Second Childhood

Evenings after supper, before TV time, before lights-out, my mother and I walk the streets of her neighborhood. One circuit on the outer block makes 1.1 miles—I clocked it on the odometer back in high school. Back then I ran every day. Six, eight, ten laps—it didn't matter. I was fast and could run forever and I only stopped out of boredom, never because I was tired or in pain or out of breath. My hair flew behind me. I ran barefoot on grass because my feet felt weightless. It just felt fast. I don't run anymore because of my back, my knees, my wind. Now, when I move, I'm feel like a fat man dancing: no rhythm, no grace, arms bent and shuffling from one foot to the other. I am a fat man dancing. Sucks to be me.

I look for my face in the mirror, sometimes, look for the kid who dreamed of becoming an Olympic marathoner. He's not there. My mental picture of myself stopped aging in my thirties, so I expect something smooth—veinless, unwrinkled, thin face, and blonde, thinning hair. Now I look at myself and I wonder whose skin I'm wearing.

After moving back home to my mother's house, she and I fell into a daily routine: Breakfast and the paper, yard work in the mornings, house work in the afternoons, television while waiting for supper. I brought a table saw and other tools for special projects. The rest of the day I've already told you about.

When I was ten years old my family moved into a brand new house in a brand new neighborhood, and my mother has never left it. There were empty lots and new houses going up all over, and woods and fields and ponds where now there are only more houses. I wore that neighborhood like a favorite ball cap. I knew every house on the block, every family, at least by name if not better. Where I used to live, up in Kentucky, where my wife lives now, I only know

the names of the neighbors on either side of me, and no one on the street does more than wave or nod when they drive past, if even that.

When we walk, my mother sets a good pace and we don't talk. It's the same way we spend our days together, no talking. Whatever project we're working on, whether it's trying to get the lawnmower cranked, assembling patio furniture, or cooking supper, she focuses all her attention on the object at hand like she's solving a puzzle. Sometimes she'll start up with a shock, as if waking from a dream, and ask me a question that seems to come out of nowhere. I wonder what random patterns led her there. "That dog Ginger we had," she blurts out, "used to watch television when it was on. You remember? How she'd look at the screen and prick her ears? She even walked away during commercials." And the other day, she said, out of nowhere, "Your grandmother had to go all the way to the Pope for permission to divorce your grandfather." Of course she meant my father's mother, since her family didn't believe in divorce. Other than that, and the obligatory "what do you want for supper," we haven't really talked in a long time. It's much safer.

We pass the Stack brothers old house, which looks naked without the trampoline. Davis's yard was where we played Roughhouse. Davis and I spent hours hiding behind the Patterson's fence to lob water balloons at passing cars and then make a getaway into the woods behind their house. Once, during a backyard campout, Davis and I stole milk from Mr. Clancy's house after the truck made its deliveries. We didn't know he was awake and so when he surprised us on the front porch we ran through backyard shadows while he rode his bicycle and flushed us down the street. We poured the milk in the Harper's swimming pool. Beth Sutter and some of her girl friends used to smoke on her carport when her parents were at work. That was about seventh grade. Virginia Slims. Beth stole them from her mother and she liked to smoke hers down past

the word “slim,” and she’d knock the ember off the butt and hand it to a boy, tell him, “I’m a virgin.” We all snickered at whoever got the butt and wondered if what she said was true. One day in high school about forty boys gathered at Russ White’s house to see Scott Paulson fight Wes Sparks because one of them had broken the other’s CB antenna off his pickup. I can’t remember who did the breaking, but I remember Wes’ blood as Scott held him down in a chokehold and methodically punched his face with the other fist.

None of those people are around now. It’s been over thirty years since I left for college, and I haven’t thought of any of them ten times since—not even Davis. It’s just seeing the neighborhood again brings back memories.

My mother is shrinking on me as she gets old, curling up like a question mark, and losing her hearing. She doesn’t like to wear her hearing aid. Says it makes everything sound like she’s in a drum. When she was in her fifties, her hair was dark and she stood half a foot taller. She was in her prime, while I was still close enough to being a kid that she hadn’t yet lost her power over me.

When I came home from college one time—a grown man, I thought—I bought a six pack and set it in the refrigerator to chill. I heard her gasp when she opened the refrigerator We sat down at the kitchen table where all family business was aired. She cried, asked me over and over what *she* had done wrong that I had turned to drinking. It obviously had to be her fault. I don’t remember what made the incident go away. I’m sure I lied to her, promised to never drink beer again. I remember crying a bit too, seeing her cry. I thought I might have to ground myself—surrender my car keys—which always worked in high school, just to get her to let up on the guilt trip. The suspension never lasted more than a day or two. My dad would dangle the keys in front of me and I’d promise to “be good,” and he’d go back to work and I’d go on about my business.

That time in college though, it took something out of me. She wouldn't let up. And so I never drank in front of her again. When I came home after that—and later with Cheryl and the kids—I kept an ice chest in the trunk and just slipped out of the house every hour or so.

We walk on in the growing darkness without talking. Air conditioning units and lawn mowers hum, parents call children in from the yard, and cicadas roar in the tall grass of the fields behind the row of houses. The air is still warm after the heat of the day, but cooling now. I'm thinking about television later on. TBS is running Clint Eastwood week, and my favorite movie of all time, *Unforgiven*, starts in a couple of hours.

We stop for a few minutes to chat with Debbie, a woman from my mother's church. I knew her in college and we went out a few times before I moved away. I can't find the girl I knew in Debbie's face any more than I can find my own face in the mirror. She's gotten old too, with grown children. She tells me how wonderful it is that my work gives me free time in the summer to come home and help my mother with her projects. I let her believe what she wants to believe. I know my mother hasn't told anyone anything different. She probably wants to believe it herself. We say our goodnights and move on. My mother tells me that one of Debbie's kids is going to grad school somewhere. Another one is pregnant somewhere. I pretend to listen.

When we get back to the house I mix a couple of glasses of ice water and we sit on the patio and watch the lightning bugs flicker over the tall grass of the field behind my mother's house. Cattle used to graze back there, but now a new neighborhood is going in, a gated community, my mother tells me. "I bet they won't even look over the fence at us," she says. I don't really know why she cares, but I agree with her and stand up to go inside. She follows me into the living room while I turn on the television and settle in. She stands just behind and off to the side. I can feel her there in her silence.

"Sit down and watch the movie."

After a minute I turn and look at her. She's watching the screen, tapping an envelope against her leg. I think she hasn't heard and repeat the invitation, but she's ready for her shower, she replies. I turn back to the television, but she keeps standing there. When I look back she's staring at the front door, making a decision. Finally she goes to the patio door and slides the bolt home. Then she takes a padlock from a hook on the wall and locks us inside. She goes to the other doors in the house and I listen as she locks them all—the front door, the driveway, and finally the backyard door off the kitchen. The windows are already locked, but she checks them again anyhow. That's how we spent the first week together, putting in padlock hasps on all the doors and windows. One key opens all the locks, and it hangs from a stretchy keychain bracelet she wears, the kind shop girls carry so they can open display cases and cash registers.

"I'll be out in a few minutes," she says, standing beside me, still focusing on the TV. "I've got to wash my hair."

I nod.

"Enjoy your show."

"Okay," I say, and she gives me a pat on the shoulder before leaving. After a few minutes I hear water running through the pipes in the walls.

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My mother sounds taller on the telephone.

When Cheryl called her, saying she was done with me, my mother climbed in her car and drove the nine hours to pick me up. She carried my bag out to the car because I was shaking too

hard to hold it. She opened the door so I could lie across the back seat and leaned in to get a seat belt across me somehow. She sniffled and cleared her throat all the way back to her house. Every so often she'd dab at her eyes with a tissue. We only stopped for gas and once at a McDonalds for coffee and fries, but I was too sick to eat. At the time, I hadn't had solid food for days. My nutrition came in 5 liter boxes of chardonnay. Some days two or three boxes. My stomach felt like a wetted dishrag dipped in ground glass, then knotted. Sometimes when I opened my eyes I saw my father—twelve years dead—sitting in the passenger seat, talking to her. Once I heard him say, "It's in him and it's got to come out!" Another time I woke to panting and looked up to find my old yellow lab staring at me. His head was draped over the seat back and slobber dripped from his lips. When I reached out to pet him, he growled and I pulled my hand back and closed my eyes. I still remember the way that dog looked the day he ran himself to death chasing a deer in hundred degree heat. Skinny and trembling and wrung out, he staggered out of the woods after I'd hunted and called him for hours. I was still in college then, and I buried him beside a railroad that ran behind the house where I rented a room. I cried for days, drinking all the while.

I don't remember crashing the car into the tree, or walking home fourteen miles bleeding so bad from a gashed forehead that Cheryl screamed when I crawled into bed and woke her. I do remember stealing my son's pickup after Cheryl took away my keys to the other car. It seemed innocent enough: drive down to the liquor store and come right back, slip his keys back in his coat pocket, retreat to the garage where I kept an old TV set and all the old movies I'd recorded on VHS, drink my wine. I'm pretty sure I swerved to miss a dog, but I took out a mailbox and about thirty yards of somebody's newly-sodded front yard before I got it back on the street. When I got home Tim was waiting for me. He squatted down and pulled a hunk of sod out of the wheel well, ran his finger along the mailbox dent, muttered something under his breath, and

drove away. He'd called Cheryl later and told her he wasn't coming back until I checked myself into rehab.

"What about it?" Cheryl asked when she told me. She had come into the garage still wearing her Chili's t-shirt she wore to wait tables, her second job after teaching school all day. When I didn't answer right away she grabbed the wine box out of my hands and threw it on the concrete floor, then she stabbed it with the first sharp thing she could find, a foot long screwdriver. She punctured the box three or four times.

I watched the wine spread across the floor and pool in the corner. I knew where at least two more boxes, maybe three, were hidden.

"We can't afford seven thousand a month." It was a sore point, since I'd lost my job the year before.

"We can't not afford it," she said. "At least you didn't kill anybody this time."

"I missed a dog."

She looked at me then, and whatever she'd felt before—pity, fear, hatred, anger, exasperation, whatever—drained out of her face and left pure contempt. She flipped the screwdriver around so she was holding the blade and swung it like a club. She hit me in the head with the handle. I fell off my stool and felt my head bounce off the concrete. I lay there for what seemed forever, wondering if I would ever move my body again. My head felt heavy, like a jaw full of Novocain.

She stood there long enough to make sure she hadn't killed me.

I sat up to vomit.

"Can you hear me?" she asked?

I nodded. I was too sick to look at her.

"Get out."

"What?"

"Take anything you want from the garage and go away. I won't have you around here anymore."

"Take what? A sleeping bag? A crescent wrench?"

"Take whatever it is you're drinking and go live in the woods with a pack of dogs like your grandfather did after your grandmother kicked his ass out. I've got your keys and I'm calling a locksmith right now." She started for the door and then stopped, turned around. She caught her breath and ran her wrist across her eyes, drying them with her sleeve. "One day I'm going to be walking downtown and I'm going to see one of those homeless guys that live under the bridge, and it's going to be you, and I'm going to finally understand how those people end up down there."

"That won't be me."

"It will" she said, tossing the screwdriver on the floor, "and it's going to make me feel guilty." She walked inside and locked me out of the house

A week later, as she was driving home from Chili's, she found me walking the streets in a thunderstorm. I don't remember that either, but I believed her when she told me later. She took me home and gave me dry clothes and tried to feed me, but as they say in AA, I hadn't hit rock bottom yet. That's when she called my mother to come get me.

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My mother comes back into the room. She's wearing a light robe and her hair is damp.

She glides past me, leaning over and brushing me with an almost inaudible sniff—the world's most reliable breathalyzer, my brother and I used to joke—and settles into the matching recliner. She reaches for the Bible on the table between us and opens it to the marker and begins to read.

On the movie I'm watching, Clint Eastwood plays an aging outlaw, a reformed drinker who once used whiskey to cover a multitude of sins, including "dynamiting the Rock Island railroad, killing innocent women and children." He's pretty pathetic at the beginning of the movie: He can't hit a tin can with a pistol so he brings out a shotgun and blows it off a stump. He's weak and sickly most of the time, wallowing with hogs trying to sort the sick from the whole. The only way to save his family, as he sees it, is to go "on a killing" for money. But when Gene Hackman beats him up, then tortures his best friend to death because Clint killed a "no-good cowboy who cut up a whore," he starts drinking whiskey again and grows strong. He rides into town in the pouring rain and cleans house. He kills the saloon owner who "decorated" his front porch with the body of the tortured man. He shoots Gene Hackman, and then stands over him with a buffalo rifle, aiming into his face.

"I'll see you in hell, William Munny," Hackman says.

Clint aims a little more and says, "I reckon so."

"I don't deserve this," Hackman says.

"Deserve's got nothing to do with it."

Clint kills Deputy Andy and Deputy Clyde and two or three more on his way out of town. Then he rides away into the rain, drunk and righteous.

I can tell my mother doesn't like the movie by the way she rattles the pages of her Bible. When it's over she clicks the television off, saying "That can't have helped much."

I shrug my shoulders and stand and stretch. "I rekon maybe so," I say, doing my Clint.

"Go take your bath and get ready for bed," she says, and I'll be in to check on you."

I nod and head for the bathroom, but I just turn on the shower and let it run for a while. When I come out she's in my bedroom and I know she's given it a thorough search, even though there's no way I could have smuggled in anything. We've spent every waking moment together since she brought me home, and I've been under lock and key the rest of the time.

"Tomorrow we've got the yard work," she says. "And then, I'd like you to go to another meeting."

I nod and think about the long day ahead. Days are okay. Even the AA meetings break up the monotony.

My mother reaches up to check the padlocks on the windows one more time. As she does, the bathrobe sleeve falls down her wrist, and I realize she's not wearing the key. I think she realizes it at the same time, but her face gives nothing away. She drops her arms and pulls her sleeve down.

"Well, that's that," she says, sidestepping toward the door. Only I'm between her and her bedroom. I imagine the key laying on the vanity of her bathroom. She pauses because I've not moved to let her past.

"Anything else you need before I go to bed?" she asks. "Did you go to the restroom?"

I shake my head, then nod, but I'm imagining the possibilities. It would be so easy, I think, especially now that I've learned to control myself.

My mother's lips tremble for the briefest moment, but then her face goes hard. "You know I wouldn't treat you like a child unless I loved you."

I start to tell her. I know what she wants to hear. I can tell her that I'll be good, again, that I want to be good again. I am good again. But the look on her face tells me the truth and I don't

even bother to tell the lie. Before my eyes, she grows back to her former stature, back like she was before my dad died and she knew what kind of man I really am. I step to one side and let her past.

"You're just doing really good," she says. "You'll get past this thing yet." She takes me by the shoulder and gently pushes me toward my bed and wishes me goodnight, adding, "Don't stay up too late reading." She shuts the door. Not quite a slam, but hard. The padlock clicks and I imagine I hear a sigh of relief.

The room where I spent my childhood and adolescence has gone through so many themes over the years. When I was a kid I had football posters of Bob Griese and Roger Staubach. In the seventies I went through a black-light phase and I stuck candles in wine bottles and melted crayons over them, burned incense in a cement Buddha I bought at the mall, played music on an 8-track tape player, hung beaded curtains and posters that advised me to "Keep on Truckin'" and "Hang in there baby, Friday's coming." My mother learned to search a room through necessity and regular practice, though back then she worried more about pot than she did beer. Once I graduated from college and got married, she lost no time converting my room to a guest room with lacy comforters and pillow shams and potpourri in crystal bowls, just the way it is now. I crawl into bed and adjust the covers, remembering how I used to lay here at night and tune in to AM rock stations that bounced their signals the great distance from Chicago and Cincinnati and imagine my adult life lived far away from this place. Someone passes the house driving fast, and I catch a snatch of music with a heavy thumping base. Truck sounds drift down from the highway. The house grows silent except for the central air turning on and off. I wonder what Cheryl's doing now, wonder why she hasn't called in over a week to check up on me. My legs twitch and I think about the long hours until daylight and the sleep that probably won't come. I

wish I didn’t have to be inside my head in this darkness, but I know I will be.