one of Dad's steady girlfriends was named Vera, the same name as Mom) and had two more kids, plus three stepsons. He was completely out of contact with both Bonnie and Irma, of course, but he and Keith kept in touch. Keith went down to Florida to fish with him, and Dad even made the trip down at one point. Butch tried his hand at many jobs in Florida, but he never seemed able to get his head above the financial waterline. He never went back to law enforcement. He began to develop a drinking problem, and this ultimately put strain on his second marriage.

Just before Dad's death, things began to straighten themselves out for Butch. Though he still had no contact with his first three children, he and Irma had reconciled, which was enough for Bonnie to forgive him (at least a little). So, Butch was back in

the family. He'd always been there, in the background (he sent money to Irma for Christmas presents for me and Tammy; Butch never knew it, but he bought me the Beatles album *Hey Jude* one year, and when I transferred from record albums to CDs years later, I hung onto that one for sentimental reasons), but by then he was calling Irma every week. When Dad went into the hospital and then the nursing home, Butch was on the phone every day, sometimes more than once a day. He hadn't been able to come to Illinois to see Dad when he was sick—Keith was coming every few weeks from Texas, where he had moved shortly before Dad went into the hospital—but when Dad died, Butch packed up his car and started on the road for home again.

It was a long trip for him, in many different ways, I'm sure.

He arrived in Decatur about half an hour after Bill left Dad's visitation.

25

It rained the day of Dad's funeral, of course. It wouldn't have been a funeral without it.

He was buried in the veterans' section of Graceland Cemetery in Decatur because of his service to the U.S. during World War II. Mom had been buried there for a long time by then, near a small tree and up a gentle hill from the driveway that wound through the cemetery. The headstones in the vets' section were all the kind that are flush with the ground; I guess it's easier for the groundskeeper to mow when they're like that. Dad was buried alongside Mom, his full name on the stone: Glenn Donald Johnson.

My middle name is Glenn, a legacy to Dad. Butch was Glenn Donald Johnson Jr.—his first Linda sometimes called him Donnie—and one of the sons he had in Florida was Glenn Johnson III. The name, if not the man, are immortal, it would seem.

The cars lined up along the edge of the grass, wheels on the roadway and wheels on the lawn. People in black leaned into the hill, high heels and slick-soled dress shoes finding uncertain balance on the grass. We ducked under the flaps of a blue tent erected at Dad's graveside. The minister was already there when our family arrived. A gaggle of old men in faded military dress—either men who had known Dad or who simply attended the funeral of every local vet—were standing to one side.

Everyone was there, of course, together but not. Bonnie, Keith, Keith's girlfriend Pam, Irma, Steve, my sister Tammy, Gladys, my girlfriend Jennie, Tammy's boyfriend Craig (for whom I later named a character in the short story "Model Monsters"), cousins and great aunts and great uncles. The four siblings sat together in the front row on metal folding chairs by the closed casket. Butch was thin and gray and wiry, nothing like I remembered him being when I was a boy. He'd aged...and done so poorly. Bonnie wore sunglasses despite the drizzle. Keith sat perfectly still, his eyes drooping, his expression vacant and far away. My mom stared straight at the casket as if she might will Dad back to life. They didn't speak to each other; the days of speaking to one another were nearly over.

I stood in the back of the tent, looking over the heads of the other mourners. Tammy was nearby, Jennie and Craig at our

sides. Everyone looked as if they belonged together, as if we were a family united in our grief.

The minister began to eulogize, but I wasn't listening. I was thinking about Dad and the fact that he'd been a soldier during the war, in the Pacific, on Iwo Jima. I had seen the souvenirs he'd brought back, bayonets and helmets now in Keith's possession. I looked at the old soldiers nearby with guns and a bugle, and the memories reminded me: Dad had killed other men as a soldier. He had shot or stabbed or exploded Japanese soldiers. There had been funerals like this one because of him. I dismissed that imagery in favor of the ones I knew firsthand.

This was the man who always had a fifty-cent piece for his grandkids when he came to visit. This was the same man who held his girlfriend's hand with the bashfulness of a teenager. This was the man who rode me on his knee when I was a little boy, singing a funny little song with lots of "boops" in it. Boop-ditty-boop. When he began to carry an oxygen tank around, he obtained a Handicapped sticker for his Pinto so he could park in all the best spaces—when I chided him for it, he said, "But they won't give you one if you're just handicapped *here*," and tapped his bald head knowingly.

He loved chickens. He played with toy trains and dressed like a railroad engineer. And he was dead. I would've given anything to turn back the clock long enough to tell him I would miss him.

They fired the twenty-one-gun salute after the eulogy. If you've never heard one in real-life, it's shocking, a blast straight to your chest. It comes at a moment when you're already emotionally vulnerable, and that explosion will burst the tears out of you. It's

deafening. And the silence that follows the first volley is physically crushing.

They folded the flag and gave it to Butch. They then waited for us to leave, to work our way back to our cars, before lowering him into the ground. As I got into the back seat of my mom's car, I looked back up the hill in time to see my cousin Bill, who I hadn't seen anywhere at the funeral, approach Butch from behind. As I watched, Bill tapped Butch on the shoulder, and Butch turned. I was much too far away to hear the words that were exchanged between them, but as Steve, Irma, and Tammy reached the car and got in to leave, I saw Bill and Butch hug one another. It might have been the only fine moment I witnessed at the end of Dad's life, but it was a fine, fine moment just the same.

26

I lost my father, Steve, when I was thirty-one. Tammy was twenty-seven.

She had lost him years earlier, though, when she lived with him after he and my mom split up.

His time in Decatur in the week after Dad's death was like watching the accelerated lifecycle of a tsetse fly. He went from welcome suitor to familiar acquaintance to tolerable partner to ex-husband in seven savagely quick days. His downfall came when he began to "advise" Irma on her relationships with Bonnie and Keith.

The night of the funeral, the four siblings had gotten together to clean out Dad's apartment (which is when I got that nice red robe I still have today). They hardly spoke to one another;

a cold civility prevailed. Of course, Bonnie had already catalogued and appraised Dad's gun collection—that sped things up a bit. The closetful of unwrapped Christmas gifts didn't add much levity to the situation. Once Dad had been condensed to a plot in Graceland Cemetery, a box full of paperwork, and a collection of memories in people's minds, the four of them parted ways, Irma and Butch allied on one side, Bonnie and Keith on the other. They went with evil backward glances thrown over their shoulders, but they went quietly.

Steve could do nothing quietly. And he could not leave the situation alone. The great mediator, he was, never mind that he had a brother he'd not spoken to for decades. And after more than twenty years of knowing Irma, you'd think he would've known better than to push her.

"They're family," he suggested. "You can't walk away from family."

"Yes, you can," Irma said. She was furiously loading dishes into the dishwasher, her back to Steve. Even I could see the rigidity in her spine as she spoke—it was like watching a porcupine raise its quills. Warning klaxons should have echoed across the kitchen floor. "You can if they're greedy little vultures who drove their father to the grave just to get his money."

"But they're blood." Steve was sitting at the kitchen table; I was next to him with my back to the kitchen wall. That moment, that casual comment about Bonnie and Keith being "blood" and therefore indispensable, would come back to haunt me years later, when I finally lost Steve.

Irma was becoming more and more frustrated with the conversation. “If you want to have a relationship with them, by all means, *you* do so. But this is *my* business. This is my blood, not yours. It’s obvious how you feel. You still have a relationship with Helen, though God knows why.”

Helen was Steve’s mom, my other grandmother. We didn’t call Steve’s mother “Mom.” That would’ve been too familiar and, frankly, too loving. We called her Grandma Miller (always with her last name attached). She was a hard woman, to say the very least about her. She lived in downtown Chicago, and she had been the mother that Steve ran away from when he was a hoodlum on the streets of the Windy City in his youth. His life with her was a series of confrontations and pacification, and up to the day she died (I was in Seattle by then), he did that particular dance with her. But to be honest, until the day Steve died, I did an equally awkward dance with him.

Grandma Miller was the kind of grandmother who sent you gifts you didn’t want and then waited impatiently for the thank-you card you shouldn’t have to write. If you didn’t send one, she would write you a three-page handwritten letter explaining why it was rude not to do so. If she called, she wouldn’t begin the conversation with “Hello.” Instead, she would sigh deeply and say, “I guess no one ever wants to call old grandma in Chicago. I guess I don’t matter anymore.” She owned a massive collection of hardback books—all nonfiction—and while she encouraged reading, she dismissed any sort of fiction as “trash.” When she learned I wanted to be a writer, she said, “Well, don’t expect me to read any of it if you plan to write fiction. Fiction is for the commoner.” She

played a wide variety of headgames with Steve about his relationship with his estranged brother Jim. “Jim’s kids call me all the time,” she would tell him. “They send me school photos and write me the most beautiful cards. Of course, Jim married a nice woman. She’s a good mother, the kind who makes sure her children are well behaved.”

Nothing grated my mom more than to have to deal with Grandma Miller. Grandma Miller considered my mom white trash, beneath Steve’s notice. It was all a big game, of course—while telling Irma that she wasn’t good enough for the unemployed modern-day philosopher, she was telling Steve that he wasn’t good enough to shine his the shoes of his lawyer brother Jim. I’m sure she told Jim he wasn’t as high-minded as his brother Steve. No one could win with her. Steve simply shrugged his shoulders and tolerated her.

“Because she’s my mother,” Steve said to Irma that day in the kitchen. “I think you’d do well to take a lesson on relationship management from me.”

“Is that so?” Irma turned to face him. “Should I find someone out in Oregon to fuck on the side? How is Dorothy, by the way?”

I couldn’t have gotten out of that kitchen any faster if I could have teleported.

And so, of course, they didn’t reconcile, as I had been secretly hoping they would. I missed having a complete family, but I didn’t miss the fighting or the screaming or the air of tension that hung around when they were both in the house. When Steve packed up and headed back to Michigan, all of us acted as if that

had been the plan all along. He honked when he reached the end of our country driveway, and then he was gone... again.

I didn't see Steve again for a very long time after that. Jennie and I split up, I met Melody—who would be my first wife, the one who fled to Florida to be with another man after just a few months of marriage to me—and we went off to the University of Illinois. We got a one-room “efficiency,” they called it, and got down to the business of higher education. Midway through my second year at the U of I, Steve came to town to visit.

He looked so much different than I remembered him from just a few years earlier—his hair was short and nearly all gray, and he was back to wearing a beard, though it, too, was gray. His teeth had gone bad, but that look of calm I'd always seen in his eyes growing up was still there. He stayed the night in our little one-room apartment, sleeping on the floor in a roll of blankets. In the middle of the night, Melody shook me awake.

“Do you hear that?” she whispered.

Steve snored like a 747 landing on the roof. He was a real window-rattler.

“Well, I was asleep before,” I said irritably, “but I do *now*.”

“How can you sleep through that?” she asked, lying back down and putting one pillow over her head.

“I don't know,” I answered, rolling over. “Practice, I guess.”

He only stayed the one night, and in that time, he somehow managed to annoy me with that superiority my mom had always found frustrating.

The next day at lunch, we sat down across from one another in the Student Union and had hamburgers. As we ate, Steve asked me about the classes I was studying as an English major.

“I’m taking a course on the tragedies of William Shakespeare,” I said.

“Ah, Bill,” Steve said, chewing. “I loved Bill growing up.”

I didn’t say anything.

“So, what else?” he asked.

“James Joyce,” I said. “I have a course that focuses on just *Ulysses*.”

“Jim was a great writer,” Steve said, “though you might find the stream-of-consciousness conclusion to be a little unnecessary. After all, Jim shifts from Milo to Molly’s point of view.”

“Okay,” I said. I studied my hamburger like it was a final exam. I didn’t want to meet his eye for fear that he would ask...

“What else?”

“Ernest Hemingway,” I mumbled. “We’re reading *The Old Man and the Sea* right now.”

“Ernie,” he said. “Amazing guy.”

“You know,” I said, sitting up straight and glaring at him, “the only people who ever tried to call him ‘Ernie’ are dead and secretly buried in Africa now. ‘Good morning, Bwana Ernie.’ BANG! Just like that.”

Steve looked wounded. “Is there a problem?”

“Yes, there’s a problem,” I said. “‘Bill, Jim, Ernie.’ Are you kidding me? These are the world’s greatest writers. Jeez, you act like you know these guys.”

“Ah, but I always felt like I did,” he said simply, going back to his hamburger. “Whenever I read their works, I always felt like they were my friends.”

I said nothing else about the subject after that. I referred to Harrison Ford and Paul McCartney as Harrison and Paul all the time. I realized I was my father’s son.

But I wasn’t.

I moved to Seattle for the job at Wizards of the Coast. Melody left me for Adam in Florida. And in the immediate aftermath of my suicide attempt, life found a new way to restart when a new opportunity arose—Wizards wanted me to go to Germany and represent the company at the Essen Toy Fair.

I’d never been out of the country before. Hell, prior to moving to Seattle, I’d only been west of the Mississippi to go to St. Louis, Portland, and once to Dallas, Texas, driving in the fiercest six-hundred-mile-long thunderstorm I’ll ever see in my life. (I wanted to see where JFK was assassinated, and Melody was willing to take the road trip from college. The death obsession of youth never really left me.) The chance to go to Germany was staggering. I called my mom back in Illinois with good news for a change.

“I’ll need to get a copy of my birth certificate,” I told her. “I need to get a passport.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll get that to you soon.”

“You have to hurry,” I said. “This is really sudden, I know, but I’m racing the clock here to have that passport in time to go next month.”

“Okay,” she said again. “I’ll take care of it.”

A few days passed, and no sign of the birth certificate. I called Irma again.

“How’s that birth certificate coming?” I asked.

Instead of answering, my mom said, “Can I call you tonight, around eight o’clock your time?”

“Uh, sure,” I said. “I guess so. But the birth certificate—”

“I’ll talk to you tonight then,” she said and hung up.

When she called next, she had already called Tammy and three of us were in a conference call on the line at the same time.

“I have to tell you something,” Irma said to me. She took a deep breath and said, “Steve isn’t your father, Mike. Tammy, he’s *your* biological father, but he’s not Mike’s.”

As the story unfolded, I learned Steve had been in the Marines when I was born; my biological father was a man named Larry, a teenager Irma had been dating when Steve left for Camp Lejeune.

“But Larry didn’t want you,” Irma told me. “He wanted me to have an abortion. And when I didn’t, he and his parents came to the hospital to try to take you away from me. But I wouldn’t let you go.

“Then when Steve came back from the Marines, he wanted to adopt you,” she went on. “But we were so poor. We just couldn’t afford it. And then, after a while, it was too late. We would’ve had to tell you the truth, because of your age and I didn’t know how to do that.”

Tammy was silent. Irma finally fell silent.

“Holy shit,” I finally said. “I’m a bastard.”

I had always had a terrifying nightmare, one that I had never understood up until to that moment: In it, I'm very, very young, maybe two or three years old. My mom is holding me by one arm, Mom and Dad are holding me by the other. We're outside Mom and Dad's house—not the house out in Harristown, but a house they used to have in town, in Decatur—and Irma is trying to get me into a car where Steve waits behind the wheel. The car's running. Mom and Dad won't let go of me, and neither will Irma. They're all screaming, and I'm screaming, too. I'm like the piece of rope in a tug-of-war. Mom and Dad finally let go, or lose their grips, and I'm suddenly in the car with Irma and Steve, driving away fast, watching Mom and Dad out the window, standing on the curb, as we leave them behind.

It turns out that this wasn't just some nightmare after all; this was something that actually happened. Irma and I had lived with Mom and Dad after I was born, and when Steve came home from the Marines, Irma intended to go with him. Mom and Dad insisted that they were going to keep me, that Irma wasn't responsible enough to raise me. She was eighteen. The battle on the curb was the battle for where I was going to live.

"Where does Larry live now?" I asked.

"Here," Irma answered, "in Decatur. I've seen him around town a few times. We've never spoken."

"Jesus," I said. Then, after thinking about it for a few minutes, I said, "Why didn't Steve ever tell me? This seems like his area—pop psychology. He must've known I'd find out eventually."

"I told him never to tell you. I wanted to be the one."

Needless to say, I didn't go to Germany for Wizards that year. My birth certificate said "Michael Johnson," not "Michael Ryan," like every other piece of identification I owned alleged. That made it a little difficult to get a passport. The fact that Irma was able to get me a Social Security card with the name "Ryan" on it is testimony to just how powerful that little card is—it laid the foundation for the rest of my existence.

I phoned Steve as soon as I hung up with Irma and Tammy.

"Irma told me the whole story about Larry and you and my birth certificate," I said without preamble.

"Ah," Steve said. I could feel his weariness on the other end of the line. "I'm sorry."

Steve was living with a woman named Bridget at the time—he would later marry her—and her two children, both of whom were under ten when Steve and Bridget met. He had a whole new family, and though none of them were "blood," neither was I, it turned out. But I had a plan to make us as close to "blood" as we could be.

"I want you to adopt me," I told him.

"I didn't know one adult could adopt another adult," he said.

"I'm sure you can. I want you to make this right."

He sighed. "You know I would do it in a heartbeat. But I can't afford it. I'm out of work, Bridget is holding this family together with her income as best she can, the kids—"

"Never mind all that," I said. "I'll pay for it. Of course I will. You just sign the paperwork when it comes. All right?"

He agreed immediately.

The paperwork from the lawyer who handled my “adoption” kept crossing in the mail with the divorce paperwork from Melody’s lawyer who handled our divorce. Michael, my lawyer, was initially perplexed by my desire to be adopted.

“You know,” he said in his office the first day, “he doesn’t have to adopt you to leave you any part of his estate. He can legally leave you anything he wants to.”

“He has to adopt me for me to *accept* any part of his estate,” I countered. “And this isn’t about money or property, Michael.”

“I’ve never done anything like this before,” he admitted as he drafted the initial court papers. He looked up at me with a hint of despair. “I’ll have to contact your biological father. He needs to sign a document waiving any rights he has as your father.”

“Oh brother.” I took off my glasses and rubbed my eyes. “You tell that fucker that he gave up all rights to me when he asked my mom to abort me. And if he makes any more noise after that, throw him a dollar figure for what he owes me in back child support.”

My biological father Larry apparently signed. I never heard another word about him.

It cost me two thousand dollars, and Irma flew from Illinois to Seattle to be with me at that first meeting with the lawyer. I couldn’t decide whether or not to be angry with her at first—I felt like I’d lost my father and as if she had been the one to take him away from me. But Steve was becoming more and more involved in the lives of his “new” children, Bridget’s kids, so Tammy and I were nearly off of his radar by then. I still heard from him on my birthday, and I sometimes made it onto a group mailing list when

he encountered something significant in email that he wanted to share. I was part of a CC line.

So, I felt that I'd lost him anyway.

Five years passed. I heard nothing from him. Then he called one day in November, and when I picked up the phone at my desk at Wizards, he immediately sang a snatch of a Beatles song to me.

"You say it's your birthday," he sang in key. "We gonna have a good time."

When I was a boy, Steve was very much into music of the sixties—the Beatles, the Stones, the Who, Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton. He had an amazing wall of electronics. Eight-tracks and reel-to-reel recorders, multiple turntables, cassette decks, amplifiers, the works. He played electric guitar, and sometimes he hooked his guitar up and played to his rock-and-roll albums. I loved to watch him, and by sitting in a stuffed black chair that my mom had made and listening, I began to learn Beatles songs. One day, Steve sat down with me, unfolded the Beatles' *White Album*, and proceeded to explain to me what it all "meant."

"In this song here," he said as the turntable blared "Glass Onion," "John Lennon is making fun of the people who try to read too much into the lyrics of Beatles' songs. When he says, 'The Walrus was Paul,' he's referring to another Beatles song, 'I Am the Walrus.'"

I was hooked, as much on the music as the man explaining it to me.

I laughed as he sang "Birthday" to me on the phone while I sat at my desk at work, and when he finished, I said, "I'm glad to hear from you."

“I know you’re at work,” he said in that old familiar calm cadence of his, “and it must truly suck to be at work on your birthday, but I hope you’ll have a happy one just the same.”

“Thank you,” I said. We talked trivialities for another minute or two, then we said goodbye.

It wasn’t my birthday; he had missed it by more than a week. I didn’t tell him.

The next year, he didn’t call at all.

And then, just when I figured I would never hear from him again, he called.

“I’m in a little bit of trouble,” he said with the understatement prowess of a British gentleman. “I could use a little financial help, if you can spare it. I’ll pay it back, of course.”

He had lost his job—or quit it, I was never quite sure—and his wife Bridget couldn’t make ends meet alone. While we talked, he seemed to shift between variants of the truth: he and Bridget weren’t together anymore. They were living apart but were still married. He would be working again soon. But he didn’t know when or where he’d be working. And at the center of it all was a loan he very much needed that, despite the recent years of silence, I didn’t mind extending. Despite all that had happened after Dad died, I still clung to the idea of the intimacy of family. For years, I had gravitated to older men, unconsciously desperate for their approval and their input on my life decisions, often disappointed in myself for my need and in them for their inability to fulfill that need. When Steve asked for money, I was buying his return to my kingdom of days.

“I’ll pay it back,” he assured me again as I was writing down the address where I could mail a check.

“You don’t have to,” I said.

“Yes, I do. A man accepts responsibilities for the debts he acquires in life.”

Fatherly words.

I believed them.

I gave him twelve hundred dollars; he said he’d pay back fifty dollars a month. I did not question the fact that he’d spend the next two years sending me a monthly check. Instead, I did the calculation based on how long he’d be around, how long I could expect to hear from him every month, how a minor debt would force him to stay in my life.

He paid me twice at random times of the month—nothing more in the envelope than the check, no commentary in the “note” section at the bottom. Then the checks stopped, his phone number changed, and just like that he disappeared, rejecting the responsibility for a debt he’d acquired in life.

Once again, a long silence settled in like a London fog. I carried it around on my shoulders, a weight that I came to admit I shouldn’t have to carry anymore. My mom had long since given up on her high school sweetheart; my sister Tammy had long since given up on her biological father. I had hung onto the memory of him with a palpable need that both defined me and depressed me, forgiving him all his petty indiscretions and more flagrant insults. Whenever he appeared, I calculated the time passed but never said much of anything about it. But for eleven hundred dollars—money I had said he could *have* instead of *owe*—he had abandoned me.

Again. His philosopher's ego wouldn't allow him to admit he couldn't repay it and ask me to forgive the debt, though he already knew I would; instead, he found it more acceptable to be true to his own selfishness and slink away from me, to hide as if I were a loan shark, to dismiss me as if I were beneath his notice.

And so, for the paltry sum of just over a thousand dollars, I let go of the only father I'd ever known.

The nightmares started almost immediately. In the most common one, I stand at a school locker I can't remember the combination to, so I call home. Steve answers, telling me it's not *his* locker. He won't help me. I'm late, and I'm desperate, and I find myself building up in red-faced shame at my situation and redder-faced fury that he won't tell me the goddamned combination. I don't know what to do—and so I wake up from the dream, trembling, raging, crying, unforgiving.

There were others. They all had the same ending: waking up angry, full of wrath, cursing his very name for throwing me away over a lousy fistful of cash. On more than one occasion, I was thankful to God that Steve was *not* my biological father. I'd been spared the heredity of his dubious, selfish morality. And at a much later point, after many years, I came to understand that he would probably drive everyone away—I'd been his last fan, and he'd decided to stop showing up for me to cheer. When the last person in the bleachers left, he would die alone. No one would tell him goodbye, no one would hold his hand and share the fear of his last moments, no one would give him reassurance that he'd been loved and would be missed.

When I thought of this, I wondered if Dad had been afraid that February night on his deathbed. And soon enough, I would wonder if Steve had been afraid when he died on his bedroom floor in the dumpy little house where he'd spent his last days succumbing to cancer. Because the end was coming.

He called one more time to tell me that he was dying. Bridget was gone; they were divorced, and he had very little contact with her two grown children now. They'd stopped talking to him, he told me. He was working at a local truck stop as a cook. (Later, when I saw photos of him at The Brat Stop, I saw a fat, white-haired man who they said had played Santa Claus for them every year. I could still see Steve's eyes in there, but the rest of him in those pictures was a stranger to me.) He made no apologies for the loan he'd abandoned, and in my reluctance to engage with him anymore, I only brought it up long enough to say it was a pretty gutless thing to do. He ignored me.

"I hope I was a good dad to you and Tammy," he said. He asked for her number; I didn't want to give it to him.

"You left us," I said.

"I'm afraid I have to leave you one more time, my son," he said. He was never a man to say he was sorry, not even when it counted the most.

He died in Wisconsin in mid-winter. It was very cold, much like the night Dad died. But I was not a boy to stand behind his mother anymore and let her carry the load of tending her father's ending. Instead, I was a middle-aged man now, my sister just a few years behind me, and we shouldered the responsibility for tending his estate—for want of a better word—like soldiers. We flew from

Seattle and Los Angeles, respectively, and we descended into a grubby little corner of the world where people wore sports jerseys and put mounds of powdered sugar on the pancakes they ate for lunch. It felt like a 1950s, down-on-its-luck, one-stoplight town, and we were summarily dismissed by most everyone we encountered—his drawling ex-wife Bridget and her sub-IQ kids, the woman who'd been his divorce attorney but who would have been more at home in a double-wide than a courtroom, the trash-talking cleaning woman who came with the attorney and with her obvious drug issues to alleged clean out his house, the hillbilly landlord who wanted us to pay more rent in order to have the time to sort out Steve's house, which looked like it belonged on the show *Hoarders*. His house was cold and reeked of stale cigarettes, unwashed laundry, mildew, food left on the counters. We could follow narrow paths like rabbit trails that wound through the rooms, sometimes with a small glen in the rubble where he'd put a chair facing a small TV or where a table held the telephone and answering machine, still loaded with messages he'd never answer. Cardboard boxes stacked high to the ceiling; mounds of unopened mail teetered on coffee tables with wobbly legs. We did not know where to begin.

We paused in the bedroom where, in a flat place that was stained with old cigarette butts and unrecognizable spills, he had fallen down and died. It was just an ugly spot; I couldn't feel anything more about it than that.

Tammy took very little; I took even less. We tried to reach out to Bridget and her kids, but they fluctuated between wanting absolutely nothing to do with Steve's memory and wanting something unspecified from his "estate." We only stayed long

enough to settle matters before I took a smoke-stained ring I could remember his wearing when we were kids, a mantle clock that still worked, and a wristwatch that I wanted without understanding why. I took some pictures; he had one each of Tammy and me in the bedroom, under some old clothes in a drawer. We found the cremated remnants of his mother, Grandma Miller, in the basement. Uncertain what to do with them, we asked our mom Irma if she would hang onto them. We couldn't fly them back to Seattle or Los Angeles without a ton of paperwork, but Irma could drive up from Illinois to get them in Wisconsin.

I realized later that I had asked for and been given one of Dad's wristwatches when he died. I put Steve's with Dad's.

Finally, I took the flag that a young Marine who looked alarmingly like a young Steve had looked when he was in the Marines in the early 1960s had presented to us at the end of his makeshift memorial that was attended by only five of us. It was tightly folded, and I kept it with the rifles shells they gave me from the twenty-one gun salute. I had been braced for the same trembling sadness I'd felt at Dad's funeral when those seven soldiers fired into the cold winter sky. But it did not come. I would have welcomed that grief because it would have meant I would miss him.

I do not believe Tammy cried, either.

But I know she misses him still.

We asked Irma if she would tend Steve's ashes as well. She took her ex-husband's last remains without hesitation.

We try to be close, Tammy and I, but we're not very good at it. We have lots in common—we read the same books and go to the same films and watch the same television—but we struggle to be tender and *close*. We're half of the entire family now, though; our numbers have dwindled substantially since Dad died. So we try and we try and we try.

I've learned we're not alone in this labor to be more intimate siblings. I have many friends who have siblings that they've drifted apart from over the years, and by comparison, Tammy and I seem to have a pretty good track record. Of course, compared to my mom and two of her three siblings, we're doing great.

Irma became one of my best friends over the years, and though I've heard other people say the same of their mothers, I know I'm talking about something different. She was the woman—the girl, really—who wanted me when no one else did, when I was still a fetus to be aborted. I saw her in the goofiest of states (coming home from a party drunk once—long after she and Steve were separated—she fell down on her bedroom floor, laughing, and proceeding to pull off her knee-high stockings. “What do you call just one of these hose?” she giggled, looking at me. After a long pause, she said, “A ho!” And proceeded to laugh herself sick). I participated in her get-rich-quick schemes, at least the ones that sounded like they actually might succeed. I spent one sweltering summer in a Daffy Duck costume—with orange tights on my hairy legs—going to children's birthday parties to perform magic tricks. “Birthday Buddies,” Irma's latest moneymaking endeavor, didn't make much of said money, but I learned to do card tricks with a five-pound duck's bill squishing my head down into my chest

cavity. I'm sure that's a skill I'll use again some time in life. When I moved to Seattle, I flew home a few months later to surprise her with a visit. She almost never cried, but she cried when she saw me standing on her front porch. Every Christmas, Mother's Day, or birthday, I tried to find a new gift to add to her Cary Grant collection (and the man's been dead for a long time now; it's getting harder and harder to find new material, trust me).

I called her every day after I moved. She is my family, my "blood," as Steve once said.

The winter after I moved to Seattle, I called Irma just to chat—she had recently begun to do some freelance design work for NCTE, my old employer in Champaign-Urbana, and I was getting good gossip about former co-workers. She had recently met a man, a fellow named Dale, whom I had yet to meet in person but whom she seemed to be quite taken with. When I called, Dale answered. I wasn't pleased that he was answering my mother's phone, but I didn't say anything about it.

"Is Irma home?" I asked.

"No, she left," Dale said. He had a very casual, lazy drawl.

"Where did she go?"

"I'm not sure."

"When will she be back?"

"I'm not sure," Dale said again.

"Well, have her call me, will you?" I said goodbye and hung up.

When an hour went by and Irma hadn't called me yet, I called back. Once again, Dale answered the phone.

“Haven’t heard from her, no,” Dale said. “But I’ll be sure and give her your message.”

This time when I hung up, I called Tammy, who still lived in Decatur.

“Have you talked to Irma or seen her today?” I asked her. (We called our mom by her first name—it freaked so many people out over the years that I wouldn’t have had it any other way.)

“No,” Tammy said. “Why?”

I explained to her that Irma was gone and that this guy Dale was in the house. “I don’t like this,” I said. “Doesn’t he have his own house? Why is he in her house when she’s not there? And where is she, anyway? It’s starting to get late.”

When we hung up, Tammy called Irma’s house, got Dale and the same vague “Not sure” responses to questions about Irma’s whereabouts.

Around midnight, we started calling hospitals, the state police, the morgue. Tammy went by the house—where she half-expected to find Dale digging a grave in the garden—but, of course, there was no sign of Irma. Dale was still of no help.

In Seattle, I was helpless to do anything but wait. I paced. I hyperventilated (Melody offered me a paper bag to breath in, which I either used incorrectly or else it simply doesn’t work). I called the house over and over, I called Tammy, and I paced and hyperventilated some more. I was on the phone to the airlines to book a flight for home when Melody reined me in. I roared up and down the chart of the grief responses—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance—so many times that Irma had died in my mind about seven times by morning.

Tammy, however, turned into Sherlock Holmes. She began to search the wintry highways that Irma drove. She called me again and, like a professional sleuth, asked some probing questions: what time had I last spoken to Dale? What precisely had Dale said? Did Dale say why he was at the house in the first place?

Dale was clearly a suspect.

Fortunately, we never gave his name to the police.

Because then I happened to mention to Tammy that Irma was doing freelance work for NCTE over in Champaign-Urbana.

Tammy hit the dark highway, driving the hour over to NCTE, arriving just before dawn. On the way, she phoned the local police there and explained what was happening, that our mother was missing. The cops rendezvoused with her at NCTE...where Irma's car was parked. Tammy rushed up to it, but as she did so, a cop barked at her, "Don't touch that car! That's evidence!"

This did not elicit a happy response from Tammy.

When they shined their flashlights into Irma's car, the cops could see Irma's purse in the front seat.

They beat on the glass doors of NCTE, and for the longest time, no one came to answer them. The place was deserted at 5 A.M., of course. When a young man finally heard them and came to let Tammy and the cops in, Irma came up behind him.

Tammy wrapped herself around Irma, crying with relief.

"Where have you been? I thought you were dead," she cried, and then, pulling back, "What the hell's the matter with you, leaving Dale alone in your house?"

As she had left her house earlier to spend the night working at NCTE, Irma had just assumed that Dale would have enough

common sense to go home when he realized she wasn't coming back that night. The problem was, Dale didn't have that kind of common sense. Instead, he managed to present himself as a murderer.

“When I saw your car with your purse in it...” Tammy said.

Irma laughed. “I'm okay,” she said to Tammy over and over again. “I'm okay.”

They finally remembered to call me in Seattle.

28

Dad's girlfriend Gladys, the one whom Bonnie and Keith were so sure was a “golddigger,” did indeed come around following Dad's death, looking for her part of his estate.

“He had some photographs of the two of us,” she said to my mom. “Silly things, really. He kept them in a small photo album. Oh, and he had some pictures of me when I was younger.” She hesitated, standing in our foyer with her purse in both hands, looking around nervously. Dad's death had been particularly hard for her; he was almost her husband. “Do you think it would be all right if I could have those photos back?”

My mom got them for her. Gladys asked for nothing else. We never saw her again.

In the end, it had been about money, Dad's money, his hidden wealth. Bonnie wanted it; Keith wanted it. After the funeral costs and the medical bills, each of Dad's four kids got about ten thousand dollars total. That was it. His house out in Harristown brought them three thousand of those ten thousand dollars, after

the lawyers' fees and the repair work. It took a little while to sell his house, and by then, Bonnie and Keith weren't speaking to Butch and Irma at all, but the lawyers were happy to talk for them. Bonnie and Keith, it seemed, had a falling out about the asking price of the house, and their relationship had disintegrated as well.

Butch and Irma didn't care if the house brought them a dime. But they were amused to hear Keith's lawyer say that Keith had "not spoken to that bitch in Peoria for months."

Irma never did quite understand why she and Keith stopped speaking. He simply stayed away. He called only one more time, after one of Butch's stepkids from Florida moved into Dad's old house in Harristown to maintain it until it could be sold.

"Who's that white trash living in my house?" Keith demanded without preamble when Irma answered the phone.

"That's Butch's stepson Alan," Irma answered, "and don't worry, Keith—he's living in *my* share of *your* house."

Christmas of 1991, I called Bonnie. Almost four years had passed since Dad died, and I'd had no contact with Bonnie or with Keith since then. Irma and Butch talked often on the phone (Butch was back in Florida, of course), but Bonnie and Keith had disappeared from our lives. Steve came in and out of my life like an eclipse, with the same intensity and regularity, it seemed. Tammy still lived in Decatur; I hadn't seen Bill since he hugged Butch on the cemetery hill the day of the funeral.

Bonnie's number was unlisted, but Irma managed to obtain it through channels. I called Bonnie on Christmas evening.

“Hello?” she said. I hadn’t heard her voice in so long that it was like a jolt of pleasure to be back in familiar territory. She didn’t know who it was yet, of course, so her tone was still friendly.

“Hi. Merry Christmas,” I said. My voice shook.

“Who is this?” Suspicion now. She knew already, I think.

“It’s Mike. I thought I’d call and say merry Christmas. How are you?”

“We can’t talk,” she said frantically. The phone banged as if she’d dropped it, then she said, “Irma put you up to this, didn’t she?”

“Jesus, Bonnie,” I said, “this is crazy. That’s all over. We don’t have to be enemies. I never did anything. Irma didn’t put me up to anything.”

“I know she did.” She was breathing hard.

“Don’t you want to know what’s happened to me? I want to know what’s happening in your life.”

“You betrayed me,” she said. “You called and accused me of stealing Dad’s keys. No, I don’t want to talk to you. I have nothing to say to you! Leave me alone!”

When she hung up, she was screaming at me. I didn’t call her back.

Eight months later, I thought of Keith, living out in Texas. I thought about how there had never been even a moment of conflict between the two of us, so I could think of no reason not to try to call him.

He was civil for the first part of the conversation, but he was very stand-offish and almost cold. He grunted a great deal,

either in agreement or disagreement, I couldn't tell. I told him I was going to graduate soon from the University of Illinois. I caught him up a little bit on how Tammy was doing. I tried to stay away from saying anything about Irma or Butch.

"Why did you call?" he asked suddenly.

"I don't know. I miss you," I said. "I guess just want to have a family again."

"Well, Mike," he said, sighing, his tone shifting noticeably—he sounded as if he were a world-weary teacher about to give a student a hard lesson. "I don't see how that's possible. See, you can't be trusted. You talk about people behind their backs and you stick your nose in where it doesn't belong."

I was surprised, but I shouldn't have been. "I don't—"

Those were the last words I got in, edgewise or otherwise. Keith went on a tirade. "I sat there in that room," he said, his voice rising, "watching my father die while you and that bitch from Peoria chatted about college. My father was dying, and you two just chatted about college."

I had a vague recollection of what he was talking about. When Dad first went into the hospital, before the nursing home, Bonnie, Keith, and I had been there while Dad was sleeping. I was going to Richland, the community college, and Bonnie—the only other person in our family to complete college—asked me how it was going. We talked while we waited for Dad to wake up, and Keith contributed nothing to the conversation. Until Keith mentioned it, I had completely forgotten about that incidental moment.

“I don’t need a family,” he said. “I have a family here. I don’t need them. I don’t need any older sister thinking Keith’s just a fucking little idiot, the baby. I know they talked about me all the time. You talked about me, bad-mouthed me behind my back. Don’t deny it. Well, I don’t need any of you. I have a family now, I have Pam’s family. You’ve got some nerve calling me, you little son of a—”

It went on for twenty minutes. He dredged up more things that I’d forgotten or never knew had occurred. He would preface his accusations with, “I sold you your very first car, dirt-cheap, and this is what you did to repay my kindness...” and then he would verbally assault me with some revisionist history moment. He attacked Irma, Steve, Butch, and, most mercilessly, Bonnie. He called her names I wouldn’t have called my worst enemy, let alone my sister.

“I hope that bitch lives a long, lonely life,” he said.

When I hung up the phone—this after the dial tone set in from Keith slamming his receiver down on me—I was crying. I was so ashamed that I’d been so stupid and let myself be so wounded by his words. I felt so betrayed and so crushed.

I called my mom that night, fresh from Keith and still sobbing like a child, and I told her all about the conversation.

“You couldn’t have known he’d behave that way,” she said.

“I thought the worst that could happen was that he’d hang up on me, like Bonnie did last year,” I said.

“No, Keith wants to spread his hate around,” she said. “He can’t be happy unless somebody else—maybe everybody else—is unhappy.”

29

You say you are holy
And that,
Because I have not seen you sin.
Aye, but there are those
Who see you sin, my friend.

—*Stephen Crane*

30

Dad's been dead for decades now, but it didn't take a fraction of that time for me to realize that he was the single thread that still held our family together. When he died and left us alone, we couldn't go on without him. Whatever rage or guilt or shame Bonnie and Keith had harbored came spilling out, and Irma and Butch could not help but respond. Maybe it had been lying there dormant since before Mom died, I don't know; I only know that when Dad died, so did our family.

I think of my own dad, Steve, more often than I thought I would. I remember the last time I saw him: he came to my wedding to Melody, and he brought Bridget and her two kids, who were little back then. When the wedding was over, Irma hosted a little get-together at her new house—finger food, soda, wine, that sort of thing. Melody and I changed from our medieval wedding attire into street clothes and came over. Steve was there, just feet from Irma,

ten years after the last time I'd seen them together the week after Dad's funeral. There was absolutely no chemistry between them. Steve and Bridget were a couple, Irma and Dale were a couple. But like Paul Matheson in my story "Model Monsters," I often imagine that I can put all the right elements of the past together—a place, the people, the time of year—and somehow time will reverse itself and take me back to when and where I want to be. But Steve and Irma in the same room was not magic.

I do not say aloud that I miss that wish for magic. I don't even say aloud anymore that I miss him. I've stopped looking for father figures; I'm too old for that now. I myself should be the father figure now, and I can only learn from the fathers and dads I lost. But yes...I miss them.

Butch divorced a second time and moved back to Illinois. He had a drinking problem that he struggled with on and off, but in the end, he controlled it...until he died. He lived with Irma and Dale, a ghost of the man he used to be when he was a Macon County Sheriff's Deputy. In the same way that Dad used to sit quietly with Gladys at Christmas gatherings, unobtrusive, so did Butch avoid much contact with anyone, despite living in the same house as his sister. The last time I visited, I knew Butch was in the house... but I didn't see him until the third day of my visit. He spent his last days in his one room, watching his TV, waiting to go to work, quietly waiting for nothing. Irma told me once that "Butch is all that's left of the family I grew up with; I'm going to take care of him, no matter if he drinks himself to death or if he lives for another fifty years. He's my brother."

When he died, she was quietly, unceremoniously torn to pieces. The last of her siblings was gone from her life now, and her world was so much smaller. She had Butch cremated, and I sent her a very nice box that I found in Hong Kong for her to keep his ashes in. Between those of my father Steve, his mother Grandma Miller, and Butch, she was living in a mausoleum for a while. She just as quietly became afraid of their ghosts.

My sister Tammy lived in Seattle for a time then moved to Los Angeles so she could work in the film industry. She had worked on her first film in Seattle, an independent piece called *What about Me?*, and while she lived in the same city as me, we hardly saw each other at all, though there was never been any bad blood between us. We simply didn't see each other. We still don't. We sometimes call each other out of the blue to talk about a film we saw or something cool that's coming up on cable TV. We go through our lives almost but not entirely oblivious to one another, but sometimes we're suddenly close again.

On my birthday just before she moved away, Tammy and her boyfriend of many, many years, Kent, were invited down to my place for cake and ice cream.

About half-an-hour before guests were to arrive, Tammy called. "I can't come," she said, sniffing. Her voice was raspy, but the kind of fake raspiness that you do for your boss when you're about to dodge work. "I'm really, really sick. I just can't make it."

Tammy had turned down almost all of the invitations I'd ever extended to her to attend parties or to go to movies. "I don't

like big groups of people,” she said once, overlooking all the one-on-one invites she’d rejected.

When she said she wasn’t coming to my birthday, I just said, “That’s cool. If you don’t feel good, stay home. Get well. Maybe you can come and visit next week or something.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, coughing for effect. “I’m just sick.”

Of course, I didn’t believe her. I knew she just didn’t want to come. But there was no point in raising hell about it—this is just who we are. It didn’t make it any easier to swallow, though.

“You go back to bed,” I said, trying to make it easy for her to get off this hook. “I’ll call you tomorrow to see how you’re doing.”

When we hung up, I went into the back bedroom for some privacy, and I cried for a minute.

I got my act together by the time the first guests arrived half-an-hour later, so that when the doorbell rang, I was ready to celebrate my birthday.

The first guests to arrive were Tammy and Kent. And yes, she was sick, really sick, keep-her-away-from-the-food-and-the-other-guests sick. Her face was puffy and her eyes were watery and she looked pale.

“What you doing here?” I asked as she came in the door from the rain.

“You just sounded so disappointed,” she said, and that was the whole explanation. When she went home that night, I cried again.

We haven’t seen each other much at all in recent years. She and Kent got married—I had the honor of performing the wedding ceremony as their minister—and then they fell on hard times,

moving into different homes in a trial separation. She struggles to find the joy she wishes her job would bring, but she never seems to find it, no matter how many times she changes career paths.

In the end, she is lonely, but she is Tammy, so she is okay. Between we two, she was always the strong one. I'm often lonely, too, but I am Mike, so I'm not okay.

My cousin Bill is still a police officer in Decatur, I think. I saw him in uniform once at the mall, twirling a baton, talking to a couple of other cops. He didn't see me, but I know it was him—my mom had run into him a few times over the years when she had been a union official representing the cops. She said he was as arrogant as Keith ever was, and that was saying a lot.

He and his dad Butch never had a relationship, to the best of my knowledge. That hug in the cemetery was pretty much all there was.

Keith could be dead, for all I know. That phone conversation between he and I is the last thing I know about him.

I've tried a few times to reach Bonnie, usually at Christmastime, through a second cousin who still lives in Decatur. Bonnie apparently still comes to town around the holidays to spend it with some of the peripheral family members whom I don't really see or know anymore. She still lives in Pekin, though I don't know what she does for a living. I gather she never wed again after her short-lived marriage to Bob. She had a long-haired gray cat named

Ebenezer way back Dad was still alive, but I'm assuming Ebenezer's gone to kitty heaven by now.

She turned down every offer to get together.

"It's better this way," she said to me through the second cousin the last time I tried, a few years ago. "We don't need to have this family."

My mom Irma still lives in Decatur, just a few miles from Graceland Cemetery where Mom and Dad are buried. For years, she drove back and forth every day to Champaign-Urbana, where I went to the University of Illinois and where Professor Kyle lived. En route to Champaign-Urbana, she passed by the spot where I rolled my Ford Escort Pony.

She's retired now; she spends her days with Dale, who I think of as my step-dad—my "step-Dale"—and who had a stroke years ago that left him paralyzed on the left-hand side of his body. They still live in an old historical house on Decatur's west side, and somehow Dale goes up and down those creaky old stairs every single day.

My mom sometimes tells me that she slept in the recliner downstairs because she couldn't get up the steps herself. She never sees a doctor; she just suffers through.

When I told her I was thinking of writing about Dad and some of the things that happened when he died, she said, "Bonnie and Keith will sue you, you know."

"For what?" I asked. "Definition of character? I want to write about this because I think it happens to everyone—someone in the

family dies, and the feud that follows breaks the family apart. It isn't about Bonnie or Keith as people."

"I don't think they can look at themselves in the mirror anymore," she said. "I think they feel guilty over what happened with Dad. I think Bonnie is ashamed that she helped put him in an early grave. And I think Keith is always going to hate this family because he never felt like he was part of it."

"Well," I said, "I'll try not to editorialize then. I'll just say what I think happened. I think about it all the time. I keep trying to make sense of it, but I don't get it. So I'll write about it and see what if that helps me figure it out any better."

It's hard, if not impossible, to just let the dead bury their dead.

31

So much has changed...but maybe not so much.

One of Butch's sons from his second marriage lives in Decatur now, not far from my mom, and is a security guard for one of the city's hospitals. I only remember him as a little boy—visiting with him in Florida so many years ago. I have seen pictures of him, though, and I can see in this man's face vestiges of his father Butch. The fact that his first name is also Glenn—like Butch and Dad before him—makes it easier to see family in him. Irma visits with him often; she complains about him with the same level of affection that she complained about Butch or Dad, so I know she's begun to make a lifetime commitment to him, to expand her very, very small family by four more: Glenn, his wife, and their two girls. She sees them at Christmas when she cannot see Tammy or me.

I've not yet taken to him, though I know a secret room in my heart wants to. I suspect I've not yet set aside my belief that family isn't forever.

And I feel bad for Glenn that he didn't get much time with Butch before Butch died. I have a greater empathy for fatherless sons than I ever thought I would, even when my parents were divorcing.

Tammy won't be having any children—she has had both medical and personal reasons for not expanding the family. I suspect sometimes that she is sad about this, but on the surface at least she has come to grips with the course her life will take. Like I said, she's tough—she's always okay, it seems. Her husband Kent has a huge family, and if they stay together (it's hard to predict such things with any certainty anymore), she will always have her extended family. And if not, she has a loner's heart. In our family, the skill to live alone seems to be the one that's in our blood.

When Irma met Dale and decided that she would stay with him, she vowed never to marry him.

“I've done that shit once,” she said. “Never again.”

And yet Dale was a constant, a part of the family now. I sent him Father's Day gifts and told him I loved him. After he had his stroke, he became much more emotional, and I had to learn not to overtax his heart. Even something as simple as “I miss you, Dale,” could break him, and our family has never been good at comforting unexpected emotion.

Dale had an elderly mother, Sadie, and a daughter from a previous marriage, Julie. Both Sadie and Julie lived close enough to Decatur that Dale could see them with regularity, and when Julie had kids of her own—a daughter first, then a son years later—Dale was thrilled to be a grandfather.

In time, his mother died. And somewhere along the way, he and Julie had a terrible falling out, an ugly fight in which Julie pitted her teenage daughter against Dale for no reason beyond petty annoyances. When the battle lines were drawn, Dale made it clear: “I have no daughter,” he said to me. “No son-in-law, no grandkids. I just have Irma and you and Tammy now. That’s all the family I’ll ever need.”

I don’t know all the specifics of what happened between Dale and his daughter Julie after Dale’s mother died, but I do know this: it is not the first time I’ve heard of a family disintegrating unexpectedly beyond salvation.

My own life has moved on, as everyone’s does.

I married again after Melody left me. And with Janell, I had a son, Harrison, a sweet, gentle little boy who loves things boys love: bathroom humor, video games, cartoons. I see Steve in me as his father—in the way I want to introduce him to music or turn him on to books or teach him to play chess (with the silent promise that I won’t stop playing with him just because he beats me one day) or the way I want to be the one who knows it all, even if I don’t. And in Harrison, I see myself: the glasses that somehow narrow his social options, the way he wonders aloud about everything he sees and hears, the intense closeness he feels for his mother, a feeling

that I know from personal experience is likely to last him a lifetime. In fifth grade, he began to write stories—dinosaurs and Disneyland and outer space. I was so excited the first time he gave me one of his stories to read. I hope that when he's middle-aged, he won't find himself writing about me.

And I have found “daughters” in the world: first was Michelle, my goddaughter, who had been a seven-year-old flower girl in my wedding with Janell but who I lost when she was twenty. I will never see her again; she found me to be too much of a helicopter parent, and she had her own issues with her father, with her mother, with her siblings, and she used drugs and alcohol to escape them. Where she went, I do not know. I suppose I will never know. She became just another variant of Bonnie, someone angry at me for reasons I won't understand in this lifetime.

Then came Emily, who was everything Michelle was not. She was sweet, kind, gentle, and loving, already an adult when I met her, searching for a father as I had, though her own father was still very much alive, very much a positive part of her life. She just wanted something more in a father figure, and I wanted a daughter figure. We found one another, and we stayed.

My wife Janell has a great relationship with her own dad, and I've tried a few times to get in on it, but I've not been very successful. I don't know why, though I have my suspicions that it's me, not him. In the end, I'm glad she has that enviable relationship; I can see just how much Janell loves her dad when I see them together. He's done a few things not unlike what my father did with me or what Dad did with my mom—unnecessary drama,

money issues, the aggravations that an aging parent will do to you, I guess. They stay close just the same, and I'm jealous.

And after all these years, I have finally learned to talk about the fact that I was raped when I was a little boy. My step-Dale is in Illinois with my mom, two thousand miles from me. I cannot be close to Janell's father. So, I think it's become easier to talk about now that my blood kin—Dad, Keith, Steve, and Butch—are gone from my life. The only other male in my life is my own son, and he's only just now the age I was when it happened to me. By the time he learns about that cold winter day behind a garage, my candy bars stolen as part of the loss, my life will likely have moved on again, as everyone's does, sooner or later, whether they want it to or not.

32

Bonnie's ex-husband Bob showed up on my doorstep one summer afternoon a few years after Dad died. I heard someone honking their car horn in the driveway, and as I went outside to see who it was, he got out of his car.

"Hi, Mike," he said. He was holding a small black box, the kind that might hold a ream of paper. "How are you?"

Bob was always a little goofy. He had been a true mama's boy, living with his mother until she died an old woman. I often saw him at the Kroger store with her, but I made it a point of ducking into the back room so he wouldn't see me. He spoke slowly and seemingly thoughtlessly. As he stood in the driveway, I didn't recognize him at first. He was older, of course, and heavier. His

eyes were still sad and lonely, and while I was a little nervous being near him, I still stayed to talk to him.

“I’m good, Bob. How are you? Long time no see.”

“I’m doing okay. Could you talk to me for a few minutes?”

I got in his car with him, keeping the passenger door open while we talked. After he closed his driver’s side door, he put the black cardboard box he’d been carrying in my lap. It was heavy.

“I sure do miss Bonnie,” he said.

“Oh,” I said.

“I think about her a lot. All the time, even. Have you talked to her lately?”

Bob didn’t know about the family feud, of course, so I told him I hadn’t talked to Bonnie much (if at all) since then.

“You know,” he said, not responding to the fact that I knew nothing about Bonnie anymore, “I’ve been writing a book. It’s about her. Go ahead, you can look at it.”

I opened the lid of the black box he’d handed me, and inside, atop his thick typewritten manuscript, was a small caliber gun.

I said nothing and closed the lid.

“Is she still working up in Peoria?” he asked. “At the unemployment office?”

I didn’t correct him—Bonnie lived in Pekin, not Peoria—and I thought she still worked at the unemployment office. “I don’t think so. I don’t even think she’s living in Peoria anymore, Bob.”

“Damn,” he said. He took the box back from me and put it in the back seat. “Do you think your mom knows?”

“They’re not speaking anymore,” I said. “I really doubt it.”

“I sure do miss her,” he said again. “I’ll find her.”

He began to mumble about having to be somewhere, so I got out of the car. He left quickly without so much as a goodbye.

I told Irma about the incident later that day, and through various second cousins and great aunts, we sent word to Bonnie that Bob was looking for her. We never heard from Bonnie, so I have no idea how she took the news. I know Bob didn't find her and shoot her because of Bonnie's "we don't need to have this family" comment the last time I spoke to her, long after Bob's threat. I can only say that I did what I thought was right—I protected my "family" from an outsider. I told him nothing. Now if he'd been an insider....

Dad's death was, I'm sure, a relief for him, as if he'd escaped from prison. He hated the metal railings on the side of his hospital bed, then the ones on his bed at the nursing home. He hated the IVs. "I'm just so sick and tired of them sticking needles in me," he said. He hated the oxygen tank that he was forced to lug around every day for the last year of his life. Maybe when he died, he hated Bonnie for taking his keys. I doubt that, though. I don't like to think that Dad could have killed other men during World War II, and I don't like to think that he could have hated any of his children, no matter what happened between them. He just wasn't like that.

There's an old song, "Midnight Special," that's based on an old prison legend about a train called the *Midnight Special*. If the headlight from the *Midnight Special* shines on an inmate in his cell, that prisoner is going to be the next one set free. "Let the *Midnight Special* shine its ever-loving light on me." The song comes from that era of songs like "Tangerine," that silly song Dad used to sing in

the car while Bill and I giggled hysterically. I think about that song, about Dad in his faded engineer's coveralls, the train man. I think, too, about that frightful train of experience, the one I rode that cold February night when I went with Irma to the nursing home to see Dad's body. Up to then, I'd only looked out the window as the train rolled on. But now, as I struggle through middle age with a song of my own, I've starting realizing that the train we all ride, running dark in the night from station to station, makes many unscheduled stops. Like everybody else, I keep riding it because someday, its light will shine on me just like it did for Dad, and I'll be free too. I hope that train leaves my family intact when it rolls out of my final stop. I know now that not all families are so fortunate. Not the one I had before.

So the whistle is blowing and the conductor is calling all aboard. I'm standing at the last window in the caboose, and when we start moving again I can see the lone figure on the platform behind us. He's dressed in those old coveralls and he's carrying a basket for all those chicken eggs he's going to collect. At his feet is the red tricycle that my cousin Bill and I could make move like a hurricane wind when we were little boys. He waves at me and calls my name.

"See ya, Mikey," he says. I'll never hear that name quite the same way again for the rest of my life.

Goodbye, Dad. I'll see you at the end of the line.



Glenn D. Johnson
b. August 20, 1911
d. February 14, 1987