

Your Father's House, Your Father's Blood

When he passed a sign saying MORVILLE, it dawned, after two hours driving, just what he was doing.

As a boy he'd kept a Polaroid. The man gazed into a dwindling bonfire, as a cigarette dwindled between two chunky knuckles. How often had he lain on his bed staring at that image, waiting for a clue to materialize; something to help explain? He'd left it somewhere, along with his curiosity.

All the same, here he was on his way to accept the extended hand, in this curiously lonesome place.

A fertilizer whiff tinged the oven-hot air whipping in his window. In a field two crows on a scorched branch faced opposite directions. Another sign: MORVILLE 3 km. Weird. Maybe he'd slipped into reverse. He really felt like a drink. Would he be offered a drink? Did his host, in newly minted tea-total manifestation, insist no alcohol infiltrate the premises? A man's home was his castle, but he seriously hoped there was something in his biological father's fridge.

A third, glarier sign loomed, inexplicably devoid of any information whatsoever. It seemed a sure message that strange events were afoot.

Then again, what had their relationship been so far? And what was anyone's life if not strange, every day of the week?

The man pressed the heel of one hand to his forehead, as if stopping up a wound. He picked up the phone.

The instant he made connection he spoke. "I'm scared shitless."

"Join the queue." An abrupt rackety laugh.

"Scared I'm about to have a drink."

"I understood you the first time."

He clenched.

"Fear is part of recovery," the other resumed. "Acknowledging fear is wise. Now, do you need me to come?"

"I'm meeting my son – any minute."

"And do you need me present?"

His babbled response did not even reference the question.

"Stop." The other cut in. "Do you need me at your side? Because I can come – if necessary. The term buddy system is informal. It's more like a saviour system, sometimes. I can get in my jalopy and be there in half an hour."

A murmured response amounted to no.

The other said, "We're all afraid somebody will decline the love we offer. But taking that risk is part of recovering our – our lost selves."

In the pause the man faced the window. "Owe you one."

Another rackety laugh. "One *what?*"

The son knocked harder than intended. Waiting, he didn't fidget. Impatience wasn't in his impressive inventory of faults. And now that he was here, he felt unreasonably calm, unusually detached – as though only improvising a scene, loosely inhabiting a character.

Steps carried from somewhere inside the house.

A heavy-set, heavy-eyed man in loose Levis and a faded Dire Straits T-shirt materialized in the hall. "Come in, come in. Come in son. No objections if I still call you son?"

"Call me whatever you like," he said half smiling, disliking his nervous humourless reply.

The flywire clicked shut behind him. Clumsily father and son embraced.

"Shot up since I saw you last."

He followed through a shadowy hall. "Tried smoking."

"Tried it myself – had a bit of luck, as you can see." The man's gait had the hint of a limp, or maybe recent soft-tissue injury.

A cramped, clunky kitchen had little to say for itself.

Opening the fridge, the man asked if he drank beer at all.

"Yeah." Half a quiet laugh. "Fair to say I drink beer at all."

The man pulled a can of bitter from its ring and held it out, and their fingertips touched.

He had nearly not come. This morning he'd woken with a queasy premonition the man could only find him disappointing. It followed a dream where they were eating, deep in conversation – the man stood and whipped away the tablecloth and turned his back.

The man opened a can of sarsaparilla. "Anyway. Cheers, son."

"Yeah . . . cheers."

They looked at the linoleum.

The man sipped his soft drink. "Long drive?"

"Not too bad." Pause. "Hot."

"Yeah, they say it'll keep up."

"Strange area."

"Strange? Yeah . . . is a bit. Bit – bit strange. Stand half a chance if they planted a few more trees."

He nodded through an easy laugh, rubbing one half of his beard, glancing around at bare walls.

The man's eyes followed his. "Needs a fair bit of work, this place."

"Doing a bit of painting?" He nodded at a paintbrush still in plastic on the table and reflected how unintelligent his question sounded.

"Started out the back. I'll make it inside sooner or later."

"Peach or lemon?"

"Peach," the man returned, pokerfaced, "with a splotch of fuchsia."

The son's smile was full, fleeting, naturally effacing. Conscious of the man's observation he wondered what sort of impression he was making: a less forgiving voice told him he didn't owe him the steam off his piss.

"No trouble finding the place?" The man shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Not that you could miss it."

"Living in exile?"

"Something like that, yeah, something like that."

Now the son's feet shifted. He could still feel the steering-wheel's heat in his fingers. Their eyes met, for real, for the first time.

"Sorry about everything."

"Nothing to be sorry for."

"About not staying in touch. About everything. I took things out on you – a little boy."

"Bygones."

"Well, that's very . . ."

"Water under the bridge."

"That's – that's big of you . . . very big."

"Thanks for calling."

"Reckoned we had some catching up to do."

Nervous smile. "What gave you that idea?"

"Just a hunch."

They sipped their cold drinks.

There was no blind on the window to block or ventilate sun. It poured in raw, undiluted. The son watched a tiny burnt-orange spider climbed the leg of a wooden chair. Some moments he felt no need to watch his words. Others, every word felt fraught. Driving here he'd felt a similarly half-mad muddle of raw vulnerability and invulnerable indifference.

Twice in eighteen years he'd seen his permanently absent, permanently disinterested father. The night before he turned seventeen, he'd been adrift, in a van with friends of a friend, far from his own town. Wherever they'd arrived, the main street was deserted and windy, and several shopfronts covered over with newspaper. They drifted to a red light when the figure appeared, staring at images of properties in an estate agent's window, with his hands buried in his jacket pockets. After twelve years, his father's face was still unmistakable. He couldn't have said *how*, and didn't say a word of it, in fact. But he'd nearly jumped out of the van and ran to him. Nearly.

The second sighting, three years later, he'd gotten such a shock, he'd almost caused a casualty. On a cloudless afternoon he and Rachel were coming home from her cousin's Cup Day barbeque, stopped in a suburban side street waiting for a kid to drag away a bin he and his brother were using as stumps. In a nearby house a man left a front door – his father. His foot struck the accelerator. Rachel shouted. The kid

dived. He braked. Accelerated again. Rachel berating now but he can't hear. At the intersection, highway traffic would not give him a break.

"What is going on with you?" Rachel.

In his rear-view, he saw a Falcon, with the man at the wheel, backing from a driveway.

The highway was unrelenting.

The Falcon coasted up behind, stopped at a polite distance.

Watching him in the rear-view, his hands trembled on the wheel.

The back veranda smelled of paint. In a corner, between two cans of paint, as if intervening in a dispute, stood a bottle of turpentine.

On the other side of unbroken paddocks, a solitary semi-trailer rattled, aimed north; the first vehicle visible for five minutes.

The son squashed his cigarette in a rectangular ashtray. "This living beside highways must be hereditary."

"Live near one?"

"Next door."

"Hectic as that one?"

"At my place there's two staple sounds – next door's kelpie barking, and traffic droning."

"Live alone?"

He nodded.

"Got a bird?"

He kept the nod going.

The man sipped his dry ginger. "She good news?"

"Four years."

"Four years?"

"Don't ask how."

"Four years – should've brought her along."

"Should've." Should've. Would've. Story of his life.

"What's her name?"

"Rachel."

Rachel, who had said, "Think of driving out there as a first step. Don't try to eat the whole turkey at once. Just take a bite of . . ." She'd laughed. "His leg."

"What if I don't like the taste?"

"Cross that bridge if you come to it."

"That your only guidance? Cliché? In my hour of nervous need."

"Let me know when it *isn't* your hour of nervous need, my darling."

Rachel who was working diligently on convincing him he'd make a good chef. And who, undoing all her good work in their most recent argument called him pitiful and pathetic, and threw the head of the vacuum, taking a chip out of the plaster.

"Thought we'd have a barbeque," the man was saying.

The son put his can down. "Sounds good."

"Nothing fancy." The man folded and unfolded hands, again. "Used to be the thing when I first came to this country – barbeque and a couple of nice cold bottles."

"Still happens."

They hit a knottier silence.

"So, tell me a bit about yourself?"

"Not much to tell, really."

"What do you do with yourself?"

"Little as possible."

"Working?"

"On and off." Mostly off.

"What sort of thing do you like doing?"

"This."

"This? Nice if a bloke could do this for a living. Show me your hands." The man leaned forward.

Momentarily the son resented the casual request. He opened his hands, palms up, on the table. The man slipped his own fingers and palms beneath. The son had a brief impression his own were as tiny and tender as a newborn's.

“Worker’s hands,” said the man, emphatically, holding on longer than was necessary. “Could get you some work in the factory. Basic assembly, to start.”

The son said he’d consider it.

“Nothing daunting.” The man gave his sarsaparilla a gentle swirl. “No place to spend your life. Meet a few characters . . . learn a few tricks.”

The son heard the voice of a carpenter friend who employed him for two farcically fatiguing months. *Mate you’re almost as handy as a screen-door in a submarine.*

He said he’d keep it in mind. It wasn’t that he felt himself above the work. It just wasn’t *his* work.

“There’s an old saying.” The man swirled the last of his dry ginger. “Nothing will work unless you do.”

“What about what Van Gough said?”

“All ears.” The man chuckled. “Pun intended.”

“He said *I put my heart and soul into my work and lost my mind in the process.*”

“All for a few sunflowers and haystacks?”

“Haystacks might be Monet. Don’t quote me.”

“Whoever knocked it out, nobody ever drowned in his own sweat.”

“I could.”

“Notice he didn't say he shirked his work. All he said was it drove him round the bend.”

“True.”

“If he *had* shirked, he would've been driven barmy not having done it. He who seeks work finds rest. He who seeks rest finds boredom. You're too young to be bored.”

It was true. But the undercurrent of reproach touched a nerve.

Polishing off his second can he heard himself ask, “Didn't you ever feel the need to speak to mum, all these years?”

The man squinted, looking away, as if the light were suddenly doubly harsh.

The son didn't feel the question was out of line but knew it was in some way out of order. “She wished you two had stayed friends.” Words ran ahead uncensored. “She said she wrote really long letters.”

The creases on the man's forehead seemed doubly deep. He gave a slow, sustained nod, as though nodding along with a gentle song. Something had him cold. He looked away, cleared his throat, glaringly inarticulate.

On the highway a semi-trailer's atonal horn sounded.

“She never knew if you opened them – or even got them.” The son shifted. “She said she – tried explaining everything.”

The horn repeated.

The man reached for something not there, with his left hand, and then picked up his soft drink in his right. "Never saw any letters."

The son nodded, uncomprehending.

"Ours was an ancient plight." The man shifted. "Sorry if that sounds dismissive."

"Not at all." The son's thumb tapped against his beer, like he was playing a low-key instrument. "Say what needs saying."

The man shifted his bodyweight, looking as if he might've been reassembling or even trying to remember words rehearsed a long time ago, words with no more charge; gone flat.

"Nothing needs saying."

"She said you were rough with her, once or twice."

"Did she?"

"Why would she say it? If it wasn't true?"

"Control."

He had to think about that.

And he had to say, "She's never seemed especially controlling."

"She's your mother, and she raised you in my absence."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you'd believe her if she told you trees were lollipops."

The son filled with his mouth with drink.

The man waved a hand. "I flung a door backwards not knowing she was right there behind me. Maybe that happened."

"Did the door hit her?"

"I don't remember the door hitting her. But a lot of that time is a blackout."

The word 'but' just sat there with them.

And then the man was staring at the table in a way the boy recognized, as if he was looking at a reflection he didn't much like.

Flushing, zipping up, the son decided he'd better make his next can his last, if he was to keep his license. Washing his hands at the basin he batted away an opposing impulse to drain the fridge of all alcoholic trace – finish with a flourish.

Paused in the lounge he couldn't help noting the absence of art, or mementos, or the slightest sign of offhanded beautification. The thought did not have its roots in derision – no, his own dwelling wasn't exactly renowned for salubrious splendour. But this place almost looked pillaged. There was little evidence the man had even lived. He wondered what anyone could feel, coming home here. He wondered what he did Christmas Day, or New Year's. He was conscious of a contradiction: on one hand there was this air of impermanence; on the other, it felt like the man had always been here, someway.

He faced the window. Something in the imposing isolation evoked something his mother had once told him. She'd hesitated, at the time.

“Just say it,” he'd snapped, “just call a spade a fucking spade.”

“Well, since you ask, he once told me . . . that without a drink in his hand he feels non-existent.”

“**Eighty-one** days and nights but who's counting?” The man folded forearms across his chest. “Lucky for you I'm not one of those blokes who swap drinking for sermonising.”

“Isn't it harder – all the way out here? Not to want one?”

“Couldn't say, never tried before.” The man pushed his plate an inch to the right. “And you? You're a – a steady drinker?”

“I'm a ready drinker. Always Be Prepared.”

The man smiled wryly, looked away.

“But don't worry.” He picked a lettuce leaf from his plate. “I've never blamed you for my failures and fiascos.”

“Failures and fiascos? Sounds like you're in it for the long haul.”

The son nodded, without really agreeing.

“Long as you're ready for the consequences.”

“Is anybody ever ready for the consequences of anything they do?”

He hardly knew what he meant by the remark. He hadn't intended to sound philosophical. And it was not his intention to shame the man.

“We all make decisions every hour, every day.” The man gave a fly a backhander. “If the gods get jack of us making the same stupid mistakes, they’ll have their fun. Bet on it.”

“How do we know they’re ready to strike?”

“We don’t – that’s why they’re gods and we’re dust.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“Eventually.”

“True.”

They watched a brown bird, hovering high over the paddock. Its outstretched wings quivered in anticipation, or maybe only in a breeze. In a blink, it compacted itself and rushed the grass. The grass agitated. The man said something about a near miss. A moment later the raptor resurfaced, only a few feet from where it had hit, in a frustrated flap. Its prey had apparently escaped, probably underground. The outwitted bird turned one way then the other, as if fighting contrary impulses. A feather spun to the grass.

In the son’s memory, something spun to the surface. On his twelfth birthday a box containing binoculars landed at his front door, Express, with no sender labelled. His mother and stepfather denied black and blue, any involvement. It had enraged him to think they’d engineered it to trick him into thinking his biological father loved him. In ten years, nobody had once mentioned it: the mystery of the red birthday binoculars. Now the question perched on his tongue, freighted, craving flight.

The bird waved and waved away.

“Back to the birdseed,” said the man.

In a mouthful of bitter, the question dissolved.

A single syllable covered for its non-appearance. “Hawk?”

“Kite.”

To the son's surprise, his father knew a lot about birds.

The son drained the rest of his can in one hit, and saw a night he and four school-friends on camp snuck out of their cabin, and crossed a field. At the edge of the lake, they stripped down and tiptoed into shinbone-chilling shallows. Yelping and whooping and laughing, they waded in, waist-deep, and swam, aimed for its centre. First, he cramped. Then his asthma hit. On the walk home, as he shivered, the others insisted he'd roared for his dad.

Now the man had asked him if he was the outdoors type.

“Rachel really likes picnics. We're avid picnickers – if that counts. She wants to do this camping canoeing thing . . . campernoeking. Keeps bringing it up.”

“When's her birthday?”

“April.”

“Take her campernoeking in April.”

The son opened his cigarettes again. “I will.”

“Don't let her slip away.”

The kite was a distant dot on the sky.

Unblinking sun burnished their rusty, reddish hair.

"Don't let her slip, if you're good together." The man ran a fingertip around the edge of his plate. "If you never hear another word I say, hear that."

"**Sure** you won't stay the night?"

"Maybe next time." Softly he shut the driver's door.

"Next time bring the missus."

"If you're lucky."

"Scared I'll muscle in?"

"No chance." He slid the key in the ignition.

The man laid a warm hand on his shoulder. "Next time we'll have that rack of pool."

"Start praying."

"No point starting now."

He turned the key. The engine coughed. "Cheers."

"Cheers son." The man turned for his front steps.

The son looked over his shoulder, reversing, one hand draped over the backrest.

At the highway he indicated. A road-train rumbled by, eclipsing his view of sundown. He waited what felt an unreasonable time. His mind

was strangely bland, almost blank. The road-train ended. A blade of unknowable light ghosted across the windshield.

He blinked, looked in the mirror at the house, and turned the wheel.

The man stood at the window.

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