

## Savings

The doctor at rehab warned him of some of the longer term problems of drug abuse. Every night came the insomnia and anxiety. It was 3:00 am and John was welcoming even the semi wakeful sleep that would usually creep over him. He was in his father's bed and pulled up the army blankets over his head and reminisced about Ivy in the backyards. The rehab doctor told him to try to think of a good memory, get lost into it, and maybe sleep might come.

As he thought about Ivy, he felt his father shape worn in the mattress. He was almost the same built as his father but lacked the weight due to his addictions. John was six-one, and before his addiction, he was 185 pounds, lean and strong. The room was now John's since his father, Big John, passed away several days before. The funeral was going to be the next day and on this day the wake would start late afternoon.

John was drifting off to the memory of Ivy when the backyard dogs howled with the sound of sirens. Slowly, the sirens faded and the long howls remained and carried him deeper into his childhood memory of Ivy, his father and himself. Ivy was a big half shepherd and chow mix John would feed her Slim Jims from his hand. He received his paper boy money and his denim jacket pockets were filled with Slim-Jims, soft pretzels, packets of M&M's and chocolate Tastykakes. Ivy would gently take the piece of meat from his hand and back off to her doghouse to relish the greasy snack.

John walked homeward and nibbled the treats thinking he had to enjoy them before he arrived home. His father would take most of his paper boy money from him and falsely preached about spending too much on treats and saving for a rainy day. John knew his father would use most of it to gamble. The other problem that night was the big corner kids that feasted on the smaller

paper boys. He felt he was okay in the darkness; he was wearing black and trying to remain silent except for stopping occasionally to pick up his stash of treats that fell from his stuffed pockets while complaining every time one fell, “Damn, damn”! There was one item he had a good grip on, the roll of quarters he aimed to use at the arcade on the weekend.

It was when he dropped his pack of M&M's that the dogs went wild with the sound of the hard shelled chocolate spilling on the concrete. Some of the dogs ran into the metal fences and then he heard running footsteps sounds coming up behind him. He was kicked in the ribs and then the head by Moose, the fat-ass shake down artist who was a few grades ahead of John in High School.

Moose started kicking John and then started going through his pockets. John heard buzzing in his ears but he knew it was up to him to handle the situation but what could he do, it was his fault for being careless. He just had to gut it out with Moose on one side and on the other side, a fence with a big yard dog barreling into it trying to latch on to John. After Moose went through his pockets, he picked up an unopened packet of M&M's. John heard him say, “Goodbye to your M&M's”, and dumped them into his mouth.

There was an audience to the events that night because John was late getting home to hand over half his pay to his father, Big John. He was late and Big John decided to walk through the back yard driveways to find him. Big John often came up the street to pull his son off the street corner. He usually found him drinking beer with the aroma of pot surrounding the corner. That night John saw his father in the dim light reaching over the fence and petting a dog. He looked sinister with shadows climbing over and springing off his leather jacket. John knew his father wouldn't

interrupt what was happening and he knew Big John would watch how he dealt with the situation at hand. He imagined his father telling him, “Hold on and go on.”

John was catching his breath when he watched Moose starting to pick up his quarters which fell from his fingers. John slowly stood up. He steadied his self, then went into a three-point stance and charged at Moose’s bent over butt. When he hit him, Moose tripped forward into the fence toward Ivy and Big John. Moose was going to beat John who had fallen again from his head butt attack. As Moose rose he noticed Big John slowly lighting up a cigarette. Moose knew the bone breaking reputation of Big John and was about to run when he was hit again by a charging ram of John’s hard head. He staggered, regain his footing and then was rammed again and again until Moose ran off yelling, “Crazy baster”!

John keep ramming the fences and growling like an animal causing the dogs to bark and back yard lights blinking on and calls from windows, “Who’s out there, what’s going on?”

Big John identified himself and said all was okay and within seconds all was quite again except for Ivy eating Slim Jims.

All that was left was Big John laughing and John on the ground gathering up his quarters while cursing and swearing he was going to kill Moose. “Head butting”, Big John said laughing and patting John on the head.

“Nothing damaged,” Big John said. He then took out his flashlight and helped his kid pick up quarters in the backyards of a Philly neighborhood.

After dreaming of the backyards, John laughed a bit thinking of what he and his father looked like when crawling on the ground picking up quarters occasionally petting Olive with her Slim

Jim breath. He remembered his father taking half his quarters and giving his son the same tired story of saving for the future.

As he woke he felt old and new anxieties wash over his consciousness. John was trying to make things straight in his head. First of all, he was alone and being a drunk and a drug addict, being alone was a big deal. Secondly, he was in charge of the house now and there were bills and all the rest of it to deal with. Then there was dealing with all the degenerate gamblers and bar flies his father had known. They would all come to the wake and there would be drinking and drug taking. Anyway, there was the matter that his father had died and he felt terrible about it but as his old man would tell him when his nerves were shot because of drug taking, “Everyone gets knocked on their ass, hold on, go on then hold on, go on.”

John was wishing his thoughts would stop reeling when he heard pounding at the door. It was George Hanley, his father’s best friend and employer. He was the kind of friend who was loyal and there when his mother passed from breast cancer when he was 9, his addiction and now his father’s death not to mention the odds and ends of life’s highs and lows. John liked George; he was closest to any family he had left.

George was a short heavy set man that seemed always out of breath. He had what John thought the typical race track haggard look. He wore an old wrinkled gray suit. His black checker shirt and cheap black dress shoes had been worn for many days. He smoked a cigar and the through the cigar smoke were watery half-blood shop eyes. John thought nothing upset him, he was always cool and calm or a bit drunk.

“Ya okay kid?” George asked John. They seated themselves in the kitchen and John picked a clean glass on the counter and poured one of his father’s Budweiser for George.

John felt like telling George to get out. He didn't understand anyone asking a question like that. Wasn't it obvious that everything in the house reminds him that his father wasn't there? But family was entitled to say dumb ass things, he thought.

"Look Kid, I can see you're toughing it out. If you need something you just ask me," George said tapping the mental kitchen table. John sat the beer down next to George and George looked at it and shook his head. "Kid, you don't have to give me a cold one; I know you have your problems with booze and all. You don't have to cater to the likes of me or the other boozers. You hear me?"

John rubbed his face and took a deep breath. He was glad George was there.

"Flannery came in the bar with your money", George said giving John folded twenties.

John took the money and placed it on the table.

"Better check it, you know that Flannery's a crook," George said.

John nodded and knew Flannery was a drunk, low life, miserable house painter who was forced to give him a job. He started counting the money. It smelled like turpentine and had some white paint on some bills. It was the first time he had actually saw all his pay. Big John collected it in the pass and gave him an allowance.

"He wouldn't cheat me because my father threatened him and I know you wouldn't let him cheat me." John said putting the money in his pocket.

"Yeah, your old man got you that job, I told him, I'd hire you to clean up but your father wouldn't go for that. It was his notion you work at the bottom and Flannery was the bottom. Old man knew what he was doing, I guess."

“I remember when we were riding over to Flannery. I was sweating about the notion of working. I didn’t know if I could. I was scared of being straight and I didn’t know if I had the guts of being normal. We get there at Flannery’s garage. The place smelled like turpentine, beer, piss and cigarettes. My old man told me to wait in the truck while he went in to talk to Flannery. I saw a hose on the side of the building so I left the old man’s truck and drank from the hose while looking in the window. I saw my father pushing Flannery around until Flannery started nodding his head yelling he would hire me. It was then that I knew something was up with my old man. He was leaner than me and I wondered how that could be since I was the boozier and addict.”

John stopped talking and lit a cigarette. He remembered the wind blew Big John’s work shirt and when the wind stopped, he somehow looked vacant and pale.

“The old man made me shake hands with Flannery and agree to low pay and taking orders from a drunken house painter. When I got back to the truck my old man said, “When you finally come around and know you have enough, you’ll feel better.”

“When my father took the bad turn and you sent that kid up to Flannery’s garage to get me, Flannery wasn’t going to let me go. I wasn’t going to leave because I was still shaky, a drug coward but then I noticed how dirty I smelled with paint and dirt all over me. I was looking more and more like Flannery. I asked Flannery again to leave and he kept telling me I had to listen to him and the last draw was Flannery pointing his finger in my face, I pushed him back and I could feel anger going up my spine like electricity. I mean my father never told me or anyone else he needed them. I stood up in front of him and it was the first time I noticed I was bigger than him.

I pushed him back and was ready to square him one but I gave him mercy.” John said crushing his cigarette in the ashtray.

“Takes a drunken, drug taking loser to know a drunken, drug taking loser,” John said lighting another cigarette.

“I remember you being out of breath and all. You telling your old man how you quite made him feel better, was good to see him bragging about you.” George said putting his hands behind his head and blowing smoke rings.

Both men became silent and remember looking at Big John falling asleep. George had sent for John because Big John had asked to see him and looking at him sleep that night he thought all was good for the moment and left son and father by themselves while he went back to the bar. It was the last time he saw Big John alive.

“I have a lot of memories with your old man.” George said puffing on his cigar tapping the table and looking over John shoulders. He was viewing all the memories of his best friend and looked at his son. John looked so much like him. It was funny, he thought looking at the cloths John wore. It was basically the same get-up his father wore, green work shirt, Khaki pants, black hair in a crew cut. Just like his father the cloths hung loose off him in a rough and ready style. It took George back to when he was young and he laughed about the pass.

“Your old man would fight with a drop of a hat. Gee, when we were about your age there was this loud mouth kid at the beach, a muscle man beach type who picked a fight with your old man. Two seconds later after your old man’s left hook that kid woke up kissing sand. He was a skinny bad ass your father.” George said. John heard the story hundreds of times but he listened. He respected George.

“Ahh, kid, you don’t want to get me started, don’t worry about anything. So, I need a shirt, want to show me them?” George asked. John stood up and walked back to his father’s room. There in a closet were about a dozen Hawaiian shirts. After Viet Nam, John’s father was station awhile in Hawaii and as a result of his time there he brought back dozens of Hawaiian shirts.

There were all different colors and scenes, blue waves, green emerald palm trees, guys surfing yellow boards, half naked women hula dancers. George started laughing and taking the cigar from his mouth he said, “What the hell was your old man thinking that these would sell in Philly. Damn, he always talked about visiting Hawaii. He loved that place.” Ed said piling the shirts in his arms.

The story John got from his father was a guy owed him money and he took the shirts in place of some of the money. Big John liked them and figured he would make a buck when he returned to Philly but he never sold them, he liked Hawaii and the shirts. He was always telling John how it was sunny all the time with a warm breeze and nice looking women running around on the beaches.

George talked about memories as he rummaged through the shirts. He was laughing at the pictures of hula girls on the shirts dancing a bit while thinking of what color would be best. John lay back on the bed not wanting to look at the shirts. They took him back when he pleaded with his old man to kill him.

The vision of the light ocean blue shirt with sword fish riding the waves made him feel ashamed. He had worn it when his father broke in the local shooting den. He had been shooting dope for some time. He had left his old man’s house and lived with a bunch of addicts. He dealt drugs for a living. Big John knew and didn’t even acknowledge him when they awkwardly met each other



on the street. Drugs were a big NO for Big John and sometimes when he saw his son he asked him with anger and disgust, “banging shit up your arm?”

John always remembers those words when one day he came back to the house when his father wasn't there. He looked for money and found some in an envelope his father kept in the refrigerator freezer. He was with two of his dope fiend buddies who had found the Hawaiian shirts. They draped the sword fish shirt around John's shoulder, laughed at the sight of him then left to buy drugs.

John knew, stealing, especially stealing from his father was a bad decision and sitting in the bedroom, he shook his head still coming to grips of how far gone he was back then. The neighbors had taken in the scene of him and the two other losers as they were leaving the house. They headed to score dope and do up at an abandon house a few neighborhoods over from his father's house

John and his buddies were lying about upstairs as there were screams and yells of the degenerates down stairs. Then there were footsteps coming up the stairs and in the doorway stood his father. He was red face, breathing hard with his fist bloody from some of the folks he had smacked around down stairs.” My son, my shirts,” he shouted kicking John's two cronies, tearing the shirts off of them and then throwing them downstairs. Then it was John's turn and John remembered his father holding him over the railing yelling, “Bum, bum son, I'll kill you with my own hands, bum junky son.”

John remember his hands were slipping from his father's gripe and John thought he was going to be dropped, He was giving into the thought that it might as well be, he was a junky, stealing from

his family and if it weren't for his father holding his anger in check, he'd be dead. His father pulled him over the railing. He remembered his father telling him, "Hang on, hang on to me."

John thought about his father hanging him over the railing, having nothing but his father hands hanging on to him and now being on his own. "Hold on," he told himself and lit a cigarette.

"Hey, 'nough with the day dreams, how I look?" George asked sporting a purple beach and orange sunset shirt.

"Guess, it's okay, it goes with the brown suit", John said shaking his head at the sight of his friend's dress.

"You got no taste kid but, I feel good in it," Ed said going back in the closet and grapping all the shirts. He was going to hand them out to the local patrons of the bar. It was a way of honoring his friend. The two men walked down the stairs and as Ed was ready to open the door and leave, he turn to John and stared at him for a minute, "You okay if I have the wake at the bar? With all your troubles..."

John shook his head," That's okay, I'll be okay, I'm not drinking, taking drugs, dealing drugs, and all the rest. I like the bar; after all, I grew up there." John said with George nodding his head.

"The human cannonball, remember, the human cannonball, "George yelled and laughed. John smiled; he still remembered when his father tossed him in the air. He put his hands out like superman and thought he would fly and then Ed would catch him and the two men threw him back and forth with him laughing and the rest of the bar patrons laughing all because a little kid was enjoying himself with the smell of tobacco smoke, reflections of different color bottles and listening to the clatter of men cursing, womanizing, gambling and drinking.

“What story you come up with for the wake?” George said flipping the ashes of his cigar then turning to walk away.

“Me in the back yards charging head first into Moose, fences and all,” John said.

“Yeah, your old man enjoyed that one, said it was an example of Irish bowling.” George said turning to say good bye to John then dissolving into cigar smoke and his red Catty.

John watched George drive away and took a deep breath of the remnants of cigar smoke. The smell reminded him of the bar and when he was a kid watching his father and George talk about horses to bet on. Sometimes he wipe tables and the patrons would give him change and his father took his money and told him he was saving it for him. He never argue about it because his father always allowed him to get his treats first and most times that pleased his desires until he turned to drugs. He had wondered where his Flannery money was going, but he didn't ask. He owed his father for taking him in again.

John had a better story to tell at the wake but he thought he keep it to himself for a bit. He walked up stairs and fetched a wrapped up piece of Hawaiian shirt from under the bed and then rested on the bed to examine it again while recalling the story.

On Big John's last night, John fell asleep on the chair next to his father's bed. It was about two in the morning when he felt his father shove him with the torn piece of shirt in his hand. John took it and looked at his father. ‘It's all good, I'm here with you’, John said watching his father nod then close his glassy eyes. He put his father hand back in bed and that's when he noticed the pill bottle under the pillow. It was his pain killers and John opened it quickly as if it was automatic he take some but he began to think what a betrayal it would be for him and his father. He felt

relieved when he saw the bottle was empty. “Hold on then go on”, he told himself, thinking in the pass, he wouldn’t have a second thought about throwing them down his throat.

He then examined the contents of the shirt. There was a bank book made out in the names of both his father and himself. There was a lot of money. His hunch was his father took no money from his Flannery job. He had given it all to him along with an advertisement on a vacation to Hawaii. On the advertisement, in his father’s scribble, the words, ‘Two Tickets’ was printed.

John kept looking at the green piece of Hawaiian shirt. It was filled with sea birds, and sunny blue skies. He fell asleep looking at it thinking of his father’s walking the sands of Hawaii.

When he woke, he found his father had passed away in his sleep. He didn’t have any feelings but only numbness and then he noticed how quiet the morning was, as if everything in the world had stood still. When he held his father against his chest, he couldn’t believe how light the cancer had left him. He closed his eyes and felt the cool breeze from the window. The only thing he heard was his own breathing and with it, he no longer felt his father’s grip. It was as if his father had released him into air.

