

Dancing Naked

When I turned the rental car off the main highway and onto the unpaved road, it began to rain. Within minutes, it became a downpour; the wipers could barely keep up with the torrent. I drove slowly on the red clay, glancing to my left at the dilapidated house which had long been abandoned, its siding weathered and discolored, the roof bowing under the weight of years of moss and moisture. I couldn't recall the name of the family who used to live in the shack some twenty-five years ago, but what did it matter? I started up the hill, maneuvering around the potholes and rocks, staying close to the right lest I slide off the ever growing embankment to my left. I was reminded of the film *Misery* where the main character careened off the road in a blizzard and was buried in the snowstorm, invisible from the main road. I wouldn't be buried under snow, of course, but under trees and brush two hundred feet below. They didn't have guardrails out here in the back country on these old dirt roads so it was proceed at your own risk. If I slid off the road, I may not be discovered for months, perhaps years.

I continued cautiously up the hill, making a right by the old mailbox fashioned from an old rusted weathervane and wagon wheel. After another few hundred feet of stone and clay, around another bend in the road, the eclectic house came into view. I pulled up to the front of the basement entrance where the road ended and noticed movement in the tall grass up on the hill. It was hard to see through the downpour as visibility was practically nil, but I knew who it was nevertheless. Dancing naked in the deluge, bar of soap in one hand, white as an albino, was my father. I sat behind the wheel of the rented Navigator watching this man, who was oblivious to my arrival, dance around like a nutcase straight out of *One Flew Over the Cuckoos Nest*. He

must not have heard the vehicle climbing up the hill through all the rain and wind. I was ready to turn and head back down the hill when he saw me sitting there like a lost tourist. I suddenly felt trapped. This was a mistake. I knew I shouldn't have come after all these years, but I was the only one left and I felt obligated after receiving the call.

He started toward me, his genitals flapping and bouncing in the wind, his hand sans soap raised above his eyebrows in a salute, trying to make out the person who had come uninvited onto his property. I shrank down in the seat as if I could make myself invisible. What the hell was wrong with me? I was acting like a strange little kid, not a fifty-year-old man that was respected and admired among his peers. I wondered if I should get out and meet my father head on, or wait for him to reach the vehicle. I could just throw the Navigator in reverse and leave, never looking back. But I knew that I would always be looking back, wondering what became of my father if I just left him, naked and dancing in southern Missouri.

Before he was upon me, I climbed out of the vehicle. I was instantly soaked. Hurriedly, I made my way for cover under the second-story porch. He watched me with amused interest and then he followed me, not bothering to cover up. When he joined me under the porch, I tried not to stare. "Go put something on," I begged. I found it funny that these were the first words I had spoken to my father in over fifteen years.

"And who the hell are you? What are you doing on my land? Get off my property!" he bellowed, waiving a hand at me like he was swatting at an insect.

"Dad...it's me, Darrin."

The old guy just looked at me.

"Darrin. Your son? Look I know –"

“I don’t have no son,” he interrupted. “Now get the hell off my property before you get hurt.” With that, he turned and went inside the house.

I hesitated for a moment and then, against my better judgment, I followed.

When Pickett, my father’s long-time next door neighbor, who lived about a mile further up the embattled road, called me last week and said I needed to come, I had resisted. And so had my wife Lauren. She had reminded me, ever so pleasantly, that my father was a louse, a deadbeat, and I had about as much obligation to him as I did to a dead rat.

“A dead rat?” I’d repeated with a smile.

“Come on Darrin, you know exactly what I mean. In all the years we’ve been married, has that man ever tried to be a dad? Has he called you just to see how you were or congratulated you on your promotions or asked about his grandkids? Has he —”

“I get it Lauren. But what if this is the last time I ever see him? What if something happens to him? I don’t want to have to live with the regret that maybe I could’ve patched things up, or possibly helped him in some way.”

She let out a sigh that said: *You just don’t get it, do you?* But she said nothing; she just gave me a sad look. I started to say something then but she just put a finger to my lips and shook her head. “I’ll let the kids know you’ll be gone for a few days.”

Now, in the basement of my father’s home, I stared, fascinated, at my surroundings. Exposed pipes and wires ran through the unfinished walls. The cement foundation to my left was bowed and cracked where the original forms had given way when the concrete was poured. Ahead of me was a makeshift kitchen that smelled rancid, as if something had died here. Along another wall, stacked on the floor and running the length of the room were canned fruits and vegetables that had molded and rotted, the lids to the jars rusted shut like an old car in a

wrecking yard. Another room was divided by a framed wall that had never been finished and stood exposed like a stripper at the end of her act. On the adjacent wall hung a discolored, tattered sheet, which had been tacked up for privacy purposes.

I heard my father upstairs then, banging around doing only god knows what. I headed for the stairs. When I got to the landing, I stopped and listened. It was eerily quiet, as if my dad had either left the house by way of the front door or was in wait for me to reach the top of the stairs where he would then lower an axe, planting it in my skull. I started up to the main floor. When I reached the top I peered around the corner, but the old man wasn't there nor did an axe make an acquaintance with my head.

I was in a room now that boasted a green couch that looked as if it had been left on the side of the road with a handwritten FREE sign on it. The carpet was an orange/black shag that came right out of some '70's sitcom. I heard a grumble coming from the kitchen. Cautiously I made my way towards the sound by way of the dining room, not sure if my father was joking when he told me to leave before I got hurt. I still wasn't sure if he knew who I was or not. Pickett had mentioned dementia, possible Alzheimer's when I had spoken with him last week.

Dad saw me through the pass bar. In his left hand was a freshly made sandwich, in his right, a knife. He grinned, put the knife on the counter and said, "I ain't seen you in a good long while!" His tone was friendly, almost comforting.

"Yeah, it has been a few years," I replied cautiously, not moving any closer, keeping my eye on the knife that lay on the counter. I was relieved to see that he had covered himself with a pair of denim overalls, favored in these parts, but it looked like that was all he was wearing. There wasn't a shirt underneath, just that white wrinkled skin winking out from the straps of the overalls. In my mind I saw myself plopping a straw hat on his head, sticking a corncob pipe in

his mouth and posting him on a pole out in the cornfields. A human scarecrow. I chuckled at the image.

Even at eighty four, he still boasted a head of black hair with wisps of whitish gray along the temples. He was missing a few teeth, and the ones he still had were stained an ugly brown, reminding me of long-time habitual tobacco chewers. His weathered skin was tough, sinewy, from years of harsh outdoor weather as my workaholic father had built this house and worked the land. His grayish stubble made him look tougher than he really was. And at five-seven, he was a good three inches shorter than I.

“How many years?” he asked, taking a bite of his sandwich.

“Well, I think it’s been about...well, let’s see,” I started, taking a deep breath and searching my brain for the last time I’d been here. “Seventeen years,” I finally said.

“Seventeen years? That seems like a long time to not talk to your father. You know what the Bible says about that? I believe that would be a sin. *Honor thy Father and Mother*. That’s what it says. Seventeen years is not honoring nothing, now is it boy?” He took another bite of his sandwich, never taking his eyes off me.

“Well, it’s not like I didn’t try.”

He just looked at me, chewing slowly, methodically.

“You never would take my calls,” I managed, feeling like it was all my fault even though I knew it wasn’t. Funny how childhood guilt carried over into adulthood, I thought. “After Mom died, you just disowned me.”

“You hungry boy? Want a sandwich?”

I shook my head. “No. No thanks.”

He grunted and walked out of the kitchen. He went into the living room and plopped down on the sofa. His feet were bare and crusted over with calloused yellowed skin; his toenails were cracked – they looked as if they were ready to give up and just fall off at any moment. Dirt was caked between his toes.

I sat down across from him in an old wooden chair that was painted purple. Odd. Didn't really go with the orange carpet or the green walls. But then nothing in this house went together, nothing matched.

Before I could say anything, a dog – I think it was a terrier of some sort – limped into the room, its fur dirty and matted, ticks bigger than my thumb clinging to the poor animal's skin, sucking its blood. My dad grinned. "Come on up here Trixster," he said, patting the soiled cushion beside him. I could smell the animal from across the room. The thing stunk so badly, I thought I might vomit. I felt my stomach lurch and bile climbed up the back of my throat. I swallowed hard. And then I realized it wasn't just the dog that smelled bad, it was my father...it was the whole damn house.

"You really need to get that dog cleaned up. Get him –"

"Her! This lovely animal is a female. What the hell is wrong with you boy?"

"Look Dad, I just –"

"Just what?" he interrupted.

"I just want to see if we can work things out, you know. We're all getting older and I thought...well...you know, before something happens maybe we should patch things up."

"Ya mean before I croak, dontcha boy? Want this beautiful property when I die huh? That's why you're here boy, isn't it?"

"My name is Darrin," I said. "And I don't want anything."

He laughed a hard, deep laugh. “Bullshit!” he bellowed. “You came only to see what you could get from a old man that might be kickin’ the bucket soon. Selfish son-of-a-bitch!”

I shook my head. “That’s not true!” I shouted. “That’s just not true,” I repeated, quieter this time. I felt a pang of shame for my outburst. It was my *father*, after all. “I...I need to get some air.” I walked toward the front door and I could hear him behind me like some stalker. I turned and he stopped, eyeing me with amused interest. “Please let me be...give me a few minutes to collect my thoughts.”

“I thought we gonna talk boy,” he said.

“In a minute. Be back in a minute.” With that, I stepped out onto the front porch and into the humid air that was May in Missouri. The rain had stopped as abruptly as it had started; I was reminded of how fast the weather could change in the Midwest. One moment it was raining like God was going to once again destroy the earth and ten minutes later it was the perfect summer day. I fumbled my cell out of my pocket; I didn’t have any service.

I started down the hill, hoping I would pick up a signal, my new Nikes beginning to go from white to brown as the dirt road did its work. I continued walking until I had two bars on my phone. I dialed home. I just wanted to hear my wife’s voice; I needed something familiar and sane after meeting with this crazy man who was pretending to be my dad.

Lauren picked up on the third ring. “Hi honey, I miss you.”

“I miss you too. More than I can say.”

“You okay?”

“I’m not sure, Lauren. I don’t, well, I don’t know what I’m doing here.”

There was silence on the other end as if we had lost our connection.

“Are you there?”

“Yes.”

“I’m at a loss of what to do. Maybe I should just come home.”

“I would love that, the kids would love that, but you need to resolve this or you will always be looking back wondering if it could’ve been different.”

“You should see this place. You should see *him*. There is rotted garbage lying around, feces on the carpet –”

“Wait, what? Did you say feces?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Oh gross. If your dad is shitting on the carpet, you really need to get him some help. I thought he was okay living on his own.”

“I think its animal feces. But the place stinks and he’s painted the walls weird colors, nothing matches, bright orange carpet, its...well strange. He must’ve done all this after Mom died because she would never have lived like this.”

“Didn’t Pickett say he was losing it?”

“Well yeah, but...”

“And your Mom died over twenty years ago Darrin. That’s a long time for someone to be alone, especially out in the middle of nowhere with nothing but a bunch of animals for company.”

“And speaking of animals Lauren, you should see the dog. She’s in terrible shape. Doesn’t look like she’s had a bath in a long time and there are dog ticks all over the poor thing.”

“Okay Darrin, whatever. The question is, what are you going to do about this?”

Ignoring her, I said: “And then he had the balls to accuse me of coming all this way only to take his property. Can you believe that? Like I’d ever want this run-down junk pile or anything

of this crazy man who never had time for..." I trailed off. I was pacing around in a circle on the road, sweating and angry.

"Darrin. Stop, please just stop."

"Yeah...okay, you're right. Sorry, it's just...it's just that I had this all different in my mind, ya know? I didn't expect things to go this way. I didn't have any clue that he lived in such squalor and -"

I heard the sound of an engine. It was getting closer, louder.

"Darrin?"

"Yes, I'm here. Someone's coming. I'll call you later honey. Love you. Bye." Without waiting for a response, I terminated the call. I looked back at the house and there was my father, that *man*, standing in the middle of the road watching me. I half expected him to start running after me, babbling some shit about the planets or something, but he just stood there as if he were waiting at a bus stop. I turned my back to him and started around the bend in the road, wiping the sweat from my forehead, when the vehicle came into view. It was a lime green, old model Ford Pickup with wooden slats for sideboards. Standing in the bed of the truck were three young men that couldn't have been much older than sixteen or seventeen. I moved to the side of the road to let them pass, but they pulled over across from me and stopped.

"Who the hell are you and what are you doing on my road?" one of them asked, deftly jumping out of the bed of the truck and walking towards me. I took a step backward and almost tripped over a large boulder. I caught myself and regained my composure just as the young man was upon me.

"I asked you a question old man," he said, poking me in the chest with his forefinger. I smelled liquor on his breath.

God, that's all I need is a bunch of drunk teenagers wanting a fight.

“Ryan, leave him alone!” It was a girl’s voice; the driver of the truck. I hadn’t even noticed her. My attention had been fixed on the three boys in the back and I hadn’t given the person behind the wheel a second thought. Until now.

The other two boys clambered over the wooden slats, jumped down to the road and joined their friend, although they stood a few steps behind their leader. The man closest to me, the one who smelled like a brewery, was at least six-five but lanky. His eyes were slits, his jaw set and he looked like he was itching for a brawl.

“Three against one isn’t really fair now is it?” I said.

“Naw it ain’t,” he drooled. “That’s why it’s jus gonna be you and me.”

I heard the door of the truck open and the girl got out. “I said leave him alone! Ryan you –”

He turned on her then. “What, you little bitch! What the fuck are you doing hanging out with us anyway? Trying to be one of the boys? Or did you just want all three of us at once, you little whore!” he yelled. He staggered, caught himself and then he did something that shocked not only me, but his friends too. He hit the young woman in the face. Not a slap, not a light tap, but he really *hit* her as if he were fighting someone his own size and gender. Blood squirted from her nose. She went down screaming.

“Ryan, what the hell! What is wrong with you man?” yelled one of the boys. He looked shocked and scared.

Ignoring him, Ryan turned back to me, his fist cocked, ready to break my nose next. Or my jaw.

And then the blast of a shotgun cut through the day with such ferocity, I feared for my life. We all stopped and turned in the direction of the noise. And there he was, standing there with a

shotgun in the crook of his arm, tendrils of smoke billowing to the heavens. My dad. He was grinning. “Go ‘head Ryan, sees what happens if you hit my boy. Or if you hit that girl again.” He looked at me and then walked over to the young woman and offered her his hand. She was crying quietly, blood mixed with snot running down her face. “Want me to shoot this piece of shit?” he asked her politely.

She shook her head. “Uh...Uh...n-no.”

He helped her up and gently guided her behind him, using his body as a barrier. Ryan started toward him, but stopped abruptly when my father raised the shotgun from his arm. “I wouldn’t,” he said, shaking his head. “Get your ass in that piece o’ junk and head outa here right now before I stop listenin’ to the girl here and shoot ya.”

Ryan looked in my dad’s eyes and saw nothing but business buried in those dark circles. He pointed at him as he backed up to the vehicle and fumbled for the door handle. “You just made the biggest mistake of your life,” he grumbled as he opened the door and climbed in behind the wheel. Ryan’s two companions jumped in the back without a word. Silent, but not taking his eyes off the man with the shotgun, Ryan started down the hill. The woman poked her head out from behind my dad and shouted: “Asshole!” as he drove off.

The three of us stood there, none of us speaking, watching the truck until it was gone. “You’re safe now,” Dad said to the young woman once the truck was out of sight. He gently pulled her around to face him. “This here’s my boy, Darrin. He comes out to visit about ever twenty years or sumpin’ like that, dontcha boy? Came out here now to see an old fellar off to the grave or to the crazy house and –”

“Enough Dad.” I turned to the woman and held out my hand. “Darrin. And you are?”

“Alice,” she said taking my hand in hers. She didn’t sound too great – there was a definite nasal quality to her voice.

“Let’s go to the house and get you cleaned up,” I offered.

“Okay,” she said. “You don’t mind, do you Bill?”

My father shook his head. “No, Alice, course not. Never mind your company, you knows that.”

I watched the two of them. “You know each other?” I asked Alice.

“Yes we do,” she replied as we started walking up the hill to the house. “I’ve been visiting your father since I was fourteen.”

“And how old are you now?”

“I turned twenty three last month,” she said with evident pride. I could tell it hurt her to talk though because when she spoke, she winced a little.

“Really? You don’t look much older than eighteen.” My mind was reeling with questions and my heart was still beating twice its normal speed, but I decided to save the important stuff for later.

When we reached the house, Alice went in and headed straight for the bathroom.

“She sure knows her way around,” I said to Dad.

“Course she does, she’s been here a lot.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Who was that guy that wanted to fight?”

“That was the local bad boy,” Dad said. “He’s nuttin’ but trouble ‘round here. Drugs. PCP I think they call it. Fried that kids head. That boys so screwed up and so mean he’s done spent a good spell of his short life behind bars.”

Alice came out of the bathroom. She had cleaned the blood off her face, but her yellow top was stained dark red. Wisps of toilet paper poked out of her nostrils like tiny fingers.

“So what were you doing with the local crazy boy?” I asked after she sat down.

“He’s my cousin. I was just helping him out by driving so he didn’t get into more trouble. They took his license a couple of months back and he asked me for a favor.” She shrugged and sighed.

“Alice is too nice sometimes,” Dad said shaking his head. “Don’t come much better than this here girl.”

“What about those other boys that were with him?”

“Oh, those boys ain’t old enough to be behind the wheel. And they don’t have any sense at all. They only hang around Ryan because he gets the good stuff. They all use each other.” She paused for a moment, looking down at the bloodstain on her shirt. “I’ve never seen him quite like this though. He’s getting worse. He’s never hit me before.”

My father got up and walked over to the dirty window. He peered outside, his back to us, and just stood there.

“Dad? You okay?”

He whirled around to face us. “Who the hell are you? Get outa my house! Both of yuns, out. Now!” He pointed to the door.

Baffled, I looked at Alice. When I started to speak, she cut me off with a slight shake of her head and a look that...well...frightened me.

Dad started pacing and mumbling things that didn’t make any sense at all. Alice and I sat there and watched in silence; after a few minutes of this, Dad stripped out of his overalls and, naked as the day he was born, went outside and back up on the hill where I’d first spotted him.

“What in God’s name is going on?” I asked.

Alice came over and sat next to me on the couch. She took my hand and gave me a look that said: *I’m so sorry.*

“Your father is suffering from dementia and it has been getting worse. That’s why I called you here.”

“What do you mean you called me here? You didn’t call me –”

“My father did.”

“You’re Glen Pickett’s daughter? Little Alice? Oh my but have you grown up! I haven’t seen you since you were...uhm...” I sat back looking at this beautiful young woman that was a little girl of five or six the last time I’d seen her. I felt old then, really old.

“I know,” she replied with a smile. “I grew up. But we really have to do something about your dad before he hurts himself or someone else.”

“Dad wouldn’t hurt anyone would he?”

“You saw him with that shotgun. He could have a ruckus with someone and just go off, blow their head off. He is completely unpredictable.”

“And how do you know so much about him?”

“Bill – your father – paid me to take care of him. Come in and cook, wash the dishes, bathe him, that sort of thing.”

I looked around at the mess but before I could say anything more, she continued. “I clean up, then within a few days the dogs have crapped everywhere, your fathers a mess again and the house stinks like a slaughterhouse.”

I said nothing.

“Do you know what dissociative fugue is?”

“No.”

“It’s when a person, such as your father, loses his identity and forgets his past. It’s like amnesia but it only last for a few hours, sometimes a day or so. This is what your father suffers from. It is usually brought on by a stressful event, such as the one with Ryan.”

“This is how he was when I first came up here a few hours ago.”

“Exactly,” Alice said. “The frequency of these fugue states has increased at an alarming rate and are very unpredictable now.”

“So what do we do?” I asked. I got up and went to the back window. I watched the naked man dancing in the waist-high brown grass as if he didn’t have a care in the world. I wondered how a person could forget their own offspring. And then I realized if I were ever to find peace I had to let it go and help this man even if he didn’t remember me or care to call me his father.

“I have made arrangements with authorities in Springfield to have him involuntarily committed, but we need your signature since you are now the only living relative. And you will have to testify in court that he is not capable of making his own decisions. I will help you with that. I will testify regarding his erratic behavior and his mental decline over the past few years.”

I turned away from the window. “Why are you doing this? What’s in this for you?”

“Darrin, your dad may seem nuts, but one thing he did right over the years was to purchase half this town.” She looked at me with a half-smile, waiting for my reaction.

I stood there with my hands stuffed in the pocket of my jeans, letting this sink in and what it all meant. “You...you mean he’s well off?”

“I wouldn’t just say ‘well off’ Darrin. Your father’s a rich man, only he doesn’t know it and if he did he wouldn’t care.”

I was at a loss for words. I must've looked as if I were going to faint or something because Alice told me I'd better sit. I did as suggested.

"I'm not asking for much, I'm really not. I like your dad and he has always been kind to me. Just a small amount, only ten percent."

"Ten percent of what? How much are we talking about?" I asked.

"Roughly two million." she said, not making eye contact.

"So you want two-hundred thousand?"

"Seems like a small amount compared to what you'll get. And you haven't even been here all these years – I've been taking care of him. The money will help me get out of this stinkin' town. Your dad would want that," she said quietly.

I watched my father in silence through that dirty window for a moment longer before I agreed to help Alice Pickett.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," I said. I went outside and drew in a deep breath of fresh air. I started down the hill, then stopped and watched the man dancing naked in the tall grass. He seemed oblivious and happy. I smiled and continued down the road to call my wife.