The Cemetery of Regrets

The first time I encountered the name Swope I was a child. My parents took me to Kansas City to visit the zoo, officially the Kansas City Zoo, but most people called it Swope Park after “Colonel” Thomas H. Swope, who donated over a thousand wooded acres to the city in 1896 (largely to reduce his tax burden). In my mind the name Swope immediately became forever linked with gibbons scratching themselves on a rock island, elephants wandering listlessly in an old limestone quarry, and a main house that reeked of urine, where small cages on stilts lined the walls and a hippopotamus wallowed in a pit.

My second encounter with the name Swope came in high school. When I was a freshman, every morning started with phys ed, where the teacher’s assistant, a gangly, pasty-faced sadist with the last name of Swope, led us through calisthenics while hurling a volleyball (whop!) at the boys who did not measure up to his standards. A mane of hair stood out from his head, as if one of the gibbons on the zoo’s island had been shaved like a Chow Chow. Swope was a senior and this would be my only year of experiencing his wrath. I don’t remember his first name. Everyone just called him Swope—fellow students, teachers, the basketball coach, even the principal. “I want to see you in my office now, Swope!” Principal Bailey yelled right before his target slipped out a side entrance. I’m sure Swope’s own family used a kinder, gentler moniker. But to him, that moniker (whatever it might have been) must have seemed like a poor stand-in, for his last name carried a certain lurking menace—a variation of swoop (think of a swashbuckler boarding a galleon), in which the graceful oo sound had been replaced with a leaden O (think of a pistol butt).

In freshman chemistry, Mrs. Thornhill assigned me to the same lab table as a girl named Didi. Or was it Dottie? A couple decades have passed. Didi and Dottie were the Moreau sisters. One girl was a freshman, the other a sophomore. Let's say the girl at my lab table was Dottie. Dottie was sweet and kind and a genuinely wonderful fourteen-year-old girl. She wasn't exactly beautiful. She had a strange little curl to her lip—a tiny wave breaking on a shore is how I thought of it. And she spoke with a slight lisp. Meanwhile, her sister, let's call her Didi, one year ahead, looked a lot like Dottie, but without the curl on the lip or the speech impediment. Didi walked with confidence, her shoulders held back, her chest thrust forward. Dottie's shoulders, on the other hand, hunched as if the difference between Dottie and her older sister weighed on her. If truth be told, I acquired a bit of a crush on Dottie. A minor little crush that only became apparent in the one class we had together. We would play footsie under the table and trade sly smiles. "For you, Brian," she whispered in my ear as she slid her lab book under mine, an evocative symbolism working overtime in my feverish fourteen-year-old mind. I didn't necessarily need her answers. I liked chemistry. But I copied her answers nonetheless (correcting a few along the way).

When Mrs. Thornhill assigned new table partners, she separated us. "No, Brian!" Dottie moaned. "What will we do?" She held out her arms to me as Mrs. Thornhill led her to a new table. Was Dottie kidding? I don't know. I was a little embarrassed and looked away.

On the bus ride to school each morning, I watched out the side window as the school bus pulled onto the street where Dottie and Didi lived. A neat flower bed stretched around the front and sides of the small, white Moreau house. Next door lived the Swope family, in a hovel patched together from fragments of plywood and sheets of plastic. Car engines in various states of decomposition or reconstitution (it was hard to tell the difference) sat on a grass-bare yard.

Anybody should have seen it coming, I suppose. It was like watching a fox in a hen house.

Swope played for the varsity basketball team, which went to the State Division Two championships his senior year. On the morning of the championship game, as Coach spent the hour diagramming plays on his office chalkboard, Swope sent the phys ed class to run quarter-mile laps of the football field—except for me. He told me to stay behind, where he ordered me to feed him the basketball and rebound his practice shots. That's how I spent the entire hour, watching him shoot jump shots from the perimeter. Swish. Swish. Swish. But for whatever reason, during the game that evening, nothing went right for him. At the end, he shot 0 for 13 from the field and his team lost. Rumors circulated that he had played drunk.

A couple months later, not that there is necessarily any connection, Dottie's waist began to swell. She always carried a few extra pounds, if truth be told, as did her sister Didi. They did *not* have hourglass figures. But it soon became obvious that Dottie carried a child.

The pregnancy threw a strange variable into the equation of how I should respond when I saw Dottie in the hallways. I didn't know what to do, and therefore I did nothing. Dottie became invisible.

Inaction would be a common theme in my life. Many years later I did nothing when my girlfriend Julie suddenly left me without any hint of an explanation. But that's a different story.

One day I met Dottie in the hallway, just us two hustling to beat the bell. I lowered my head. She pushed my shoulder.

"Don't say anything," she commanded. Pure sarcasm.

I searched for a response. But her words had thrown me. My synapses fizzled.

"Okay. I won't," I said. More sarcasm, but of a noticeably weaker variety.

Those were the last words we ever said to one another.

Dottie, wherever you're at, I apologize. I was not a good friend. I abandoned you.

I don’t know for certain that Swope was the father. I didn’t try to find out. I simply glanced out of the corner of my eye as Dottie passed in the high school hallways, and I pretended I didn’t know her. Dottie, I wish you the best. I was a fool. Where are you now? Were you rushed into marriage with Swope? He disappeared from school for a week, with sly comments from other boys about Swope getting a girl in trouble. Was that Dottie? I don’t know. And in fact, my entire conception of the time frame from my freshman year of high school is now so tenuous I don’t know whether the girl-in-trouble episode came before or after—or concurrent with—Dottie’s pregnancy.

The next time I encountered the name Swope was roughly twenty years later, when I accepted a job as a technical writer. A minor software company hired me to write user guides. The Product Development manager led me around the building. “This here’s Zacharius Swope,” he said. “You’ll work together.”

The introduction to a new Swope brought back memories of my high-school years. Could these two Swopes be related? Not likely, I decided. Zacharius was barrel chested and clumsy. He pecked at his computer's keyboard like a mourning dove at a feeder. Definitely not a basketball player. I asked if he knew other Swopes from the St. Joseph vicinity. “No, not too many of us Swopes around,” he said. He had grown up in a small town in Kansas and had only relocated across the Missouri River for the technical writing gig. Later, I asked Zacharius if he knew a Dottie or Didi Swope, not that I hoped this name mashup bore any relationship whatsoever to reality. Please, please, say no, I thought. Even if Dottie/Didi and Swope did get married, I didn’t want to know about it. That couldn’t have been good. I imagined a bread-basket-sized house with barking dogs on chains and mud-smeared, half-naked children bawling in the front yard. Zacharius pondered the question and grimaced.

“Why do you ask?”

I told him the story of the Moreaus and the basketball-playing Swope.

“What would you do if you found her?” he asked. He peered at me with his good eye, the other, a prosthetic, squinted shut. He said he had lost the eye a decade ago in a “best-forgotten” drunk-driving incident in which he wrapped his car around a tree.

“I think she deserves an apology,” I said.

“Hmm. Is this like making amends?”

“No. I just want to find out what happened to her.” Well, that was half true.

Technically, I wasn’t making amends, but I had some drinking issues of my own that I had confessed to Zacharius after hearing about his eye. I was thinking about attending an AA meeting and I knew making amends was part of the deal. I was doing my homework in advance. I wanted to find out if this was something I could really do, although the Swope-Moreau episode did not involve alcohol (at least my portion anyway, can’t speak for the rest).

“Let me check on something and then I’ll get back with you,” he said.

A couple days later Zacharius said I needed to go with him during lunch hour. I said okay. He took me to a run-down cemetery a half-mile from work, where he liked to nap. “Sleeping with the dead,” he called it. I followed him between monuments. He pointed at a brass name plate attached to a simple marble headstone.

The inscription said,

Domitille Swope
1958-1979
Loving sister

“Doh-mee … how do you say that?” I asked.

“It’s French. I think it’s pronounced DAW-mee-TEE.”

“She wasn’t French.”

“And maybe she’s not the woman you’re looking for either. I don’t know,” Zacharius said. “The funeral home closed years ago and there is nowhere to go for more information. But there it is. For whatever it’s worth.” He nudged the headstone with his foot. "She was maybe the last person buried here. Two years after the funeral home closed."

“You’re not related to her?” I asked.

He shook his head.

I stared down at the nameplate. “The birth year looks right,” I said. The grave sat squeezed in place between Thomas and Ethel Potter on one side and Bingsley Potter on the other, with no apparent rationale for this *non sequitur*.

In the weeks to come, during lunch hour, I regularly accompanied Zacharius to the cemetery. We ate our sandwiches and chips and pudding cups, our dill spears and Twinkies. And he told me little stories about some of the people buried in the cemetery. Sometimes he napped while I smoked a joint, although he frowned at the lingering smell in the van. “Must you?” he said. I brought clippers and cut the grass growing around the Swope headstone. Was this the girl that I knew from Mrs. Thornhill’s chemistry class? Or was this the sister? Or was it someone else entirely? I searched for Swopes in the local phone directory and found none, except for Zacharius. How about Moreau? I found one. Elroy. I called. It rang and rang and no one answered.

And then I had a bright idea.

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I followed River Road north of town, past the casino and the old water plant, the river flashing between birch and sycamore trees on my left, while loess bluffs cast shadows on my

right. I found the number for Elroy Moreau on a mailbox and pulled over a cattle grate. Abandoned cars and trucks lined the drive, some faded to shades of rust, others glistening white and tan and green. Mud ruts marked the left track. I hesitated. How much did I want this? But I had driven fifteen miles north of town and that distance suggested a turnaround now would have been foolish.

I continued and passed an old RV enveloped by black mold, a sedan with thistles and milkweed growing through the floorboards, and a pickup with the hood lifted and a spiderweb where the engine once sat. I rounded corners only to find more vehicles, many as if they had been parked yesterday, others dissembled and scattered. Between the vehicles, flickers of movement occasionally attracted my eye—chickens bobbed their heads, a cat stalked unseen prey, and a pair of goats stood on a dirt mound. Blackened windows marked a mobile home. Had someone actually lived amongst the abandoned vehicles? Or had the mobile home been towed here after the fire? A large flat platform occupied a clearing. A weight scale for vehicles? A small shed stood beside the platform. I drove around the shed and through a gap, into a long tunnel of tree branches where three, four, no, five, six, seven donkeys stood and stared. I edged my car beside one. He had a lazy ear. I slapped his flank. A cloud of dust billowed. I rolled up the window and coughed. The donkey turned and smeared the glass with his lip. The other donkeys ambled in front of my car, making no more than half a mile per hour. I considered honking my horn, but I didn't want to attract any undue attention, assuming someone did wander the premises. I continued down a slope and across another field, the parked vehicles occasionally thinning for piles of ripped plastic bags that spilled paper, milk cartons, and mounds of glass jars. I sighed, grateful for not finding anyone. This now seemed like a mistake. I turned around and attempted to retrace my route.

Just past the weight-scale platform, I encountered a gate. It had been open when I passed before. Or so I thought. A pair of llamas stood looking at me, one on the scale, another nibbling leaves from a bush, its lower jaw circling as if unhinged. The door opened on the shed and a man stepped out. He wore overalls and Wellingtons, his chest bare. I recognized the halo of hair, although he had gained fifty or sixty pounds. No longer was he gangly. His waist had spread so that he now resembled a bowling pin.

“You come to park your car?” he asked. His teeth were like barrel staves.

My car? Did it look like it was ready to be abandoned?

“No. I’d like to think it has a few more miles left.” I smiled, but my attempt at levity got no reaction. So I backpedaled. “I drove in by accident.”

“None of my business why you want to park it. I ask no questions. Just two hundred dollars.”

“What?”

“Everyone has his reasons. And I don’t care what they might be.” He tilted to the right and inspected my car’s front bumper.

“I’m not here to park my car, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Okay, one hundred. That’s a damn good deal.”

“I didn’t come to park my car.”

“Why’d you come then?” He wiped his hands on a rag that he pulled from his pocket.

I squinted at him. “You’re Swope,” I said.

His spine straightened from a lazy S into a fence post. His belly pushed forward as if he were proud of it.

“Do I know you?” he said.

“We went to the same high school. You led gym class when I was a freshman. You were a senior.”

He sucked in his stomach, slouched beside my car door, and leaned to look me in the face. His nostrils breathed hot, damp air that smelled of chewing tobacco. He looked me over as he continued to clean his hands. His fingers were yellow, his nails the color of rust.

“I don’t remember you,” he said.

“No reason you would.” I wondered if I dared mention why I had come. The closed gate made me hesitate. I had told no one where I was going. I could disappear here and the world wouldn’t know. But I needed to say something. “Back in high school, I knew a girl named Dottie … or Didi.”

His lower lip curled down and he spat to the side. The donkeys had returned. A curious one wandered close. Swope slapped its nose. It flinched and batted its eyes, but it didn’t move.

“She was my friend,” I said. “I always wondered what happened to her.”

“Huh.” He stepped back and squinted. “So what do you want?”

I thought about his question for a few seconds. “I don’t really know,” I said. “I ran into a grave at Maple Knoll Gardens and wondered if that was her. Domitille Swope.”

He winced at my pronunciation. “And what if it is?” he said.

“Just thought I’d pay my respects.”

He said nothing.

“I could have been a better friend,” I said. “I wanted to apologize.”

“You’re about twenty years late.” He spat again. “I don’t know what she’d do with your apology anyway. Why don’t you just take it out there amongst the cars and park it. I’ll only charge you fifty bucks.”

“What?”

“I reckon fifty bucks would be a good deal, for parkin’ an apology to a dead girl.” He wiped with the rag again and then held out his hand, waiting for an offering to be laid on his palm, or so I assumed.

I looked at the gate.

He continued his pitch. “You can park your apology and drive away, go back to your life, and leave your regrets here. That’s what I call this, the Cemetery of Regrets.”

He flicked his index finger at a bit of fuzz on his palm. I squinted at him for several seconds. A donkey tried to steal the rag from his back pocket. He kicked it in the rear.

I tried to restate my case. “I didn’t come here to—”

He cleared his throat, his Adam’s apple jumping. A pair of crows flew out of the trees. The curious donkey that he had whacked on the nuzzle cocked its head to the side, did a little kick, and wandered away. Its hooves tossed semi-circles of dried mud. I looked at the closed gate.

“I just want to—”

“Only fifty dollars,” he said. “That’s a small price to pay for forgetting what you done.”

What does he know about what I did? He didn’t even remember me. I began to think of the fee as a toll, the price for opening the gate. I sighed and dug for my wallet.

“You’ll feel better afterwards,” he said.

I found a twenty and a pair of fives. “I only have thirty dollars,” I said.

He squinted at me as he considered the situation. His lips narrowed to a line. Then he nodded and shook his outstretched palm.

“I need a receipt,” I said as I handed him the bills.

He nodded and stuffed the money in the pocket of his overalls, the bills crumpling as he shoved them deep. He dug with his fingers and came up with a shiny coin that he held up to a ray of sunlight. It gleamed.

“You know what?” he said. He leaned down, his head at the window. “I don’t do receipts, but I’ve had a feeling all day long that this here was a lucky coin. You drove up from St. Joe, right?”

I nodded. He held out the coin. It was a one dollar token for the Frontier Casino.

I hesitated. “Take it,” he said.

I held out my hand and he pushed the token onto my palm.

“Go pull that arm for me. Big Lucky Sevens. It's due. If you win, you can keep half. Partners, okay?”

I didn’t want the token and any responsibility that went with it, but I nodded nonetheless.

He walked to the gate, undid the hasp, and tugged the gate wide. But there was an outstanding issue. I pulled my car beside him and stopped.

“So what happened to—” I didn’t know whether to say Dottie or Didi, so I said—”the Moreau girl.”

“If I told you, the mystery would be gone, wouldn’t it? And then where would you be?”

“I’d be better off than I am now.”

“No, that’d cost a lot more than thirty dollars. You’re getting a cut-rate deal as is.” He stepped back. “You can leave your apology down that there row.” He pointed at parallel tire tracks that ran to the right, between rows of abandoned vehicles. “And then go pull that arm for me. I feel lucky.” He did a little two-step jig that reminded me of how he would finish his jump shots in high school. The ball arced. Swish.

“I need to know,” I said. “About the Moreau girl.”

“We all need to know about something or other. But life don’t work like that.”

He waved me forward. I pulled through the gate, anxious just to get away. As I came to the path that he had suggested, I started to turn the steering wheel, but then I thought I’d had

enough of this. I straightened the tires and drove out, mud and gravel slapping against the wheel wells.

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As I neared town, the casino rose on the right. A lighted marquee said “PLAY BIG LUCKY SEVENS,” followed by a payout figure in the tens of thousands. The words scrolled to the left and popped out again on the right.

Maybe at one time the paddlewheel boat actually plied the river waters, but now the boat was an afterthought. The main gambling hall occupied a warehouse-like building separated from the parking lot by a moat.

I looked down at the dollar token in the cupholder and wanted it gone. What would it hurt to give the arm a pull? I parked and wandered under the Frontier Casino banner.

My ex-girlfriend Julie used to perform on a stage at the side of the main room. A semi-circle of barstools in a single row led around the stage. Just this past summer before she left me for a rich man from Grand Island, Julie had played keyboards and sang while gamblers moseyed to the slot machines, maintaining her cool in the face of indifference. I always respected her for that. Are you happy now, Julie? Do people listen when you play?

I sat at the empty stage and watched the gamblers, while I felt the dollar token in my pocket. A woman with gray hair stood in front of Big Lucky Sevens, which towered over her like a robot in an old science-fiction movie. She did a little prayer before she inserted each token, the knob on the arm as big as her head. She hung onto the arm with both hands, her heels briefly dangling. The dials spun with a hypnotic swirl, like the spiral on a magician’s magic umbrella. Finally she gave up and limped away. I took her place.

A bar waitress nudged me. “Hey, sweetie. You want a comp beverage?”

I shook my head. “Thanks anyway. I’m trying to stop.”

“Good for you. If you change your mind, let me know,” she said. She wore cowboy boots, her hair in a beehive. A pair of plastic revolvers jutted from holsters on her hips.

Just one pull. That's all I needed. I inserted the token and reached for the arm. I pulled down. The dials twirled. One Lucky Seven, two Lucky Sevens, and a third flirted with stopping before the dial took a final lunge onto cherries.

“Oh! I thought sure you were gonna win,” said the waitress. Her voice squeaked like a children’s pull toy. “Sometimes I can feel it.” She stood behind me with an empty glass on a tray. She winked.

“I didn’t really want to win,” I said.

Her face twisted. “Never met someone who wanted to lose,” she scoffed.

“It takes all kinds,” I said.

“You can say that again.”

I weaved through the casino, past the stage (“See you later, Julie,” I muttered), and out the front door. The parking lot stretched away in a dozen or more rows filled with SUVs, oversized pickups, and battered sedans.

Where had I parked? I tried to remember.