

FIREWORKS FOR MICKEY

We pulled the cars onto the apron of the road, skidded to a halt in the gravel, threw open the doors, and hit the ground running, sprinting out onto the bridge. We tore open the box of fireworks and went at it: firecrackers popping, cherry bombs and M-80s exploding, bottle rockets and fountains shooting into the air, sending bursts of color into the midnight sky, the river rushing by below us, the tumbling rapids reflecting the rainbow of the explosions.

It was glorious and wild and beautiful, and the fact that most of us were buzzed added to the sensation. None of the fireworks were legal, but we were not worried. My older brother Randy was the county sheriff and had promised to keep his patrol cars away for at least an hour. We would empty the box before then, stagger back to the cars and peel out, tires screeching, gravel flying, heading down the river road to a place on the bank where we could finish our beer, laughing and shouting, pushing and hugging each other, behaving like tomorrow and its hangover would never come.

Crazy, reckless, dangerous—call it what you want. Mickey would have loved it.

**

It started in my parents' kitchen, a group of us gathered around leaning on the counters, drinking wine and beer and talking about Mickey. The house was full of family and friends gathered after Mickey's funeral, come to share food and drink and stories, so many stories.

Mickey is—was—my younger brother. He died in a water skiing accident at the lake just outside of town. He took a hard fall, hit a submerged log and crushed his chest. It was too soon after a summer storm to be skiing with so much debris washed out of the creeks and into the lake. But that was Mickey, always living on the edge, pushing the envelope until it burst. He was twenty-eight years old.

It's safe to say that everybody loved Mickey. Oh, maybe there were a few who were jealous of the way he stormed through the world, always the life of the party, always the guy with the prettiest girl on his arm, always the star of the winning team, grinning from page one of the sports section with the trophy in his hand.

Mickey! Even his name had a story. My father named him for Mickey Mantle, his all-time favorite ballplayer. It was easy to be jealous of a guy like my brother, but people loved him anyway, because he didn't have an ounce of meanness in him. Even the girls he loved and left never held it against him. Think about that for a minute.

So there we were in the kitchen, talking, laughing, telling Mickey stories, when Patsy Keller came into the room. I recognized her right away, even though her auburn hair was shorter and she no longer wore the horn-rimmed glasses that I thought were so cute and sexy back in high school. I caught her eye and she smiled at me. She crossed the room, took my hand and led me out onto the patio where we could talk. She was one of Mickey's girls; at least I thought she was. They had dated for a while, which broke my heart at the time because I had a huge crush on Patsy Keller. Out on the patio, on this warm July evening, she put her arms around me and held me close. When she stepped back, I could see the tears in her eyes.

“Bart, I am so sorry about Mickey. How are you doing? How are your parents holding up?”

“I guess we’re doing okay. It’s really hard on my parents, especially my dad. I still find it hard to believe that Mickey is gone. He was like a force of nature. But I don’t have to tell you that. You two were a couple, for a while at least.”

She smiled at the suggestion. “No, not really. We had a few dates, but I wasn’t Mickey’s type. Cheerleaders were more his style. I’m sure I was the only nerd he ever dated.”

The only nerd Mickey ever dated? I had to think about that for a few seconds to realize it was true, and it made me laugh. Patsy was indeed the quintessential nerd: the smartest girl in our high school class, captain of the debate team, president of the chess club, valedictorian for the class of 1998. I have to admit that I joined the debate team and the chess club just to be close to her. And the fact that she became my lab partner in Chemistry was, in my adolescent mind, the big trifecta. Of course I could never work up the courage to declare my feelings, or to ask her out on a date. I was just an acne-scarred, pimple-faced kid, praying that one day I could look in the mirror and not be mortified. When Mickey, who was a sophomore while we were seniors, asked Patsy to be his date for the Homecoming Dance, I could have strangled him. Didn’t he know she was my dream girl?

We chatted for a while longer and then drifted back into the kitchen to refresh our drinks. That’s when Gil Bradley, Mickey’s best friend, came into the room carrying a very large box. He dropped it in the middle of the floor and we leaned in to take a look.

Fireworks! Every variety of illegal fireworks you could imagine, piled to the top of that big box.

Gil looked around at all of us. “You know what Mickey would have done with this.”

We looked at Gil and saw the tension in his face, the wild look in his red-rimmed eyes. My brother Randy, Sheriff Randy McMillen, recently elected to a four-year term, looked into the box and shook his head.

“Is there anything in there that’s legal?”

“Hell no!” Gil locked eyes with Randy. He didn’t have to say it. He wanted Randy’s permission to blow up this box of paper and gunpowder, to do it in honor of a guy he had loved since they were in kindergarten together.

Randy sighed and made his decision. “Okay, look. I’ll give you cover through dispatch for one hour. Where are you going? How about down at the bridge where all the crap will fall into the water. Okay? One hour, that’s it.

And with that we went tumbling out the kitchen door, piling into the nearest available vehicles for the race to the bridge.

**

The Koffee Kup was an institution in Millers Forge, a prairie town ninety miles from Kansas City. My parents bought the place twelve years ago, the year I graduated from high school. My mom served as general manager, cashier, and hostess. It was her business to run as she saw fit, and she’d done a fine job. The café was open for

breakfast and lunch and the regular customers were there almost every day. It was a mini version of Times Square: if you stayed there long enough, everyone you knew in the county would walk through the front door.

My father's business, the Conoco station, was directly across Main Street. Dad had opened the station thirty-three years ago, just after my brother Randy was born. Millers Forge was the hub of the county and Dad drew his clientele not only from the townsfolk but from the surrounding farms as well. Most people filled their tanks at McMillan Conoco, but the real business was in the three service bays that were constantly busy with repair work. Dad built a reputation for quality service at a fair price, and he'd managed to keep up with the latest technology, purchasing state-of-the-art diagnostic equipment and training for his mechanics as cars and trucks became more and more like rolling computers.

It was just after 9:00 a.m. as I opened the door to the cafe and the bell attached to the doorframe rang brightly. Mom was behind the counter at the register and she greeted me with a tired smile. She really didn't need to be on the job the morning after Mickey's funeral, but there she was. She had insisted that being busy at work was better than sitting at home with nothing to do but think about Mickey. I gave her a hug and a kiss and asked her to join me when she had a few minutes to talk. There was an empty booth near the window that looked out onto Main Street. Mom brought two cups of coffee and slid into the seat across from me.

"How's it goin', Mom?"

"It's been pretty steady, honey. Just the usual crowd."

“I wasn’t referring to the café business. You know you could have taken a few days off.” She glared at me. “Okay, okay...I won’t mention it again.” I paused for a few seconds before continuing. “It was a nice turnout for Mickey. The house was packed last night.”

“Yes...well you know Mickey. He didn’t have any enemies.”

“True. Not even among the ex-girlfriends. I always envied his popularity. He made it look so easy.”

She reached across the table and squeezed my hand. “I know it wasn’t easy for you, Bart. But look at you now. Independent, successful, making a place for yourself in the world. You’ve done so well.”

I felt a sudden lump in my throat and it was several seconds before I could speak. “Thank you, Mom. It’s good to hear that from you. I wish I’d hear it from Dad.”

“Look, Bart, your father is proud of you. Don’t ever doubt it. The two of you just need to sit down and talk it out, put all the old hurt feelings behind you.”

“I know—”

“He was hurt when you joined the Navy and went west. You know he wanted you to come into the business with him, eventually take it over and keep it in the family.”

“It just wasn’t for me, Mom. I needed to get out of this town, see more of the world for myself. I would have been miserable, and I’d have made you and Dad miserable too.”

“Deep down he understands that, honey. You just have to give him a chance to come around. You need to start by talking to him, listening to him, give him a chance to listen to you.”

“Yeah, I know—”

“And do it now, before you leave to go back to California. The two of you need to work this out.”

I knew she was right. She’d always been the keeper of the family wisdom, the glue that held us together. “Look, I’ll go across the street as soon as I have one of your delicious waffles. I’ll make a date to sit down with him, away from the station, someplace where we can talk. Okay?”

She got up from the booth, hugged and kissed me, tears filling her tired eyes, and then headed back to her duties at the cash register. I waved to Donna, one of the waitresses who had worked at the Koffee Kup almost as long as my mom, and ordered my waffle.

Patsy and I had a date for later that day, a picnic lunch out at the lake. I would stop by and see Dad, set a time and place to have our talk, and then head home to get ready for the picnic.

**

Patsy and I got as far as the parking lot for the beach area at the lake, and then I could go no farther. I was overwhelmed by the feeling that Mickey’s death was so meaningless, that he’d lived and died for nothing, taken by a damn waterskiing accident

in the prime of his life. And I was angry. How could he have been so reckless? There was no way I could sit on a picnic blanket looking out at the lake where my brother died. I just couldn't do it. I tried to say something but I couldn't get the words out. Patsy understood. We agreed to head back to the river, down below the bridge to the spot where we had gathered after the fireworks adventure. There was a sandy stretch along the bank and the river was clear and pretty this time of year.

Patsy had packed a nice lunch for us—bread and cheese, lots of fruit, fresh-baked cookies—and I'd brought a bottle of Chablis wrapped in a towel to keep it cold. We spread a blanket on the sand and dug into the lunch, talking quietly, bringing each other up to date on our lives.

She had earned her master's degree in education and was currently teaching English at the high school in town, our old alma mater. She was looking for a doctoral program, considering several possibilities, and eventually saw herself as a professor at the university level. Doctor Patricia Keller. It had a certain ring.

I told her about my progress in building a career as a software engineer. I'd had some success and landed a VP's position with a startup in San Francisco. Business was strong and growing and we were beginning to plan for an IPO. I'd fallen in love with Marin County and bought a house in Mill Valley, just north of the Golden Gate. I rambled on and on about Northern California, until I caught myself and apologized for boring her with the subject.

We walked down to the water's edge and I did my best to impress her with my ability to skip stones. Patsy skipped a few herself, every bit as impressive as mine, and I

remembered that she was also a member of the varsity softball team back in the day. I wondered if there was anything she could not do.

Later, sitting on the blanket, she gave me a quick rundown on the people we'd gone to school with, all the usual suspects: the jocks, the cheerleaders, the student body officers, and of course, the rebels. I was amazed that it was so easy to talk to her now, remembering how tongue-tied I'd been when we were teenagers.

"You know, Patsy, I had a major crush on you. All through middle school and high school."

"I know. I liked you too."

"What? You're kidding me!" I was shocked. How could our signals have been so crossed?

"I kept waiting for you to make a move. I was a little too shy to make one of my own. When we were lab partners in Chemistry, I thought sure you'd ask me out."

"But...you went to the Homecoming Dance with Mickey. You know that broke my heart."

She smiled and laughed. "Talk about surprises. Mickey just walked up and asked me to the dance. I couldn't think of anything to say but 'yes.' You were the one I really wanted to go with."

We were sitting close together and I didn't have to move very far to kiss her—the first time. There were a lot of kisses after that and Patsy was very good at kissing, just as I had dreamed she would be. My heart pounded out of my chest and I wanted to

shout *I love you! I've always loved you!* It was way too soon, but what a wonderful beginning.

**

The Koffee Kup was busy as usual, but I was able to secure that same booth next to the window. My dad had to open the station and make sure all of the repair appointments were covered, and then he would join me. I sipped a cup of coffee and tried to organize my thoughts. It wasn't working. All I really wanted was for the two of us not to be angry anymore. I watched him cross the street and swing the door open, the bell ringing its happy tune as he came in. My thoughts were still jumbled as he slid into the booth. Our waitress, a young girl I didn't know, brought coffee for my dad and menus for both of us, though we didn't need them. We both ordered waffles with eggs on the side and she smiled and hurried away toward the kitchen.

"Bart, I'm glad...you know—"

"Yeah, Dad, ah...I know you're...uh...busy." Shit. This was not going to be easy. It was quiet for a few seconds.

"So...was that you and your friends, down at the bridge the other night, with the damn fireworks?"

Oh boy. He was pissed. We'd embarrassed him, created a rowdy scene on the day of his son's funeral. Now I was getting a little stirred up, too. I locked eyes with him. "Yeah, Dad. That was us. Me and all of Mickey's friends."

"You couldn't wait...couldn't pick another night to go raise hell?"

I was seeing red by then. I knew if I stayed in that booth, I'd say things I would regret later. I slid out without excusing myself and headed for the men's room near the front of the café. I locked the door, leaned against the sink, stared in the mirror, splashed water in my face—anything I could think of to calm myself, to make my heart stop racing. I'm not sure how long I was in there, but someone began to jiggle the doorknob and knock. I unlocked the door, brushed past the man waiting outside, and started down the aisle toward the booth, surprised to see that my dad was still there. I sat down and we stared at each other for a few seconds.

“Look, son, let's start over. Okay? Yeah, I was upset about the fireworks thing. But, I talked to Gil Bradley...” I saw the glint in his eyes soften. “He told me it was—”

“It was spectacular!” I pronounced every syllable. “Mickey—”

“I know...Mickey would have loved it.” He finished my sentence and his lower lip trembled.

I should have gone to his side of the booth and hugged him, but we were never that comfortable with open displays of affection. It took a few seconds to recover, but the ice between us had melted. I opened my mouth and let it rip.

“Look, Dad, I'm sorry things didn't work out the way you wanted. I know you wanted me to come into the business with you, but it just wasn't for me, you know? I just had to get out of this town, not that there's anything wrong with Millers Forge. I just had to see what else there was in this world.” I waited then, searching his eyes, not knowing what to expect.

“You’re right, son. I was counting on you to come in with me. I mean, we knew Randy only cared about law enforcement, about being a sheriff. That’s all he ever wanted. And Mickey...well, Mickey was a damn fine mechanic, but he had no interest in running a business. That left you...smart, good with numbers, good with people. I guess I looked at you and saw a way to pass on my...my legacy. I know that sounds like a pompous ass thing to say, but that’s how I felt. When you joined the Navy and went to California, I was hurt. I didn’t take it well. And I took it out on you. I’m sorry.”

I was surprised, but only for a moment. This was my dad: he’d always been a straight shooter. He never talked a lot, but when he did, he gave you the plain truth.

“Dad...I...I don’t—”

“Wait, son. Let me finish. I know now that what you did was the right thing—for you. And believe me, I’m proud of what you’ve done out there, even though I don’t understand what the hell it is.” He smiled then. “And you bought a house? In Mill Valley? I’m proud of you, Bart. Very proud.”

From there the conversation flowed and we managed to clear away most of the accumulated garbage. The waffles and eggs were gone, our dishes cleared away, and we were into our second gallon of coffee, when my dad grew very serious once again. I knew something big was coming.

“Bart, your mom and I have been talking about it, for some time, even before Mickey’s accident, and I’ve finally decided. I’m going to retire. Hang it up. Sell the station and...well, just do something else.”

I couldn't believe it. "Oh my God! Dad! I mean, that's great. But do something else? Like what?"

"I don't know, son. We've done pretty well, saved our money. The book of business, all the loyal customers at the station, should bring a good price. I have a set of golf clubs I've hardly used. We may travel a little, see some of the country. Of course, we'll keep the Koffee Kup for a while. Your mom wants to stay busy. But we have good help here, especially Donna, and we can take off and be gone and not worry."

"Dad, I don't know what to say. I think it's great, for both of you."

"You know, I've always wanted to see the Grand Canyon, and Mt. Rushmore, and that Crazy Horse monument, and Yosemite. And...well, I'd like to see your neck of the woods, Mill Valley and the Golden Gate Bridge, maybe ride one of those cable cars."

When we finally left the restaurant, Mom looked at us with a curious expression, trying to figure out what brought on so many smiles and so much shared laughter, and why she was getting hugged and kissed like that, right there in public. We'd explain it to her later, at home.

**

I spent a beautiful Sunday with Randy and his brood. My sister-in-law Joanna did her magic in the kitchen while my brother and I watched my niece and nephew demonstrate their riding skills. Randy and Joanna had purchased eight acres out in the rolling country, enough to provide good grass for two ponies. Randy had built a corral

and a small barn for the horses and he kept it well stocked with hay. Their rambling four bedroom house sat up on a nob, the highest point on the property, and the view from their porch made me remember all the things I loved about home.

Their children, Randall Jr. and Dianna, were ten and twelve years old respectively and they were not sure what to make of Uncle Bart. It had been a long while since I'd seen them. Still they enjoyed showing off a little, first with the horses and then with a spirited game of soccer out on the front lawn.

Randy and I settled on the porch with a cold beer while the kids went to clean up for dinner.

"I hear you and Dad talked it out, dumped some of the old baggage."

"Yeah, we did. It was time...past time, actually."

"Did he tell you he's gonna retire, sell the station?"

"Yes he did. Knocked me for a loop. I thought they'd have to carry him out of there with his boots on."

Randy laughed. "Me too. But, hell, he's worked hard all his life. It's time to take a break. If he can just convince Mom to do some traveling, take some time for herself, I think it's a good thing."

We were quiet for a minute, watching a trio of buzzards circling in the bright blue sky, a few puffy white clouds drifting through to the east. Finally, I raised the topic we'd been avoiding. "So how are y'all handling Mickey's...Mickey's accident?" I couldn't make myself say *death*.

“I don’t know, Bart. I guess we’re okay. The kids were really torn up. They idolized Mickey. In their eyes, he could do no wrong. He’d come by for dinner most Sundays, and the kids looked forward to it like it was their birthday or something. They took it hard.”

“And how about you, Randy?”

He took a long pull on his beer and I could see him blinking rapidly. “I guess...I was just like the kids...couldn’t wait for him to get here. It’s like Sunday couldn’t begin until Mickey turned off the highway and up the road. He always made me laugh, Bart. Always made me laugh...”

Joanna opened the screen door. “Come on in, boys. Dinner is about to hit the table. And, Bart, I want to hear all about you and Patsy Keller, and don’t skip any of the juicy details.”

Thank God for Joanna’s good timing. I watched Randy dry his eyes on his sleeve as we headed inside.

**

I glanced at the clock on the bedside table. “I should probably go.”

“Why don’t you stay? This is nice, isn’t it?”

“It’s perfect.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“You were perfect...more than perfect...if there is such a thing.”

She laughed. "You weren't too bad yourself, buck-o."

I paused for a few seconds. "My parents will be expecting me. They'll worry."

"So, call them."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, tell them you're staying over."

"Okay."

"I'll get the phone for you." Patsy threw back the covers and walked quickly across the room to retrieve her cordless phone.

I watched her go and return and my body felt like I'd grabbed an electric fence. She was no rail-thin supermodel, not even close. She was a woman with a woman's lovely curves. She was beautiful. I couldn't wait to hold her again.

A while later, I dialed my parents' number and my dad answered. "Hi, Dad. Hey, just calling to let you know I won't be home tonight."

"Oh? You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm staying over at Patsy's. I'll see you guys in the morning."

"Okay, son. We'll have to leave around ten tomorrow morning to get you to the airport. Bart..." He paused for a moment. "Give Patsy our love."

I smiled and glanced at Patsy. "I will certainly do that...and Dad...I love you." It felt clumsy when I said it, but I was determined to end every conversation that way from now on.

"Love you too, son."

Patsy was smiling at me as I handed her the phone.

**

My flight left Kansas City right on time. I thought about closing my eyes and trying to sleep, but I knew it was useless. I was too jazzed to relax. Patsy would be coming to California next month for a visit and to check out doctoral programs at universities in the Bay Area. I couldn't wait to show her around Mill Valley, and San Francisco with its iconic bridges, hills, cable cars, and world-class restaurants. I knew she would love the wine country, and the Point Reyes Seashore, and maybe we could make it down to Monterey, or up to Lake Tahoe. Northern California has so much to offer, in addition to the great schools.

I'd also made plans to come home (yes, Millers Forge would always be home) for my dad's sixty-sixth birthday in October. It felt good to know that the two of us were on the right track, finally, after the lost years. And I was determined to make sure that he and Mom came west for a visit. Dad was absolutely going to get his cable car ride.

I glanced out the window at the thick cloud cover below the wings of the plane, a vast sea of cotton balls. Up ahead, I saw a break in the clouds and far below, somewhere on the prairie, a lake was coming into view. I thought about Mickey and felt

my heart drop. How long would it be before I could look at a lake—any lake—and not think of my brother? As the scene below passed under the silver wing, I thought about my Dad and all the ground that we had gained. I thought about Patsy and our plans for the future. And I thought about how it all came together. I saw my reflection in the window, tears in my eyes, a smile on my face. *Look what you've done, Mickey. Just look what you've done.*