

## INTENSIVE CARE

Hi, Dad.

Have I been sleeping?

I don't know if it's day or night, I'm asleep so much! I can't see the windows from here. But every time I wake up, I see you, or I feel your hand, and, gee, Dad, I don't know how to say it, but thanks.

No, I mean it. At first I thought I might be dead, but then I noticed all the noise these machines make. They've got them all over the place. Are they all hooked up to me? I never knew I had so much stuff you can keep track of.

It helps a lot having you here. A time like this, maybe you say things a guy doesn't usually say, but you know, Dad, I love you so much. I always have.

When I was a kid, it was awful tough for me, those times Ma left you. I didn't want her to leave, and I didn't want to go either! I was always so scared I'd never get to see you again. All that arguing and crying, and you begging Ma not to go! I just wanted us all to stay together and be a family.

I used to dream that someday we'd have a great big fat album of happy pictures. You know, I've got a few shots of us together.

No, really, I do! You know, like at holidays and stuff. Every holiday, Ma always made such a great dinner. When I think about it, I can almost smell the chicken roasting! And her apple pie! Boy, those were great days!

Remember that time at the beach you got me a cotton candy?

Sure you remember! We took the trolley to Revere Beach and got off right behind the big roller coaster, and we walked down past that stand where they had the laugh track going all the time. You let me take my chance at knocking over the milk bottles. I tried so hard, but I couldn't do it. I didn't understand it was rigged, and I wanted to try again. Ma said you shouldn't have wasted the money on it the first time, let alone a second. She said we don't have money to throw away, and no one wins those things anyway. When the guy at the stand started arguing with

## INTENSIVE CARE

Ma, you told him to leave her alone. You even said she was right. Then we walked over to the next stand, and you bought me a cotton candy, and you bought Ma an ice cream, and you kissed her right there on the sidewalk. And on the way home, we stopped at Rego's, so Ma could buy some cheese, and she made her special baked macaroni and cheese for dinner that night.

Who could forget a day like that?

It was while you worked at Albertson's, Dad! No, wait, it was the day after they let you go. You told Ma after dinner that night, and she started crying.

Ma loved you, Dad, she really did. When she'd take me to stay at Grandpa Joe's, she always cried her eyes out from the minute we got there. She used to wear dark glasses to the dinner table so it wouldn't show, and Aunt Margie always had something to say about it. Boy, was she mean! How do you get to be like that, you suppose, always thinking you know what's best for everyone else, every little thing they should do, never caring whose feelings you hurt, just trying to boss everyone around. Ma would sit down at the table with those sunglasses on, and in that snivelly little voice of hers, Aunt Margie would say, "We're eating with a movie star, no less!" Then Grandpa Joe would say, "Let her be, Marge," and Aunt Margie would say she was just making a joke. Ma would end up leaving the table without eating much of anything, and Grandpa Joe would take me into the kitchen and get me a big dish of ice cream.

You never had so much ice cream in your life as I had at Grandpa Joe's. Aunt Margie used to say, "You're going to rot his teeth out, Pa." And Grandpa Joe would say, "No, he's a good boy. He's gonna brush his teeth extra good for me tonight, aren't you, Frankie?"

He was always so nice to me.

I think it was Aunt Margie's fault he didn't like you, Dad.

She told some awful lies! You know what she said to me once? She said you were a bum, and I was just like you. But when I started arguing with her, she said, never mind, you'd gone away and I'd never see you again anyway. Imagine saying that to a little kid, about his own Dad! She told me you didn't love us. I knew you'd come see me like you always did, but I was so little, part of me was scared, what if she's right? The next day, I crawled behind the couch to the parlor

## INTENSIVE CARE

window so I'd be able to see you the minute you got off the trolley. Aunt Margie yelled at me to get out of there before I got the curtains dirty, but I wouldn't. I rubbed my hands up and down the curtains and stuck my tongue out at her. So, of course, she went running off yelling to Ma that I was a little brat, even though she was the one who started it. When you got off the trolley, Aunt Margie was still yelling at me, but I didn't care; I was just so happy to see you.

Did you know Aunt Margie's dead now, Dad? At the wake, Uncle Joe said, "All the girls are gone to their eternal reward. I'm the only one of us kids left." The eternal reward thing got me thinking. Did God let Aunt Margie into heaven? I don't suppose she ever did anything bad enough to get her sent to Hell, but I can just imagine her up there, picking and badgering at Ma, just like she always did down here. It makes you think twice, knowing that all the people who were mean to you, well, they might have been nasty, miserable devils, but they probably didn't die in a state of mortal sin, so you're going to be stuck with them forever.

Maybe heaven's not all it's cracked up to be.

Yeah?

Think so?

You know, the nuns at Sunday school always used to say that when you died and saw the face of God, you'd be so sorry for all the wrong things you ever did, that you'd hardly be able to stand it.

Hope that happened to Aunt Margie.

Know what she said to me once, Dad? She said, "You're ruining your mother's life!" I got her that time, though. At supper that night, after Ma left the table, I said, "Grandpa Joe, am I ruining Ma's life?"

And he said, "Aw, Frankie, don't ever think that. Your Ma's just not feeling good tonight. You're a good boy, Frankie."

And I said, "Aunt Margie said I'm ruining Ma's life. I don't want to ruin Ma's life!" I wouldn't have cried, but I was just a little kid then.

"He's got to grow up sometime, Pa!" Aunt Margie said. "You spoil that kid."

Grandpa Joe just said, "Leave him alone, Marge." Then he took me in the kitchen for ice cream, and we left her sitting all by her lonesome eating Brussels

## INTENSIVE CARE

sprouts. Later, after I finished all my ice cream and brushed my teeth and went to bed, I could hear them talking, not their words, just their voices. I couldn't tell what they said, but Grandpa Joe sounded mad, and Aunt Margie never said to me again that you had gone away.

Yeah, I guess it doesn't matter anymore. Ancient history, huh?

Remember when you went into the hospital for the operation, Dad? Ma didn't miss a day visiting you there! Not one. Me either. Every time I came in, I was so scared, I didn't even know what to say to you. I just sort of joked around like we always did, but I held your hand. Two grown men, and I was holding your hand and kissing you. I didn't know what I'd do if you died.

Now you're holding my hand, huh?

After they operated, I can remember looking at you, and how awful you looked, almost like you were dead already. I didn't even know if you could hear me, but I kept talking to you, telling you things, even though you didn't answer. You could hear me, Dad, couldn't you? I wanted to tell you that Ruthie was expecting. I wanted to make sure you knew, if it was a boy, we were going to name him after you.

We did, you know. He's got your eyes.

Gee, Dad, I wish you could have known my kids. You would have loved them to pieces. You would have been so proud of them!

I suppose they'll be here soon.

You'd think the hospital would let them come in all at once instead of two at a time. It'd be easier on them if they were all together. They'd be able to help each other. I heard the nurse tell them that it'd be too much for me to have everyone in here all at once. Where was she when they were little kids? They used to be so noisy that Ruthie and I thought we'd go crazy. The whole bunch of them—well, there was always something going on. If we weren't yelling, we were laughing, and since they went out on their own, most of what I remember is the laughing.

I'd like to hear that again.

## INTENSIVE CARE

Now they come in, they hold my hand, they try to talk to me. Ruthie cries. She thinks I don't see it, but I do. They don't even know if I can hear them. They all tell me that I'm going to get better, but, I can tell, they think I won't.

Dad, what do you think? Am I going to die?

I will and I won't? Always the funny guy, huh?

You know, I heard when you're dying, you go out of your body up to the ceiling, and you can look down on yourself. That must be strange.

Some guy on the TV said it happened to him, but he came back down and got back in his body and lived.

No?

Yeah, I guess it is a good way to get on TV.

What about the long dark tunnel? No? Just as well.

Do you think the family will understand?

About as much as I did with you, huh? I was afraid of that. I don't like to leave Ruthie in the lurch. But she'll be O.K., won't she, Dad?

You're right, the kids will look after her. I wish I could talk with her, just one more time. That's the hardest thing.

Thanks for staying with me, Dad.

I love you.