

INTO THE DARK

Our father was a mile tall and I once thought he made the sun. He had a stare as black and nameless as a Mississippi night that could fix you in a moment, and hair all snow-silver white, flat across his head. He was a preacher, and a gambler after that, when I was already gone to The Place. I guess those two callings are not that far apart—gambling and preaching—gambling on the chance that there’s a god, *the* God, god of Abraham and the Ishmael that Grandmother named him for, the Bible’s wanderer. God of our fathers, God who stretched His hands over the waters and parted them the way Father threw an embrace around our family that divided us from others, even ourselves, as surely as a burning tree in a garden. My father, our father, was a high school defensive back who said his everlasting regret was batting down a pass he should have intercepted.

We used to have family meetings before Bible study on Wednesdays, but on this April Monday he called us all into the study. I remember every word he said all week long, but I’m like that, remembering things. He always told us that we should love words, that they’re beautiful and a little pitiful to have to communicate with, but they’re all we’ve got. So I remember.

Father cleared his throat and stared at Mother’s freshly cleaned carpet. “Bubba will not be coming home to us again,” he said, his tone flat and final. The thought of blue came to me, the shade of blue that is cyanide. What did he mean? He and Bubba had been fussing, at least as much as anyone could fuss with Father, because it mainly didn’t occur to us to do it, or at least not often. He had every right to expect us to follow the rules and not fuss about it. We had to wait for what Father would say next. Did Bubba run off to Memphis in a huff? Had Father banished him? We stared at him in confusion, but Father just continued to stare at the carpet as if fixated on the one speck of dirt that the machine had left, as malicious in the flawless pile of the weave as a jag of glass in the beach.

It was as though Father for once couldn't find his voice. Mother stared down at her hands and finally choked out, "The Lord saw fit to take my angel boy." She did not look at us, and she did not move. It seemed as though there were ashes, ashes all over, ready to cave down on my head. When finally Mother looked up, it was my eyes she met. It seemed like something in her eyes was slipping, that she was looking into the future, where The Place waited for both of us. I had never known her ever before to speak while Father had the floor, which he usually did.

And there was a difference in Father, too—his voice sounded different when he told us, "They found him at the lake." It was such a hoarse voice. I wondered if God sounded like that when Christ was withering at Golgatha. But no, Jesus wanted water, so God wouldn't have spoken in such a parched voice. I saw Father's Adam's apple working as he tried to decide whether to say something else or wait for us to say something. There was nothing to say because if you opened your mouth all the ashes would flood in and your whole body would taste of ashes.

Bro asked how, and Father said that only the Lord knew and there must have been a purpose for it. Nikki was quiver-crying but no sobbing sound came out. I heard her breath catching in her throat. But she didn't really cry, just stared at me like there was glass between us, and she looked so small and frightened on the other side of it, like when she was born and I was looking through the windows at her in her little box. Now my eyes had slipped down to where my mouth should be and I couldn't open them or the ashes would be in my eyes, too. So I kept them closed, thinking of looking in a mirror to find your face all switched around.

I was thinking then of how Bubba had left the house—voices in the study. The door was closed and I was upstairs. I couldn't hear the words but Father's voice was raised to his hellfire sermon pitch. I was sure Mother heard it too, though she kept folding the clothes and talking about the new dress she'd put on layaway for me at Five Points West Parisian's that she wanted me to wear on TV. Bubba and I were "so

photogenic," they said, so we were the kid hosts of the Mousketeers Saturday program. We didn't do anything but say "Welcome, Mousketeers!" and look neat and clean. Bubba was feeling too old for it, but it made Mother so happy to see him in his suits, and Bubba did like his suits, not like most boys. Mother was fanatical about dirt and about the cleanliness of her children. When I was a baby she even rolled up the edge of a soapy washcloth and cleaned my nostrils.

I waited until Mother went back to the garage for another load of wash and crept downstairs to Father's study. I heard excited words, a harsh tone, but I couldn't make out much until Father put out a full-on thunder voice, terrible, piercing, words spat slowly and deliberately: "You impudent!" "four generation of this family's sons," "God's plan," "You will go where I tell you to go, and that is Covenant College and that is that!" Bubba said something softly that I couldn't make out. Father yelled back "And this unnatural *thing*, this disgusting—I won't even say it! An abomination is what it is!"

Bubba said something again, and Father thundered, "Go then, and nevermore be son of mine!" I heard a thud like a book had been thrown on the floor.

I ducked around the corner and heard Bubba's shoes thumping up and then back down the stairs. Then I heard the front door slam. I could hear Father pacing and muttering "Absolom, Absolom." I was scared for Bubba and scared for myself, too, feeling like a slender thread Father might cut with the irritated flail of a man shaking off a cobweb. But after all that fuss was dinner, and Father seemed the same as he always was, gravely giving thanks, policing our table manners. When Bro asked where Bubba was Father just cleared his throat and stared at him, which was Father's way of closing a discussion.

It had never really come to anything before, but now Bubba wasn't just not home for dinner and this time he'd gone for good, not just hitchhiked to Nashville or maybe down to New Orleans. When I looked

at Mother I knew she had seen the ashes too. It was an awful, veiled look in her eyes. Father had us kneel to pray for strength.

I thought of that dinner on that night when Bubba wasn't there and of how Bubba couldn't ever have any roast or Grandmother's pear preserves or anything good to eat with us again, and I cried. I wasn't sure I cried for Bubba. I cried that I would have things he would not ever have again. I cried because my heart was a divided landscape, because I was told there was a life where there was harp music on one hand and sulfur on the other, cried because there was still that horrible proof of mortality, those shattering hands curled over the breast, hands that only a week ago carved for Nikki a butter knife of pine, that yesterday buttoned his shirt, started the ignition in Mother's Riviera. Those hands I could imagine so expressively appealing to Father now folded like resting limp butterflies over his chest as he lay on some white table in a cold room. When Grandfather died, Bubba said his death brought us all closer to our own, which I thought was a somewhat morose thing to say.

Death wasn't really all that was heavy in the house. Death is a big noun, but it was more than this. We had not much seen or felt each other's tears, and the tears didn't matter so much, didn't prove anything. It was more like an immovable darkness had settled on the furniture like something less visible than dust but came off on your fingers all the same. The darkness didn't hide in corners or cracks in the ceiling. It perched on the family Bible where our birthdays all were entered in Mother's elegant cursive. It was on the German clock Uncle Luke brought back from the War. It stared out in the way of an argument we had not begun yet. The darkness was Father locked in his study, Father pacing the living room, Father taking up smoking and even doing it indoors as if no one could smell it or see the low haze of smoke when he opened the study door.

That Thursday Bro put on his good gray flannel suit and Nikki and I wore our Easter dresses. We took our places along the front row to wait for Father's address and smiled and said "Thank you so much" to the

ladies who tapped on our backs or came over to say what a fine boy Bubba was and how lucky we were to have him for as long as we did. Bro mainly stared at his hands, clinched in his lap, nails bitten to the quick the way he's always bitten them. I couldn't breathe with the smell of flowers and ladies' perfume. I was staring ahead, staring at nothing—not at Father, or the altar, not at the candles. I kept my mouth tight to keep the ashes out.

Father cleared his throat once and looked very solemn, as though he were the coroner finally pronouncing Bubba dead. Then he put on his glasses and began in a clear, strong voice, the voice he always had from the pulpit. He always looked fierce with the word of the Lord.

“The miracle of human interaction is a strange, marvelous thing. It can break people down as a prism breaks light and it can carry the seed of life in its fragile veins. It is more the need we have for some otherness, something besides ourselves. It is the catalyst for *life*.” The f-sound whistled through Father's lips. “So we die, hurt and heal; so we are born and bring others life; so we sometimes perceive even one another's secrets, because we are created with the desire to reach out to others. It is when we do not reach out to break another person's loneliness that we commit a grave trespass against the Creator. Bubba reached out to touch us, and we reached back. He was a bright flame at which we wanted to warm ourselves.”

I knew it was rude, but I was numb and bored and a little put off that it sounded like words Father might have tossed into any old sermon or any eulogy for anybody, even someone he didn't know. So I turned my head and scanned the rows behind us. Bubba's best friend Billy Lowell was sitting with a clump of Bubba's teammates. I always thought his blue veins were so pronounced because his skin was so pale and his face so thin. Mother always said Billy's complexion was so perfect, like a little porcelain doll. His face was delicate, his mouth plump, his teeth perfect. Mother said he was so pretty he ought to have been a girl.

Billy called Bubba Paul, which is what he liked to be called away from home. Today Billy's face was taut, as though wires were stringing his lips shut in a straight line. Maybe he was trying to keep the ashes out, too. I know that he must be hurting like we were. Bubba and Billy went everywhere together. "Two peas in a pod," Mother always said. "Joined at the hip." Billy Lowell never looked up but wiped his eyes a couple of times.

I began to wish profoundly for a piece of gum. My mouth was so dry I was almost glad this wasn't real Sunday church because we wouldn't have to sing so much and I wouldn't have to lead the youth group in rounds. I wanted Nikki to sniffle more quietly and not to have those little hiccups in her breath and I wanted Bro to unclench his fists and spread his palms on his knees. I wanted gum so that when the ashes came they'd taste like Juicy Fruit.

"There is a poem by Mr. A.E. Housman that reminds me of Bubba that I want to share with you now. . ."

The skinny strap of Nikki's slip was sliding down her shoulder and out of her sleeve, and she was trying to squirm it back into place. I felt squirmy, too, wanting to wriggle free of the buttock-blessing pews and crawl into a colored glass pane over the choir loft. I didn't hear the beginning of the poem, I was trying so hard to escape and rematerialize as glass. Father's voice, remarkable, resonant, hypnotic, lulled me like rain. I started to pay attention to the words and not just the undulating cadence of Father's voice when I saw Bubba's coach studying me.

*Now you will not swell the rout
Of lads who wore their honors out,
Runners whom renown outran
And the name died before the man. . . .
And round that early-laurelled head
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead
And find unwithered on its curls
The garland briefer than a girl's.*

Father nudged his glasses up and peered out past our row, maybe trying like me to astrally project all the way to the back and out the door. He paused suddenly, and the abrupt silence seemed almost angry.

“Bubba was one who had many laurels in this world. Many times he distinguished himself on the athletic field, in the classroom, in the church. He was a young man of great faith, and as most of you know, bound for seminary in the fall.” Bro and I furtively glanced at each other. He clenched his fists tighter. The ladies behind us issued a hushed chorus of “Amens.” Father’s chest became a huge ball, all puffed out with the glory of the Lord.

“In a way, Bubba was like that laurel tree he helped me to plant in our yard at home.” Bro made a slight snorting sound, and we looked at each other in shocked confusion. There was no laurel tree in our yard. There was a sad old hackberry tree and a birthbath about halfway to the road out front, and a rusty swingset with a busted chain out back. But maybe Father was speaking in parables, like Jesus saying “Know ye the parable of the fig tree” or “Know ye the parable of the mustard seed.” Maybe this was Ishmael’s parable of the laurel tree.

Billy Martin didn’t look like he understood parables. He was glaring at Father, mouth agape, shaking his head slowly back and forth.

“The laurel is a lovely strain when it first begins to glow with its faint, budding green, but no bloom is more maligned. The Greeks have it that the river god turned a girl named Daphne into the laurel tree so she could stop running from the sun god Apollo. She was turned still then, no longer fleeing in fear. Stillness lurks all around the laurel tree. The laurel tree is fixed, never to run again, free of the pursuit by the things of this world.” Father paused for awhile before continuing, “Yes, Bubba was like that laurel tree he helped me to plant. There will be times now when I will look out my study window and see my fallen boy on that mound where we planted that tree, he and I . . .”

“What’s he even talking about?” Bro whispered. “There’s no laurel tree. And you can’t see any trees from his study.”

“It’s a parable,” I whispered back.

“I will remember digging into the hard clay and raising that bed, splaying the delicate roots with my fingers. But the laurel died, as Bubba died, because the glory of this world is short. . .”

“You’re still standing,” Bro muttered. Billy Martin got up and let the door clatter on his way out.

“The life of a laurel tree, symbol of the world’s honor and glory, is necessarily transient.” He read more, about how Bubba did not die the subtle, more horrible death we die each day when we deaden ourselves to the needs of others. He finally said something about how the laurel and Bubba were beautiful because they were simple and unpretentious, and how it was the simple things that we never forget, that become our habits.

I don’t know why the whole time he was talking, I was thinking “Whenever Richard Cory went downtown. . .” The line repeated itself like a song with a heavy bass, and then Father’s voice broke in like static over the radio. I tried to switch the channels but always there was the poem or Father’s voice turning in circles, spinning, spinning, spinning me out to that sealed coffin by the blue velvet curtain.

And I thought of the darkness in the casket, how no one was ever going to open it again to let the darkness out, how when Father’s eulogy was done the darkness would still be there like the ringing in your ears that sounds like a whole orchestra of July crickets, chirping in notes so shrill that even the Almighty Himself couldn’t play them; that the darkness was going to be there like the water in Bubba’s lungs.

It finally was over. I heard a lady outside talking—“Can you imagine having to preach at your own son’s funeral? What a brave soul.” The cemetery where we had always been buried was a long way down the highway. All I remember of the time at graveside is Mother holding Nikki and shushing her not to cry through her own tears. Mother didn’t ride back to the house with us but rode instead with Aunt Inez. On

the way home people kept pulling off the road to let our procession pass. I turned to watch them until they were shrunken to pinpoints out the window.

When we were home and the neighbors and church people had left their ham and beans and pies and gone, I lay on my stomach for awhile and tried to write a poem for Father because he looked so grim now, as though all the air went out of him when the people left and he just sort of deflated. I worked Jesus in because I knew Father wouldn't like it if I left Him out, made death just so much darkness and ashes. But you couldn't really talk about Bubba and Jesus at the same time unless you were talking about supper on the grounds or going off to Covenant where Bubba didn't want to go. You couldn't really talk about Bubba and being dead at the same time, either, because that was too real and Bubba should be coming in from ball practice with Bro and telling Bro how gross it was when Bro drank milk straight from the bottle. Bubba should be just playing a joke on us, like that time at Grandmother's when I was really little and he told me a swamp monster had crawled out of Grandmother's pond and eaten cousin Joey. He should just be breezing in and out of doors, sometimes storming away from Father like it was for good and all and come back smiling, blameless as the wind and about as obedient.

The poem wasn't very good but I decided to give it to Father anyway. I copied it over in my prettiest handwriting and rolled it into a scroll, bound it with some yellow ribbon I had left over from when I made Bubba's last birthday card. When I went down into the den I saw that Mother had pressed a rose into the Bible and put down on the family page the note, "Paul Andrew Masters, April 13, 1960." I couldn't just leave the poem there, by the opened Bible. I went down the hall to look for Father.

There was a sliver of light from his cracked-open study door. I heard him talking in low tones to Uncle Luke. They sounded like they were sneaking a secret over on us, so I leaned in toward the door. I heard "coroner," "no one knows" and the sound of Father sobbing. My uncle's voice was soft and reassuring,

unusually tender. “You did right,” “the kids couldn’t know,” “saved everybody’s reputation,” “preacher’s kid with pills,” “and then that other business that would’ve come out sooner or later,” “killed himself.”

There was the sound of Father’s sniffing. Then Uncle Luke again: “You didn’t tell Beatrice the boy was like that, you know—did you?” “No,” my Father’s voice whispered. “No reason to tell her that.” Father’s sounded weak and resigned. “No, no. The boy was just confused, is all. A little too exclusive with that Billy Lowell. It influenced him, is all. He would’ve outgrown it and seen the light at Covenant if. . .” His words fell off. For a professional convincer, he sounded like a man who didn’t believe himself.

The anger seeped from my ears to my feet, my whole body becoming part of the fire. I saw Father speaking to the congregation, accepting their pecan pies and casseroles when he knew all along. I now remembered his words at the service as sly and thought it couldn’t be true that Bubba could be righteous and have been like Uncle Luke said because Father had always said that that was impossible. I thought that Bubba couldn’t be in heaven like Father said if it wasn’t an accident. I saw Father assuring all those people with words that could have been sewer gases spilling out of his mouth and floating over the pews. I saw a laurel tree choked with weeds. And finally I saw Bubba staring at Father like he did, his lip in a little wordless snarl, his eyes set so deep that you wondered if someone hadn’t come up with a forked stick and shoved them back there. His intense stare, matching Father’s, trying to make him blink.

I saw it happen: him idling Mother’s Riviera on Timberlake Road, swallowing those pills and cutting the lights, sitting in the dark for awhile in the loblollies. I saw him stumble past the “Park closes at dark” signs, stagger onto the shore and take off his socks and shoes to test the cold water, too cold.

He took his watch off and tucked it in a shoe. He waded past calf-high into knee-deep, then shoulder-deep water. He just kept walking, thinking the whole time that it wasn’t the way he should die, with a bottleful of Mother’s pills. He should have taken Father’s revolver and squeezed until there wasn’t anything left of Father, squeezed until finally there was nothing left of him, either. He should have taken

that way out, feeling a cool bullet gouge out whatever demon danced in the blue veins of his temples that made him the way he was, a broken and shameful thing, not man enough to live. Or he should have taken a knife and cut the tendonous thread that held his life together. Pills, a cowardly, girly way out, with water to hold him down after he could not take another groggy step.

I felt robbed by him, by Father, by all the church people. I wondered how mad Thoreau was when his brother died from a rusty shaving razor, but at least that was an accident. I wanted him to come back and tell us that he didn't mean it, it was just a terrible misunderstanding with the universe, that he wanted us back.

I started to cry as the ashes filled up in my mouth and the light went black around the bodies of my father and my uncle. "Bubba! Bubba!" I said. "Wait! It's dark out there."