I PUT MY LIFE IN YOUR HANDS

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In the months after my father's death, I saw him everywhere. There, the stoop-shouldered stranger in front of the firehouse. There, in a diner, his oval head under a puff of white hair, his eyes boring into me through a painted glass window: "Pancakes and Eggs – $3.99." At the school where I taught English, a raspy voice in the hall made the hair on the back of my neck tingle: my father's voice in the body of a gray-haired man wearing a rumpled tweed sport coat, asking directions to the music room. How often I heard my father's artless, clockety gait every time the custodian passed in front of my classroom with the rolling trash bin. He had a wooden leg, my father, wedged into a wooden shoe.

The wooden leg was on account of what happened to my father in the Second World War. He was marching through a pasture in the Netherlands on a mission of some kind, and a cow nearby stepped on a live mortar shell that blew the animal to bits. My father was lucky he didn't die; the shell just took his leg off below the right knee. He was covered in viscera from the cow. He would tell people he was a war hero, but it wasn't like he lost his leg in a firefight with the Germans. That would have been heroic. No, it was all because of a Dutch cow in the wrong place. Still, he came home with only half a leg and the gruesome memory of an exploded cow, so maybe there's something heroic in that.

This whole period I'm talking about was nuts, really. These months after my father died. I couldn't stop seeing him. I saw him in every gin blossom, every determined limp, every moth-eaten cardigan, every pair of brown slacks. I saw him in the mall, at the gas pump, at Mass, at bus stops, in the pharmacy. I started seeing these kaleidoscopic images of my father's face, swirling around my head, like cartoon birds, twittering. Like I said, this went on for months. But

the most startling visions came at night, when I'd wake and see him standing next to my bed, watching me sleep. Sometimes, before he'd appear next to me, I'd hear him. Mind you, this was in the middle of the night. I'd hear, *ker-clop, ker-clop, ker-clop.* We had wall-to-wall carpet with foam padding throughout our house, so there was no worldly explanation for me to hear these firm wooden footsteps at night, which had to mean there was something other-worldly going on.

Soon, I was at my wit's end with it all. It got to the point where I was only sleeping a few hours a night, if I was lucky. There were nights I didn't sleep at all. Or I could count my sleep in minutes. I was scared. I started taking pills just so I could get some shuteye. I started taking Annie's expired pain pills, left over from hernia surgery. These were pills that had a warning label saying not to drive a vehicle or operate heavy machinery, because they would make you drowsy. You'd think they'd knock a guy like me straight out. I am not a big man. It's not like trying to drug a horse with a tranquilizer dart. But no luck. Annie's post-op pills had no effect on me. "They're expired," she said, but I said they should still be potent enough to make me sleepy.

So, I tried an allergy pill and a glass of Gallo. We didn't drink like we used to, so I thought a little wine and an allergy pill would put me out. Still, no luck. Then I tried two pills and two glasses of Gallo. Annie said I was going to accidentally kill myself. I said, "Anything for a little sleep, Annie." She didn't find that funny, not one bit.

Even with two pills and two glasses of Gallo, I wasn't drowsy, not at night anyway. By day, though, I was a mess. I started missing work. When I was there, I yawned through lessons on Chaim Potok and William Golding. Then, during lunch hour, I put my head on my desk and slept. I drooled on student papers, so I moved to the floor. I locked my classroom door and curled up under my desk, just to get a few minutes of sleep. All because of my dead father.

Things were going downhill for me, and fast. At home, with Annie and the kids, I was no fun to be around. I snapped at the kids for running through the house, at Annie for talking too loudly. Her voice bounced around my skull and wouldn't leave. I shushed her once. She was talking loud and cutesy to the dog and I said, "Shhhh!" It was very abrupt of me, but her loud, cute talking really struck a nerve at that moment. Every one of my nerves was raw and sensitive from lack of sleep. I was becoming somebody else, entirely.

"You need a counselor," Annie said. This was after I shushed her. She was going on about how she didn't recognize me anymore. "These last few months," she said. "Since your dad died." There was a time in our marriage I would have not thought to shush her, Annie said. "What has happened to you? To us?"

"You're right," I said. "I need a counselor."

She said, "We're growing apart."

"We're not growing apart," I said. "Maybe we just need a night out. We don't go out anymore. We used to have fun." Annie looked hurt by this. I'd say she looked wounded, like I was telling her our marriage had gone stale. And maybe it had, a little. Maybe *routine* is a better word to describe what was happening with me and Annie. Things had just gotten routine. And then, the visits from my father. It put me so on edge that other things were bubbling up. Things that were lying dormant were now coming to the surface. I got more tired. I got worried. Maybe Annie was right. Maybe we were growing apart.

I had an idea, though. Something that might just fix the whole mess. "I have something I want to try," I said. "It could be just what I need."

Annie was up for it. "I'll try anything," she said. "I can be fun. I can really let my hair down. You'll see."

So that Friday night we sprung for a sitter and a cab ride to Mick's on Main Street, where my father used to drink. It happened to be his birthday, and Mick's was where he spent all his birthdays. Not just birthdays, even; he was a regular at Mick's. It was his usual haunt. They knew his name there. He had a running tab. My whole idea, this thing I wanted to try, was to go to Mick's and make amends with my father's ghost. If Annie and I could have fun while doing it, I could kill two birds with one stone.

As I said, Annie was up for it. She said, "Let's go have some drinks in honor of your father." She said, "Let's put this to rest." Annie put on a black dress and heels for the occasion; she looked slim and shapely in this dress. She let her hair go a little wild so it fell unevenly around her face. ("I told you I could let my hair down," she said.) I wore a silk shirt and tie. This was going to be a funeral, of sorts, but it was also going to be fun. That's what I told Annie. I said, "This is going to be fun, you wait." She said, "you can't spell funeral without F U N." Since we didn't have an actual funeral for my father, I figured that's what was behind it all. The visiting, I mean. Maybe my father resented me. His spirit was restless. I don't know. I figured if I had a small funeral for my father, and we had a few drinks and laughs together, he'd stop coming around.

We met friends at Mick's that Friday, Earl and Jenny, old pals from our drinking days. Earl was a retired prison guard. Jenny, a social worker at a private practice. Over the phone, we all agreed we were going to tie one on, just like we used to, in honor of Woody, which is the name my father went by on account of the aforementioned wooden leg and wooden shoe. His Christian name was Gary, but nobody ever called him that. It was Woody or nothing for my father. It reminded him of his war days, and there was pride in the name, even though what brought him home was that Dutch cow. I bought a pack of cigarettes from the bartender, Earl

bought a pitcher of lager, and we found a booth in the corner of Mick's, where we could hunker down and linger in the pale blue nimbus of our smoke. Through spells and shanties and incantations, we were going to exorcize from me all forms of my father—all visions and voices—once and for bloody-hell all.

I set a photograph on the table of my father in his soldier's uniform. This was a picture my mother had in her personal effects. That's what the woman who helped me pack my mother's belongings called them: her personal effects. I had never heard that before. I had never heard that boxes of things belonging to a dead person were called "personal effects." This made them more special, I guess, more special than just "things." Anyway, this picture was in a box of personal effects marked "Gary" (she could not bring herself to call him Woody), which she never returned to him after they divorced. She just kept the box on the floor of her coat closet for twenty-two years.

About my mother: I didn't have visions of her after she died. She never visited me in diners or at work. I never heard her voice, and she didn't watch me sleep. Then again, *we did* have a funeral for my mother. We laid her soul to rest. I think that was the key to the whole enigma with my father. For my mother, there were dozens of mourners in the church, and everyone got to pay their last respects. It was a nice celebration of life for my mother. There was a sermon. There was a reading from the book of Luke ("Father, I put my life in your hands"). The sacrament of the Holy Eucharist was given. My mother had friends there who dabbed tears in their eyes with silk hankies. They had cold, blue hands, and they placed them on my cheeks. They rubbed under my eye with their thumb. They said, "There, there." They said, "Your mother thought so highly of you, Richard."

Right afterward, my father approached me in his cardigan and tie and brown slacks. He smelled of mothballs and whiskey and sandalwood musk. Exactly how an old man should smell. He made me swear I would not have a funeral for him. “I mean it,” he said. “I need you to promise me this one thing.” As though I’d broken all other promises to my father. He said this as my mother was being loaded into the hearse, as the casket rolled inside, as the black hollow engulfed her, as the steel doors shut, as the final pallbearer signaled to the driver that all was safe and sound.

“Okay,” I said. “I promise.”

He could have at least waited until she was gone before he started in on himself.

“That’s a good boy,” my father said. Then, joking, he said, “If you have a funeral for me, I’ll never talk to you again, *ha ha*,” which is the exact opposite of what happened; I wound up granting his wish, then after he died, he wouldn’t leave me alone.

In the picture on the table, my father wore a steel helmet with the leather chin strap undone. He was with two other soldiers wearing the same helmets. They were smiling, all of them, so this was obviously before my father’s incident with the Dutch cow. There’s no way you could smile after something like that, after being spattered with cow guts, I mean. This was a picture taken when my father still had all his body parts. It could have been the day before, for all I know. I wondered how he got the picture. I wondered who was walking around the front lines with a camera and all that film instead of a gun, which would have been more useful.

We took turns looking at the photograph. Me, Annie, Jenny, and Earl. We ran the pads of our fingers over the picture. Jenny said my father looked happy. He looked like he was “in his element,” Jenny said.

Earl said he looked like a troublemaker. Earl said he looked like the type of guy who would come back and haunt his only son.

"Earl, hush," Jenny said.

"Best thing we can do is raise a glass to him," Earl said. So that's what he did. He lifted his beer-filled mug. "To Woody!" he said.

"To Woody!" we said.

Then, Earl shouted, "Now be gone with you, Woody!" It was a proclamation, really. It was the kind of thing a fat king would yell to a disobedient subject. "Be gone with you!" This drew some attention from the others in the bar. There was a pregnant pause, as they say, but then, slowly, people went back to their own business of forgetting. There returned to the windowless atmosphere the tinkling of glassware. "That ought to do it," Earl said. "I think he's gone."

"Let's hope so," I said.

We raised our mugs to join Earl, clinked them together, and drank. I took a long, satisfying pull of the lager Earl ordered for us. It went down easily. Annie and Jenny sipped at the foam. They made little slurping noises as the foam crossed over their lips. Annie's face puckered; she wasn't much of a drinker anymore, not since the kids came around. I could say the same for myself. Things I used to relish I no longer felt drawn to. I didn't blame the kids for this, or Annie; it's just how it was then. I didn't even enjoy my cigarette.

Earl, though, Earl was a different story. Earl lived life to the hilt. Earl didn't sip at the foam. He finished his beer in one swallow. He threw his head back and his neck looked like a snake with a rabbit wriggling inside. These mugs were small, twelve ounces or so, not that it would have mattered to Earl. He was a fat man, all puffed up, his big, florid face pumping out sweat. "If I don't sweat, I'll explode," he'd said, and we got a kick out of that, me and Annie,

because Earl was one of those funny, unpretentious fat men. He told jokes about himself: “I once wore a yellow raincoat on the street and someone yelled ‘Taxi!’”

Hilarious, Earl.

Earl went places with a clean white towel around his neck, which he used to dab at the anvil of his sweat-beaded forehead, like he’d just walked out of the sauna. He had layers of fleshy chin, broad hands, and fingers with big knuckles. Wedged below one of them was his wedding ring, which he said would need to be cut off if Jenny ever left him. His ring finger was like a twisted balloon animal. As God had seemingly created Earl in good humor, Earl’s mission was to honor that creation by laughing at himself and inviting others to laugh with him: “I have more chins than a Chinese phone book,” he always said, with an overtly conscious lack of tact.

Over the years, Jenny had fallen into the role of Earl’s handler. They didn’t have kids, unlike me and Annie. We had a boy and a girl, Marty and Sharon, seven and five. They were good kids, so far. No real trouble to speak of, but they were still young, Annie said; they could still turn into trouble.

“Earl is my kid,” Jenny always said. Earl was all the kid Jenny needed; he gave her purpose. Jenny’s job was to take care of this man who bumped through life like a blind circus bear. She loved him purely and completely. It was a remarkable kind of love. Who knows where Earl would have been without Jenny?

After he downed his beer, Earl clunked his empty mug on the table and wiped the back of his hand across his lips. “Mmmm,” he said. He poured himself another, which foamed up and spilled over the rim. He topped me off, then waved to the barmaid. She wore a black leather skirt over fishnets and a white shirt with ruffles. She walked over and sat down very stiffly upon this

little tuffet right next to our table. She said, “You folks look like you’re ready to have fun.” She refreshed our cocktail napkins and our ashtray. She set a basket of oyster crackers on the table.

“You can keep those coming, honey,” Earl said about the oyster crackers. Earl liked to snack while he drank, for absorption, he said. He said something about enzymes in his stomach.

Jenny said, “She has a name, Earl.” Then the barmaid turned her shoulder so we could all see her name tag: *Lydia*. Earl pointed his fat finger at Lydia’s name tag. He spelled her name out loud with his finger bouncing in the air over the letters: “L Y D I A,” he said.

“Okay, then,” he said. “Lydia, *honey*, bring one pitcher every ten minutes until we pass out. Then, bring one pitcher every twenty minutes.”

Jenny punched Earl in his shoulder, which was big as a ham.

“Don’t mind him,” Jenny said to Lydia.

Then, to me: “Annie said you’ve had a visitor.” This was more like a question than a remark.

“My father, you mean.”

Annie and Jenny exchanged knowing glances. Annie had debriefed Jenny. As I said, Jenny was a social worker. She was gifted in the area of talking to people with troubles. I guess to be with Earl—to be married to him, I mean—you had to have had some kind of mental health training. Jenny went to school in Bakersfield at the state college there. She wanted to work with inmates when she started out. She wanted to go into the prison and give angry men tools to cope with their issues, so that’s what she did. Earl was a guard there, so this was quite a joke with them for a while, when people asked them how they met. “In prison,” Earl said, which really was God’s honest truth on the matter: Earl and Jenny met in prison. They had a small wedding in the prison chapel, followed by a reception in the exercise yard, which, other than the razor wire, was

all very nice and festive, if you ask me. A prison wedding would not be my first choice, but it suited Earl and Jenny just fine. It was *apropos*, all things considered.

After a while, there was a need for a social worker at a local practice, closer to home, and Earl said that would be a better fit for Jenny. He didn't like that his now-wife, a bird of a woman, was in a room one-on-one every day with a violent offender, no matter how repentant the man was over his crime. No matter how shackled and sorry. Plus, Earl grew too fat, so he retired. He said he could no longer chase anybody down. Jenny got on with the practice to work with grieving people and to keep Earl happy. She sat with sad women whose husbands had died, for instance, and coaxed them through their sorrows. She told them to remember the good times. To cherish them, is what she would say. She gave them literature to study, little books written by priests on the process of grieving, filled with comforting Bible verses: "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord." Stuff like that. She gave them these books and her business card and said, "Call me when you are feeling sad about your husband." Or your mom or your dad or your sister or your brother. Everybody had losses, and it was Jenny's job to talk people through them. So, if there was anyone in the world who could help me figure out this thing with my dead father—how I could get to a place of un-seeing him—it would be Jenny.

Jenny said, "Yes, your father."

I said, "Yeah, well."

"Tell Rich the thing about bereavement hallucinations," Annie said to Jenny. "Tell him what you told me, about how it's pretty common." Annie was wagging her finger in Jenny's direction, as though she was really on to something here.

"Very common," Jenny said.

"What about them?" I said. "What do you know about hallucinations?" I wanted to know what Jenny said to Annie about me, about my father. I wanted to know exactly how common these hallucinations were.

"It's not uncommon to continue seeing your loved ones even long after they die," Jenny said. "Especially in your dreams."

"I'd hardly call him a loved one," I said. "When will he go away?"

"Maybe never," Jenny said. "He may never go away."

"Let's not talk too much about all that," Earl said. He had his big hand on the pitcher of beer. The pitcher looked small in Earl's hand. He could have drunk straight from it.

"Well, that *is* the reason we're here," Jenny said. She rolled her eyes at Earl. "We're here because Richie needs closure with his dad."

"Richie needs another beer, is what Richie needs," Earl said.

"That's fine," I said. "Fill 'er up, big guy." I was feeling swimmy inside. I was tired, too. So very, very tired. Sleep was still evasive at that point. But I also felt unbalanced, unmoored, as though someone or something had removed me from myself. Just a few beers into the night, and I was already in a swale of self-examination. Who was I? Was I *really* crazy? What was wrong with me? That's when I felt the soft weight of Annie's hand on the back of my neck, when I caught the scent of her hair. Her eyes had a little light in them. There was a smile forming on her red lips; her inviting neck lit a fire in me.

Earl topped off all the beers at the table. He drained the pitcher and, just like that, Lydia was back with another. I drank half my beer in one swallow. (Like I said, the mugs were small.)

"Here we are, folks," Lydia said. "Ten minutes, on the dot."

"That's the stuff," Earl said. He rubbed his hands together, as though warming them.

Lydia set the pitcher of beer in the middle of the table, along with a fresh basket of oyster crackers. While she busied herself, I peered into my beer mug; I closed one eye, and with the open eye I studied what was left in my glass, like I was looking into a microscope. I discerned the shape of my own hand through the fluid, pressed flat against the table. I stared a good long time into my glass, looking for clarity in my own fingers. It was dizzying, to be honest. In the aperture, everything was in honey-colored motion. There was something nauseating going on at that moment. A pain in my eyes, like they were crossing. I opened both of them and looked away from my beer and shook off the nausea.

Annie asked was I okay. She said, "Whoa, there." I reached for her wrist; I swayed a little and tried to lock eyeballs with Earl, but it was a space across the table too vertiginous to cross.

I turned toward Lydia then, with nothing on my mind but a cool glass of water. I was all set to ask Lydia for this water, to say, with a flourish, "Can we get a round of ice waters for the table?" and that was when I saw my father, right there in Mick's. Standing where Lydia was standing, with an empty, perspiring beer pitcher in his liver-spotted hand. Unmistakably, my father. Lydia was gone and my father was in her place. There, the burst capillaries in his knobby nose; his dark, deep-set eyes; his bushy, graying eyebrows; his white hair gone yellow at the flyaway tips. Yes, that was my father. The name tag: *Woody*. Lydia was gone, vanished. And it was my father's voice, not Lydia's, that said he'd be back in ten minutes with another pitcher, "on the dot." And then, more strangely still, he turned and walked away like a corkscrew, limping from our table, such that even in the din of a noisy bar, I could hear him: *ker-clop, ker-clop, ker-clop*.

All of this was as real to me as Annie's hand, still on my neck, her fingernails softly raking my skin. Suddenly, I began to shake. First, it was my shoulders. Then it moved down to

my arms, into my wrists and hands. The beer still in my mug slopped and splashed onto the table on account of my spasming hand. The glass tumbled away from me. My whole body shook in jabs and jolts.

"What's up with you, man?" Earl said. "Are you having some kind of seizure, Richie? Are you having a stroke?" He started to come over the table to me, upsetting the full pitcher of beer my father had just left. "What's going on with you?"

I looked at Annie; her face had gone ghost gray. At that moment, she was spectral. I had this horrible, lucid fear that she would disappear, that I would reach for Annie but my hands would pass right through her, that she was somehow a figment, either a life I was losing or a life I never had. I managed to raise my hands and place them on Annie's shoulders. They were there, thank God; I held them. Annie's shoulders were firm beneath my trembling hands. I told myself that Annie was real.

"Oh, baby," Annie said. "I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry, baby." Then she said everything was going to be okay. She said this through tears. Jenny hollered for a doctor. She yelled, "Is there a doctor in the house?" just like in the movies. Then Earl yelled, too, in his booming voice. He yelled, "Someone call a doctor!" There was a ruckus at that point; there were people milling about with some fervor. I was already in some other place by then, inside the strangeness of the smoke-filled bar, wandering through my own murky head, too removed from myself to know what I was feeling, but with an urgent sense that I needed to say something, to tell Annie and Jenny and Earl that my father was gone, that I watched him walk away.

Annie said, "I love you, baby." Annie loved me and I loved Annie. I knew this in my blood but I could not speak it. My lips were trembling. I was trying but failing to speak. *He's gone*, I wanted to say. Annie seemed to know what was happening to me. She said, "I know,

baby, I know." Her voice told me I wasn't alone. Her voice told me how tired she knew I was. I wanted to put my head down right there, in the crook of her neck. I wanted to let myself slip to the floor, like a satin sheet, but I found that no part of me could move. Still, there was a sensation of stepping into the air, a white passage into a different kind of life, one finally free of my father. Annie took my face in her hands and brought my cheek to her cheek. She held our faces together, fused, skin to skin, and I felt her tears on my neck. They were hot tears, but I shivered, so Annie pulled my whole body into hers. Her urgent arms devoured me in her warmth, and in her I surrendered to a familiar yet infallible found-ness unlike any I had ever known.