

What's the Story?

Late one evening the fall of my twelfth year, I was up in my room cutting rungs for a miniature Gloucester rocker. As I worked, I became aware of voices from down below: my mother and my older siblings, Ray and Marlene, by the sound.

“Prob’ly got called in,” Ray was saying.

“Or he’s out for a spin. Don’t you ever feel like a spin?” There was no mistaking Marlene’s whine.

“Needs a new muffler,” Ray said. “Hear that?”

Thanks to the unique acoustics of my room—still a walk-in closet, no matter what they said—I had a definite visual of my big brother kneeling on the living room couch, nose mashed against the picture window.

After a pause, my mother’s words came through sharp, accusatory: “I didn’t say for sure it was him. Dark out there. Could’ve been Suzanne.”

It had to be our across-the-street neighbors, the Mitchells, they were talking about: Harvey, who worked at the cement plant, and his wife, Suzanne. I got back to my rocker.

The next morning when I came downstairs, my father, who had come in late after one of his sales runs, was already there at the kitchen table, along with my mother and my younger siblings, Nick and Emily. Ray and Marlene slept until their ride honked.

"Truck there when you came in?" my mother asked as she poured coffee.

"What truck?" my father mumbled from deep in the classifieds.

"Harvey's. Who else has a truck?"

"Huh. Say," he added, finally looking up, "I think the bank might go for those tiles after all. For the lobby?"

"Wouldn't you have noticed if the truck was there? Or not?"

Why a neighbor's vehicle so interested my mother, I couldn't imagine. Nor, apparently, could the man behind the paper.

A few nights later I was working on a book report when my walls, like Poe's, started closing in and I went down to the living room. Only my mother was there, lying on the couch leafing through one of her magazines. Just as I was getting settled, I heard an engine start up, and through the window saw the truck of interest backing out across the street. My mother frowned and nibbled her lower lip: the sound was registering.

"You see who it was?" she whispered across the room.

"Who who was?"

"Shh. Don't be childish. The driver."

"I *am* a child."

"You had the angle."

"What's the big deal anyway?"

"Something funny...."

"Ask 'em."

"Drew! That's prying."

As my mother handed me lunch money the next morning she said, as if sleep and Cap'n Crunch hadn't interrupted our conversation, "See if you can find out anything from Mikie, okay?"

"Mikie" and Lily were the Mitchell kids. Mike was in my class but at least a year older. He'd been kept back because of meningitis, which had affected his hearing as well as his talking. Since then, instead of Mike, kids called him What? which was pretty much all he said.

I didn't ask him anything at first. It can be pretty weird with people like Mike. Plus, I'd been told not to pry, and for sure didn't like being used. But two days later my mother was still after me, so when I saw Mike out shooting baskets I wandered over to his driveway.

"Hey!" I shouted. When I repeated at close range he spun around, the ball dribbling itself off into the weeds.

"What?" And then, "I just did thirty. You?"

"Thirty one," I said, and flashed the fingers to make sure.

As he brought the ball back, I got to the point. "Where do you guys go nights, anyway?"

"Nights? My Mom. Watch this!" He dribbled right and hooked an air ball.

"To the store?" I offered.

"My aunt. Dying." And just like that, ball under his arm, he hurried toward his back door and disappeared to the slam of the screen.

Wow, I thought, walking back to my house. Did I get that right? Dying? Both of my grandfathers had died, but way before I ever knew them. As far as I was concerned dying might not even have been involved. My mother's mother was in a nursing home, meaning she was dying, but she'd always been dying. Always would be dying. This was the first time I'd thought of dying to the point of actual death. The thing was, though, Mike's aunt was no one I knew

personally, so her dying, if that's what it was, was little more than an abstraction. And he could have said it for effect. People do that.

I didn't report to my mother right off and sure enough, later that evening she slipped into my room and closed the door.

"So? Saw you over there this afternoon."

"At What?'s?" It was hard to do justice to this possessive question questioned, and I wondered how in the world you'd punctuate such a monster. I'd have to ask Miss Martin in English the next day. She was good on that stuff.

"What's the story?" she went on.

"No. What? isn't the story."

"Drew!"

"Okay, okay. The story is...." I paused for a long, still to this day inexplicable, beat. "The story is, Suzanne's having an affair."

That statement, as if it were an act of ventriloquy, as if I were not just some kid being quizzed in a closet, but a mystic channeling his god in a cell, caught me totally by surprise. First of all, I had never called Mrs. Mitchell Suzanne before, though suddenly that was who she was. Secondly, I had never used the word "affair" before, and hardly knew what it meant, other than that my mother had used it, always in eyebrow quotes, and I had seen it in her magazines and overheard it on her programs. And thirdly, and mostly, I—or whatever force it was possessing me at that moment—had never before realized, or to such a degree, the delirious possibilities of imagination. Of course, as a manual arts instructor once told me, my little furniture was imaginative. But that was an imagination restricted to the literal world of wood and glue, of mechanics and manners. This leap of imagination—intuiting in one epiphanic moment that

Suzanne having an affair, no matter what, exactly, an affair consisted of, was way more interesting than her caring for a dying sister, and that my mother was way more likely to respond to news consistent with her tabloids and soaps than to hearsay from someone who couldn't hear—this leap, then, felt, deep in my core and despite what I might previously have considered a fabrication too far removed from that of miniature furniture to be countenanced, right.

“Mrs. Mitchell? An affair?” I could tell from the way the A-word looped upward from her mouth and hung shimmering above us in the humid breath of its pronouncement, that I had fashioned something very special, something nearly perfect, in fact, out of the rough timber of words.

“Mmm,” I temporized, then looked off. She, like me, was going to need a little more time here.

“Are you sure, Drew? What sort of... affair?” There it looped and hovered again only slightly less numinous than before.

“Oh, I don't know. That's all he said. *Affair*. What's that mean, anyway, Mom? *Affair*.”

“Not a word of this to anyone, Drew. *Anyone*.” And as she left she made a little zip-the-lips sign so intimate it almost broke my heart.

From then on, my mother posted herself in the living room evenings, watching for any activity across the street. Once, I found her asleep on the couch in the morning, and knew that—and, unlike my siblings, why—she had forced herself to keep such a late vigil. It was obvious that nothing else I could have told her, no fact or insight or wonder involving this world or any other world, could have won her the way this had.

“Mikie say anything else about his mother?” she asked me later that day, under cover of a yawn.

“Uhhh....” And there was the rush again: suddenly I was remembering in exquisite detail, hearing repeated in my head with Surround Sound clarity, every word Mike had been confiding to me about his mother. So varied and rich were these recollections that it was almost impossible to choose among them, but finally, feeling I could no longer ignore the great responsibility that had been thrust upon me, nor the great opportunity that had been at long last afforded me, I made an executive decision. “Dad. It’s... Dad.”

“Its dad what?”

Punctuation, that miniature furniture of language, had intrigued me for years—especially that year with Miss Martin—and recently I had been puzzling over its absence from the oral tradition. But, pertinent as such a discussion would have been to this latest instance of miscommunication, now hardly seemed the time for it. “Uh, with his, you know, mother? Suzanne.”

My mother’s face went flat, deadpan. So deadpan, in fact, that I thought for a moment my words might have acquired not only rhetorical but lethal powers.

“Oh, God,” she mimed.

Things were definitely different around the house after that. In a way, the woman I knew, or thought I knew, had moved out, leaving only a simulacrum behind. When my father was home from his sales trips, she barely spoke to him. Strangely, I thought, no one else in the household seemed to appreciate the change in the family dynamics I had wrought, not that they’d ever appreciated anything else I’d ever wrought. Maybe everyone was just glad she was off their case, never mind the reason, and never mind the possibility of a crisis—a narrative climax, I now considered it—that could affect them all.

And why my mother wasn't acting on the narrative I had provided, I didn't know. Maybe she was waiting for some kind of hard evidence, harder than what I had included, though wasn't that hard enough? Fed up with the waiting, and anxious to find out what happens next, I let slip one afternoon when I got home from school that the Mitchells were getting divorced. Monday.

"Mikie said that?" she asked. More like confirmed.

"No. Kids. Everybody knows."

"I've got no choice, then, do I?" As I was wondering what, exactly, she meant by that, since I could think of dozens, hundreds, of nifty plot twists without even trying, she grabbed me in her arms and hugged me hard. I squeezed back.

That night my father was home. My parents' room being next to mine, I could hear their voices, hear them intensify as if a volume knob were being ever so slowly advanced. "How could...?" "... do you mean...." "I know...." "... divorce...." I listened hard for my name, suddenly terrified that my mother would reveal that I was her source and my father would come storming straight through the Colonial Homes poster tacked on our common wall. Though I had no doubt I could produce explanations, I didn't know that they would be my best on such short notice, and at such close quarters.

But she didn't. Either she wasn't revealing her source because she really didn't believe it, or she was protecting it because she really wanted to believe it. Drawers banged, doors slammed, the engine started up next to the house, and then all was quiet except for a long, eerie keening, like the sound the car made when Ray said a belt was going. Whether my siblings heard any of this or not, I didn't know: another one of her programs, they might well have thought.

Things were even more different after that. Better, I concluded. She cried off and on, but there is something oddly satisfying about victimization—that's always been my experience any

way—and I wasn't sure my mother had ever known real satisfaction. My brothers and sisters seemed in a better place, too, once they got the bigger picture. Ray took over the father role and, I thought, played it better than our actual father ever had. He quit his band, got an after-school job at the Shell station, and started sitting at the head of the table and asking us about our day at school. Marlene stopped doubling people's questions back on them. Nick got serious about staying in the lines, and Emily asked me if I could make her doll a water bed. Nobody mentioned our missing father, and when our mother said he had called, which he apparently did every few days, they all just looked at each other and then away. They knew what was coming.

Even at school things looked up. Word must have gotten out because kids started talking to me in the halls. "Bummer." "You gonna go back and forth like Eddy?" Teachers asked if I needed more time. I got excused from Phys. Ed. The social worker, Ms. Lothrop, had me in for half-hour sessions, which became twice and then three times a week once I figured out just what it was she wanted to hear.

Fortunately, my mother never had a chance to do the obvious—confront Suzanne. She wasn't across the street any more, having, I gathered from Mike, moved in full-time with her sister. What my mother did do, though, was hire a lawyer who, it sounded like, didn't buy the whole story. My first rejection. I ended up arguing with my mother until I realized she was actually on my side: it was the lawyer I was going to have to deal with.

That happened only a few days later, when we went to an appointment at the woman's office, upstairs from 60 Minute Photo. The place was actually not much bigger than my closet, and dwarfed further by an industrial steel desk, a laminate file cabinet, and a one-armed bench. Too retro even for retro.

At first, the lawyer, Carlene, talked with us together, but, unable to keep things straight, asked to have a little tête-à-tête with me alone. That turned out to be nothing like the little tête-à-têtes I was used to with Ms. Lothrop, especially when she started pressing me about exactly what Mike had said and heard, and on what date and in what circumstance; and then accusing me of changing my story when all I was doing was editing. It was like talking to the old Marlene. In short order I realized that the only chance I had to maintain internal consistency was to flesh things out even more. Tell the whole story, so to speak.

“I think I was about six,” I said, squinting up at the water-stained acoustic panels. “Nights, Mom would read me a picture-book about girls and boys, and then she would reach up and pull the light chain and slide all the way down under the covers except for her hair and her perfume and, you know....” And then, ever so slowly, I looked all the way back down from the panels, down the bare walls, past the desk to my lap.

Wow! Talk about a rush. I knew the minute my eyes came to rest that this plot line had brought the affair *histoire* to a whole new level. I'd hit the jackpot. Both of us had. Carlene moved in extra close and third-degreed me for another hour, scribbling notes on scraps of paper pulled out of drawers and when they were empty the wastebasket, even when what I said didn't make a whole lot of sense to either of us, and even when my mother, or someone outside the now locked office door, started pounding and Carlene had to put in a call.

It wasn't too long before heavier pounding sounded, followed by deep voices of authority. Carlene let two male officers in, along with a woman in clogs and mismatched plaids. I knew there must have been other people outside with my mother because, in between the questions, I could hear her shouting. When they finally led me out, though, no one was left and it was dark except for a sputtering streetlight. They put me in the back seat of one of the cruisers

idling at the curb. The plaid woman slid in close and began stroking my knee and asking me about my favorite foods.

Shelter was what they called the place they took me to. I had a room at least four times as big as my room at home, complete with TV, a window—barred, but a window—and a plate of bananas: no sign of the food favorites I thought I had ordered. I ended up staying there for two weeks watching DVD's and telling my story, or rather stories, to a parade of clipboards, smart devices, and recorders. My mother came a couple of times with a policewoman, but got so hysterical when she saw me from down the hall that she was led away. Her hysteria was unfortunate, I must admit, though from another point of view I felt that it was about time she took me seriously. And weren't affairs and child abuse and divorce where the woman's heart was really? Did she have the right to be upset just because it happened to involve her this time? Did she think she was better than all those women in the gossip columns and on TV? That *schadenfreude*, unlike its sister pleasures, comes at no cost whatsoever?

After the shelter, they moved me into a foster home with several other kids. It reminded me of the paradox of my own home—the solitude-in-a-crowd thing. I tried to get my miniatures and supplies sent to me, which I thought would be simple enough, if not actually therapeutic, but they never showed up. The sharps, it must have been. I also tried to find out where my father was and if he was up to speed on the case, but the social worker and counselor at my new school said the courts were backlogged and, in an embarrassing effusion of clichés, that I should try to look forward into the future rather than backward into all the pain and hurt of my past. They wouldn't even tell me about Ray and Marlene and Nick and Emily, but just said not to worry because, although the siblings couldn't all be together until the investigation was complete, the authorities

were looking out for their welfare, too. No social networking just yet, but if I'd like to, I could write to them old style.

If I'd like to? Long, detailed notes I composed, including entire verbatim conversations I had with my foster parents as well as my foster sibs, foster neighbors, foster strangers. They were often not just right, though, those notes, failing, despite revisions, to capture exactly, or entirely, or only, what it was I had in mind. Often as not I balled them up and tossed them in the trash. Unfortunately, the social worker turned out to be into trash. She undid and read every page, including ones I'd started to Mike about my new appreciation of the violence of silence. That might have been the one that got me transferred.

For the next two years I lived at the youth training center about a hundred miles from my home. There I made a few acquaintances and, when I wasn't on KP or in class, wrote, and not just notes and letters but freestanding pieces in new and cross-over genres. Occasionally I read my efforts to my colleagues, who shook their heads and said how did I come up with shit like that? Some of them were so impressed they gave it a try, but their results were disappointing, to say the least. I never did give them honest critiques, though: it was my feeling by now that creativity, no matter how crude—witness my first chairs—is the surest avenue to personal salvation.

Periodically I was updated on my case. There were going to be trials and hearings and depositions but then at the last minute they would be postponed because of my mother's psychiatrists or my father's lawyers or my siblings' guardians or the newly deconstructed subplots of my story. Carlene was history. New and more suspicious lawyers and psychologists came on board arranging conference calls and issuing reports. The whole exercise, as far as I was concerned, was beginning to lose its charm, and I was beginning to realize that no fully

satisfactory dénouement was going to suggest itself anytime soon. I'd had no problem with Beginning and Middle, but what about End?

An opportunity for that came one day when I was at the Burger King in town, where by then I was allowed to go because I'd been reclassified. I was writing away at my table by the window when I glanced up, searching for that *mot juste*, and saw on the far side of the parking lot a trucker climbing down from his big rig. He crossed the lot, strolled into the restaurant, ordered, and sat down with his tray at the table next to me. I watched him unwrap his burger, suck up half his soda, blink hard.

"Where ya headin'?" I asked.

He turned, blinked hard again as if finally coming to. "Tulsa."

"No shit," I said, the adrenaline already pumping, premises colliding in my brain like neutrons in a critical mass. "I got a brother lives in Tulsa. Well, outskirts. He's gay, my brother. HIV. Guess that's why he's born again. Haven't seen him in two years 'cause of the, you know, family, how all that works. Say, you wouldn't be able to...?"

I never did make it to Tulsa though: by St. Louis I'd had it with long haulers. I found a homeless shelter not far from the river and evenings would walk down to watch the barges float by, Huck and Jim pole in and out of the lengthening shadows. But then, after about a month, that, too, got old. I hit the road again, south this time, car only, laying over in Y's and bus stations, panhandling or pick-pocketing as the spirit and necessity moved me.

Florida is as far as I've gotten, as far south as one can get in the forty-eight, of course. I continue to write every free minute, propped against the trunk of a palmetto on the beach, nursing a coffee in a diner. Here in the library I share tables with sleeping men, or women leafing through magazines back to front, the way my mother always used to. From time to time I gaze

over at the stacks, thinking how, once I start publishing, I'll finally have it made, though I know literary success will, like Florida or anything else peninsular, mark a journey's end. A time, perhaps, to reverse course. If it's not too late.