

Fathers

“Colder than a witch’s tit,” I said to myself.

“In a brass bra,” I replied, but it didn’t make me snicker like it had in junior high. The defroster wasn’t living up to its name, and the tight turn lay outside the small circle in the windshield I had managed to keep fog free. The car lurched as I bounded over the curb and into the parking lot of the Altenheim assisted living facility.

My first-person dialog might well be evidence of a severe psychological condition, but I figure talking to myself is preferable to drinking too much or kicking my dog, and it usually keeps my mind off the ridiculous condition of my car. Usually, because the inefficiency of the heater this winter was more than any man should have to bear. I got out and slammed the door shut. It crashed into the seatbelt buckle and bounced back against me, leaving a swath of road salt on my pants leg.

“At the North Pole!” I shouted and slammed it again. It held this time, but I aimed my foot at the snow booger in the front wheel well anyway. The thick brown chunk of ice didn’t budge. By the time the pain registered in my pain control central, I was halfway across the mushy parking lot.

“At midnight,” I muttered.

The double doors opened when they saw me, and I entered the foyer. The second set of doors opened as I was stomping the slush from my feet onto the mat. A woman with a walker stood in front of me.

“Good afternoon,” I said, opening my face into a smile.

“My daughter is coming for dinner,” the woman said. “Now that it’s turned warmer.”

“Sounds good,” I said, but she had continued past, maneuvering the walker carefully over the tiled floor.

My father was slumped in his wheelchair in front of the large flat screen in what was called the living room. A large, red-carpeted area with windows opening onto a courtyard, it sat between the dining room on the right and a small library-like space with a conference table on the left. I looked to the glass-fronted birdcage covering the rear wall, but I was too far away to hear the birds. Maybe he’d like to watch them fly around, maybe the colors would catch his eye. Sometimes he likes that. Usually I can’t tell.

He was wearing the plaid shirt I had given him for Christmas under a black cardigan. Both were flecked with food spots, fresh, probably from today’s lunch. His legs, knobby and veined I knew them to be, were hidden by a pair of gray sweat pants, elasticized at the ankles, pulled down nearly to the tops of the ASICS trainers he had been wearing for years. The soles, however, were clean and unmarked, and I didn’t look at them. I also didn’t look at my father’s waist, thickened by the diapers he wore. The sweats and the shoes reminded me of the athlete he had been.

“Hey, Pops,” I said and bent down to look into his eyes.

His eyes lighted to mine then flickered to someplace over my shoulder. “Wha?”

“It’s me, Joe.” I patted my father’s hands, and sat down on a red tufted armchair beside him. His hands were nearly transparent, blue-veined like his legs and flecked with brown spots, but surprisingly sturdy, not like they had been, but not as fragile as they appeared. I told myself that touching the skin of my father’s hands, like the goodbye kiss to come, made up for my lack of faith when I identified myself instead of letting him say my name. I was afraid to know if my father knew who I was.

“They treating you well?” I said. “You look pretty good.”

“Well, yes, I guess so. They ran me to the creole. Thursday maybe, and they told me about the howza.”

“The howza?”

“You know, the, the.” Dad’s eyes jumped as he struggled to find the word.

I cursed myself again. I knew better than to put him in that kind of spot. “Oh, yeah the howza. Sure. So did you have a good time?”

“Your old man knows how to have a good time.” He chuckled the way he used to and reached out his hand.

I squeezed it and swallowed the lump in my throat. “Yes you do, Pops.”

“St. Swithun’s Day. The what do you call her told us about St. Swithun.”

“You got me, I don’t know who that is.”

“Thursday,” he said and nodded confidently. “Thursday.”

“Thursday,” I agreed. “Sounds good to me.”

“What’s Thursday, Conrad?”

“Oh, hi Jodi,” I said to the caregiver. Unassuming and kind, the young woman had the patience I lacked. “I don’t know exactly what we’re talking about, but I know it’s Thursday.”

My father said, “Damn right.”

Jodi laughed and handed me a small can of diet soda. My father’s she poured into a plastic cup. “He’s been better, Mr. Lehrer, sitting at the check-in counter and chatting up a storm.”

“Call me Joe,” I told her like I always did. “Can anyone but you understand him?”

“Jodi!” Dad said proudly and pointed to her.

“He’s my buddy,” she said and wiped his lips with a napkin. “We don’t have a problem. He knows what he’s saying.”

“If I close my eyes, he sounds like he always did,” I said. “His voice is the same.”

“We understand each other, don’t we Conrad,” she said, and winked at me. “Come on now, its time I clean you up for dinner.” She unlocked the chair and moved around behind it.

“Thank you, Jodi,” I tried to say. I bent down to kiss him. “Bye Dad,” I managed.

As she wheeled Conrad past the birdcage into the dining room, my eye caught the red one diving from her nest on top to a branch down below. She opened her beak, but I was too far away and the glass was too thick. I couldn’t hear her.

The sun never shines in winter in Cleveland. Clouds roll in over the lake in November, Thanksgiving at the latest, and hang in low gray bundles as if tethered to the Terminal Tower. Then we wait and hope for spring, but the word itself is a misnomer. No season lasting two weeks deserves its own name.

They call it cabin fever in northeast Ohio. It’s the trapped feeling people get when the weather sentences us to five months indoors. Five months of screaming kids, irate spouses and smelly dogs. Five months of bad Cleveland sports teams, horrendous heating bills and wind chills in the minus teens. For kids in school it’s worse.

Somehow it had warmed up over the weekend, and the sun actually appeared this Monday. I considered how it would affect the students of Stradford High School. I knew how it affected me: it blinded me as I made the turn onto Grandview and drove east. Its complete orb rose above the strip mall on Cleveland Ave., and illuminated the road salt on the windshield between the steering wheel and visor.

I squinted and slowed down behind the school bus, glad this time when its elephantine bulk blocked the light. I was borderline late as usual, and this bus, route number 14, would stop three more times before it continued on to the junior high and I could turn off into the high school. I tooted to a kid waving in the back window as I passed the student lot into a space reserved for teachers. It was beautiful, a blue sky, a bright yellow sun, and warmer than it had been for months. The kids would be complete idiots today.

They were idiots that day. More inattentive in class than usual, tardy, talky, bored with life in general and my class in particular. Until the fire alarm rang. I had suspected something was up from the constant glances at the clock, the sharing of excited looks and the chatter from my circle of CI's. Not Confidential Informants in the legal sense, but the kids who combine their love of talking with the currency their gossip earns from adults.

Sometimes there is a difficulty getting high school kids to properly exit the building for a fire drill. Not that they'd rather stay in class and learn, it's just that they've done it so many times before and they've never seen a fire. This time, the last week in February, there was no difficulty, not even a moment's hesitation. As soon as the bell rang and the strobe lights started flashing in the hallway, they burst from my class and ran down the steps.

That was the good part, the only good part. Once outside the snowballs started flying, and one thing you can say about our nation's youth, they don't back down from a chance to plaster a friend or a freshman girl with a wet snowball. It was a 25-minute melee, a sun-drenched, great-packing-snow, we're-not-stuck-inside-anymore melee.

It had been a false alarm and Gale Stevens was not happy about it. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, his voice pitched higher than usual and his face pinker. "It is an intolerable situation, that can not be tolerated."

"Redundant, too," Bob said. I stifled a laugh.

"This trend of behavior," the Principal continued, "is contrary to everything this school stands for: order, obedience and most of all the safety of the children in our care." He fixed us with what passed for his determined-slash-fierce look. The faculty sat quietly in their rows of metal chairs in the Media Center. He didn't mention learning as a goal of this institution.

"We can not allow this type of behavior to become a pattern and adversely affect all the good things we do here. The valuable things. I have therefore called a special meeting of the Principal's Advisory Group."

He said this as if he actually believed another meeting of his lackeys would accomplish anything more than the production of great volumes of gas or the consumption of mass quantities of glazed donuts. As Bob turned to me, I held up the palm of my hand.

"I merely wanted to recount your glorious days as chairman of the PAG," he smirked.

"--and as the second prong of our assault on this aberrant behavior, I have asked Mr. Bridges, to," here Stevens allowed himself a small grin, "round up the usual suspects."

I glared at Bob.

"I know how much his movie references bother you," he whispered, "but I was just going to mention that in this society it must be difficult for a guy with a girl's name to act tough." His round, Irish face opened in apparent honesty.

"You're an asshole," I said.

"But like your dad used to say," he said and I had to laugh.

Conrad used to say, that the man, or me, or whomever he was vilifying at the time, was so dumb he couldn't find his own ass with two hands. As Bob had known, Stevens' two-handed approach didn't do any better. Like the Principal had feared, spring became a series of classroom distractions, from the harmless in retrospect beginning to the increasingly dangerous end.

A couple of false fire alarms were no big deal. Those ended when the alarm mechanisms were sprayed with a material that showed up under black light. A week or so passed without incident, then an alarm was phoned directly to the fire department. We had a couple of those before caller ID, new at the time, put an end to that. This was before every kid had a cell phone, so it was pretty easy for Bridges to keep an eye on the pay phones in the building. There was a rumor among the faculty, okay, Bob told me, that there were quite a few call-ins and Stevens had ignored most of them.

It was easy enough for me to work around the distractions, even the water on the terrazzo when the weather really broke in May. Squirt guns, shampoo bottles and water balloons were mildly dangerous but not life-threatening. However, Stevens' decision to nail plywood across the bathroom doors to keep the kids from the water supply was an over-reaction. Maybe it led to the escalation from fire alarms to bomb threats.

We tried everything, from keeping the kids outside in bad weather while we searched the building, to having dogs check backpacks and lockers, to adding days to the school year for time missed. We thought we caught the kid several times, but the threats never completely stopped. Bob's conspiracy theory was the principal was simply ignoring the threats, but I didn't believe it. Stevens might be a nebbish, but he wouldn't risk lives. Stradford High is mostly a one-story cinder block structure without a basement that would collapse in an explosion.

Then a locker blew up.

It was several minutes into third period and I was at my door looking for stragglers. Bridges was passing the locker bank when it exploded and I happened to be looking over my shoulder as he was lifted off his feet and tossed across the hall. Not a loud TV explosion, it was a muffled boom, smoke, and Bridges lay crumpled on the floor. I pulled my door closed and ran to him.

The left side of his face was blackened and blood ran from his nose. An ember smoldered on the sleeve of his shirt and I smacked it out. He didn't react.

"T.J.! Wake up!" I straightened his legs so he lay flat. "T.J. you all right?"

His eyes opened and he choked a cough. "Good, go ahead and cough." He tried to speak, but coughed again. That meant he was alive, and when others arrived, I stood to let them see to him.

Bob was at the locker, pulling scorched books onto the floor. Several of them were black, but not on fire. The door hung canted, one hinge twisted, the other gone. "Coulda been worse," he said, "a lot worse."

"Couple minutes earlier and the hall was packed with kids." The locker stood on the end of a bank of ten or so, at the intersection of two main corridors.

"He ok?" Bob nodded at Bridges, concern replacing his normal grin.

"Wasn't all that close and it knocked him down," I said. "He could be dead."

"Somebody has got to do something about this," he said. I nodded.

Bridges missed a week of school and returned with a partial hearing loss in his left ear. It seemed to me he was moving slower and speaking slower. What bothered me more was his spirit seemed to have been slammed against the wall along with his body. I had criticized him for trying to be too friendly with the kids, playing chess with the miscreants was a little much, but now it seemed that his flame was flickering and nobody deserved that.

7:05 am and I was at my before-school hall duty post. The kids call it Monkey Island. A round, a two-tiered, carpeted thing they had put in front of the south entrance to the Media Center to keep the place from looking too institutional. Like the primary-colored plastic M & M chairs inside, it was round and fun and impractical. But a lot happens on the Island, and not all of it monkey business. It was a good place to watch, and it would have been a better place if Bob hadn't been yapping so much.

"So are you in or not?" he said.

I rotated away from him to keep my eye on the Island, but he moved with me. "Put your money where your mouth is, or continue to be a big weenie?"

"Ballpark mustard," I said automatically, before I turned my gaze from Barb Huth braiding someone's hair to his round face. "I never said I was betting on Valedictorian."

"That's my point," he said. "You try to weasel out of it every year, like you're doing now, and then at the last minute you say you knew all along. That's not right."

"They're like monkeys pulling bugs out of each other's fur," I said, then faced him. "Ok, so what's the big issue this season?" I knew if I let him talk, I could keep my eye on the Island and catch

the flow of kids streaming around the corner.

“Big controversy this year,” Bob said, “lot of stress. Grade point averages gonna come down to .001 or something like that. Closest race in years.”

He went on for several minutes as I continued to watch the flotsam and jetsam eddy by. The gist of it was that several of the top students had increased their GPAs by skipping lunch and taking an extra class. The A’s they earned in their eighth class raised their averages enough to put them in contention for the top spot. The kids that only had seven classes, a class every period, were furious. Their parents more so, as state law mandated every student have a 30-minute class-free lunch period.

“So who are the favorites?”

“The usual suspects,” Bob said and laughed loudly.

I shook my head.

“Work with me here,” Bob said. “You know, the juxtaposition relative to Stevens, and, shoot, you could at least smile.”

I tried not to. One of these kids passing by had to know something about the bomb threats.

“Yeah, well, so the usual suspects run the gamut of ethnic types,” Bob continued. “You got your Asians, your sub-continental Indians and a couple of random Anglos, maybe eastern Europeans.”

“Cut it out!” I said sharply. “That’s not yours!” The kid glared at me, but returned the book he had taken. I gave him the deadeye until he retreated down the hall. I turned to Bob. “Your favorite?”

Bob struck what he considered his intelligent pose, brow furrowed, lips pursed, eyes narrowed. He looked like he was about to take a crap. “Indians? The Submaranian kid. Asians? The Kim kid. The great white hoard? Smyth or Smith or however the hell you say her name. I’d go with one of those.”

“When are they gonna get make a decision? Commencement’s in a couple weeks.”

“Rumor has it,” he whispered, knowing as well as I did, that Rumor was one of his middle names. “The lawsuit is settled or tabled, whatever, and they have to let the extra period kids keep their GPAs. They’ll re-write the protocol for next school year so no one can have more than seven classes.”

“So the little schmucks get away with it.”

“This year anyway. Hope it was worth the stress.” Bob said.

It looked to me like he meant it. “Smyth is in my class, I’ll go with her.”

“Good choice,” Bob said. “She’s the only one with a relatively normal home life.”

I tried to figure out what he meant as I handed him a buck.

“It’s more important to her than it is to her parents,” he said as he wrote something on his clipboard. “Those two boys, they’re feeling heavy pressure. Both families are flying in grandparents for the big event. From Korea and from India.”

“It’s Smyth, long vowel,” I said. He didn’t know what that meant, but he had given me an idea.

People who don’t work in schools make the mistake of dividing kids into two groups, good and bad. Working with them on a daily basis, I know that like the rest of us all kids are good and all kids are bad. And it’s not only the bad kids that get bored in school.

Unfortunately, some school administrators too often make the same mistake. After talking to Bob, I ruled out Stevens’ usual suspects. Those kids, the ones that take up all the time and disciplinary effort, don’t need to fool around with false alarms; they cut school when they don’t want to come. Cutting is one of the things that labels them as bad, and that gives them credibility among their peers. Besides, Stevens and Bridges had been targeting them since the first false alarms and it hadn’t had any effect.

The middle of the road kids, the audience for the minor disruptions, were turned off by the locker bomb. Getting out of school for a while, water balloons, and squirt guns were fun, but the explosion had legitimately scared them. The tone of the school had quieted because of it, so I didn’t think it was one of them.

The burnouts? The purple-shirted-Erwins of the world? The hard-ass guys with Luckies rolled

up in their shirtsleeves? They have so little interest in anything that happens around here, even fire trucks and pranks, I ruled them out as well.

I focused on the perfect kids. Jump? They ask how high. Homework? They do it so you can read it. Grades? They know theirs down to the thousandth of a point. We call them perfect, because they're just what we want them to be. Maybe that's the problem. They're so busy trying to impress us, they sometimes lose who they really are.

The cafeteria was a large, low-ceilinged room, filled with round Stradford blue tables. The 300 kids assigned to this lunch period usually filled the room to capacity, but today the cafeteria looked to be half full. It wasn't, nearly every chair at every table was occupied, but it was so quiet the crowd appeared smaller.

In the comics, Charlie Brown hated lunch period, and when I considered the scene in front of me, I understood. The cafeteria was a map of high school cliques, as if the girl in charge of adolescent social status had made a seating chart. Charlie would be nowhere near the Little Red-haired Girl.

Adam Barnhelm was holding court at his usual table, a grinning, animated crowd gathered around him. I put my lunch tray on the rack and took a position outside the group, facing him.

"Business as usual, Herr Barnhelm?" I said.

"And business is good," he said, a wide grin covering the lower half of his face. Above it he looked 13, round nose, two bright brown eyes, a swath of hair covering his forehead. I motioned, and he got up and stood next to me.

"Word on the street?"

"Pretty quiet since the locker went off." He gestured to the room, "Look at it."

"Even Burnout land," I said. "What's going on?"

"The action today is in Geek city," he said. "National Honor Society is raving. Probably still arguing about Valedictorian."

"Who's your pick?"

"I'd like it to be Lauren, but they'll give it to one of the guys. Probably The Submariner."

I laughed at his comic book reference. He was glad I noticed. "He takes French so I don't know him very well."

"Good guy," Adam said, "but he tries too hard." He turned to face me and put his hand on my elbow, saw my reaction, and yanked it away. "Sorry, it's a habit. I always talk with my hands you know."

"I've noticed," I said.

He pushed the hair out of his eyes. "So anyway, yeah, he worries about it too much. Makes Lauren look calm. Ok, almost calm, but you get my idea."

The crowd at the Geek table was talking earnestly, it seemed. I was too far to hear them, but it looked like they were keeping score. "The other kid, Kim?"

"He's just flat out brilliant, Herr. Works hard, but he's more American about the stress. Maybe he's too normal to win it. Normal in a geekified sort of way, you know."

"Tennis player, isn't he?"

"And a harrier." Adam checked to see if I knew the word, then looked past me to the table. He didn't know what to do with his hands.

"Time up?"

"You know it," he said. "A guy can only talk to a teacher for so long."

He was right, a kid has to think of his reputation. I decided to see what the commotion was at the Geek table and was working my way toward them when the bell rang. The last kid, one of the Patels, was leaving the table as I got there. He hurried past me yelling something that sounded like "I am Spartacus!" I shook my head.

“That Kirk Douglas movie,” Bob said, “the one where Tony Curtis is a faggy slave.”

“That would be the part you remembered,” I said. We were sitting in his office in the Guidance Department. “Not the revolt of the slaves, not the gladiators in the Coliseum. Not the mammoth Technicolor splendor.”

“Old Larry thought Tony was rather splendiferous,” he said and slapped his desktop. “Mammoth, too.” He was a man who enjoyed his own jokes. “Boy, I’m glad they released the original version of that flick. I missed all that stuff when I was a kid.”

“Only you would call Sir Lawrence Olivier ‘Larry’,” I said and looked at my watch. I still had a couple minutes in my prep period. “So why do you think Patel was yelling ‘Spartacus’?”

“There were signs saying ‘I am Spartacus’ all over the halls this morning when I got here. The janitors took down a whole mess of them. He leaned onto his desk and lowered his voice. “I never can tell what those geekoids are talking about half the time. They come in here asking for apps to Princeton and Stanford and Harvard and they just lose me.”

“Wait,” I said, “didn’t your buddy Tony and the other slaves yell ‘I am Spartacus’ at the end of the movie?”

Bob squinted like he did lining up a putt. “Yeah, that’s why they crucified the whole lot of them. They wanted to kill Spartacus, and ended up killing what, eight miles of them or something?”

I nodded, seeing the brightly-colored scene in my mind, hundreds of crucified slaves lining both sides of the road. “But what does that have to do with Patel and the Geeks?”

The whole school found out two days later. In between Stevens had panicked, again, this time threatening to cancel Prom if everyone didn’t stop insisting they were Spartacus. That made it more popular and the other cliques started doing it too. I actually caught one of the Erwins, Tommy I think it was, taping an ‘I am Spartikus’ on the lockers next to my homeroom. He told me it was a headbanger band.

The Valedictorian committee was meeting at the time, Stevens, the Department Heads, Senior Class Advisor and Bob representing Guidance. He had told me about it at Monkey Island that morning, a typical long-winded account of how it was normally ‘pro forma,’ he actually said that, but this time because of the controversy, they were going to discuss the issue. He probably wanted to know if I was changing my bet from Lauren to one of the boys.

The bomb warning sounded during my class with the seniors.

“Another false alarm,” Adam said. “Damn Spartacus, oops, I mean darn.”

I shook my head. “That’s not the fire alarm.”

Lauren Smyth stood up. “It’s the bomb signal. We have to evacuate.”

We joined the tide of bodies jamming the corridor, trying to turn the corner and get to the exit. It was quiet. The kids were serious and ready to panic. The heavy glass doors fell against a girl in a wheelchair, and the crowd piled up behind her. Lauren fought her way across the stream and held one open. At a nod from her, Adam held the other.

Outside I helped press the crowd away from the building and up the rise into the parking lot. Normally they stopped a few yards from the doors. Today they wanted to get away from the building, so it was easier to move them through the lot up to the tennis courts. That’s where we saw Chandy Submaranian.

He was on the tennis court at the net. He was wearing an orange jump suit, and as I moved closer he appeared to be tied to the stanchion holding the net.

“Look at the fence, Herr,” Adam said. “The cups in the chain link.”

Styrofoam cups had been pressed into the holes in the fence surrounding the courts. ‘I DID IT,’ they read.

“A Spartacus prank from him?” I said.

“On his big day, too,” a voice behind me said. I turned to see Bob. “Just named him

Valedictorian.”

When adolescents sense real emotions, they are compelled to see it. The hardest part of breaking up a school fight is getting to the combatants. Bob and I struggled through the crowd and onto the courts. He shut the gate to keep the kids from following. I wondered where the other teachers were. Bridges and Stevens were probably at the front of the building.

“Hold on, Chandy,” Bob said, “We’ll get you out of there.”

I looked up to see the boy holding a megaphone and pointing to the vest he was wearing. Lights blinked and wires ran across shapes covered in masking tape. “Stop right there,” he said, “or I’ll detonate the bomb.” His voice was metallic and thin. We stopped.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said. The crowd outside the fence stopped rustling. “I have called you here to make an announcement.”

“Quit screwing around, Geek,” someone called. There was a short burst of laughter. Bob and I held up our hands and the noise stopped.

“That is exactly why I have summoned you here. For those of you who don’t know me, I am Chandrakant Submaranian, commonly known as the Geek.”

The crowd murmured until he tossed the untied ropes aside and held up a detonator. He rotated to show it to all sides. In the background I could hear sirens.

He heard them too. “I only have a few moments. I don’t want to hurt anyone, so be quiet and let me speak.”

“Chandy,” I called to him. “If you put that down, we can fix this.”

“Both of you move back.” He gestured with the device, and Bob and I retreated off the court.

“I am a geek, I admit it,” he said into the megaphone. “But that is not all that I am. I am normal, like you.”

Stone silence.

“All anyone calls me is Geek, all anyone knows about me is, 4.237 Grade Point Average, National Honor Society, Chess Club. I am more than that!”

His voice rose, then broke. “No one listens. They only know about my grades and--” He took a breath. “--and they don’t want to know any more than that.” I was close enough to see his hands shaking.

“You’re the class valedictorian, Chandy,” Bob said. “That’s something to be proud of.” He clapped his hands and we encouraged the crowd to applaud.

“Stop that! I will not be the valedictorian!” He looked defiantly at the crowd around him. “I, Chandrakant, put the bomb in the locker. I am sorry that Mr. Bridges got hurt, I did not mean to hurt him.”

He gestured with the device in his hand until the crowd quieted.

“No one would listen to me! Even after the bomb. Did people see me? Did people give me any credit at all? No! No, my friends took the credit! They are not Spartacus, I am!”

There was a commotion behind us. Bob and I turned with the crowd to see who was climbing the rise to the courts. The kids moved aside as a number of policemen led Stevens and several adults into the court.

“Mr. Submaranian,” Bob said extending his hand. “And Mrs. Submaranian.”

The pair ignored him. Mr. Submaranian brushed past and steered his wife toward the net and their son. “Chandrakant,” he said, his voice clearly heard by the now-silent crowd.

Chandy’s head dropped as did the megaphone and what I recognized as a garage door opener.

His mother attempted to slow the advance of her husband, but he yanked his hands away and continued across the red surface. She stopped halfway and put her hands to her face. He was an older form of his son, tall, thin-waisted, graceful. He glared at Chandy, but the boy’s head was bowed to the ground, and their eyes did not meet.

Mr. Submaranian stopped in front of his son. As Chandy slowly raised his eyes, his father

slapped him across the face. One loud crack, then he turned away, lowered his eyes and reversed his path. His wife followed, then his son. At the gate the crowd parted and the three disappeared down the slope. It was quiet on the tennis court but I could still hear the slap, and see the hopelessness in their nearly identical postures.

Conrad was sitting in his wheelchair in front of the TV, where I had left him as if expecting me. If he knew I had left. I waved to Jodi as I passed the front desk and sat down beside him.

“Bing Crosby movie today,” I said. “One of the Road pictures?”

He glanced at the middle of my chest, then back to the screen. I patted his hand and said, “It’s me, Joe.”

I could hear the tinkling of glassware and china as the staff prepared dinner. At a table set up in front of the birdcage, a man threw down a card from his hand and the others laughed. A woman on the sofa to my left snored, her head lolled back, her mouth agape.

“Did you take Mom to see this one in the theater?”

“Yeah,” my father said, and then something I couldn’t make out.

“In Milwaukee, when you were in school?”

“Marquette,” he said, nodding, his eyes still on the screen.

“A couple of Hilltoppers,” I said, and he nodded again. “So when are Dorothy Lamour and Bob Hope gonna show up?”

But it wasn’t a Road picture. Crosby was married to a much younger Ingrid Bergman, living in a squalid New York apartment. He was an alcoholic, depressed about the death of their son, trying to make a comeback in a Broadway show. The director of the show was a guy I’d seen before, but I couldn’t remember his name.

I felt something and turned from the screen. Conrad was looking at me. His eyes were focused, the brows above them relaxed. “I love you, Joey,” he said, clearly.

I released the breath I didn’t know I had been holding and smiled. “I love you too, Dad.”

He held my gaze for a second or two and we saw each other, then he turned to the TV. “Busby Berkeley,” he said, nodding vigorously.

“Made all those Gold Digger movies in the ‘30’s, didn’t he?” I said and settled back into the chair beside my father.

The End