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To our mothers – Elizabeth and Barbara

South of Main Street

By Robert Gately

CHAPTER ONE

Henry Wolff climbed out of his upstairs bedroom window and stood up looking out into the sky for those early morning stars that flash into existence in the predawn glow of the horizon. He took a couple of deep breaths and then looked around quickly to see if anyone was watching, as if he were sneaking out of the house and didn't want to be detected. He struggled to balance his fifty-five-year-old body on the sloping roof, walking it like a plank. One careless maneuver and he'd fall into the shrubs. The jogging suit hugged his body like a second skin. He felt the sweatshirt creeping up, so he yanked it down, stretching it for a fitted look. He stopped, briefly, scanning the heavens in a sweep. The sun nudged up and the stars vanished with the arrival of the orange glow, an exhilarating sight just above the skyline. The view made Henry feel life was good, the earth was magnificent, and all God's creations were in perfect harmony ... as they should be.

"Ohmmmm ... ohmmmm ..." he chanted, carefully half-stepping across the roof. He grabbed at the overhanging branches of the maple tree that dominated the front lawn. Clinging to the branch, he pulled himself along the edge of the roof to a rope which was draped over the gutter. Picking it up, Henry slipped his foot into the looped end. The distant end was firmly knotted to a thick bough of the tree. Henry yanked vigorously to make sure it was fastened strongly, testing whether his square knot would hold.

Launching himself into an exhilarating swing, he was Tarzan for a brief moment, sweeping past a smaller tree and his objective, the mailbox. Henry arrived at the apex of his swing, defied gravity for a fraction of a second, and then swung back towards the mailbox. Henry let go of the rope with one hand and tried to grab the mailbox with his other, but his foot

slipped through the loop, and he hung awkwardly as he swung towards the house. On his way back again, he seized a branch of the sapling and clutched onto the smaller tree for dear life. The branch broke, and his shoulders slammed into the lawn while the rope held his foot high in the air. He wiggled and jiggled, flopped like a fish out of water. Exhausted and embarrassed, Henry indulged himself with a few seconds of self-pity. All the while the tree held him up as if it were posing for the camera with its trophy – the prize catch of the day.

Henry took a deep breath and lunged for the rope, the loop, his foot - anything to make the tree release its grip. He bobbed and dangled and clutched and finally wiggled his foot free. He stood, brushed himself off and, casually, looked around to see if anyone had been watching.

Across the street, Maureen Aldrich, a retired schoolteacher, was sweeping her porch and saw everything. “Can’t you stop being a child for one day?” she shouted at Henry.

Maureen was the last person in the world Henry wanted to witness his botched attempt to retrieve the morning paper. ‘Mizzz Aldrich,’ as Henry called her, was a short and cantankerous woman. Something about her round shoulders and rough disposition gave him the shivers. She reminded him of a storybook witch, ugly and old, though maybe a tad nicer than the one from the West.

Shrugging, Henry opened the mailbox and removed the morning paper, and with a well-practiced sweep of the hand, he tucked it under his arm, and over his shoulder he asked Maureen in a gravelly voice, “You wanna go for a swing?” Though he laughed, it was obvious his quip didn’t amuse her. Mumbling, she turned and entered her house. ‘You mumbling about me?’ Henry whispered in his best Robert De Niro impersonation, as her door slammed. “Hey, Mizzz Aldrich, you left your broomstick outside,” he said a little louder, but still out of hearing range.

Henry picked up the loose end of the dangling rope and tossed it into the maple tree a couple of times until the looped end caught on the tree branch near where his circus adventure had started. With a demeanor of defiance, he raised his hand and pointed to the clouds indicating his morning exercise was over. He then turned and marched into the house with the air of dignity showing, if nothing else, that he was better off for this experience.



ROBIN WOLFF sat across from Dr. Zeke Tucker, her psychologist who always seemed to wear a button-down shirt – always opened at the collar. His beard was always the same length. Same brown shoes, laced and double knotted. When the light was just right, he looked more like an appealing bartender than some Dexter-looking shrink who sought to understand the psyche of a woman in her thirties.

The room, like him, never changed. Everything was in its proper place. A notepad sat in the upper right-hand corner of the desk while he sparingly took notes on a yellow pad with a yellow wooden pencil. His family picture faced at three-o'clock on his desk and a pencil cup filled with bookmarks sat at the left corner. Robin appraised the room at every appointment, and nothing seemed to be out of place in this session. Impeccably clean, devoid of clutter, she was surrounded by a comfortable arrangement of a single couch and two chairs. The walls and the furniture reeked of earth tones, liberating her of emotional associations to her surroundings - a clever arrangement, she thought. In some respects, she felt comfortable thus allowing her to seek truth from within herself more freely, like the fact that she was unmarried, in her prime – a half a decade from forty – and childless which left her with nagging thoughts that her fertility might be in a possible free-fall.

She wondered if she would ever be happy in a town like Coalsville, Pennsylvania. It didn't have a movie theater or a big name hotel, although it did have a four-star bed 'n breakfast listed in the Tudor Travel Guide. The town had one pharmacy, two bars, and a quaint Main Street where shoppers could buy name brand shoes and clothes. Notwithstanding, no one picked the name of "Coalsville" from a hat. The roots of the name gave special thanks to those men and women who worked the mines and helped define the Industrial Revolution in America. No nonsense. Blue-collar all the way. But that was its isolated past and, proud as Robin was for being brought up in such a place, she wondered - maybe even hoped - if it might be time to explore other places.

It got very cold in Coalsville. During the bitter, arctic days of winter Robin joked there was less corruption in Pennsylvania because the politicians had their hands in their own pockets to keep warm. To say living in Coalsville was like living anywhere else along the Appalachian territory was like saying present day in the new millennium was like any other time in American history. In many ways, in Robin's mind at least, Coalsville changed very little from one generation to the next. People seemed to be rigid in their beliefs. Republicans were always backed by big oil or coal manufacturers, and Democrats were always spending other people's money. That never changed.

Robin grew up believing paved roads were free, and thought all one had to do to possess the gold ring was take the merry-go-round enough times, keep on reaching, stretching, probing, and just 'go for it' - the prize would eventually be hers. But times were tough and, although people struggled much in the same way they always had, that metaphoric ring seemed harder to define as the years have rolled on. Or perhaps her passion for life was changing - her motivations - her dreams. Or maybe the things she held important in life were not so important

anymore. Indeed, she felt privileged because she grew up living on the north side of Main Street, the rich section of town. She was a lawyer. She knew people. She could maneuver through the maze of bureaucracy better than most, which made her feel important. Those who lived on the south side were less fortunate. Main Street seemed to divide the town between the have and the have-nots. That never changed either.

So why did she feel depressed, she wondered? She always considered herself able to handle life's 'issues'. All she had to do was just go for it! It made sense she was feeling this way because her mother was in the hospital on her deathbed, but she had prepared for her mother's impending fate for months, so that couldn't be it. Maybe this feeling was because Christmas was right around the corner and her well-groomed happy façade, sustainable during even the most trying times -- and a way of secretly canonizing her loneliness -- seemed more fractured as of late. However, the memories of past holidays, much more endearing than this impending one, was never a reason to be melancholy. Still, maybe thoughts of future Christmases without her mother were reason for feeling the way she was. It was just her wayward sister, Sharon, and her father now.

Her father ... yes. That was probably it. Her father, who for as long as she could remember, needed special care. No, no. She didn't want to get into that with the good doctor. Not again. She'd be talking in circles. Maybe it was Sharon, who once-again was acting like a selfish brat ...

Robin pursed her lips and tried to shake the downbeat reflections from her mind.

"Why did you just shake your head just then?" Dr. Tucker asked.

"Oh, nothing! I'm just trying to remove these negative thoughts. They're killing me. I can't shake this cloud of ... whatever is hanging over me."

“Like what?”

“I don’t know,” Robin said. “Like everything. I want to change my disposition. I want to change my life.”

“Maybe it’s because your mother is dying.”

Robin shrugs and lets out with a quiet, “Maybe.”

Dr. Tucker just sat there waiting for her to explain herself.

She wanted to tell him the stigma of seeking the solace of a psychologist interfered with her ability to be honest, or at least open. Perhaps, if there was more red in the room, she could be more revealing.

“Maybe it’s my father,” she blurted out.

“What about him?”

“He always needed looking after and now that Mom ... I don’t know.” Robin brought up her father, the usual topic of conversation, because in the midst of everything being the same, he seemed to be the only one changing. “I just feel so unsure about him surviving on his own. Yet, he’s done so well taking care of Mom when she was sick. Christmas is right around the corner. It doesn’t feel the same. My sister’s a pain in the ass. You see, I’m in and out of these moments of negativity. Mostly in. I can’t stop them. Help me stop them.”

“I can’t,” Dr. Zucker said. “I mean I can help, but I can’t do it. You have to do that.”

Of course he couldn’t do it. It had to come from within herself. Maybe she should try and encourage herself like her father used to do when she was in grammar school, when he used to improvise Knute Rockney before an important exam. Although this is not a test, she heard him in her mind’s eye. *Come on, Robin. You gotta go! You gotta run! You gotta forget your mother is dying. So what, your father’s only predictability is his unpredictability, and your sister’s self-*

centered attitude is causing you grief. Stop this crap and get off the pity-pot. Be the steady rock in the Wolff family. Come on. You gotta go. Go ... go ... go ...

So, she got off her proverbial pity-pot and stared at the doctor for a few seconds secretly acknowledging he was a slightly attractive man with an impeccable-groomed beard and long flowing black hair. He seemed interested enough in what she was saying, although he exuded an element of detachment, a tactic he probably learned in school, or a skill he picked up after years of listening to his patients' tales of doom and gloom. Nevertheless, she tried focusing on his above-average looks - a good reason for a minor distraction, she thought. Robin knew Dr. Zucker had left a few broken hearts since she met him, and no one would blame her if she acted on her marginally lustful thoughts, but she knew that was a road paved with sink holes. Although currently unattached, the good doctor was gay, and the prospect of doing an end run around nature would be too exhaustive. There would be no issues of transference with her shrink on this day – or any day for that matter. There were more rewards catering to her negative projection anyway.

“I’m feeling like there’s a war inside me,” she said. “I have resentments. My father. He is what he is. But my sister? I got this deep ... abiding ... bitter ... anger towards her.” She paused for a few seconds to see if the good doctor had anything to contribute. He did not.

“My father gave us nicknames when we were younger. Sharon’s was *Flower*.” Robin couldn’t help herself accenting the nickname with over-the-top candor, nor could she stop herself from raising her hand and cupping it as if she were holding a rock and was a fraction of a second away from squeezing it into a black hole.

“I sense you’re still upset over that,” Dr. Tucker finally replied. “Are you?”

“Over a nickname?” She relaxed and sat back, let out a single puff of air that was supposed to be a chuckle, and thought about his question more seriously.

“What was your nickname?” he asked.

Now he was getting closer to what was bothering her. “Trigger,” she admitted, none too willingly.

“I see,” the doctor said. He looked at her as if he wanted her to get on with it.

“You’ve heard this before,” she continued. “I’d just be repeating myself.”

“Yes, you would. We’re coming full cycle, which brings me to the question of what you’re looking to gain from your visits.”

Robin took her time thinking about what the doctor just requested. For a tiny moment she thought about telling him a roll in the hay might be what she needed and wanted, but that was a comment that would go nowhere. Perhaps she should tell him she was thinking of saving her money by going to a 12-step group for people who have control issues or who embrace negative projection like it was kettle popcorn. But she suddenly remembered a piece of her past she had never told the good doctor.

“When my dad ‘zoned out’ on us when we were kids,” she began, “he’d open an imaginary door in our rooms and describe his fantasy place as if he were really seeing it. I remember Sharon saying in her little shrieky, irritating voice ‘Where is it, Daddy? I want to go there’. And he’d say, ‘It’s la-la land.’ Everything was ‘la-la land’ to him. Jack climbed the beanstalk in ‘la-la land’. The three little pigs were in ‘la-la land.’”

She took a deep breath and exhaled in an attempt to rid herself of all the bad karma. She went to say something, but stopped. Maybe this was a good time to talk about Sharon. Yes, this was the time to dump. “I don’t understand why my sister has to be so ... I don’t know. I don’t

have a word for her right now. She's worked at the damn collection agency for so long that I think she has become her job. My sister likes squeezing people. It's a game with her. Maybe she's jealous of what other people have. She's so ... so ..."

"Self-centered?"

"Yes," Robin said. "Self-centered. You know what she told me recently? She gets so caught up in the 'squeeze' frenzy because of this end-of-year prize they give for the best ... what would they call them ... *squeezer*?"

"They probably call them agents," the doctor said.

"Well, the *agent* who squeezes the most money from people gets the 'big kahuna' bonus. She has worked for so long and hard playing on people's fears and misfortunes ... like a dentist, you know? She drills them until there's no more defense, no more masks. She's become a monster."

"Wow! That's a little more than being self-centered, Robin. You seem to be extra sensitive today?"

"Yeah, well, I've had too much coffee today. Or maybe I'm still pissed off over the other thing." Robin fell silent and the doctor sat stoically waiting for her to continue. "I mean, he's our father, for crying out loud. He may be slow or dimwitted, or however you want to classify him, but he can handle his own affairs. He's getting better."

"From what you told me in the past, Sharon doesn't think so," Dr. Tucker replied. "Your mother has had to take care of him all these years. Isn't that so?"

"Yeah, but he did just fine the past year with Mom being sick. And more recently he's had to take care of her when she was bedridden, right? Okay, I've had to pay the bills for him, but he does his own food shopping now. He cooks for himself ... he ..."

“What about the bank printout your sister showed you? You told me your father's taking liberties with the bank account. That's reason for concern. Right?”

“Perhaps,” Robin conceded.

“So, might your sister have a point?”

“The point is, our mother is lying in the hospital, dying, and our father is doing just fine on his own. What kind of daughter would go to a Judge declaring her own father as incompetent to handle his own affairs? What kind of daughter would want to spy on her father in an effort to claim him as unfit? What kind of person would actually like going to work because she loves sucking the living marrow from people who have come on bad times? What kind of human is she?”

A buzzing sound interrupted her. “Oh, damn ...” Robin sighed deeply and pulled out her cell phone and hit a button to stop the ring. She looked at the caller-id window and recognized the number. She flipped the phone shut. “What the hell does he want? It's Pastor McMillan.”

“Well, maybe that's a sign we should call it a day. Same time next week?”



PASTOR MCMILLAN and Henry Wolff were sitting in the front pew in an empty church not too far from where Robin had her session with Doctor Tucker. The Pastor sat with his leg half-bent, up on the seat, facing Henry who sat straight up looking ahead like a statue.

“Why, Henry?” the Pastor queried. “Why do you want to do this again? You've already been baptized. And more than once.”

“I need a change,” Henry said. “I need to wipe the slate clean. Besides, doesn't it say in the Bible *He who is baptized will be saved*? Henry felt his philosophy was sound, fool proof, and a good way to reach heaven in case he got hit by a truck after he left the church.

“Yes, Henry. The ceremony of baptism by *water-sprinkling*, as you put it, is for the forgiveness of sins of a true repentant.”

“That's why I want to be baptized,” Henry said.

“But we did it last year, and the year before that. It's not a tool to use every time you want to be forgiven for your transgressions. If you want a demonstrative approach to do that, then become a Catholic. With them you can go to confession every day.”

“Well, I think baptism should be like making a confession. Hey. You got a good thing going with baptism. It's like a good knuckleball. A pitcher wouldn't use it all the time. Just when he needed to.”

“Baptism is not like having a cocktail,” the Pastor sighed. “What you want to do is an abuse of its intent. And besides, what sins have you committed in the past year?”

Henry thought hard and then slammed down on an invisible button with his hand as if he were on a game show. “Impure thoughts. That's my final answer.”

“I have impure thoughts, Henry,” the Pastor confessed. “That'd mean I'd have to be re-baptized every time I think of a girl in a swimsuit. Don't tell anyone I just said that ... Listen, Henry, you're treating baptism like a game.”

The church door swung open. Pastor McMillian looked over to see Robin enter. He squeezed Henry's shoulder and then rushed toward Robin. He took her by the arm and moved toward the front.

“Henry wants to be baptized again,” the Pastor whispered, but loud enough for Henry to hear.

“I'm afraid my father is a little unnerved by my mother's condition.”

They settled at the front pew. Henry smiled up at them, and gave an over-the-top wink to Robin. She received it with a grunt and a sigh.

“How is Mary doing?” the Pastor inquired.

“Not good. It's nice to know you care, though.”

“I do care, Robin. I hope you don't think when ...”

“Please not now, Pastor. We can talk later when we both can be ... it's just a bad day so far.”

Henry noticed some angst in Robin's tone – an indication of bottled-up feelings against the Pastor, perhaps. There was always a little strain between them, and Henry never knew why, exactly. Still, Henry was no stranger to awkward situations and usually, when one presented itself, he found a way to be in the middle of it.

“I'm dying, you know?” Henry said, and then smiled at his daughter.

“We're all dying, Dad.”

“I don't mind dying,” Henry returned. “Trouble is you feel so damn stiff the next day.”

Henry could almost hear Robin growling.

She turned to the Pastor and said, “Joke of the day in the newspaper, probably” and then turned her attention back to Henry. “You're not going to get baptized again, and that's that. Let's go see Mom.”



WHILE DRIVING Henry to the hospital, Robin found it difficult finding the right topic to start a conversation where she wouldn't have to filter her speech like one does when talking to a child. Even if she talked about the weather, Henry would probably turn it into something silly. She'd say, “It looks like rain” and he'd say “Hey, do you know what happens when it rains cats

and dogs” and she’d say, “No, what happens, Dad?” and he’d say something like, “You have to be careful not to step on a poodle.” Robin was not in the mood for that. So, she kept silent.

When they passed a cemetery, Henry finally broke the ice. “People are just dying to get in there.”

Robin gave her customary ‘that’s nice’ smile. Nothing demonstrative to encourage him to say anything else. Nothing like, “That’s the millionth time I heard that joke” which would only inspire him to continue with his frivolous list of tired one-liners.

“I’m sorry you had to leave work,” he said.

“It’s Saturday, Dad.” Indeed this was not the way she wanted to spend her day off. Or any day, for that matter. “What else am I going to do on my day off?”

“Anything,” Henry responded. “You’re beautiful. You’re smart. You can do anything you want. I’m very proud of you, Robin.”

“Thanks. You want to tell me what this baptism thing is all about?”

“No,” Henry quickly returned.

Robin didn’t know how talk to her father at the moment with her mother lying in the hospital dying. So she drove in silence, pondering the future of the Wolff family. She really didn’t know if Dad could take care of himself, but she wanted him to be given a chance to stand up on his own two feet. He had risen to the occasion taking care of Mom for the past year. That was a good sign to her that Dad was ready to take care of himself as well. Of course, the argument could be presented that her mother, Mary, although incapacitated for most of the year, was instructing Henry on what to do, what to shop for, how to talk to people, and those kinds of things.

Robin saw a parking spot close to the Oncology Section of the hospital and grabbed it head first. Before Henry could unbuckle his seat belt, Robin was out of the car walking towards the entrance. “Come on, Dad,” she yelled, and that was enough for Henry to hurry up and follow Robin, like a child trying to keep up with his mother.

The elevator door opened to the Oncology Ward of the hospital and Robin and Henry exited. As they walked down the hall, they passed by a maintenance man mopping the floor. Henry pointed to him and said, “Didn’t I see him in the operating room with a scalpel in his hand?”

Robin ignored her father as they proceeded to room 401 where Mary lay in bed. A nasal cannula protruded from her nose, and wires and tubes monitored her vital signs. A nearby EKG machine beeped in unison with her heart beat. Sharon sat bedside when they entered. “Glad you guys could make it,” she said.

Henry gave Sharon a peck on the cheek then sat down on the opposite side of the bed. “I hate hospitals,” he said, looking at Sharon and then at Robin. Neither gave a response. “We should keep your mother at home. I was doing fine taking care of her.”

“Yes, you did do well,” Robin said. “But we can't take her home now.”

“Why,” Henry wanted to know.

“Because she's comatose.” And that was reason enough, Robin thought.

“Because she's dying,” Sharon said, ending the conversation with a quick dose of the truth.

Robin wanted to say something to Sharon, like a healthy ‘SHUT UP’, but this wasn’t the time or place to start a Wolff family battle. Actually, this was the first time everyone was

together in months. Visits to Mary during the past year by the Wolff sisters were sporadic and never at the same time.

“You know, old watchmakers never die,” Henry jumped in, breaking an awkward silence. “They just run out of time.” He waited for a response but didn’t get one. “Old yachtsmen never die ...”

“Yeah, yeah” Sharon interrupted. “They just keel over. We heard that one before, Dad.” Sharon gets up, grabs her pocketbook and faces Robin. “I’m going outside, you coming?”



SHARON TRAMPED onto a patio area of the hospital with her short blonde hair fluttering in the wind. She strutted her shapely figure, disguised in a loose fitting corduroy jacket and baggy Levi’s, right to the corner banister where she could sneak a cigarette out of view.

Robin followed close behind and joined her.

“I can’t take him today,” Sharon said while pounding an unopened pack of cigarettes on the banister. She retrieved a lighter from her purse, opened the pack and offered a cigarette to her sister.

“I don’t smoke,” Robin barked. “You know that.”

“You do when you’re stressed.”

“I’m not stressed.” There was a chill in Robin’s voice, along with a pause between each word. A measured response, Sharon thought, that was supposed to end any further discussion on the matter.

“Could’ve fooled me,” Sharon barked right back. She wasn’t going to be pushed around by her sister. Not today. She lit up and blew the smoke towards the sky. “Do you ever think how things would be different if our grandfather didn’t invest so wisely?”

“No,” Robin said, then eyed her sister and wouldn’t let go of her gaze.

Sharon knew Robin thought her to be conniving and Robin was probably just waiting for a hidden message behind that question. There wasn’t any hidden message, per se. She just wanted to know what the estate was worth and why her mother hated her so. Sharon pondered for a second whether to pursue such inquiries. With their mother ready to croak, maybe this was not necessarily the right time or place to talk about investments and things that were due her.

“Why are you looking at me that way?” Sharon snapped.

“I’m just wondering why you asked that question. That’s all”

“I’m just wondering what the trust is worth now. Is that a crime? The market’s on the rebound. Last time I checked it was worth three million.”

“It’s worth a little bit more now,” Robin said.

“That’s what I figured.” A few seconds went by and then Sharon continued. “I never quite understood why Mom always lived below her means. She never liked people knowing she was rich.”

“Everyone knew anyway,” Robin replied. “It’s where we lived.”

“Yeah, but a lot of people on the north side aren’t as wealthy.”

“Mom just liked to live less extravagantly than her means,” Robin said.

“What’s the point of having money?”

“And what’s your point, Sharon?”

“I’m just thinking about Dad. If it wasn’t for Mom’s father making his fortune in ... in ... crayons or ... what the hell did he make his fortune in, anyway?”

“You know damn well it was commodities. Crayons! Why are you being obtuse? Spit it out, Sharon. What are you trying to say?”

“You know what I’m trying to say. Our grandfather set up the trust for Mom. It was always intended to be a *family* inheritance. And I’m having a tough time understanding why she never changed her will to reflect that.”

“Reflect what?”

“Don’t be cute, Robin. We can take care of Dad much in the same way Mom took care of him over the past thirty years. For some reason, Mom didn’t change her will ...”

“No, she didn’t. And maybe there’s a good reason why she didn’t.”

“Yeah? And what do you think that reason is, Robin?”

“Maybe to encourage Dad to live more independently. Or maybe it’s something very simple like ...”

“Like what? To keep it away from me?” Sharon knew that’s what Robin wanted to say. Instead of biting on that remark, Sharon decided to surprise her sister and remain calm. “I don’t want a fight,” she said. “My point is Dad won’t be able to take care of himself regardless of what Mom thought. He’s never been able to take care of himself as long as I can remember. That’s why I went to court. So, stop giving me an attitude.”

Robin grabbed Sharon’s cigarette and took a puff.

‘I did it!’ Sharon wanted to yell, referring to breaking down Robin’s restraint for smoking. But she exercised a little restraint of her own and just said, “Keep it,” and lit up another one for herself.

“We could’ve worked it out,” Robin said. “You didn’t have to go public and file for guardianship ...”

“It was Limited Guardianship, with an accent on *limited*. And Judge Brady elected you as temporary guardian until this thing is settled, didn’t he? So, quit griping.”

“Yeah, well now we're under the microscope,” Robin said. “And that can't be good.”

“It'll be over before you know it,” Sharon added.

“Oh, yeah? Well, what if it doesn't? What if the ... what if the *secret* comes out.”

“It won't.”

The sisters paused on that thought for a few seconds. Sharon was uncomfortable talking about that topic, so simply changed the subject. “And let me tell you something,” she said. “The discretionary spending allowance you're allowed to give him? The hundred and forty dollars a week? That's not enough for him. He'll be banging on your door for more. You wait and see.”

“Fine. We'll wait and see. By the way, Judge Brady called me yesterday and asked us to see him on Wednesday. I told him we would.”

“The hearing's in a couple of weeks, so why does he want to see us now?”

“He's known us all our lives,” Robin reminded Sharon. “He wants to understand why *you* think Dad's incapacitated. Off the record.”

“All he has to do is read the petition. And it's *limited*, for crying out loud. It's just financial guardianship. The Judge knows how dad is. It shouldn't be hard to figure out.”

Robin put her cigarette out. “I got an idea,” she said. “Let's put Dad away in some institution. This way we can get the whole enchilada. And he won't be in our face every day.”

Robin always had a way of getting under Sharon's skin by saying something that wasn't exactly true. Robin was good at disguising the truth by smothering it with an exaggeration. “You know I don't want *that*,” Sharon said.

“Then, if you just want a piece of the pie, take ten thousand a year. A gift from the estate. No tax.”

Sharon turned to do battle, but the door burst open, and a nurse stood in the doorway. At first Sharon hurried to put out her cigarette thinking the nurse was going to read her the riot act for smoking. Instead, the nurse's face conveyed a deeper concern.



ROBIN AND SHARON stormed into room 401 to find their mother had died while they were out on the patio. Although Robin had already prepared for her mother's passing, she was taken aback by her father's response. She watched Henry fluff up Mary's pillow. He stroked her hair as if she were still alive. Robin stood bedside along with Sharon, quiet, refusing to interfere with his way of saying goodbye. Henry looked up at his daughters for a brief second. His eyes looked cold, unknowing. A bank-full of tears. Fear.

He surveyed the various wires connected to her body and began removing them.

"Dad!" Sharon yelled. "What are you doing?"

Both Robin and Sharon rushed to his side, edging him away.

A doctor barged in and Henry backed up to the doorway and watched the commotion over Mary's body. Robin noticed Henry by the door taking deep breaths, as if he was having an anxiety attack. She only looked away for a brief moment, and when she looked back he was not there any longer.

Robin ran out of the room after him, but he was already halfway down the corridor, walking briskly, swinging his arms, as if he were marching. "Where are you going, Dad," she yelled.

"I'm gonna get a banana split," he yell back. "Your mom always got a banana split when things got too ... crazy."

That was so typical of Dad, Robin thought. Ducking out when the tension got too great. As he disappeared around the corner, Robin knew there would be fewer second chances for her father. No longer would Mom be around to be his guide or manage his misbehavior. What would happen to him now if Sharon gets her way, Robin thought? She turned back into the room wishing she had an answer.

CHAPTER TWO

HENRY CLIMBED out of his upstairs bedroom window much the same way he did most mornings when it was not raining. He glanced around the neighborhood to see if anyone was watching, and noticed Mrs. Aldrich already out sweeping the porch, as if she was waiting for him to come out. He waved and she just shook her head, a clear sign of her disapproval. Undeterred, he wiggled his way across the roof adjusting his new jogging suit, now a size too big, and giving the impression he might've lost some weight between now and his last attempt to retrieve the mail. He stopped briefly and scanned the heavens in one sweep then half-stepped across the roof to the rope. Without much fuss he slipped his foot into the looped end and commenced on his Tarzan-journey to the mailbox. This time he jumped off precisely at the right moment and landed on his feet not far from his intended target – the mailbox. He looked at Mrs. Aldrich and bowed, as if he just gave a commanding performance to the crowd of many. With much ado, he retrieved the paper and marched into the house.

Henry slapped the Coalsville Gazette down on the kitchen table and turned to the weather section. The caption, WHITE CHRISTMAS? dominated the page. The article beneath reported a warm front moving into eastern Pennsylvania and would be hanging around for a while posing questions if the next front would bring snow for Christmas.

Henry snatched a journal from the top of the refrigerator, sat down at the table and began writing, alternately scribbling a few words and looking at the pictures of his wife stuck on the refrigerator door with magnets. She looked so young in those photos, he thought. He closed his eyes and tried to picture her when they first started dating in high school. He was attracted to

those long beautiful legs sitting in front of him in history class. Such a distraction! That seemed so long ago.

“Why did you leave me, Mary?” he asked.

Hootie, the house cat, got up on his hind legs and stuck his head between Henry’s lap and the table, purring for his breakfast.

“In a minute, boy,” Henry said, penning a few more words in his journal before they escaped his mind.

Henry stood up, leaned over the kitchen sink, and looked out the window at the garden in the back yard. “Darn you, Mary!” he said to himself. “The garden’s a mess and I can’t cook for myself. You were the cook. I never learned how. Who am I gonna clean for? Who’s gonna complain about my terrible Henry Fonda impressions now?”

He gulped repeatedly trying to release the words that stuck in his throat. Tears streamed down his face, dripping onto the sink, one little splash after another. He angrily wiped his eyes, cheeks, chin, and sat back down.

“Stop, stop,” he chastised himself out loud. “I’m digging up your garden, Mary. I’ll rototill and plant grass there until I can’t recognize that it was ever a garden. Then I can stop thinking about you every time I look out the window. I’m giving away your sewing machine too, and all the thimbles and threads and fabric you left behind.”

Henry thought for a moment and then continued. “You fell asleep right in the middle of our last conversation, did you know that? You didn’t even give me a chance to say goodbye.” He slapped the table one more time and continued as if she was sitting there with him. “You said you didn’t want me to be angry or sad. Well, okay then. This is the last time. I’ll only think about happy things from now on.”

Henry started writing again, one sentence after another, then pounded a bold dot onto the page, and raised the pen into the air feeling like a maestro who had just finished his *Magnum Opus*. “You’re the only one I ever loved. Good-bye, my dear.” He closed the journal, and tucked it away in the cabinet, behind the soup bowls.

Henry proceeded as if the day had a new beginning. He opened the pantry cabinet and took out a can of cat food. Hootie jumped up at the ‘snap’ sound of the lid popping, and then quickly dashed to his food and water bowls and patiently waited. Henry fed him and watched his companion scoff down his breakfast, like he hadn’t eaten in days. The litter box sat behind the bowls, which didn’t contribute very much to the culinary ambiance in Henry’s mind. But that was where Mary had wanted it -- a convenient one-stop living arrangement where Hootie could take care of all his worldly business.

Henry reflected on the day Hootie became a member of the Wolff family five years earlier. Driving home from a *Hootie and The Blowfish* concert, Henry had spotted the abandoned kitten on the side of the road.

“We nearly ran you over,” he said, watching Hootie eat. “But we stopped and I ran after you, didn’t I, boy? You didn’t want me to catch you. Remember? You ran into the woods and I chased you for over a half-hour. You finally let me catch you. And when I got back to the car with you in my arms, she fell in love with you instantly. Yes, she did. And I named you *Hootie* ...” He chanted Hootie’s name several times, like a rambunctious cheerleader at a football game. Hootie kept his head buried in one of the bowls, ignoring his master, as he usually did when eating.

Henry bent over the sink, opened the window overlooking the backyard, and filled his lungs with fresh air. A thermometer hanging from the old oak tree spelled out the day’s

temperature – a nice, comfortable fifty degrees. He sang while he washed the dishes, but the serenity was short-lived. Angry yelling from next door was abrupt as it was unsettling. The voice belonged to Henry’s forty-two year-old neighbor, Charles Petzinger, and it was directed at Danny, his son. Henry held his arms up high, touched his index fingers to his thumbs, and sent healthy incantations out to the cosmic consciousness, hoping to improve Danny’s karma.

“Ohmmm ... Ohmmm.”

From the window Henry saw empty beer bottles scattered on his neighbor’s porch. Some stood straight up, others laid on their bellies pointing in different directions. An empty Seagram’s bottle protruded from the middle of Charles’ lawn with its neck imbedded in the ground as if someone chucked it from the porch.

Henry couldn’t remember exactly when Charles began drinking so heavily. He wasn’t always such a recluse or so nasty, either. In fact, Henry and Charles had always been cordial until this year. Before then, when Charles worked on his car in the driveway, he would always wave hello to Henry. Sometimes they had a neighborly chat while Charles had his head buried in the car engine and asked Henry to retrieve a crescent wrench or some other tool he couldn’t reach. Those were peaceful times back then, when Stephanie Petzinger still lived with Charles and their son, and Mary was alive and healthy. Stephanie had always been friendly with Mary, popping over to visit a few times a week. Then, over a period of a month or two, her impromptu visits became less frequent until she stopped coming over altogether. She always had some place to go and her casual ‘hellos’ became forced and hurried. Then, one day, Mrs. Petzinger packed two suitcases and left her family and Coalsville forever.

Right after his mother left, Danny and Henry began talking by the chain link fence that separated the two properties. In the beginning, Danny looked at Henry with empty, searching

eyes, as if the older neighbor had the answers to life's bigger questions. Is there life after death? If yes, is there a hell? Or, why did my mother leave? At times, the boy's mouth would bravely sport a smile, but his eyes always gave him away. They searched for comfort, but Henry didn't have any answers. And as time passed, Danny's body drooped, like he was carrying the world on his eleven year-old shoulders. Then he stopped smiling altogether and developed permanent corner creases on his mouth, like he was frowning all the time. And he would stand at the fence and stare into space with a glazed, uncaring look.

Charles quit his job as a financial analyst a few months after Stephanie left. He told Henry that he had invested wisely during the bullish nineties and didn't have to work for a while. But he began drinking more, while becoming less neighborly even though he had more time on his hands to socialize. No more waves from the porch. No more chats in the driveway. The 'hellos' became nods, which turned into undecipherable blank stares. Eventually, Charles communicated with moans and grimaces, and an occasional glowering, face-tightening frown that was directed mostly at Henry for talking too much and too long to Danny by the fence.

At first, Henry noticed Danny spending a lot of time by himself in the back yard, picking grass or tossing rocks at a tree while he was reciting lines from a school play. Henry would go outside and pick up a rake or make believe he had to clean up the shed. It was hard getting Danny to come out of his shell. A casual 'Hi, how are you? Why do you look like a sad sack today?' didn't work very well. So, Henry reverted to quoting useless trivia to loosen the boy up a bit.

"Did you know that Walt Disney was afraid of mice?" Henry would ask. But sometimes it would take more than one try.

“The sound of E.T. walking was made by someone squishing her hands in jelly.” And sometimes it would take more than two tries.

“The average lifespan of a major league baseball is seven pitches.” More silence.

“A toothbrush should be kept at least six feet way from a toilet to avoid airborne particles resulting from the flush.”

“Ooooo!” Danny finally responded, scrunching his eyes, nose and mouth all at once. That started their first conference by the fence. They talked about moving their toothbrushes far away from the toilet. The next time Henry tried to talk to Danny was a little easier, and when Henry said, “Bad day, today?” Danny was less tight-lipped.

“Dad wasn’t this way when my mom lived with us,” Danny said one day. “He blames me for my mom leaving and I don’t think he likes me very much.”

“Sure he ...”

“And I think my mom left me because I got a bad report card and ...” There was a sad quiet for a brief moment. “... my dad thinks I’m stupid. Everyone thinks I’m stupid.”

Henry was taken back. He had nothing to give Danny except a weepy interjection to the contrary. “Oh, don’t be silly. All moms love their children,” was all Henry could say.

Then one day, his young neighbor told Henry about the letter he had written to his mother. He didn’t know where to send it because no one knew where she lived. Henry told Danny to save the letter and write another one, which he did. And after that Danny wrote another one. He had five letters written to his mother while waiting for her to write him, which she did, eventually. He was so ecstatic and read it to himself over and over until he memorized it. Then he read it to Henry. She explained she was very sad leaving him in Coalsville, and was now living in Seattle. She said she loved him so very much, but she couldn’t live with Danny’s father

anymore because she felt trapped. She went on about how people sometimes grow apart, and so on and so-forth, but Henry knew the real story. Stephanie told Mary about the ‘other man’, a manager of a bookstore, or a drug store, or was it a novelty shop? Henry forgot exactly what Mary had told him, except that the man moved to Seattle and Stephanie packed her two suitcases and headed out with him. So, maybe it was partly true Danny’s mother felt trapped with Charles, but she didn’t tell Danny the whole story.

Danny mailed all five letters at once, and for a while he and his mother wrote to each other regularly. In fact, she wrote almost every day for the first month, and he wrote back every day as well. Henry watched Danny bolt from the school bus and run to the mailbox each day. In the beginning, he’d find a letter or postcard from his mother. Then the correspondence became less frequent. But he still walked out to the mailbox, even though there were no letters or postcards to greet him. Over time, she stopped writing. So, he stopped looking.

As Henry talked to Danny by the fence, most of the time he noticed Mr. Petzinger was watching them from the kitchen window. That’s when the chats and casual hellos from Charles became more infrequent, until they stopped altogether, as if the elder Petzinger was jealous of Henry’s relationship with Danny; as if Henry was responsible for Charles’s deteriorating relationship with his son.

As time went on their conversation by the fence became more personal. Danny told Henry that it was hard for him to listen to his friends complain about their parents because they got grounded for something stupid. They complained about silly things like their parents were ‘out of touch’ because they didn’t know who LL Cool J was, or because they didn’t like them wearing their pants too low on the hip. Danny wished he had a mother at home he could ‘diss’ from time to time because of silly stuff like that. He wished he had a working father who was

being a ‘jerk’ because he was too busy sometimes to pay attention. No, those friends didn’t realize how good they had it. He retreated from them. Eventually, he had no one to talk to, except Henry.

Henry knew the Petzingers were carrying an emotional boulder or two, and needed help. So, he began chanting and sending vibes Danny’s way. Charles could take care of himself, Henry felt, and didn’t need any special incantations. But Danny was a whole different story.

A loud crash interrupted Henry’s thoughts at the opened kitchen window. Then other sounds: the scraping of a kitchen chair on the floor, maybe, or someone stumbling or falling. Or worse. Henry knew that this kid needed a little more help than just chanting, but he didn’t know what to do.



DANNY PETZINGER ran out of the house dragging his schoolbooks behind him in a shoulder pack, and holding his jaw as if he had an abscessed tooth. He bolted straight to the chain link fence that separated the two properties, threw his books down, and buried his head in his folded arms on top of the fence, sobbing.

“Ohmmm ... ohmmm,” Danny heard Henry’s voice as if he were standing close by. The boy looked up and saw his neighbor peering through the opened kitchen window. “What a beautiful day, Danny!” Henry bellowed through the small opening.

The young Petzinger grunted and kicked the fence. He was not in the mood for an upbeat spirit so early in the morning. He didn’t want to hear that Venus is the only planet that rotates clockwise, or that donkeys kill more people annually than plane crashes, and the last thing he wanted to hear was someone touting what a wonderful day it was when it was a perfectly horrible, stinkin’ day.

“Life sucks, Mr. Wolff,” Danny said just to let his neighbor know it would take more than a weather observation to change the desolate conditions in his life.



HENRY OFFERED a soft smile, but this seemed to aggravate the boy further. Danny just picked up his books, rushed off along the fence, down the driveway and out of sight to the bus, which was waiting for him out front.

A solitary groan came out of the Wolff house and dispersed into the universe. It was Henry’s way of praying for intervention of some kind. For divine guidance.

The dishes done, Henry dried his hands and walked over to the calendar where X’s marked the days gone by. He grabbed a pencil, but before he checked off Tuesday, December 2nd, he noticed a note in the box for this day. ‘*Wake – 11AM.*’

“Oh, my God. How could I have forgotten?” he bellowed.

Just as he said this, the doorbell rang. He rushed into the dining room, stopped and looked up at the solitary family portrait that served as a centerpiece on the wall. Reflecting on the people who surrounded him in the picture - Mary and his two daughters, Sharon and Robin – it offered a momentary feeling of comfort.

He walked past a mahogany table, which crowded the dining room, opened the top drawer of the china cabinet, pulled out a bag, unzipped it, and removed its contents of eighty dollars in fives, tens, and twenties. He crammed the money into his pocket. On the wall in the living room, an antique mantel clock told him it was eleven-ten. He straightened the knick-knacks on the shelves next to it, a small porcelain cat and little bronze booties from when his children were infants.

The doorbell rang again. He continued into the living room past a couch with puffy cushions and a walnut-stained coffee table that showcased Henry's coin collection which was complete except for a 1913 quarter.

Henry finally reached the door just as the bell rang for the third time. Mrs. Aldrich, the retired teacher from across the street, stood confrontationally close to the front door. Henry stood a foot taller and looked down at her slumped back – the evidence, Henry presumed, of a career-long posture of bending over children slapping their knuckles with a ruler. He remembered when Sharon was a child she had asked him why Mrs. Aldrich was always leaning forward as if pushing a boulder up a hill. Henry told Sharon it was Mrs. Aldrich's large breasts that kept her off balance. Mary didn't like that answer at all and told Sharon the real reason. Henry had forgotten what it was. Scoliosis, perhaps.

"Hello, Henry. I was getting ready to go to the wake, and I saw you outside before, so I decided to stop by." She pronounced each word carefully, like a Mother Superior talking to an incoming first grader. "I promised Robin that I would look after you," Mrs. Aldrich spoke slowly and in a tone that suggested to Henry he better be good or else there would be some behavioral obedience training in store for him.

"Yes, Mrs. Aldrich," was all that Henry could say, feeling intimidated by her matriarchal presence.

"It's after eleven. Shouldn't you be at the wake, dear?"

"Oh, my," he said. "I'm late. I'm late, for a very important date."

"Yes, well ..." Mrs. Aldrich said as if it were a question. Henry knew enough not to say anything and just stood there with no intention of making a response.

“It was terrible, Henry, the way Mary suffered in her last days.” She paused. Still, no response. “You dear man. What’s going to happen to you now? Hmmm?” She paused and examined Henry up and down. “I can take you to Duffy’s, but you can’t go looking like that. Shake a leg, Henry.”

I shouldn’t’ve answered the door, Henry wanted to say. He was trying to think of something nice. Mrs. Aldrich and Mary spent many hours on the porch talking about ... whatever women talk about, and he figured the least he could do was act civil, for Mary’s sake.

“Henry,” she said loudly. “You go upstairs and change, right this minute.”

With that, Henry slammed the door in her face. He peeked out the window and saw her shaking her head. She looked up and, as if she were talking to someone above her, “Mary, I hope you made arrangements for him.” Then she put her hands on her hips and knocked on the door hard. “I’ll take you to Duffy’s, Henry. Hurry up and change.”

Henry ran out of the house through the back door and snuck around to the front from the side walkway. He peeked out from the side of the house and saw Mr. Aldrich was preoccupied trying to look through the front window. He took the opening, scooted down the driveway, loped down the street without detection, and swung his arms in exaggerated motions as he walked. “Nothing like a brisk walk in the morning,” he said to no one in particular, and then frowned, because he remembered where he must go.



DIXIE SWANSON sat on a bench on Main Street across from Duffy’s Funeral home and pondered for a few moments on what she wanted to do. She rose from the bench with her CD player under her arm and a headset draped around her neck. She pulled down on her shirt as if it would make it fit better. It didn’t.

She walked down Belmont Avenue to an old stone bridge and glanced down and saw movement. The bridge could barely fit two cars across. It was thirty yards away from Main Street on a road that connected the north side of Coalsville to the center of town. She slid down the embankment and joined Joe and Wheezy by the riverbed. Joe, shoeless, wore socks that had more holes than toes and seemed to be asleep wearing a dirty undersized overcoat and a couple of plastic bags as a blanket. He struggled to get comfortable on a weather-beaten mattress. Wheezy sported a dressy hat and wore a tattered trench coat. She wheezed while she arranged aluminum cans in bags. The deeper the breath, the louder the wheeze. By all appearances, they both had taken refuge under the bridge for some time.

Dixie sat on an old, smelly couch cushion under a two hundred year-old stone bridge that hovered over a dried-up riverbed, and watched Wheezy and Joe which, in Dixie's mind, was slightly more exciting than watching grass grow. Dixie carried a small portable CD/tape player, which had a strap to carry it on her shoulder. The music through the headset swept her away, temporarily, from her squalid reality.

Large-bellied flies buzzed around Dixie, taking aim at food crumbs and half-eaten fruit cores close by. She swatted wildly and hit one sending it sputtering over to Wheezy and Joe who were giving Dixie 'the eye' for invasion of their privacy. Dixie was familiar with looks of disdain. These particular deadpan stares were coming from two homeless people who had set up house, under the bridge, and were claiming ownership, like squatters. Joe leaned back and shrugged like he stopped caring Dixie was there. But Wheezy seemed insulted by the intrusion on their home.

"Why ... are ... you ... here?" Wheezy asked, wheezing in between her words.

“Just make believe I’m a general,” Dixie said, “And I’m temporarily taking over this place for strategic reasons.”

Dixie knew Wheezy had problems breathing especially when she talked. In fact, she gave Wheezy her nickname a few years ago because of the malady. Usually, before speaking, a crackling sound emanated from her chest. Like now. She hacked a bit, and then said, “Very funny. Why ... are you here?”

Dixie removed her headset, shut her CD off and stared at Joe and Wheezy, speculating how these two sorry souls had wound up living under the bridge, out of sight, for such a long time.

“How old are you, Joe, sixty?” Dixie asked.

Joe jerked his thumb up several times. “Sixty-five?” Dixie guessed again. Joe waved his hand back and forth. Close enough.

Dixie had never heard him speak. He communicated with grunts and moans, mainly, or hand gestures. She didn’t know his story. No one did, except for Wheezy who was the only one Joe trusted, and she wasn’t telling anyone. The most Wheezy ever shared was the fact that he’d been treated for depression some years back and lived in a halfway house on Long Island just before settling in Pennsylvania.

Dixie thought Joe had been a mental patient in a hospital somewhere in the northeast -- schizophrenic maybe -- thrown into the streets because of budget cuts. What Dixie could say with some certainty was if Joe died tomorrow people in the community wouldn’t know or care. If it weren’t for Wheezy, he would hardly be missed, Dixie thought, as she watched Joe trying to settle into a comfort zone to take his nap on several pieces of cardboard.

Joe reminded Dixie of a Willy Loman character. He probably had a son named Biff out in the world looking for him right now. Or maybe he was a father of five who lost his job somewhere in suburbia and struggled with three, four part-time jobs before he lost his home and his wife and, finally, his dignity and hope. Then he probably vanished from society and wound up under this bridge with limited wants and fewer earthly trappings.

Dixie didn't know Wheezy's real name. She only knew her by the nickname she had given her. Sometimes the gurgling sounds were pretty bad when she took deep breaths -- a bronchial condition, Dixie guessed, that came from living in a cold, damp place most of the year. Dixie sensed that if her living conditions didn't change, she'd be dead within a year.

"Why ... are ... you here?" Wheezy demanded.

"Oh, am I bothering you," Dixie responded. "You have some place to go?"

"Why are you here," Wheezy barely got it out in one breath?

"Don't worry. I'm not staying," Dixie said. "I'm waiting for Mr. Wolff."

"Oh, I see."

"What's that's supposed to mean?"

Wheezy just shrugged and looked the other way.

"You're a *mutant*," Dixie whispered under her breath, a term used by the old-timers in town referring to some of the miners who worked underground many years ago. Dixie's grandfather, on her mother's side, told stories about The Sakawanna Coal Company. They bought the quarries on the outskirts of Coalsville, making a few people rich and establishing the demographics of the haves and have-nots who settled, respectively, on the north and south sides of Main Street. He told her about the men and women and young children employed as miners who worked long hours and got paid very little. Coalsville was once a gorgeous valley, he said,

mostly farmland before the mining days. Then Sakawanna Coal moved in and set up shop, built hundreds of row houses for the miners on the south side of Main Street. In contrast, the managers constructed spectacular stone homes on large fenced-in properties on the rolling greens on the north side of Main Street. A hospital was built nearby due to accommodate the increased population caused by the industrial need for both coal and steel. In the beginning, most of the people who went to the hospital were coal miners who developed wheezing sounds from the damp mine conditions. They were nicknamed *mutants*. Some died from black lung.

A deep crackling breath echoed in the underpass. Wheezy pointed to where Dixie was sitting and said, “Don’t get too comfortable. That’s my spot,” in such a tone as to imply she didn’t like being called a mutant.

Dixie grunted and swatted at nothing in particular. She wanted to tell Wheezy this was public property and she had no business bossing anyone around. But she didn’t say anything, because sadness filled Dixie’s soul as she looked at the two bridge-dwellers. She took a sweeping look at the squalor and dirt and wondered how anyone could sink to this level in life. A dozen or so plastic bags, some partially filled with aluminum cans, some with clothes, littered the riverbed. Others were folded neatly as bed sheets. Joe was using a 50-gallon plastic bag that was filled with newspaper and hand-me down children’s clothes.

“What’re you looking at?” Dixie yelled. Wheezy looked away and tried to get comfortable next to Joe. “You know, I want to be sympathetic to your condition, but ...”

“I don’t need your sympathy.” More wheezing, as Wheezy tried to catch her breath. “You’re not too far from living like this!”

Wheezy’s words startled Dixie. She clinched her fist and cocked her arm, a knee-jerk reaction. Dixie needed to control her anger because it was consuming her sometimes, like right at

this moment. Dixie breathed deeply; the extra oxygen calmed her. “You know, I want to be nice, you damn fool. But you’re just a jerk.” Dixie flipped her hand at her because Wheezy was not worth her breath.

She focused on Joe for a second. Sunken eyes. The look of death. What would happen to Wheezy when he died, she wondered? They were sort of a husband and wife team without the marriage certificate. Wheezy had been taking care of Joe for so long, he was probably her reason for living now. She gathered aluminum cans by day at five cents a pop, and begged for money at several corners of Main Street by night, then used the money to make sure they had enough food and clothing. As much as Wheezy irritated her, there was an admirable quality to her mothering.

But cold weather was coming -- maybe late compared to most seasonal debuts -- but no doubt it would present itself with disregard for Joe’s condition. Dixie thought that this might be Joe’s last winter. She shuddered. It made life seem so much more fragile, harsh and unkind ... and uncompromising.

“Joe doesn’t look all that well,” Dixie said.

“He’s fine,” Wheezy replied.

“You know, you’re very ... flip. You think you’re better than me?”

Wheezy raised her eyebrows as if to suggest that she was.

“You’re a turd,” Dixie added. “You’re damn lucky people in this town feel sympathy and give money when you beg.”

“I’m their conscience,” Wheezy said.

That comment came as a surprise, yet Dixie didn’t know what Wheezy meant exactly, and didn’t want to appear ignorant, but she had to know. “What do you mean?”

“I’m a reminder of how things could be for them.”

This jarred Dixie's memory. Gramps used to talk about the Great Depression, when everyone feared winding up in the streets, when Main Street was a conglomerate of failing businesses and bellied-up banks. North side residents scrambled their investments, diversified holdings and survived the crisis, a little poorer perhaps, but much better off than the south side folks who could barely eke out a living. Anyone living on the south of Main Street had to beg to survive.

The worst of the stories of the depression days was told about a south-side man who broke into a home on the north side of Main. He stole a little food and some money hidden in a cigar box in a sock drawer. When he was caught, the north side folks tarred and feathered him. The man died, suffocating from hot tar that dripped into his lungs. Nobody was arrested or charged for this crime. According to Dixie's grandfather, it caused hard feelings on both sides of town, accentuating the class attitudes that still exist. The Southsiders were convinced anyone could get away with murder if you lived on the right side of town.

Staring at Wheezy and Joe, Dixie concluded there were at least two people in town who were below her on the social ladder. If she could just stay clean for a couple of weeks, she could get a job, or even go to school. She wouldn't allow things to get so bad that she had to grovel just to stay alive, like Wheezy.

"I'm going to college, you know." This came out of her mouth without thought. She wondered why she said it the instant she spoke the words. Maybe because her grandfather was on her mind. He believed living in the projects on the south side offered little hope of escaping the bondage of poverty. He also believed there was a better side to human nature and wanted Dixie to go to college when she graduated from high school to explore that side of her. But she hadn't. She couldn't. She was too dependent on ... other things. Sadness tugged at her soul for

not having gone to the Community College like she had promised her grandfather. But she made that promise before she found out the *truth* that led her to experiment with life and adventure; and ... drugs.

Dixie chuckled. "The truth shall set you free," she blurted out. Wheezy stared as if Dixie were touched in the head.

The real truth was that her mother bore her into this world some thirty years ago without knowing who Dixie's father was. To save face, Dixie's mother penned a name onto the birth certificate - a man who had left town and could've been the father, but Mrs. Swanson didn't know. Dixie's mother was sleeping with so many men during that time; she had no idea of the *truth*.

How dare Ma scold me for my behavior, Dixie thought. How dare she turn me out because I'm not 'functional'! Dixie held her head between her hands. "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" she scolded herself for thinking such depressing thoughts. She promised herself she would stop thinking about her mother because it would always end up the same. She'd fill with anger and her stomach would turn into knots, and she'd feel like vomiting. She held her ears tight as if this blocked out her thoughts.



WHILE WHEEZY GATHERED all the aluminum cans in one bag, she held a gaze on Dixie, thinking she should be committed, locked up in loony bin after the way she was talking to herself.

"What're you staring at?" Dixie shouted.

Wheezy looked away and continued bagging the aluminum cans.

"Make one more pass by Main Street's garbage containers and back alley dumpsters,"

Wheezy mumbled. "I'll fill two more bags before the week's done."

“How much you make collecting those cans?” Dixie asked.

“None of your business.”

“Ten, twenty dollars?”

“Twenty for the cans. And fifty on the corners.”

“No way. You couldn’t lug that many on foot.”

“Believe what you want.”

“You make fifty dollars begging?” Dixie asked. “What the hell do you spend it on?”

Wheezy’s head nodded towards Joe; then pounded her chest. “Medicine.” She liked the idea that Dixie appeared perturbed over the issue that Wheezy made more money.

“I gotta do something with my life,” Dixie mumbled.

Wheezy had seen Dixie drunk, or on something else, in unflattering places, like back alleys, so she felt a grade better than her at the moment, especially since she made money and Dixie didn’t. Her sin, in Wheezy’s mind, was that Dixie squandered her youth and was in no position to preach to anyone.

Measuring her words between breaths, Wheezy said, “Main Street’s a two-mile strip mall ... has everything we need ... right in my back yard.” Again, she reveled in Dixie’s reaction. Her groan was a tone of respect, almost.

Wheezy bumped Joe by accident. He grunted and waved a hand at her to move over. She shifted a foot, and he moved a little, presumably finding a more comfortable spot.



DIXIE WAS intrigued at how they communicated with each other. A flick of a finger, a blink, a twitch of the neck or shoulders, all seemed to have meaning.

“Saw you the other night,” Dixie said after a moment of reflection. “I was up there.” She pointed to a tree with exposed roots running along the shoulder of the road. It leaned toward the dried-up riverbed over their makeshift home.

“Why do you park your butts here. That tree is going to fall any day.”

“Provides shade. Protects us.” Wheezy growled. “Been there forever. Never harmed us.”

Dixie was amazed how the tree did hover over them. “I sat up there a couple hours watching you two.”

“That’s invasion of privacy.”

“I saw you bring food to Joe. You were eating pretty late.” Wheezy didn’t respond.

“What was that fancy bottle you were drinking from? Wine?”

Wheezy nodded, and cocked her head as if she liked the idea Dixie was envious of her late night cuisine complete with fancy wine.

“You helped Joe walk down the stream. I followed.”

“You got nothing better to do?” Wheezy asked.

“I saw you giving him a bath. Heard him complaining a lot. He howled like a dog.”

“The water was cold.”

“Sounded like you were beating him.”

“It was that time of the month for his bath.” Wheezy finished arranging the bags, then tried to settle herself by the support beam. She curled her lip, extremely displeased that her customary spot on the cushion had been taken without permission.

Dixie scrunched her face, waved a hand in front of her, and puffed out a burst of air. She curled her upper lip and snarled, indicating she smelled a stench coming from where Wheezy and Joe were sitting. “I think *you* need a bath.”

Wheezy ignored her. “When are you getting out of here?”

“Don’t worry your little panties off, assuming you have one on. I’m not staying long.”

“Good. Don’t ... fart ... in the cushions,” Wheezy growled. “That’s where I sleep.”

Dixie looked around and saw a lot of empty wine bottles. “Alcoholic,” she whispered under her breath.

A wheezing sound. “Look who’s calling the kettle ... black ... Doper! ”

“Aaaagh,” Dixie grunted. Just then she heard a distant sound. A person humming from down the road. “That must be Mr. Wolff.”

Dixie grabbed her CD player and climbed up the embankment a little ways. She spotted Henry down the road sauntering towards her.

A wheezing sound echoed in the hollowness of the breezeway. “Is he comin’?”

Dixie slid back down the embankment and ducked under the bridge. “Shut up, you dumb old broad,” she said, then moved closer to Wheezy so there would be no misunderstanding. “Now, listen to me, you patch of manure. When Mr. Wolff comes down from the hill, you stay put.”

Dixie picked up something from the ground. “I’ll stuff this rotten chunk of pumpkin down your throat if you cause any trouble.”

Joe grunted loudly and flicked his finger.

“Joe wants you to go,” Wheezy said. “He doesn’t like you.”

“Yeah? Well, the feeling’s mutual, I’m sure.” Dixie heard Henry singing from down the road, “*Zipadee do dah, zipadee yea, my oh my, what a wonderful day...*”

“He’s coming,” Dixie shouted. She started to climb the embankment. “You stay put,” was her last command before going over the top.

Henry came walking by the bridge still singing and humming. All of a sudden Dixie popped out of nowhere. He leaned over and clutched his chest.

“Sorry about that, Mr. Wolff. I didn’t mean to scare ya.”

Dixie looked down and saw Wheezy trying to climb up the embankment, but she was unable to get her footing. Dixie kicked some rubble down from the shoulder of the road for good measure.

Henry stood next to Dixie. They both stared down at Wheezy and Joe. Then Dixie took Henry by the arm and turned him around. “Come on, I’ll walk you to wherever you’re going.”

“I’m going to Duffy’s,” Henry replied.

“Oh! How stupid of me! Of course. Mrs. Wolff ... your wife.”

“Mary.”

“Yes. Your wife, Mary. I’m so sorry. I should’ve said something yesterday when we ... talked.”

All of sudden Henry looked somber. Contemplative.

“She was such a nice woman,” Dixie added.



HENRY ACTED SURPRISED. “Did you know her?” He knew very well that Mary and Dixie knew each other. In fact, Dixie had gone to school with their daughters. Mary had talked about Dixie from time to time about how pretty she was and wished the girl could get her act together.

“A little I guess. When I was a kid I played up in your neighborhood sometimes. I had a couple of friends on the north side. I’d see her once and awhile outside. She invited me in for a hot chocolate one time. She was so nice to do that. Your daughters didn’t like me, though. Told

me I shouldn't be hangin' up there. You know ... 'cause I lived in the projects, and all. Your wife, I mean, Mrs. Wolff, didn't seem to care. I remember the hot chocolate. She was very nice to me."

"Well, come up to the house again. Yes. You do that. I think I have some hot chocolate in the cupboard."

Dixie chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"Cupboard. I haven't heard that word since my grandfather died."

While they talked, Henry heard some wheezing sounds and he walked back to the bridge. Wheezy had run to the other side and started up the embankment where the slope was more gradual. Henry watched Wheezy struggle with a purpose. She grappled and scooped and clawed at the dirt, trying furiously to climb the slope. Henry lifted his hands, let them drop, and then held them out again, wanting to help, but not knowing exactly how.

Wheezy finally made it to the top, huffing, puffing, and wheezing so laboriously that Henry held his breath, thinking she was going to have a heart attack or stop breathing altogether. "Can you spare ... some ... do-re-me ... Mr. Wolff?" she finally asked.

"Sure." Without hesitation, Henry reached into his pocket.

But Dixie grabbed Henry's arm. "Don't give her any money. She's just out for an easy score. Besides, she'll just buy some fancy wine with it. She doesn't need your money."

Wheezy gave Dixie a fist, then opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something but couldn't on account of the congestion and being out of breath.

Henry took his hand out from his pocket and shrugged.

"Come on, Mister ..."

“Henry,” Henry said with a strong tone. “You all can call me *Henry*.”

“Come on, Henry. I gotta take care of ...” Wheezy pointed down the embankment at Joe. “Just a dollar.” She was breathing heavy, but managing. “For myself and ol’ Joe down there. Two unfortunates needin’ some do-re-me.”

“Leave us alone, you pest,” Dixie said.

Wheezy scowled like a baboon and swung her arm as if she planned to knock Dixie’s head clear into New Jersey. But she missed. “Come on, Mister. You done it before.” Wheezy said, undeterred. “You live in that fancy house ... up on the hill. You can spare some do-re-me.”

Henry reached into his pocket again and took out a five-dollar bill. With the speed of a frog’s tongue, Wheezy flicked her elbow and the money disappeared into her hand. Clutching the prize, she shifted her weight and a stone under her foot slid. About to tumble down the embankment, she howled like a thousand wolves. Dixie bolted to Wheezy’s aid, grabbing her shoulders, then turning her around and forcing her to sit.

Dixie bent down and whispered into her ear, “I told you not to cause any trouble, you bitch. You don’t listen very good.” She stripped the five dollars from Wheezy’s hand, then forced her shoulders to the ground and pushed her down the embankment. “Adios, amigos,” Dixie said.

Henry rushed to the shoulder of the dried-up riverbed and watched Wheezy’s descent. He glanced under the bridge and saw Joe’s motionless feet clad with faded, torn socks.



WHILE WHEEZY SLID effortlessly to the bottom, she yelled and cursed with a tone of resignation, knowing she didn’t have another climb in her. As she rumbled down, the dust and pebbles collected in her shirt. She sat motionless for a second at the bottom, then stood. The dirt

and rubble and sand slid down her back and settled into her pants. She took off her clothes and inspected her naked body, now covered with a new layer of loose dirt and coal dust from years gone by. She used the palm of her hand like a washcloth and scrubbed the loose earth off her skin. She smelled herself, then sniffed her clothes.

“Hard to tell which is worse,” Dixie yelled down to her.

Wheezy flicked her fingers off her chin, sign language, a message for Dixie.

“We bathe tonight,” she said to Joe, her voice mixed with a bronchial wheeze.

“Aagh,” Joe responded. Which Wheezy interpreted to mean, “Too cold, leave me alone.”

He turned his back to her.

As Wheezy dressed again, she inspected the sky, as if she could predict the weather. She shot a look up the embankment. Henry and Dixie were gone.

“A lost opportunity,” she mumbled. She dragged the cushion into the shade and sat. She smelled a new rancid odor and instantly determined it was Joe.

“We bathe tonight, Joseph. And that’s final.” She turned her back and tried to get some rest.



DIXIE GLANCED back at the bridge. “Good riddance to bad garbage.” She handed Henry back the five dollars. “She makes more money begging in a week than most people make in a month.” She laughed, but saw Henry wasn’t laughing. “She’ll get over it. So ... what were we talking about?”

He stopped and turned back towards the bridge, but Dixie grabbed his arm and pulled him forward. “Come on,” she said. “Wheezy’s okay. She’s a survivor. Hey, I caught her when

she slipped, didn't I? She looked like she was going to take a nasty fall back there. I might've saved her life even."

"You think," Henry pondered.

"Hey. I didn't want her dead. I just wanted her lost."

They walked for a while without saying a word. Dixie spotted Duffy's Funeral Home down the road.

"Chocolate," Henry said suddenly.

"What?"

"We were talking about you coming up to the house for some chocolate."

"Yeah, yeah. I will. I will. Say, Mr. Wolff ... I mean, Henry. I know you gave me money yesterday, for that loan I told you about." Dixie looked left and right, a nervous habit when she was about to say something that was embarrassing, as if someone might be listening, although she knew no one else was around. "You think you can give me something today?"

The muscles in her face twitched and she rubbed her forehead and cheeks to stop it. Asking for a handout, even a loan, made her feel ... dirty. Her eye-lid twitched so she ground the heel of her hand on her eye and stopped it. She didn't like using Henry this way because he was different. His very presence made her want to become a better person. It was a strange feeling, one she didn't understand. Still ... she needed the money, and she had nowhere else to go.

They stopped walking. She faced Henry, and then looked towards the funeral home, imagining an invisible line in the road ahead, one that separated her world from the north side dwellers. She felt uncomfortable, all of a sudden, being on the wrong side of the town.

Mrs. Aldrich's car burst into view. She honked her horn several times, like she had lost control of the car.

Dixie jumped out of the way. “You crazy old bat!” she yelled.

Mrs. Aldrich slowed down and, as she passed by, she shook her finger and babbled something. Dixie saw her waving her hand indicating Henry should get in immediately, as though he was in some kind of danger. He waved back, casually, pointed in the direction of Duffy’s, as if Mrs. Aldrich couldn’t find her way and needed directions. Dixie could see Mrs. Aldrich’s face as she passed by, the grimmest of looks.

“Who the hell is that?” Dixie asked.

“Mrs. Aldrich. My neighbor. A friend of Mary’s.”



HENRY KNEW from the look on Mrs. Aldrich’s face that she disapproved of Dixie, and of him talking to her because of her reputation of doing drugs. No doubt, she was going to tell Robin.

CHAPTER THREE

The outside porch of Duffy's Funeral Home faced Main Street and one could see down Belmont Avenue all the way to the bridge. The porch was covered with a sloping canvas top, which blocked the noon sun. It was where people congregated to smoke or to take a break from the dreariness of the viewing rooms.

Sharon and Robin Wolff opened the door and walked out onto the porch. Robin rested her arms on the rail. A small breeze rustled through her long brown hair. She brushed it from her face and looked out onto Main Street, thinking. Sharon rustled her fingers through her short-cut blonde hair, styled on the frizzy side this day. She stood two inches taller than her sister.

Robin looked up at her. "A little heavy on the makeup today, aren't you," she quipped.

Sharon pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from her pocketbook. "Cigarette?" she offered as she held out the pack to her sister.

"No thanks."

They both stared out into town in two different directions. Sharon noticed their father talking to Dixie on Belmont Avenue. "Look! Look!" Sharon pointed.

Robin spotted Henry talking to Dixie halfway between Main and the Black River Bridge. A van came into view and almost hit Dixie.

Sharon laughed. "Give that man ten points for trying."

"You can't control who Dad talks to," Robin said.

"Yeah, well, if I could, what's-her-name would be on top of my list." Sharon took another drag on her cigarette and blew the smoke out the side of her mouth. She put the cigarette out in the ashtray next to her.

Robin watched Dad talking to Dixie and noticed how he lavished attention on her.

“Life is so simple for Dad,” Sharon said. “He doesn’t have a care in the world. Talks with anyone who listens. Sinners. Thieves. Prostitutes.”

A pang of guilt flushed through Robin like a sudden autumn chill. “You know,” she said, “I see how civil Dad is with Dixie. In all my years of growing up with her, I don’t think I ever showed her the time of day.”

“That slut,” Sharon quipped.

“Her name is Dixie,” Robin said. “Anyway, I can’t ever remember speaking a civil word to her. We were not very nice to her, you know. I feel guilty about that.”

“Yeah, well, she’s a druggie. A loser.”

“Mom didn’t think so.”

“Mom was a civil servant to everyone except ... me,” Sharon said.

“Oh, please. Mom was tough when she had to be.”

“Really, now? Mention one person who she got tough with besides me.”

“Okay. Pastor McMillan.”

“Reverend McMillan?” Sharon laughed, then suddenly stopped, and nodded. “He was always submissive to Mom, come to think about it.”

“Not always. Mom had to ... what’s the right word ... *coach* him.”

“Really. What happened?”

Robin laughed as she remembered. “I’d never forget that one Sunday when he gave a sermon about the wrath of God and how important it was not to anger Him ‘else fire and brimstone and eternal damnation would be our rewards’. When we left the church, Mom shook the Rev’s hand and wouldn’t let go. She told him the sermon was so powerful and carried such a

barbaric message that she was going to have to keep her children home for a few weeks to debrief us from the metaphorical horrors that would most surely cause us nightmares.”

“I can imagine Mom saying that,” Sharon said.

“Oh, there’s more. The Pastor had to pull his hand away from her, like it was stuck in a jar, or something. I can remember the look on his face. Whew! He was pissed, but Mom kept us home from church as she promised. I didn’t realize it then, but her weekly contribution also stopped, which caused so much consternation from McMillan that he personally came to visit her. He begged her to come back. I remember that night. Mom sent us to bed early and I remember vividly hiding in the hallway, listening to the words and the tone of their voices. There was a cowering tone to the Pastor’s voice, very different from his booming, sermonizing voice that scared the hell out of me on those Sunday mornings. Mom was so self-assured; her words were pointed like daggers. That’s where you get your tongue from.”

“Please. Finish the story.”

Robin pointed her finger into Sharon’s shoulder. “Do you realize what you are doing to my children?” She pounded her finger into his shoulder like that, pushing him back into the wall. ‘Do you know you’re scaring the children with all your hell and damnation talk? What’s the matter with you?’ It was great. She promised the Reverend we all would go back to church and she would resume the contributions if he would preach peace and love.”

“Aagh, I see. Money talks, even to God,” Sharon scoffed. “The Wolff family’s contributions would continue to lace the Pastor’s coffers if he toned down his flaming message that God kicks butt whenever He feels like it.” Sharon pounded the pack of cigarettes against the banister. “Money talks ... it’s the number one criteria for human existence.”

“Oh, good grief!” Robin held out her hand. “Give me one.”

“Ah, you’re so easy.” Sharon opened the pack and took out two cigarettes. She handed Robin one and lit them both up.

Robin took a drag without inhaling. She watched her sister take a slow easy drag, as if the smoke gave her strength. Robin took another drag and spit out the smoke as if it were a pit. “I can’t believe you would do such a thing to your own father,” she said.

“Don’t be so melodramatic,” Sharon countered. “I’m not trying to commit him; I’m only trying to stop him from pissing away Mom’s money.”

Mrs. Moyer, sixty-ish with an Einstein hair look, entered the porch and walked right up to Sharon and hugged her. She quickly turned to Robin and hugged her as well. “I’m so sorry about your mother,” she said.

“Thank you, Mrs. Moyer,” Robin said.

“Yes. Thank you,” Sharon echoed.

“I can’t believe it,” Mrs. Moyer said. “She died so suddenly. It was the old ticker, wasn’t it?”

“No, Mrs. Moyer,” Sharon said. “She had cancer. It took a long time for her to die.”

“Oh, dear. That’s right. I’m thinking of Sherwood Pentagast. He died of a heart attack, didn’t he?”

“Yes, I believe he did,” Robin confirmed.

“What a shame.” Mrs. Moyer gently held her chest and continued to mumble to herself as she walked inside.

“What a flake,” Sharon said. “Pentagast died over a year ago.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

Sharon groaned. “Dad can’t take care of himself. Period. End of story”

“I disagree. Dad can take care of himself just fine. He doesn’t need us to do that.”

“Oh, you know this for a fact, do you? Well, did you know he withdrew five hundred dollars the day before yesterday?”

“What are you doing, spying on him?”

“No. Dennehy from the bank told me Dad came in and took ...”

“So, what’s your point? He took money out of the bank? So what!”

“So I asked him what he did with the money. He told me he gave it away to that drug addict ...” Sharon pointed down the street.

“Her name’s Dixie,” Robin interjected.

“For crying out loud, Robin. Mom has taken care of Dad all my life. He can’t ...”

Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins walked up the steps of the funeral home and approached the sisters.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Mrs. Jenkins interrupted while Mr. Jenkins stood behind his wife, respectful, keeping his distance. Mrs. Jenkins, the representative of the duo, stepped forward and hugged Sharon and Robin.

“Thank you,” Robin said.

“Yes. Me, too,” Sharon said.

Mrs. Jenkins stepped aside and gave a slight head-nod to her husband. Robin sensed that he was reluctant to step forward. Mrs. Jenkins gave him a deadpan stare. He stepped forward and hugged Robin from a half step away.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, Matthew,” Mrs. Jenkins said. “She doesn’t have germs.” He turned to Sharon and hugged her too, and then nodded and backed off, as if waiting for his next instructions.

“Thank you, Mr. Jenkins,” Robin said. The Jenkins turned away with heads bent. Properly solemn, Robin thought.

“Now there’s one submissive man,” Sharon said. “I gotta get me one of those.” She puffed on her cigarette and leaned into Robin. “How long do you think Mom’s estate would last with Dad doling out money to every street-wise whore?”

Robin put out her cigarette. “Dad showed some responsibility in taking care of Mom this past year, don’t you think? He never complained. Why don’t we just leave him alone and give him a chance.” She turned to go inside, but Sharon grabbed her arm and pointed down the street. They both witnessed Henry handing money to Dixie.

“How long do you think it will last?” Sharon asked. “Dad has no ... no ...”

“What, Sharon? Your father has no what? Careful. This is the man who loves you a lot ... gave you everything he had within his soul. He always tried his hardest to please you. And you’re angry with him because he ... what? Because he told his ‘baby-head’ joke every time your friends came over to the house?”

“That was a stupid joke. It was embarrassing.”

“How many fathers would take the time to sit down and play ‘Chutes and Ladders’ every night for a month because his two little girls fell obsessively in love with the stupid game? How many daughters had a father sit with them to watch SNOW WHITE ten thousand times and recite lines with his children and act out the cartoon like ROCKY HORROR cult-heads? And for this, you petition the courts to freeze his assets so you can be his financial guardian. I don’t think so, little-sister-of-mine. At least Judge Brady had enough sense to make me temporary guardian.” Robin was losing it and she had promised herself she wouldn’t. Not today.

Sharon squeezed Robin's arm tighter and moved closer so they were almost nose-to-nose. "Why are you getting so up in arms, you witch? You're a fancy, schmancy lawyer. You're making enough money so you don't have to worry about your future. I got squat."

"You could've finished school if you had the heart," Robin declared. "Nobody forced you to quit and marry Mr. Potatohead. And no one is forcing you to work at a collection agency, although it fits your personality quite well."

Sharon released Robin's arm and the two just stared at each other for a few seconds. Robin broke eye contact first and proceeded into the parlor. Slowly, Sharon followed.



SHARON SAT quietly in the front row next to her sister in the main parlor. Her mother lay peacefully in a coffin a few feet away. Sharon's mood had changed. More reflective. She felt her nondescript life, at 31 years old, had to change. She was tired of resenting Robin, her benchmark of achievement while growing up. Teachers and relatives and neighbors always compared progress in Sharon's life to Robin's successes and accomplishments. Sharon never measured up. A college dropout with little prospects of carving out a prosperous future of her own, she could hardly compete with a graduate from Harvard Law School. She settled into a career as an agent for the Clarion Collection Agency, which seemed to validate her public image as the wayward daughter, the sister with lesser abilities. Yes, she must work on her image. She was committed to doing that.

"How are you two holding up?" Mrs. Aldrich asked, interrupting the two sisters' solitude. She sat next to Robin.

Sharon nodded, lifted her hand slightly, a greeting gesture.

"I didn't want to bother you on the porch. You two looked like you needed your privacy."

“Thank you, Mrs. Aldrich,” Robin said.

“Your father is a bad boy.”

“Why? What has he done now, Mrs. Aldrich?” Robin asked.

She leaned closer to Robin, looking around as she prepared to divulge a secret. “He’s dressed in a sweat suit. And he’s hanging around with that ... floozy girl.”

“You mean Dixie, Mrs. Aldrich?”

“Yes. Yes. That’s the one.”

While Robin and Mrs. Aldrich talked, Sharon sat quietly next to them thinking how negligent her mother was for *not* leaving some kind of legacy to her daughters. It wasn’t as if *Mother* didn’t have time to reflect on her last will and testament during those months before she died. If she had made promises to her mother to change her focus in life and finish college, maybe that might’ve made a difference. A missed opportunity, Sharon thought.

Sharon’s mind drifted to different times and places. She thought about other missed opportunities in her life and the anger that seemed to control her. Sharon remembered how it was when she enrolled at Lehigh University right after high school. “I’m not ready for college,” she had told her mother. However, her mother firmly insisted Sharon go to school and there were no if, ands, or buts about it. No discussions. That’s the way it always was with Mom.

Maybe if Mom hadn’t been so controlling, Sharon would not have entered into a contract with John Stone, Mr. Potatohead, as Robin called him, the disinherited son of a retired State Congressman. “That was a big mistake,” she whispered to herself. She got up and eased over to the casket and knelt down. “I got pregnant with John’s child,” she whispered to her mother. “Then I married him because I was convinced you’d set up a trust fund for us. Isn’t that what Grandfather did when Dad knocked you up with Miss Wonderful sitting behind me?”

She leaned on her folded hands and stared at her mother and thought about the great plan with John Stone. She got pregnant on purpose, married and left Lehigh University in that order. She and John Stone would divorce, of course, and he would be paid handsomely for his efforts. Sharon even made John sign a pre-nuptial agreement in case he had a hidden agenda of his own.

But Mom suspected something, and when she found out what was really going on, Mom called it ‘a cunning strategy’, and from that day forward there were no legacies, no inheritable trust funds forthcoming. In fact, Mary Wolff gave quite a dissertation that Thanksgiving Day when Sharon announced at the dinner table she had eloped with John. Somewhere between the main course and dessert, Mom made her own announcement which disavowed any responsibility to share or give any money from her estate to any of her children simply because they were old enough to copulate and marry. Conditions would be different, Mom told Sharon, if she decided to go back to school and earn her degree.

“I was caught in a dilemma, wasn’t I?” she whispered. “I really didn’t want a child, and I didn’t want to wait five years, and you knew it. You didn’t like John that much, but he was a congressman’s son, for goodness sakes.” Sharon chuckled to herself, recalling the fights she had with her mother. “You knew it was all a ruse and I had no intention of living with him forever. But you wanted me to have that baby, didn’t you? Was it because you wanted me to carry the Stone name? Have some political influence?”

She stared at her mother’s stern face and chuckled, remembering her mother’s reaction when she told her she was pregnant. It seemed ironic to Sharon that even in death her mother still scowls. “You couldn’t forgive me because I got an abortion without telling you. That’s what it was all about. The secrecy. But down deep you were embarrassed by me, weren’t you, Mom? Oh, don’t deny it. Why else were you so hell bent on telling people I had a miscarriage? You

never liked me working at the collection agency, either. Did it surprise you that I've been there all these years? They appreciate me there, you know. They appreciate my ... powers of persuasion, which I inherited from you, Mom. You should be proud of me for that."

Sharon looked around, checking if anyone was within hearing range. The coast was clear. "You always had to have things your way. It made me so mad, sometimes. You know, when I was a kid, I wished you dead. But then I grew up I thought, hey, she just wants the best for her daughters. And when you announced you had cancer, I thought everything would fall into place between you and me. I thought you were going to change your will. But you didn't. What was that all about, Mom? Just to get me to visit you during your last days? How cruel is that?" Sharon paused for a second, adjusted the flower on her mother's lapel."

Sharon scouted the room again and saw her father in the back talking and shaking hands with a couple of people. Mrs. Aldrich was still yapping behind her.

"Can you hear what's going on behind me? Mrs. Aldrich is complaining about Dad's relationship with Dixie? That's the man you left all your money to, Mom. And he's over there talking to people like it's a convention, or something." Sharon paused for a second. "Agh, you never listened to me when you were alive. What should make me think you'll listen to me now?" She leaned in and looked directly in her mother's face. "Big deal. So I got an abortion without talking to you first. We'll, here's something you didn't know. It was a boy you never got to raise." Sharon reached into the casket again, and with a quick jerk she broke the flower off the stem.

Sharon got up and sat back down and listened to the conversation between Mrs. Aldrich and Robin. She noticed how Robin took extra care to pronounce each syllable of every word. Perfect diction. Symbolic, Sharon thought, of how her sister lives her life, everything in its

perfect place, proper order, a model citizen who sets commitments and exceeds expectations in whatever she does, disgustingly successful. Mom's favorite.

Robin rolled her eyes to Sharon, as if to suggest Mrs. Aldrich won't stop talking. Sharon made a puppet mouth with her hand and flapped it. Blah! Blah! Blah!

Sharon noticed her father slowly approaching from the far end of the room. He waved to people as if he were a politician schmoozing his constituents. Distracted by a sudden feeling of tightness in her chest, Sharon took several quick breaths and whispered to herself, "It's only anxiety. Relax."

Mrs. Aldrich finally ran out of steam and stood up and waved her good-byes. Sharon watched her as she started down the center aisle, but Mrs. Aldrich saw Henry and turned and quickly exited the other way.

"She's a real odd-ball," Sharon said to herself. She looked around and noticed the parlor was filling with people, most of whom she had known all her life. She noticed Mom's bridge club sitting in the back away from everyone. There were also some women from the correctional institution where Mom did volunteer work as chairperson for a co-dependency group-meeting every week.

Sharon looked at her watch and then leaned over to Robin. "Dad's here. He's an hour late. Now, how responsible is that?"

Two female strangers approached before Robin could respond. "We're so sorry for your loss," one of the strangers said.

"We're from out of town," the other woman immediately piped in. "And we read in the paper ... Well, we knew your mother when she was in high school. And we wanted to pay our respects." Robin and Sharon both nodded and they shook hands before the strangers left.

Robin leaned in to Sharon and said, “You’re pissed at me because Judge Brady elected me as his temporary financial guardian so the bills can be paid ...”

“I’m not pissed,” Sharon interrupted. Both women feigned silence. “And don’t forget the twenty dollars a day you’re ‘allowed’ to give him,” Sharon finally chimed in. She looked over and saw Henry was preoccupied talking to someone, so she leaned in to Robin and whispered, “I don’t think Dad is financially responsible, and what is profoundly evident to me is that YOU don’t think he’s financially responsible either. Yet, you’re letting me do the dirty work. Are you telling me you think he can live responsibly by himself? Are you actually telling me that?”

“Mostly. Yes.”

“Damn it, Robin. The estate is ours. It always has been ours. Mom felt pity for Dad, that’s all. And Dad is giving it away like water to people like Dixie. I just don’t understand why mom ...”

“Mom loved Dad, and she always did. That’s the reason she never changed her will. I don’t understand you. I take that back. I do understand you. You have a job where you squeeze money out of people who can’t afford their mortgage, and you love it. You love it. You love what money does. You love the power of it. The smell of it. And no matter what you have to do, even if it means destroying what’s left of our family, you want control of it.”

“Such drama,” Sharon said. “Dad won’t be able to survive on twenty dollars a day. He won’t be able to survive on a thousand dollars a day because he treats money like a child treats money. Like there’s an unending supply. Hell, he’s lived life like a child for the past three decades. Mom had to supervise him. Without her, how long do you think it will be before the estate is gone? A year? Two years? I’m not a demon, Robin. Believe it or not, I love Dad very

much. But I'm also a realist. And I think it's irresponsible of you not to care what Dad does with Mom's estate."

Robin starts to rebut her sister, but she sees Henry approaching. "Shh. Dad's coming. And besides, this is neither the time nor place to discuss this."



ROBIN FELT ESTRANGED from her sister and bound to her only by genetics and their father's love. Still, she wondered if Sharon might be right. What was it about Dixie that Dad found so enticing? She wanted to cry as her sense of family was being shattered. Something she might want to talk to Doctor Tucker about.

All of sudden Henry stood before Sharon and Robin with open arms. The three clutched each other and Robin couldn't help feeling that, by all appearances, they seemed to be properly grieving - a tightly knit family with an oddly dressed patriarch.

"Dad," Robin said as she eyed him up and down. "You're wearing a jogger's outfit, do you know that?" Robin motioned to the other people sitting behind them. Mrs. Steinberg was wearing a black dress. Mr. Cunningham, a suit with an Oxford button down shirt and tie.

"Ooh. I see what you mean," Henry said.

Out of nowhere, a woman came up to Henry and hugged him. Then she turned to Sharon and grabbed her hand. "I'm so sorry," she said. Sharon nodded.

The woman then grabbed Robin's hand and repeated the same words.

She turned to Henry and hugged him again. "I'm so sorry, Henry." Several seconds of silence went by. Then Henry finally broke the tension. "Yeah, life's a bitch, then you die."

The woman took a sudden inhale, as if she had taken a blow in the solar plexus.

Henry pointed to the casket. “Go. Go pay your respects. And don't forget the church ceremony tomorrow.”

The woman seemed horrified. Stunned. She hurried to the casket and knelt.

“Tomorrow is the funeral service, Dad,” Sharon said. “It's not called a ceremony.”

“Ah, yes. And this is a wake,” Henry added. “Should be called a snooze. Everyone here is so somber.”

Robin received Sharon's raised brow as having an underlying message that their dad was loony.

They all sat down. Henry took a position between his daughters and Robin leaned towards her father and whispered, “I thought I knew everyone in this town. Who is that?”

“Oh, that's Mrs. ... HmMMM. I don't know who she is.” A few seconds went by. “Oh, yeah. She's Jamie's mother.”

“Jamie who?” Robin asked.

“I don't know. If I knew that, I would know the lady's name now, wouldn't I, Sweetie?”



HENRY GLANCED around the room at people's faces and saw very serious, somber looks -- the furrowed eyebrows, the bent heads, and the folded hands on their laps. Henry mimicked what he saw trying to blend into the ambiance.

He folded his hands on his lap and looked ahead. Jamie's mother got up from the casket, started to walk over to the Wolff family but stopped. Henry was giving her the Groucho highbrow, which seemingly persuaded her to turn and head in the opposite direction.

“Mrs. Clinton!” Henry shouted and pointed to Jamie’s mother, who jumped a foot in the air as she was walking away, as if someone just poked her with a stick. “Mrs. Clinton,” Henry repeated. “Jamie’s mother.”

“Yes, I am,” Jamie’s mother said. Everyone in the parlor looked at her. She turned and hurried to the back of the parlor where she slid down into one of the chairs in the last row.



SHARON HAD her hands on her lap, clutched, twirling her thumbs, and feeling estranged from her father and sister. Henry just humiliated a woman in front of fifty people, and her sister hated her for filing a petition against their father and, while she was indulging in her negative projection, she might as well throw in the fact that her mother never liked her either.

Another person quickly gave her condolences and left. For the next few moments, Sharon watched people walking up to the casket offering their respects and then turning and finding their way to the Wolff family. Sharon accepted these greetings somberly and quietly. She noticed Henry greeting the well-wishers with a robust handshake, as if the mourners had just entered a Tony Robins’ motivational seminar. Sharon looked over to Robin for her response to her father’s odd behavior, but she was avoiding eye contact.

Mrs. Cohen stepped up and said to the entire Wolff family, “I’m so sorry for your loss.” She turned to Henry. “How are you doing, Henry?”

“I’m fine,” Henry said. “How are you, Mrs. Cohen? I haven’t seen you since Mr. Spector died.”

Robin nudged her father, then turned to Mrs. Cohen and said, “Thank you, Mrs. Cohen.”

Henry leaned to his daughters and said, not all that quietly, “I think the only time she comes out of the house is when someone dies. A strange coot, wouldn’t you say?”

“Strange?” Sharon interjected in a much softer voice. “You think Mrs. Cohen is strange?”

Sharon picked up her things. “I gotta go to work.” She got up to leave.

“You’re not staying?” Henry asked.

“I’ll be back tonight. Robin and I worked it out where one of us is here at all times.”

Henry frowned and Sharon came back. She touched her father on the arm. “Are you okay, Dad?”

“I’m fine, Sweetie,” he said. “I miss you. I don’t get to see you much.”

“I’ll see you tonight.” Sharon kissed her father on the forehead and left.



HENRY SAT next to his oldest daughter without speaking for a few seconds. He started to hum, as if he was doing a mantra. Then, with a sudden focus, Henry got up, walked over to the casket and knelt down. He looked to the ceiling, closed his eyes and whispered, “Dear God, I love you. I love you because you are much smarter than anyone I ever met. You made the animals, and a million species of bugs, and us. No one else could’ve done that.” He paused, looked down at Mary. “Mary, when you see God, ask him ... when you see Johnny, ask him, too ... if they have forgiven me. That’s it, honey. Just ask them if they have forgiven me and ... and I’ll be up there with both of you before you know it.”

He laid his hands on the casket and appeared to be listening. “I love you, too. I always have, and I always will.”

He got up and turned to those who were gathered in the room and bellowed, “My wife appreciates you coming. She wishes you all happy holidays, and wants you to know that someday soon you, too, will die. She says don’t be afraid, even though death might be painful to some of you, it’s only a temporary pain, like a prick of a needle before the morphine kicks in.”



ROBIN RUSHED to Henry's side. She took him by the arm and, while escorting him outside, noticed the whispering, the nudging, and the subtle shakes of the head. She remembered all too well while growing up those looks of amusement, the disapproval shown by the raised eyebrow or the half-closed eyelid accompanied with the condescending shake of the head. She spotted Mrs. Aldrich who sat quietly with her rosary beads mumbling prayers, unfazed by his bizarre comments. She was probably the only one in the room used to Henry's bizarre behavior.

Robin led Henry outside. They stood on the top stoop, alone. "Did I say anything wrong, Sweetie?"

"No, Dad. But I don't think people like hearing they are going to die any time soon. Life is hard enough to live on its own terms. They don't want to be thinking about their own ... death!"

"How can you *NOT* think about dying when you're in a funeral home?"

"Yes, well, here comes Mrs. Cunningham. Let's be civil, okay?"

Mrs. Cunningham walked up the steps. She hugged Robin and Henry. "I am so sorry," Mrs. Cunningham said. "Mary was such a good person."

"She still is, Mrs. Cunningham," Henry said.

"Yes. Yes. Well, I must go in."

"Thank you for coming, Mrs. Cunningham," Robin said. "Your husband is inside."

They both waited in silence for Mrs. Cunningham to walk inside.

"She looks so unhappy," Henry said.

"Dad, I think she's feeling sad because Mom died."

"Oh! Okay. That makes sense."

Sharon drove by and honked the horn. The two sisters gave each other a cold wave.

“Bye, Sweetheart,” Henry yelled to Sharon.

Robin noticed Henry staring at Sharon’s disappearing taillights. “What’s the matter, Dad?”

“I think your sister works too hard,” Henry said.

“Yeah. Right. Listen ... Dad. I have to come over and discuss something with you. Did you get a chance to read the letter from county court?”

“Yes.”

“Did you understand it?” Robin interpreted her father’s silence as a ‘no’. She sighed because she really didn’t want to deal with this today. But she felt she must, so she continued. “It says that I’m to govern your finances temporarily because Sharon has requested a hearing concerning your competency to handle your own finances.”

“Oh. That’s what that letter meant?”

“Yes, and I’m suppose to temporarily manage your bills and allowance.”

“Okay.”

“And we have to see Judge Brady on Wednesday.”

“Judge Brady? Why?”

“Because he wants to ... he wants to see if you understand what’s going on.”

“Oh. I see. Okay.”

“Maybe Sharon will change her mind,” Robin pondered out loud.

Henry laughed hard. “Sharon is stubborn, you know. Stubborn as a raging river after a thunderstorm. Can’t stop a raging river, you know. No matter how much you try.”

“Starting tomorrow, I have to allot you twenty dollars a day. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” he said as he reached into his pocket. He pulled out just one dollar.

“That’s all you have?” Robin asked.

Henry shrugged his shoulders and put the dollar back into his pocket.

“What happened to the money you took out of the bank?”

Henry looked down on the ground and avoided Robin’s eyes.

“Did you give it away?”

Henry nodded.

“To Dixie?”

Henry’s lack of response angered Robin. She tried to contain herself. She wanted to burst into a rage and shake her father’s shoulders and tell him he shouldn’t be so irresponsible, that he had to be more careful about what he did with money because the Judge might rule against him for being so flippant with the estate. But she knew any such reminders would be futile. Simple reasoning, however, had worked well in the past -- as long as it was simple.

“Why did you give Dixie your money, Dad?”

Henry looked at the ground, like a boy who didn’t want to talk.

“What’s the matter, Dad?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I don’t want you to say anything, except the truth.”

“But you’ll judge me if you don’t like my answer.”

“I see. Okay. I promise I won’t judge you.”

“I didn’t want to give it to her,” Henry said.

“Then why did you?”

Henry closed his eyes and tilted his head high, as if deep in thought. “Because she needed it more than I did, and it was the *right* thing to do.”

“You think it was the *right* thing to do?”

“Yes.”

“Dad,” Robin said softly, “Dixie is a drug addict. Remember our discussions about enabling people?”

“Yes ... no.”

“Well, if she uses that money to get food and clothing, then I would agree with you that you did the right thing, but she’s taking your money and buying drugs. You are helping her to continue to be a drug addict.”

“Oh. You think?”

“Dad. She could die from taking drugs. You should know that.”

Henry frowned, eyes furrowed. “Oh, my. I guess I shouldn’t have given money to Wheezy, either.”

“You gave money to her, too. Dad!”

“Yeah. Last week.” He rubbed his hands together, a gesture the conversation was over. “I want to go back inside.” He turned and walked back inside the funeral home.

Robin wished Sharon were there to give her a cigarette. She took a deep breath, looked out onto Main Street and spotted Dixie dancing into town in rhythm from the music of her CD player.

“What a waste,” Robin whispered to herself. She fixed her gaze on Dixie, watched her dance to her own music. She remembered hanging out with Dixie in the school yard when they were kids. Those were the days when taking drugs meant cherry-flavored chewable aspirin. It

was hard to believe the different paths in life they had chosen. What kind of relationship could Dad and Dixie have, for crying out loud? What possible reason would Dad have for making friends with such a loser?

She turned and headed back into the parlor.

Robert Gately

Robert is the author of two novels, two non-fiction books, twelve screenplays and three stage plays since retiring early from AT&T in 1998. His body of work has been recognized as finalist or better in over 170 theatre, book and screenplay competitions around the world since 1999. His screenplays and stage plays alone have won a total of 27 contests and came in 2nd place in 19 others (e.g., Breckenridge, Telluride, Fade In Magazine, Garden State Film Festival, etc.), and he is one of the most accomplished unproduced writers in the world as noted on the moviebytes.com site.

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