

DAD

The young man parked his car near the barn, his usual parking space, and walked to the trees that bordered the first pasture, a short distance away. He stood under branches and leaves that filtered the light of the moon. A slight wind tickled the green-black leaves. He heard a rustle. The young man bowed his head and looked at the ground. He put his hands in his pockets.

I've been a bitch she had said. With the smallest smile. It wasn't an apology. Was she bragging?

It was almost ten p.m. and he was home already. He looked up and touched a leaf. He wished he could go to bed and fall asleep instantly. Without a thought.

He walked to the house. An old man stood on the back porch and watched his approach.

"What's wrong?"

There was concern in the man's face, voice, and posture. He stared, ready to receive the news of an accident or disaster. His thin, white hair, unkempt at all times, silvery in the moonlight, reminded the son of a goat's hair. He wore pajama bottoms and slippers. No top. His belly was round, soft. His chest was smaller and hairy. The strong jaw was covered with the stubble of two, three day's growth of whiskers. The man waited.

"You ok?"

"Yes," said David.

"I saw you drive in. You didn't come to the house."

David did not reply.

"You take a leak?"

"No."

The son imagined what his father must be thinking. So what were you doing? Talking to the trees?

"You going to bed?"

"Eventually!"

"What are you getting mad about??"

"Nothing. Nothing."

The old father, turned, and went to his bed in the house. His son watched him without any feeling of compassion or disgust. He regretted that he hadn't stopped by a liquor store on the way home. He needed to drink away his disappointment.

Christmas Eve and a full house. Brother Steve, his wife Darlene, and their two boys. His sister Vinnie, her husband, Bob, and their two boys. Mom. Dad. And him. He sat in the corner of the living room, watching the play of the four boys.

“Uncle David!” yelled one as he raced by.

The other adults stood and sat in the kitchen and talked. David put the JOBS NOW! WEEKLY paper on the floor. Nothing in there to apply for. What did he expect? Nobody hired on Christmas Eve. Nobody had been hiring for months. Seven months. David looked at the Christmas tree and hated its glittering gaudiness. Four of the gifts under the tree were from him to his nephews. He had sold his plasma twice a week for two months to pay for them. He got thirty dollars the first visit, Tuesday, and thirty five the second donation, usually Thursday, sometimes Friday. It had felt strange at first being in the plasma center with the derelicts, winos, and losers. He got used to them. He brought along a book to read while he waited for the needle stick. Right arm, Tuesdays; left arm, Thursdays.

“Lately I’ve been in close to fifty hours a week,” said Steve in the kitchen.

“Seems like I’m doing about the same,” said Bob. “Usually spring is our busy season, but it’s been hectic lately. People are buying carpet like crazy.”

David put his hands together as if he were praying. His forefingers were pressed against his lips. He knew the upcoming night and the following day would be a bad time for him, but he could wait it out. Just say nothing. On December 26 everything would be the same again.

“David?” said his mother from the kitchen. “We’re all having eggnog. Do you want some eggnog?”

No, he did not.

They met in the inner office. The interviewer placed the resume on his desk and studied it.

“You have several gaps in your employment history. Why is that?”

David hesitated. “It just turned out that way. I didn’t want it to.”

The interviewer watched him and repeated his words. “Turned out that way.”

David stared at the phone on the desk. He wanted to look through the window just to avoid the man’s critical eyes, but that would have been too obvious.

“Three of the places I worked at went out of business. The last job was temporary job to begin with. You can’t always find something new right away.”

“I see you do not have restaurant experience. Why don’t you walk into one of our locations and just watch and observe. To see what goes on. It’s a fast-paced environment.”

“I’ve been to fast-food restaurants before.”

“We’ll be making our decision in a week.”

Ok. You don’t like me. I get it.

He heard a noise. A chair moving against the vinyl floor. Footsteps. And intruder was in the house. In the kitchen. David forced himself to sit up. The bed groaned. He listened. The house and the intruder were silent. David slipped off the creaking bed and stood. He walked toward the kitchen.

His naked father stood before the sliding glass patio door. He was a figure both familiar and unfamiliar, intimate and strange. He looked through the glass at the irregular line of trees at the end of the pasture. His rapt gaze was focused on something distant. Perhaps a memory.

His father was shorter than he had remembered. The white hair wild again. The upper back slumped over. The man’s skin sagged at places: the upper arms, once muscular, the chest, the neck. His legs had thinned. His penis was limp, wrinkled. David thought it strange to know that it had once created him. The long scrotum had been stretched by time and gravity.

“Dad?”

His father did not hear him. He continued to look through the glass and savor that something that was across the night grass and into the trees. What was it?

“Go to bed, Dad.”

David touched his father’s forearm to lead him to his bedroom. The man’s face turned and David was given a glimpse of the man’s private terror. The blue eyes were sharp, intense.

The walk down the wide corridor required a tightening of the breath and a resolute pace. Faces peered at him from bodies in wheelchairs. A woman cried, "Help me. Help me. Oh, please help me." The stench of urine emanated from one room. He heard a bell repeat a ding ding ding ding ding ding. One resident, a thin, small man, his hands folded in his lap, sat in his wheelchair, and gave him a look of deep-seated hate. A tiny woman stopped him in the corridor. She wore a sweater over her dress and carried a child's purse.

"What time does the bus come? The bus. I'm going to Florida to see my boy. What time does the bus come?"

David looked down to avoid her gaze and saw the worn slippers on her feet. He said excuse me and walked around her.

"What time does the bus come?"

David entered Room 127. His father was asleep in a chair. The head hung downward and appeared to be too large and heavy for his neck.

David came every day. He was the only who did. Everyone else had jobs. His visits were maintenance sessions. His father slept more and talked less. When he did speak it was sullen words or nonsense syllables. David walked over and touched his father's shoulder. The man woke.

"Morning, Dad. It's me. David."

He received a wary look.

David began his routine. He removed the false teeth and took them to the sink to brush them. He washed his father's face and shaved him. He held the hair brush under the hot water of the water faucet and brought the brush to the man's head. He combed his hair.

"There. You look five years younger."

An aide rolled in a cart and gave out a lunch tray. David fed his father some of the creamed corn, toast, cottage cheese, pear slices, and the milk. He coaxed as he held the spoon.

After lunch his father was less morose.

"Where's Steve?" he asked.

"He's at work."

"Why doesn't Steve come?"

"He's at work." David began to clean up the tray.

"Why aren't you at work?"

"I don't have a job."

A nurse entered the room.

"You're lazy and stupid." His father's declaration had been made with vehemence.

The nurse looked away from David. The bedspread was suddenly a thing of great interest. David looked at it too and wished he was someplace else.

There was no place else.

The family sat on chairs lined against the wall that faced the casket. No one talked. The casket lid was open. If David stared long enough at the body it appeared that his father was breathing, the chest moving up and down the smallest fraction of an inch. He knew it was an illusion. Something he wanted to see.

Life had eased out of his father's body after all that pain of the last month, the month of terrible decline. The body shrinking in bed.

Someone familiar approached from the hall. She was dressed up, whoever she was....Susan. What was she doing here? Who told her to come? He hadn't. He would never. Darlene. It was Darlene. Didn't she know they weren't seeing each other anymore? God. More unpleasantness.

Susan entered the parlor and walked up to him. She looked a little nervous. Should he stand? He didn't know.

"Hello, David."

"Hello."

She sat down next to him.

"I'm sorry to hear about your father. Is there anything I can do?"

David shook his head. The room sat in silence. David knew Steve was suppressing a grin. He did not want to even look at Susan. He suppressed an urge to get up and walk out. Go to the lounge and have a cup of coffee. Be by himself. No people.

The Stephensons came, followed by the Boyds, Charlie Trenter, Evelyn Monte, and others. People talked.

It was time to do something. He turned toward her. "You been ok?"

"Yeah. You?"

David nodded yes. "Considering." He looked down at her thigh and saw her nearby hand. He thought about holding it.

"Are you making good money?"

David held his breath. Had she actually asked that? In a funeral home? With his dead father fifteen feet away? His face felt warm. What the devil did she want anyway? A Corvette? A trip to Europe? Damn her!

Did anyone hear her?

He knew who he was. What he was. He was not making good money and he never would. It wasn't in him. He was not like Steve.

David felt her steady, unapologetic stare as she waited for a reply. He got and stood by the casket. She did not join him.

He had been given the task of going through his father's things. He emptied drawers, shelves, and closets. A memory of his father's existence lingered in the razors, aftershave lotions, ties, shoes, old magazines, and ancient photos. It was mysterious. The man was dead, yet his invisible shadow, his molecules, were on everything. David filled five large garbage bags. Mom wanted everything gone. It was like he was burying the man a second time as he threw away the socks, the pajamas, the shirts, belts, the man's slippers, the frayed straw hat his dad wore when he baled hay. A memory of loading the hay onto a slow-moving wagon during a sunny afternoon years, years ago came to David.

He found a letter in a shoebox that had photos, receipts, a roofing estimate, business cards from strangers, and a comb. The letter was one folded, yellowed page.

Dear Grace,

I am not much a letter writing, I am not that well schooled, but here goes. My new job is going good. I am welding. It sure is loud and noisy in the plant. The other guys don't know me too well, but I am starting to be friends with two of them, Bill and Ivan. They call me Country. That's my name I guess. They pay is good. I hope to save enough to buy a farm someday.

I miss you every day, Grace, and I think of you all the time. Hope you think of me from time to time.
Yours truly, Tom.

p.s. I am learning a new song on the guitar that I wrote for you. I will play it for you if you come to the company picnic with me. Will you come? Tom.

David smiled as he folded the half-century old paper. He put it in his pocket to later show to his mother, Grace.

His car was parked on an old logging road that went through the woods. He opened his fourth can of beer. The first one had a flat taste, the second was better, the third even better, the fourth one flat again. The song coming through the car radio was a ballade that plodded along. Throbbing violins echoed the singer's complaint of being unloved. David turned the radio off and kicked the dashboard.

"Nuff of that shit."

It was one a.m. He took another sip. David rolled down and leaned his head out. The warm air of the night felt good on his face. Something moved through the underbrush ahead. The steps were delicate, timid. David turned on the car headlights and saw a startled doe twenty feet away. The brown animal stood still in the hypnotic, white light. Her eyes looked like large, garish gems.

David turned the lights off and heard the animal bound away. He got out of the car and walked to where she had stood. He sipped from his can. He thought that being among the trees would comfort him. He needed comfort. He needed to get drunk. He sipped. They fired him! From a part-time job! He hadn't been there a month! God, what a loser he was. A part-time job! He couldn't keep anything. Why did people hate him? Because he was a loser. A loser.

He poured out the rest of the beer onto the ground.

He didn't want to spend the money, but he went anyway. His mother had said that he needed to get out more. So he went to the county fair and walked among the pig pens, the rows of chicken cages, and the lines of cows in the livestock shed. He was not interested in livestock. He recalled the time he showed Bessie, his heifer, and got a white ribbon. Steve had entered Jezebel and was granted Champion of Class.

The next building was the produce shed. Huge pumpkins, watermelons, cantaloupes, and ears of corn, all decorated with ribbons of blue, red, white, filled the tables. He stepped out almost immediately.

He walked over to the noisy midway. Shoulders and elbows bumped into him. The urgent part of the crowd separated as it came upon David, swerved around him, and merged together in front of him. He saw hand-holding couples whose pace was faster than his. Nearly every girl wore halter tops and skin-hugging shorts. Sandals. Some of the exposed flesh was not that attractive; some of it was. David walked by the moving Ferris

wheel, the ring toss booths, the cotton candy vendors, the hot dog stands, the man who guessed your age and weight. He saw the Obese Woman. She sat on a bench and panted slightly in the summer heat. How much did she weigh? David guessed over five hundred pounds. Her flabby arms were bigger than his legs. She wore a purple dress. Sandals. A folded-up aluminum walker was nearby.

The Obese Woman looked at him. She did not care that he had been inspecting her. He saw her unrelenting boredom, her angry despair. A bead of sweat ran down her thick neck.

He walked away.

At the parking lot he saw a couple driving out in a convertible sports car. The woman in the passenger seat had thick, blonde hair. She laughed and laughed at something hilarious. David opened his car door and sat on the faded and torn fabric of the car seat. Just sat there.

He found his father's single-shot rifle and the shells. The aim would have to be precise to make it work. He knew that. Aim was critical. Critical. He would have to be calm. He could not miss. Could not.

David took off his shoes, removed his socks. He started to put the socks into the clothes hamper. No, he would not need them anymore. He threw them into the trash can beside his desk. He slid the shoes under the bed and lined them neatly together. He turned the radio on to mask the sound of the shot. He adjusted the volume so that it was low. He did not want to wake his mother.

David looked at his bedroom. It was neat. As it should be. He had thrown away the miscellaneous, unnecessary stuff. The books, magazines, fingernail clippers, odds and ends. The clothes she could donate.

It was time. He slid a shell in the firing chamber, closed the bolt, flicked the safety off, sat on the edge of the bed, put the heel of the stock of the rifle on the floor, between his bare feet, leaned over, guided the end of the barrel into his mouth, held the barrel with both hands, and slipped his big toe into the trigger guard.

He listened to the thud thud thud of his heart.

Why was he waiting? Why was he waiting??

David closed his wet eyes. The barrel had a peculiar taste. His back began to ache.

Why was he waiting??!!!

He heard the music on the radio. A symphony. Mozart? Haydn? He saw the rifle, the length of it, and the carpet. He realized he should have vacuumed the carpet. It wasn't clean enough.

He waited for his courage to return. The necessity of it. It would take time. He had time. He had all kinds of time before dawn. It would be over before morning. Over.

He heard the door open but did not look up. He heard the harsh gasp and could not move. When his mother's hand grabbed the barrel he still could not move.

His mother came out of the therapist's office. David reluctantly put down the magazine. She sat in a chair and reached into her purse for a facial tissue. He noticed that her eyes were puffy from crying. He also saw that she looked older, that she was indeed an old woman. She was not frail or withered, just worn. There were years in her body.

"Come in, David," said the therapist.

David followed the pudgy, bearded man into the office. The man motioned to a chair and David sat.

"Tell me about yourself."

"There's nothing to tell."

"I know it's difficult. Just think of me as a friend." The therapist waited.

David was silent. He could outwait the therapist.

"Your mother says you don't have any friends."

"No."

"Why is that?"

David grimaced. "I'm not well liked."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Are you rude? Arrogant? Obnoxious? Do you have terrific body odor?" The therapist laughed. "Are you mute? You can't speak English? No? None of those things? Can you smile? Can you listen? Yes? Then you can have friends."

David hated the therapist.

"Do you avoid people?"

David shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you like your mother?"

"Sure."

“Your father?”

“He’s dead,” said Adam.

“Do you miss your father?”

David considered it. He had no answer.

“Did you love him? Did he love you?”

David still had no answer. A minute passed. “When I was six he used to call me Little Dummy.”

The therapist listened.

“I suppose the worst thing was when he said I was lazy and stupid.”

“When did that happen?”

“When he was in the nursing home. He was right. I am stupid.”

“Really? According to your mother you finished in the top ten of your graduating class.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

The therapist wrote a few words on his note pad.

“How would you describe yourself using three words?”

“Unemployed. Unattractive.” David could think of a third word.

“I’m not like Steve.”

“Who is Steve?”

“My brother. He has a good job and a wife.”

“Did your father prefer him?”

“Yes. Always.”

The rest of the session passed in a realm without time. David revealed to the pudgy, bearded stranger all sorrows forgotten, truths he did not know he had buried within.

They talked in the car on the way back.

“It was rough at first being married to him,” said his mother. “We moved out to the country. To the farm. I didn’t know a soul. I was so lonely. I thought, hoped, prayed, he would take me to town once in a while, but all he did was work. He worked all the time. To build the farm up. That took years. He had the best farm around. He was so proud of that. You and Steve were a lot of help. I did not know how to drive a car. He wouldn’t teach me. I taught myself in the driveway. Almost ran into the house more than once.” His mother laughed.

Her tone changed. “When you were born, Tom was so proud of you. He called you his little man. One day---you were just crawling then---he had come in from the evening milking and you knew he put on his slippers

after he took off his work boots. Well, you crawled after them and brought them to him. He was so pleased.”

“I’m not a baby anymore, Mom. I’m not doing too well as an adult.”

“You’re just like your father. He was very shy. He married late. I thought he would never ask me. He was a good man. Despite the hardships. And so are you.”

“What did that guy tell you what was wrong with me?”

“He said you suffer from low self-esteem and that you have a melancholic personality. I know you feel unloved, David, but you will be someday. You’re going to be fine.” She reached over and put her hand on his. David couldn’t recall the last time she had touched him.

David walked into the barn. He needed to be alone. He had to think about all the things the therapist had said. He couldn’t remember them all. What had that professor said in his lecture that was on public television? One’s life is a mystery. One cannot truly understand what one’s life is about until most of it has been lived. He understood that he wasn’t really very smart. His dad had been right. He had made stupid decisions. Decisions based upon hope. He had not known what the world was really like. He had not known what people wanted from him. He did not know what the rules were. No one had told him.

He had lived a long time. He was still young, but he had lived a long time. Two guys he went to high school with were already dead. Dead in the coffin. In the ground. And he was alive. He had to learn how to live, that’s all.

David saw his father’s tools hanging on nails on a horizontal board on the barn wall. A framing square, a handsaw, a bow saw, a level, a crowbar, a claw hammer. He picked up the hammer. The wooden handle was worn. How old was it? Sixty years? How many nails had he driven with it? And how many had he pulled out? Yes, the man liked to work.

Oh, Dad. Mom told me you loved me the best you knew how.

But why did you make it so hard for me to love you back?

Why?

He closed his eyes.

Why?
